Exploring the Rise of Populism: The Global Populism Database

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Abstract

This research note introduces the Global Populism Database (GPD), which uses textual analysis of speeches to gauge the level of populist discourse of political chief executives. The current GPD covers 279 government terms in 66 countries across all continents, mostly between 1998 and 2018. We describe the data and data generation process, then use the data to describe the level of populism across governments. We also give a few examples of how the dataset can be applied to investigate the consequences of populism for democracy. We find that recent growth in populism is modest, limited mostly to moderate forms of populism in Western Europe and North America, and that its thick ideological correlates vary by region. This tempers claims of a "populist wave" in recent years. We also find that populism correlates with declines in liberal democracy but with increases in democratic participation.

Keywords: Populism; Database; Text Analysis; Democracy; Comparative Politics

With talk about the "global rise of populism" (e.g. Moffitt 2016), more scholars than ever are trying to track its growth, assess its causes and consequences, and provide tools to mitigate its most negative effects. The most fundamental challenge in this research is data, especially measuring populism at the level of political elites. Policymakers and the public are anxious to know where populists are in power and if the phenomenon is growing. And social scientists hope to test theories about the causes of populism and its consequences for democracy and economic policy.

To help move this research forward, we introduce a new elite-level dataset of populist discourse. The Global Populism Database (hereafter GPD) uses textual analysis of speeches to gauge the level of populist discourse of political chief executives. The GPD is an objective, continuous-level measure, similar to some current datasets, but utilizing a measurement technique especially suited for covering multiple languages at lower cost. It currently includes 279 government terms in 66 countries across all continents, mostly between 1998 and 2018.

We showcase the database through two applications: a description of the spread of populism over the past two decades, and an assessment of populism's consequences

for liberal democracy. We find that growth in populism is modest, limited to moderate forms of populism in Western Europe and North America, and that its thick ideological correlates vary by region. We also find that populism correlates with declines in liberal democracy but with increases in democratic participation, thus adding nuance to mostly negative depictions of populism's consequences for democracy.

Measuring Populist Discourse

Until recently, cross-regional datasets for answering questions about populism's spread, causes, or consequences were scarce. Until roughly two decades ago, the study of populism was limited to a few countries and regions, mostly Latin America, and there were few efforts to build any quantitative datasets (Conniff 1999; but see Weyland 1999).

Two developments altered this situation. First, thanks to a greater effort at cross-regional research, scholars have identified a few core attributes of populism that now figure into most definitions. The unifying element is ideas (Hawkins et al. 2018). Whether using a political-strategic (Barr 2009; Weyland 2017), stylistic (Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy 2009), Essex School (Laclau 2005), or ideational (Mudde 2017) approach, most scholars argue that every instance of populism at least includes a discourse in which the putative will of the common people is in conflict with a conspiring elite. While scholars

continue to disagree about other aspects of populism — such as the role of organization type, leadership, or other ideological components — nearly all agree that the presence of these ideas is necessary.

Second, thanks to this growing consensus about definitions, a number of new methods have been developed to measure populism in terms of ideas at the level of political elites.[1] One is expert judgments in the form of systematic surveys or reviews of the scholarly literature (Houle and Kenny 2016; Van Kessel 2015; Wiesehomeier 2018). These have the advantage of cross-national coverage, and when done carefully, provide confidence that scholars are responding to precise definitions of populism. However, some datasets reflect the judgment of small numbers of experts and lack indicators of intercoder reliability; furthermore, it is not always clear if they are measuring populist ideas or aspects of populist organization.

The other method is textual analysis of politicians' rhetoric which provides a direct, objective measure of politicians' ideas as communicated to the public. Scholars have used several techniques to measure populism through textual analysis. Because populist ideas tend to be latent and diffuse, captured in broad patterns of language that are often unique to countries and periods, most datasets rely on human-coded analysis, taking either sentences, paragraphs or whole text as units of measurement (Hawkins 2009; Hawkins and Castanho Silva 2018; Manucci and Weber 2017; Rooduijn and

Pauwels 2011). Analyses that rely on dictionaries generally work best within single countries, where the political context is held constant, making populist rhetoric internally consistent and easier to codify (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Dai and Shao 2016).

