

Teens treated unfairly by teachers more likely to have populist attitudes

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Perceived unjust teacher behavior is strongly and positively associated with populist attitudes among children and adolescents.

These findings appeared in the journal [Perspectives on Politics](#).

Populist attitudes consist of ideologies including anti-elitism, people-

centrism, and a dualistic perception of good versus evil, and where the foundation of political decision-making should be based on the general will of the people.

In contrast to the association with [teacher](#) behavior, the correlation between young people's relationships with peers and the development of populist attitudes is less strong, and the correlation between young people's relationships with parents and the development of populist attitudes is non-existent.

In the study, researchers investigated how populist attitudes developed among young people and used unique surveys and interviews conducted in schools to collect data from 3,123 adolescents of a mean age of 14.66 years across three different countries: Austria, Germany, and Switzerland.

The findings show a consistent association between negative relationships between teachers and students and higher levels of populist attitudes among those students. These findings are also supported through additional findings from panel data in the UK. It is the first study to explore the pervasiveness and correlating factors of such attitudes among adolescents.

The study also found that girls and adolescents from schools with a higher aspiration level have on average a lower level of populist attitudes, whereas adolescents with migration backgrounds and higher family affluence are associated with stronger populist attitudes. No differences were observed across age, parental education, countries, and whether the survey was carried out before or after the COVID-19 related lockdown.

Julia Weiss, of the GESIS—Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences in Germany, said, "Our study makes clear that adolescence is a pivotal

phase for receptivity to populist ideas. Individuals go through tremendous cognitive and socio-cognitive growth during adolescence, allowing them to think about political problems in more abstract and complex ways.

"During this time, the role of environmental variables—such as family, peers, and school—is crucial, for these environments are critical in forming youth political orientation because they are where young people first meet politics.

"Reasons people develop populist attitudes include a low sense of political efficacy and a perceived lack of representation. Populism flourishes when people feel they have little say; feel a sense of injustice; and when they perceive a lack of will or an inability of those in power to respond to individual or social grievances.

"Given the hierarchies and power dynamics sometimes present in classrooms, examining the roles of school experiences and relationships with teachers is crucial when seeking to explain how individuals develop populist attitudes."

Sebastian Jungkunz, of the University of Bonn in Germany, said, "Schools serve as an early representation of the state, providing students with insights into how public institutions operate and how they can anticipate treatment from authorities. These formative experiences during childhood and early adolescence shape individuals' perceptions of justice and power and can have long-lasting effects into adulthood.

"For this reason, among others, equal treatment of students at school is crucial for the development of a strong civic identity. For [school-aged children](#) and adolescents, teachers represent the executive state, and the behavior of individual teachers can significantly impact the political socialization of young people.

"The link between populist attitudes and negative teacher relationships, and not relationships with peers or parents, can potentially be explained by the fact that teachers typically hold one specific role within school settings—adolescents do not see their teachers switch between environments in which they have more or less power.

"This is different for relationships with parents and peers, who might fulfill different roles at different times. For instance, parents serve as authority figures, but they can also be emotional safe havens in times of trouble from the outside world."

More information: Sebastian Jungkunz et al, Populist Attitudes among Teenagers: How Negative Relationships with Socialization Agents Are Linked to Populist Attitudes, *Perspectives on Politics* (2024). DOI: [10.1017/S1537592724000434](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724000434)

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