

## **The Impact of Populism on Liberal Democracy**

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### **Abstract:**

Does populism have a negative effect on democracy, and if so, why? We answer these questions by extending the insights of the ideational approach to populism. This approach defines populism minimally, as a set of ideas, to explore more carefully the consequences of populism for liberal democracy. We test the predictions of this ideational approach and compare them to those of the political-institutional approach using a dataset that measures the populist discourse of political leaders from Latin America and Europe. The dataset covers 107 leaders in 73 countries from 2000 to the present. In line with the predictions of the ideational approach, our results show that populist discourse is associated with declines in key features of democratic contestation, including civil liberties, horizontal accountability, and the quality of elections. Importantly, these declines are associated with the intensity of the politicians' discourse moderated by the number of terms in office. However, our results show a counter-intuitive effect of populism on voter turnout: only right-populist parties have an increasing effect on voter turnout, while leftist parties increase turnout whether or not they are populist.

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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, populist parties and movements have attracted the attention of scholars and the public. Partly this is because of their negative impact on economic performance. Left-populist movements such as Chavismo in Venezuela and Syriza in Greece have implemented macroeconomic policies with disastrous consequences; this follows a pattern of macroeconomic mismanagement by populist movements over the twentieth century, particularly in Latin America (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Edwards 2010).

But probably the more significant impact of populism is on democracy. The effect is not limited by ideology: populists of both the left and the right have often been responsible for undermining key institutions of liberal democracy. While often heralded as increasing democratic participation (Chalmers et al. 1997), populists seem to accomplish this at the expense of democratic contestation: declining civil liberties, concentrated power in the executive branch, and a skewed electoral playing field. Thus, the result is not so much full-blown autocracy as it is a hybrid regime (Levitsky and Loxton 2013; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012).

The apparent consistency and severity of populism's impact on democracy demands our attention as political scientists. In recent years, scholars have begun to theorize and gauge this effect. The result has been a few case studies and small-N comparative analyses. While instructive—they generally confirm the mixed effects of populism—their results are imprecise and support conflicting causal mechanisms. This makes it easier for supporters of these governments to brush aside criticism, and more difficult to recommend policy responses.

Does populism have a negative effect on democracy, and if so, why? In this article, we answer these questions by extending the insights of a new, ideational approach to populism that has been gaining traction. This approach defines populism minimally, as a set of ideas, to explore more carefully the causes and consequences of populism. The approach tends to see populism as innate to democracy and argues that it appears in a variety of ideological flavors that could be more or less harmful. It also specifies carefully the causal mechanisms that link populism to (declining) liberal democracy, seeing these as a product of the intensity of their discourse rather than their organizational features (Canovan 1999; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Kaltwasser 2012; Panizza 2005).

We test the predictions of this ideational approach using a relatively new dataset. This dataset measures the populist discourse of political leaders from Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe, as well as a few countries of Western Europe, Africa, and Asia. The dataset covers 107 leaders in 73 countries from 2000 to the present, although in some countries the coverage is earlier. Portions of the data have been presented earlier (K. A. Hawkins 2009), but the dataset featured here is updated and geographically expanded to represent a much larger set of regions. Together these regions capture much of the current variation in populist and non-populist regimes.

Our results confirm the negative impact of populism on democratic contestation, showing that the ideational approach gets this relationship right. Populism is in fact associated with declines in key features of liberal democracy, including civil liberties, horizontal accountability, and the quality of elections. Importantly, these declines are associated with the intensity of the politicians' discourse moderated by the number of consecutive terms in office.

In contrast, we get a more ambiguous finding with regard to democratic participation. We find that populism does increase voter turnout, but it does so only under right-populist parties; leftist parties have a positive effect on turnout whether they are populist or not. Thus, one of the

principal arguments made in favor of populist movements (typically those of the radical left) likely does not hold true.

We begin this paper by discussing the literature on populism and democracy and lay out a series of hypotheses based on the ideational approach. Afterwards, we describe our research design and present our findings. We conclude with policy implications.

## **Approaches and Hypotheses**

Studies on populism have traditionally begun with long discussions about concepts and definitions, but lately a consensus has been emerging that populism should be defined in just one or two ways. Hence, we dispense with this discussion and get immediately to theories of populism and democracy, with some references to concepts along the way.