Tests show that measures of populism based on human-coded textual analysis are precise, valid, and replicable (Hawkins 2009; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). However, most resulting datasets are small, limited to one or a few countries within a region (although some cover long periods of time), due to the relatively high cost in time and resources to collect documents and train coders.

The Global Populism Database

Our response to these challenges of measurement is the GPD, a dataset of populist discourse for political leaders using textual analysis of political speeches. The GPD applies a technique known as holistic grading in which coders read and assign a single score to the entire text. Holistic grading was designed by educational psychologists to assess diffuse, latent aspects of student writing, such as tone, style, and quality of argument. Coders apply an integer grade scale based on a rubric that identifies rough attributes of texts at each grade. Coders are then trained by repeated exposure to anchor texts that benchmark scores in the rubric (White 1985; Sudweeks, Reeve, and Bradshaw

2004). The main advantage of holistic grading over other techniques of content analysis is that it is quicker and can be scaled up quickly among coders from many different countries, each reading texts in their own language without translating speeches or training materials.

In our rubric, texts are initially assigned one of three scores, listed below with their descriptions. In more recent versions, coders have used a decimal scale (0.1, 0.2, etc.) in which 0.5 rounds to a 1 and 1.5 rounds to a 2.[2]

2 A speech in this category is extremely populist and comes very close to the ideal populist discourse. Specifically, the speech expresses all or nearly all of the elements of ideal populist discourse, and has few elements that would be considered non-populist.

1 A speech in this category includes strong, clearly populist elements but either does not use them consistently or tempers them by including non-populist elements. Thus, the discourse may have a romanticized notion of the people and the idea of a unified popular will (indeed, it must in order to be considered populist), but it avoids bellicose language or references to cosmic proportions or any particular enemy.

0 A speech in this category uses few if any populist elements. Note that even if a speech expresses a Manichean worldview, it is not considered populist if it lacks some notion of a popular will.

The unit of analysis is a chief executive's term in office. To code each term we draw a quota sample of four speeches: campaign, ribbon-cutting, international, and famous.[3] These types comprise most political speeches and are available in most countries. We opt for a quota over a random sample to impose limits on variety and ensure comparability of speeches across leaders, and because we want to include rarer speeches (campaign and famous) that are more likely to contain populism, thus avoiding Type II errors, while still including common speeches (ribboncutting and international) less likely to have populism. When many speeches of any one type are available, we rely on the most recent speech with at least 1,000-2,000 words (shorter speeches are difficult to code).

Each text is read and coded in its original language by native speakers, with two coders per speech for the majority of cases.[4] Coders do not share their work with each other until it is complete. Discrepancies of .5 or greater are subjected to a reconciliation session in which coders can adjust their scores if they demonstrate an error in coding, but otherwise differing scores are retained and averaged for a final score on each

document. The four scores are then averaged (unweighted) to provide a single score for each leader-term.

The GPD is available as a datafile with documentation in the Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LFTQEZ. It includes 1,113 speeches, with a total of 2,003 grades assigned, covering 66 countries, with 215 unique chief executives serving 279 terms. The bulk of these are in Europe and the Americas, although there are a few additional countries in Asia and Africa where at least a few leaders are covered. In Asia, coverage is most complete for the Central Asian republics, Thailand and India. Coding is most complete between the years 1998 and 2018, although the dataset contains a few historical presidents in Latin America. The GPD unifies all previously published versions (e.g., Hawkins 2009, Hawkins and Littvay 2019; Hawkins and Selway 2017; Hawkins and Kocijan 2013) with a few substantive updates.

Is Global Populism on the Rise?

The recent growth of populism, especially in the US and Western Europe, has led to talk about a populist wave or surge (Moffit 2016; Lewis et al. 2019), but it is still unclear if this is really a global phenomenon and how strong it is. The GPD provides the first data allowing us to answer this question with precision.

Figure 1 shows the average level of populist rhetoric between 1998 and 2018. The overall estimate from the entire GPD is the solid line with 95% confidence intervals in gray. We add three extra lines, one for each of the regions with most cases in our data. Globally, there is no identifiable trend of increase or decrease: on a scale of 0-2, the global average has remained steady at around 0.4--relatively low. However, we do observe regional variation. Western Europe and North America show the increase that has attracted international attention. From a low start in the late 1990s, the line steadily rises until touching that of Latin America. But the wave in Western Europe and North America seems somewhat independent of trends elsewhere. The other two regions are consistently higher, with averages approaching 0.5. Latin America registers only a slight increase since the early 2000s. Central and Eastern Europe shows a slight initial increase, which tapers off in the mid-2000s.

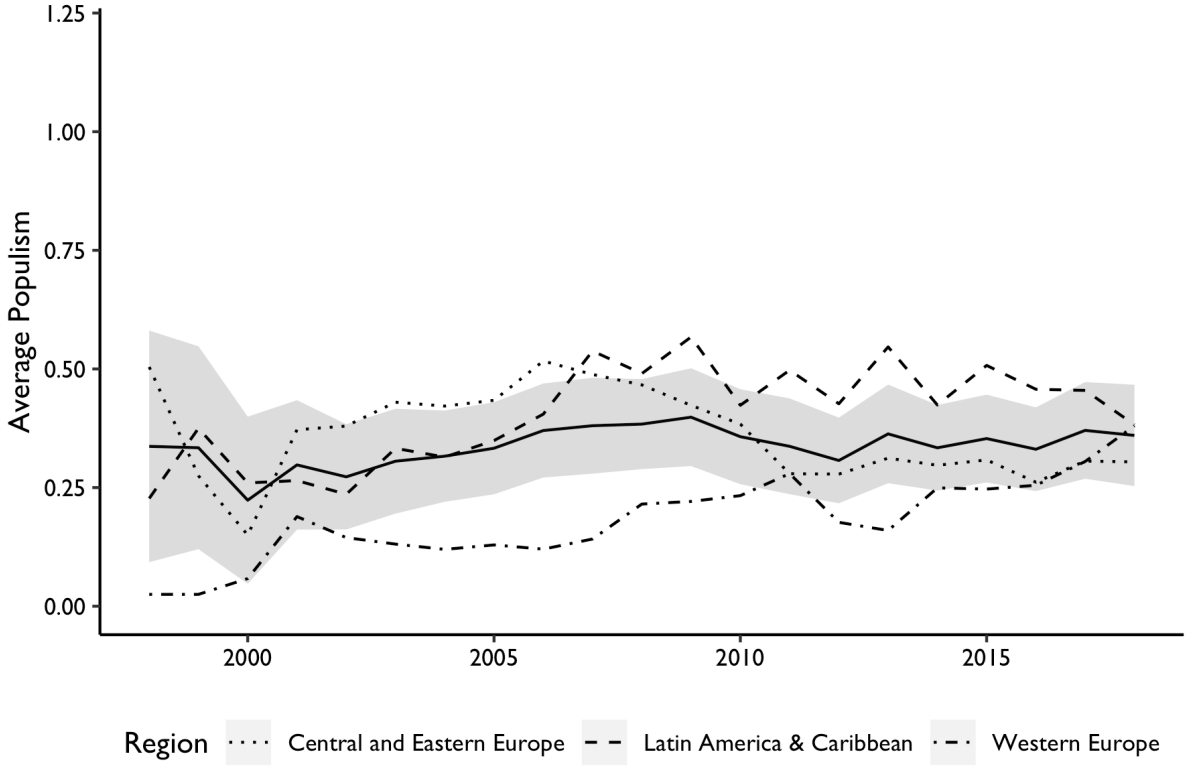

Figure 1: Average Levels of Populism in Chief Executives' Speeches and 95% CI's over time