Research on populism initially focused little on its democratic impact. Aside from the early work of Germani (1978), which saw populism in Argentina as akin to fascism in Italy, scholars preferred to study populism's economic consequences. Populism was generally associated with short-sighted macroeconomic policies, a view shared by both neoclassical economists and dependency theorists, although for opposite reasons: economists saw populism as a deviation from market-oriented principles, while dependency theorists viewed it as a diversion from state-led industrialization (Cardoso 1972; Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Ianni 1975; Weffort 1978).

However, with the advent of neoliberal populists in Latin America (Roberts 1995; Weyland 1999) and radical right populists in Western Europe (Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1997), scholars began to realize that populism's effect on economics was contingent on the ideological flavor of the movement. While left- or "inclusionary" populists such as Alan García in Peru (in his first term) were prone to disregard economic fundamentals, rightist or "exclusionary" governments such as that of Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Carlos Menem in Argentina were just as likely to be associated with market-oriented economic policies. Partly because of this, economic and structuralist definitions of populism fell out of favor among political scientists (Weyland 2001).

Thus, it is primarily in recent years that attention has returned to the negative impact of populism on democracy. This attention has been driven by salient instances of democratic backsliding under the third wave of democratization, including Venezuela under Hugo Chávez's movement, Turkey under Recep Erdogan's AKP, or Hungary under Victor Orbán's Fidesz, to name only a few. In nearly every country controlled by a highly populist party or movement, key democratic institutions have been compromised and competition has become polarized. This effect appears to be indifferent to ideology, with populists of both the left and right having similar consequences. And the impact is understood to be negative only for *liberal* democracy; many proponents of the radical left see populism's polarizing effects as helpful to furthering their revolutionary program (Laclau 2005), which has an ambiguous stance towards the institutions of liberal democracy.

Scholars suggest the effect goes in two directions. First, populism undermines democratic contestation. Populists do not entirely eliminate elections, and the opposition generally retains some chance of winning. But populists in power tend to undermine civil liberties, concentrate power in the hands of the executive branch, and skew the electoral playing field. Thus, they produce hybrid democracies (Levitsky and Loxton 2013; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Second, populism enhances democratic participation. Populists supposedly incorporate marginalized sectors and increase their voice (Chalmers et al. 1997; Mudde and Rovira

Kaltwasser 2012). This takes place through the extension of the franchise and greater voter turnout, but also through the creation of new forms of civil society and institutions of direct democracy, and more generally through the symbolic representation or “dignification” of these groups in official government discourse (Ruth and Welp 2014).

Scholars offer two explanations for these effects, each of which reflects one of the current approaches to populism used by political scientists. The first reflects a *political-institutional approach* common among Latin Americanists. Scholars using this approach define populism primarily as an organized phenomenon. While they acknowledge populist rhetoric as a common feature of these parties and movements, they center their attention on how these are organized, in particular the existence of a movement led by a charismatic leader who is a political outsider. The antagonistic, “people versus the elite” rhetoric of these leaders is seen as important for creating a broad appeal, but not a sincere feature or a useful determinant of the movement’s policy choices once in power (Barr 2009; Weyland 2001).

According to this approach, the undemocratic tendencies of populist movements are primarily a result of their charismatic leadership, the anti-systemic views of their voters, and the objective position of the leader as a political outsider. Populist movements come to power with a mandate for change, and their voters expect them to enact radical reforms that punish the traditional parties. When movement leaders are political outsiders, they lack connections to the established parties and institutions that might lower the cost of negotiating with them, and they find it easier to undermine the party system and the institutions that protect their opponents. Furthermore, because these movements are often led by a single, popular leader, it becomes easier for them to circumvent other branches of government and rule directly through the executive. Thus, the populists’ actions are driven primarily by their self-interested behavior as office-maximizing politicians and the costs and benefits created by their institutional setting.

The other explanation, and the one that we favor here, draws from an *ideational approach* to populism that has become common in the study of Western Europe and the United States (Kazin 1998; Laclau 2005; Mudde 2007; Stanley 2008), although it also has a few proponents in Latin America (de la Torre 2010; K. A. Hawkins 2010). As the label suggests, this approach defines populism almost entirely in terms of its ideas or rhetoric, as *a political discourse that posits a struggle between a unified will of the common people and a conspiring elite*. It sees these ideas as the main driving force behind the (un)democratic behavior of populist leaders and followers, providing the motivating force for their policy choices. It does not discard the impact of material constraints, but it sees these constraints as moderating factors in the expression of populist ideas.