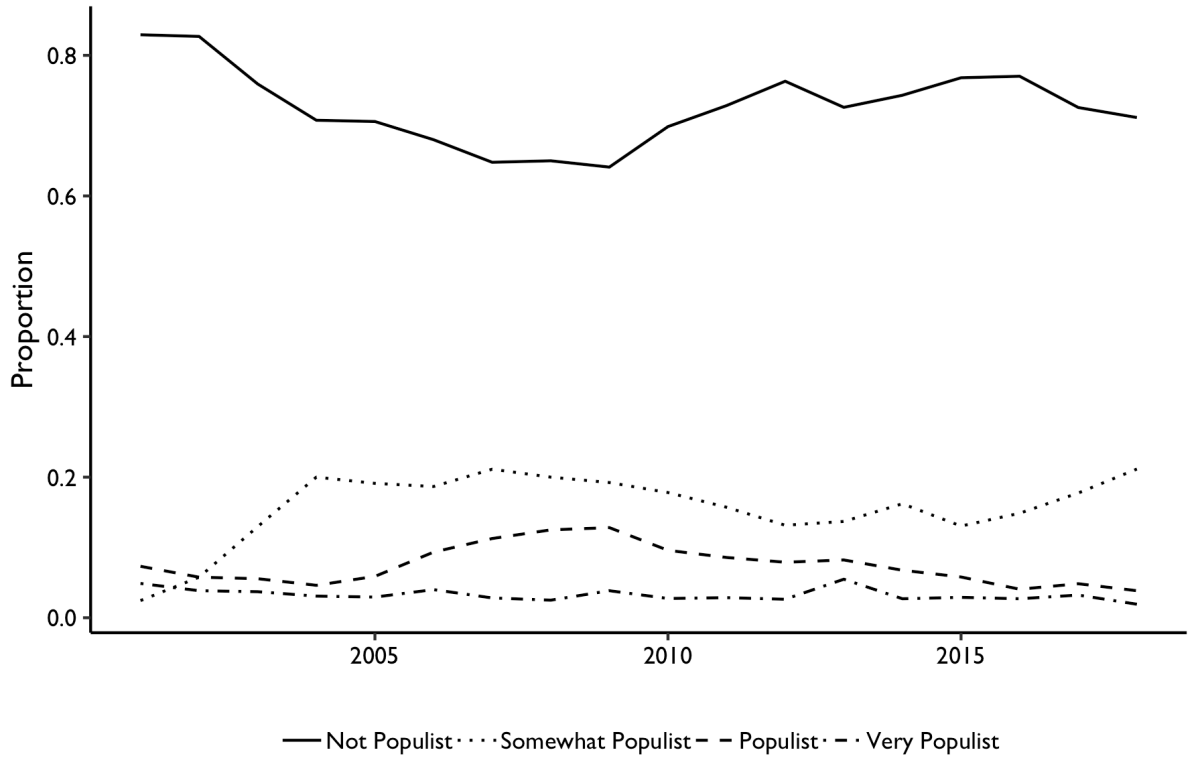

Figure 2: Categories of leaders' populism over time

A related question is whether the limited growth in populism reflects a change in the number of highly populist leaders or only moderately populist ones. In fact, the GPD allows for gradations of populism across individual government terms. Borrowing from the classification used by Lewis et al. (2019), Figure 2 tracks the proportion of governments at each of four different levels. Leaders whose speeches average below 0.5 are counted as "Not Populist"; those between 0.5 and 0.99 are "Somewhat Populist";

between 1.0 and 1.49 “Populist”, and 1.50 and higher are “Very Populist.” Early in the 2000s, we observe a remarkable increase in the proportion of Somewhat Populist leaders and a decrease in the proportion of Not Populists. In contrast, the frequencies of the two highest categories remain almost the same. Thus, what much of the debate over the global rise in populism is responding to is not an increase in the number of highly populist leaders, but of moderately populist ones. To be clear, highly populist leaders have emerged in recent years, but there is enough attrition within that group that there has been no long-term secular increase at the highest levels.

The GPD allows us to break down the level of populism by other factors. In particular, populism scholars have been concerned with increases in different ideological subtypes of populism positions, especially the radical right. While some see these positions as definitional (Norris and Inglehart 2019), others are more agnostic, arguing that there are populists of the left, center, and right (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). The GPD includes a separate classification of each leader’s overall ideological position, measured as left (of center), center, or right (of center) categories, using a combination of data sources, including the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project (DALP, Kitschelt 2013), the Political Representation, Parties, and Presidents Survey for Latin America (PREPPS)[5] and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015), as well as consultation with in-country experts.[6]

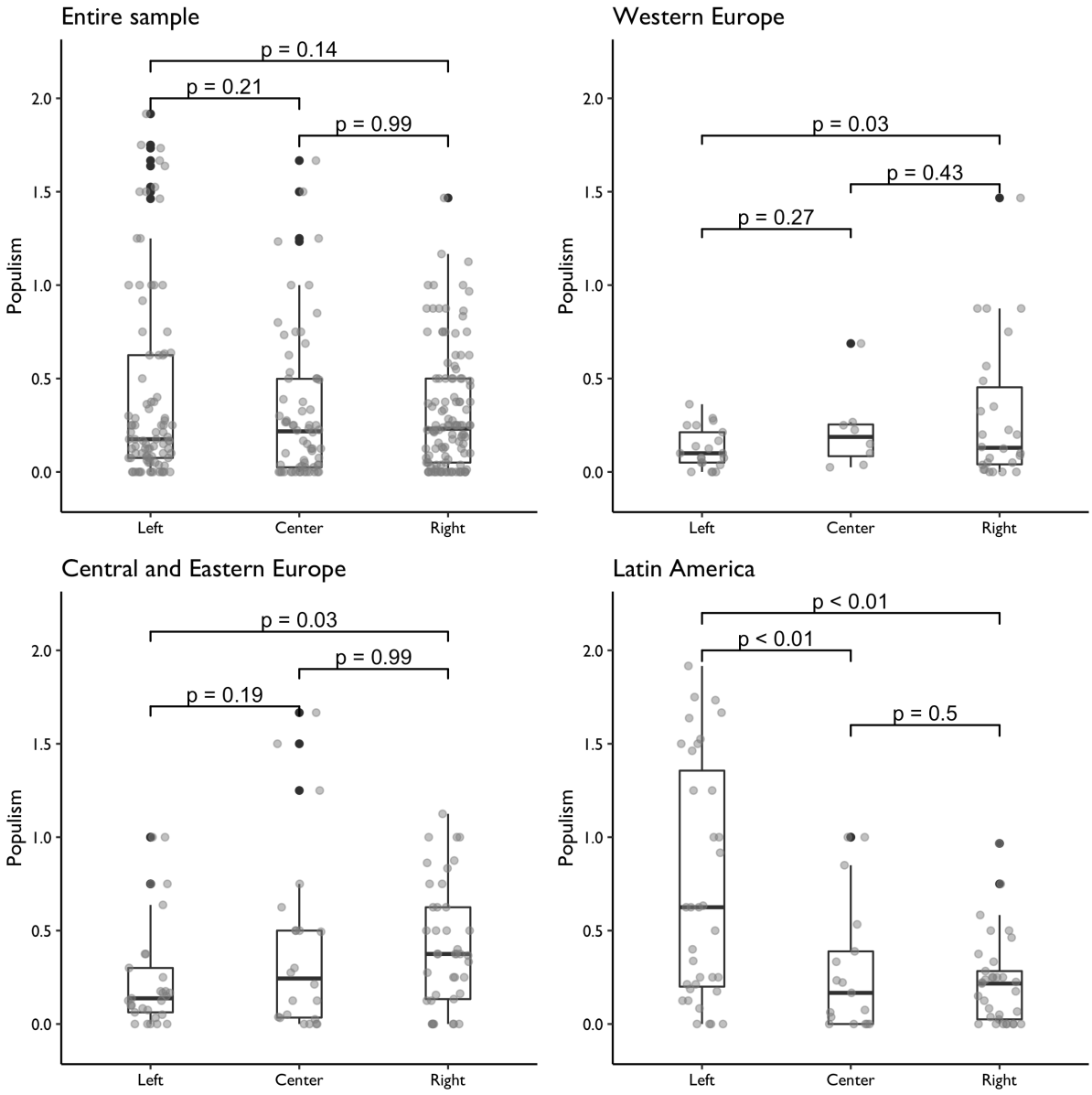
Entire sample
p = 0.14
p = 0.21
p = 0.99
Western Europe
p = 0.03
p = 0.43
p = 0.27
Central and Eastern Europe
p = 0.03
p = 0.99
p = 0.19
Latin America
p < 0.01
p < 0.01
p = 0.5
Populism
0.0
0.5
1.0
1.5
2.0
Left
Center
Right

Figure 3: Ideological Distribution of Populist Discourse. P-values from two-sample t-tests. Each dot is a leader-term.

The results in Figure 3 confirm the importance of regional differences. The average level of populism for left-of-center leaders in the entire sample is 0.41, while that of right-wing leaders is 0.32; in a two-sample t-test this difference is not statistically significant. Further, neither of the two sides is significantly different from centrists. However, when looking within regions, we see that right-wing leaders in both Western and Central and Eastern Europe are significantly more populist than left-wing ones ($p = .03$ in both), but not more than centrists. In Latin America, on the other hand, left-wing leaders are significantly more populist than both right-wing presidents and centrists.

Interestingly, the modest surge in populism in recent years is not limited to any one ideological subtype. Figure 4 tracks the trend in populism by region and ideology. In Western Europe and North America, where growth is strongest, there is an increase in all ideological subtypes of populism; in Latin America, it is constant across all subtypes; and in Central and Eastern Europe, changes affect all subtypes. Thus, not only is the surge in populism modest, but it includes the radical left and right together.

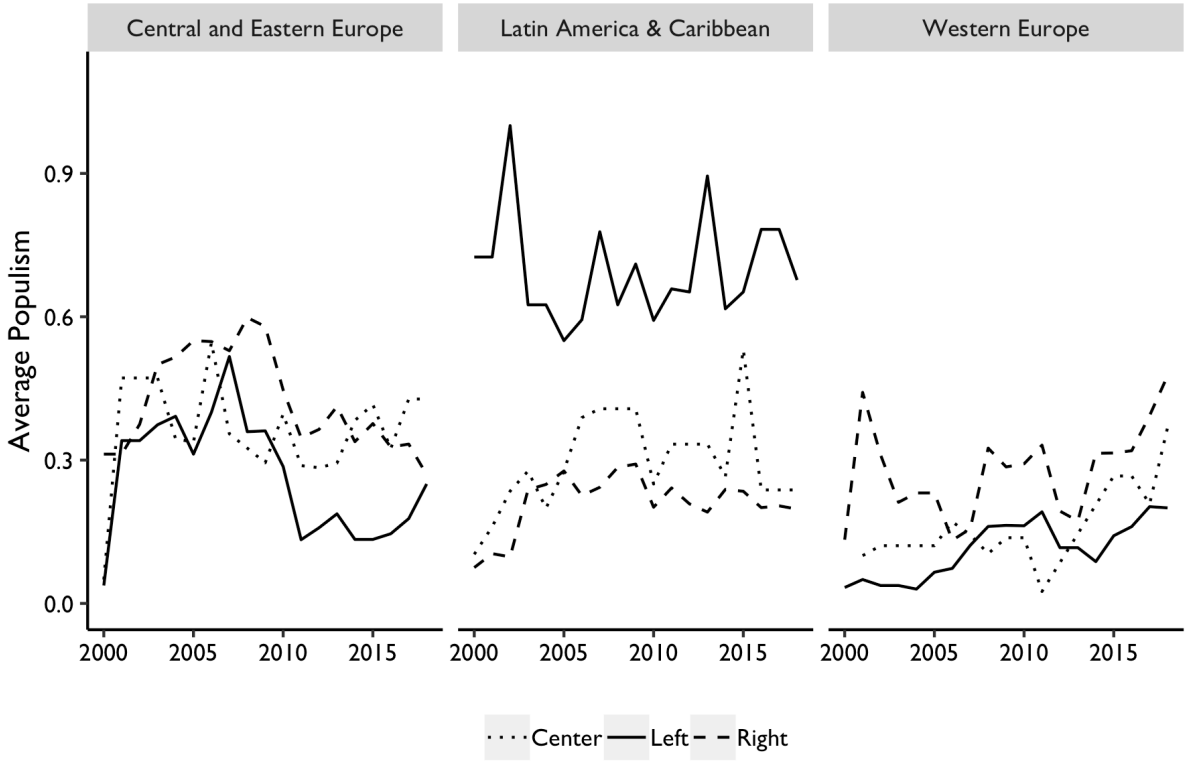

Figure 4 - Evolution of Populism over time by Leaders' Ideology and Region.

Does It Matter? Consequences of Populism

This dataset provides multiple opportunities for research. One of these concerns populism's impact on democracy. Most scholars worry that a rise in populist control of government will lead to the erosion of liberal democratic institutions. Specifically, populists in government restrict civil liberties, undo checks and balances, and

undermine the quality of elections (Abts and Rummens 2007, Levitsky and Loxton 2013). A few scholars also argue that populism can have a positive side, encouraging political participation and the democratic representation of neglected groups, especially when populism occurs in left-wing parties (Canovan 1999; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Tests of these propositions are somewhat mixed. All quantitative studies find that populists undermine liberal institutions (Huber and Schimpf 2016; Kenny and Houle 2016), but none have found that it has a positive effect on participation (Kenny and Houle 2016; Immerzeel and Pickup 2015). Furthermore, most of these studies focus on single regions, making it unclear how general these effects are and whether they differ for the ideological left or right.

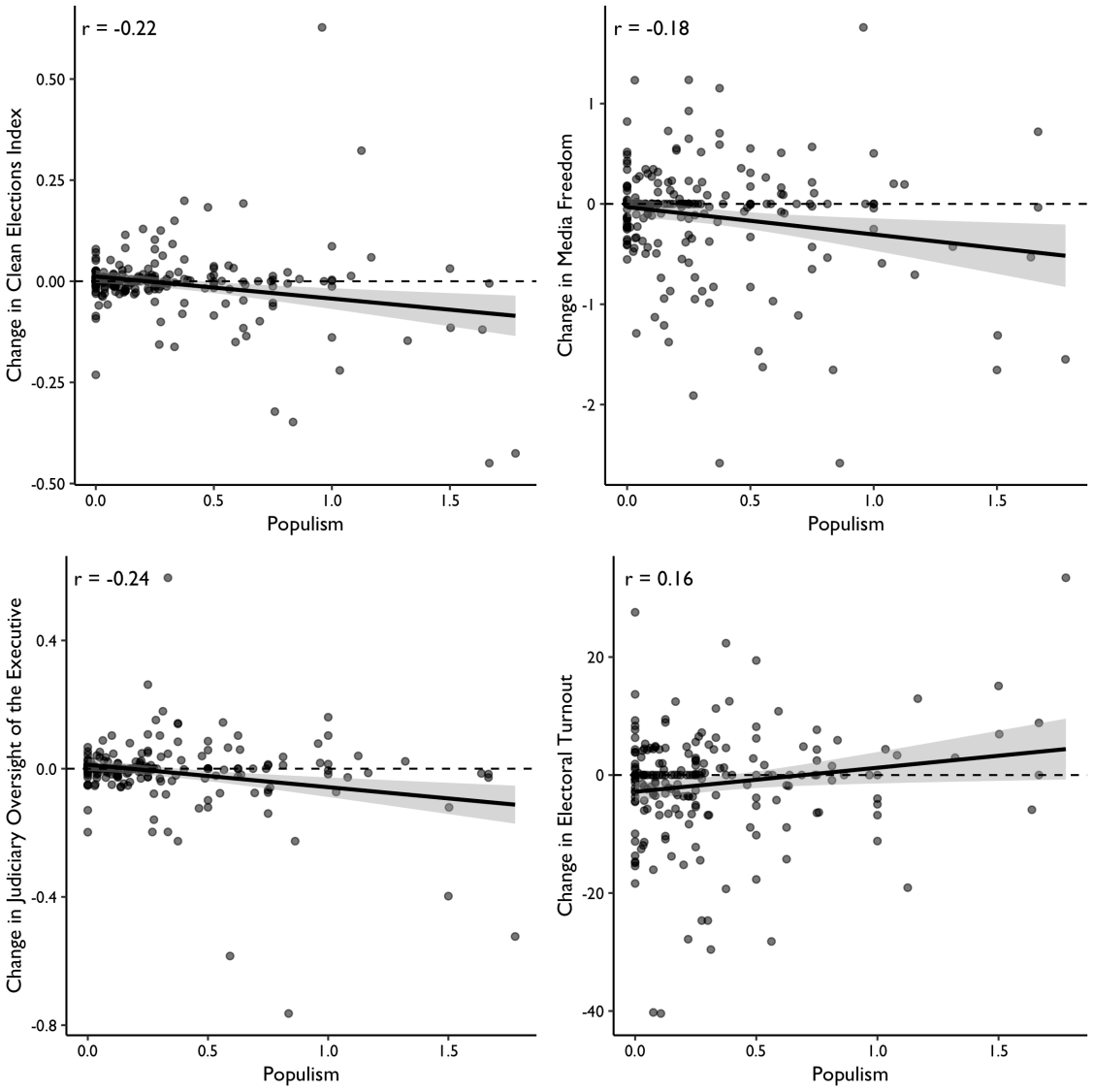

Figure 5: Populism and Its Correlates, with OLS lines and 95% Confidence Intervals.

The GPD allows for more comprehensive tests of these arguments, which we illustrate through a series of bivariate measures. Figure 5 compares the level of populist discourse with the change in components of liberal democracy over the period leaders were in office. Each dot is a leader: for those with multiple consecutive terms, we look at the difference in indicators between their very last year (or 2018, in case they are still in office) and the very first year they were elected, and we average their levels of populism. We take all indicators on democratic quality and turnout from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al. 2018).

First consider populism's negative impact. The three top/left panels depict the association of populism with changes in the extent to which elections are free and fair (V-Dem's "Clean Elections Index"); efforts of media censorship by the government, where lower values indicate that "attempts to censor [print or broadcast media] are direct and routine"; and how much the executive respects judiciary oversight, with higher values representing a more independent judiciary. All three panels tell the same story: there is a clear tendency of democratic erosion associated with populist leaders being in office. There is a deterioration in judicial capabilities of oversight during populist administrations (r = -.24), erosion of media freedom (r = -.18), and worsening quality of elections (r = -.22).

Now, consider participation. The bottom-right panel examines the relationship between populism and the change in voter turnout in national elections across the chief executive's term. We find a positive and significant correlation: the more populist the administration, the higher the turnout in national elections at the end of their term.

In the Online Appendix, Table 1, we present results from simple regression models for each of these outcomes, controlling for their initial levels and the leaders' ideology, together with the interaction of populism and ideology. We confirm a significant effect of populism in all but clean elections. Furthermore, we find no significant difference from right- to left-wing populism in any models, although for voter turnout the interaction is in the expected direction (increasing the further left the populist is) and approaches standard levels of significance ($p<.05$). Thus, the GDP confirms the pessimistic view of populism's effects on liberal democracy but also rejoinders about its ability to increase participation.

Conclusion

The Global Populism Database offers a valuable tool for testing arguments about populism's global reach, causes, and consequences by providing a precise, replicable measure of populist ideas in the rhetoric of government chief executives. In this article, we describe our coding strategy in the GPD and showcase its features. Among its most

salient advantages is its scope: it includes 66 countries with good coverage over the past 20 years. Another is its precision: a continuous-level measure that carefully focuses on populism's discursive component. While scholars using an ideational approach to populism will find the GPD especially valuable, analysts using other approaches can combine the data with measures of other posited features, such as whether chief executives are political outsiders (Carreras 2012).

Using the dataset, we show that populism in most parts of Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe has not shifted dramatically in recent years, but that it has been increasing in Western Europe and North America. Most of this increase is among moderately populist leaders--strongly populist leaders are relatively rare--and is found equally among populists of the left and right, although certain ideological flavors predominate in some regions.

We are also able to tentatively test common arguments about populism. For example, we confirm that populism is associated with increased forms of democratic participation, but greatly decreased quality of other liberal institutions. The findings on turnout are especially significant, as they contradict some previous studies that have found null effects. The GDP will continue to be updated as new leaders come to power and to cover more countries. We look forward to the uses of this database by the scholarly community to better understand populism worldwide.

Endnotes

[1] Scholars have also developed survey item inventories for measuring populist attitudes in society (see, e.g., Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; and a review by Castanho Silva et al. 2019). Because these inventories get at the demand for populism, we do not discuss them here, but we note that some have been adapted for use in parliamentary elite surveys (Andreadis and Ruth 2018).
[2] The full coding rubric is in the Online Appendix.
[3] The full description of types of speech is in the Online Appendix.
[4] It is not always possible to have two coders due to funding constraints or the lack of native speakers. When there is only one coder, they still meet with the project coordinators to discuss their scores. For the 886 speeches graded by two coders, Krippendorff's alpha (interval-level) is 0.824, indicating high reliability.
[5] Available at http://ninaw.webfactional.com/prepps.
[6] A detailed description of how this variable is constructed is in the Online Appendix.

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