The ideational approach especially sees populist ideas clashing with liberal democratic theory. Liberal theory argues that the capacity of citizens to make rational political decisions, or agency, is the normative basis for democracy; as long as subjects have this capacity and meet some minimal legal standard, they are guaranteed full citizenship. They are not judged based on their interests, so long as they are willing to respect the rights of fellow citizens. From this follows the minimalist procedural definition of democracy in terms of contestation for office, participation of most adult citizens, and a set of civil liberties that can ensure the effective exercise of these first two conditions (Dahl 1971; Dahl 1991).

Populist ideas clash with this liberal premise in at least two ways. To begin with, although populism is democratic in its view that ordinary people are the rightful sovereign, it does not see democracy as a contest among equally valid interests. Rather, it sees democracy in an essentialist way, as the eventual expression of a moral, popular voice that should be

undivided. Hence, the expressive, symbolic element of electoral participation is more important than competitive selection. Populists are unlikely to do away entirely with elections, but they are less concerned about their fairness. Second, populism sees this moral voice locked in a cosmic struggle with a conspiring elite that has wittingly and selfishly acted against the common good. By abusing its agency, the elite has forfeited its right to participate as a democratic equal and must be constantly monitored. Hence, undemocratic means are justified in dealing with the opposition, and the continued extension of civil liberties to opponents becomes a generous and risky concession.

Thus, populist ideas (from the right or the left) are an important set of arguments that justify and lead populist leaders and their followers to compromise key components of liberal democracy. That said, the ideational perspective sees material constraints as important moderators of populist ideas. The charismatic leaders that head successful populist movements also help shape their democratic behavior. To the degree that the leader is seen as an “empty signifier” who embodies the collective will (Laclau 2005), followers are willing to tolerate the concentration of power in the executive. Furthermore, independent branches of government are suspect because of their lack of accountability to the people, especially if they are controlled by appointees from the traditional governing parties. But charismatic leadership alone does not produce these outcomes; it requires the presence of a charismatic leader and followers with populist ideas.

Likewise, populist parties and movements cannot work their most significant effects on democracy unless they are in power. It requires time and control over the levers of power for populist movements to alter democratic institutions. In particular, multiple terms in office are important, because re-election provides popular validation for controversial policies. Moreover, the polarization that often ensues once populists are in power can make it easier for them to roll back democratic institutions, with moments of protest and conflict providing the needed pretext. These political opportunity structures matter because even populist leaders cannot immediately impose their will in a democratic context, and because their policy path may not be fully clear; it need not be the result of cynicism.

According to the ideational perspective, outsider status is also not a crucial determinant of populist behavior towards democracy. This is not because outsider status fails to create any incentives to undermine democratic institutions, but because *objective* outsider status is in fact rare among populist politicians. Within our own dataset, only 25 percent of chief executives with a moderate or highly populist discourse are political outsiders.<sup>1</sup> Most populists are not newcomers to politics but objective insiders, with considerable experience in government (Erdogan, Orban, Berlusconi, Morales, etc.). But all of these populists are outsiders in a *subjective* sense, as populist claimants to power against a putative elite. For these politicians and their voters, the claim to outsider status is endogenous to the discourse, and it is the discourse that drives their subsequent actions in power. Objective outsider status may be a variable worth controlling for (we do so in our models), but the ideational approach regards it as an independent feature of populist government.

Thus, the ideational perspective suggests the following hypotheses on contestation:

*H1 The impact of populism on democratic contestation is a function of the intensity of the discourse and the number of terms that the leader is in power.*

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<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a difference in means test shows that outsiders and insiders do not differ significantly with respect to the intensity of their populist discourse ( $p=0.1975$ ).

The ideational approach is somewhat less clear at explaining participation. The ideational approach sees populism increasing participation directly and indirectly (Canovan 1999; Panizza 2005; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). It expects a direct effect due to populist ideas, which are essentially a claim that the common majority has been politically excluded. Populists motivated by these ideas will spend their resources to mobilize and include these groups, and individuals within these groups will respond to the message of empowerment and inclusion. But there is also an indirect effect from political polarization, especially if populists gain power. Not only will sympathizers turn out in greater numbers to support their candidates, but their opponents will participate more actively as they become the object of the populists' demonization and sense the increased stakes of the democratic contest.

Some scholars taking the ideational approach also argue that this effect is contingent on the party's "thick" ideology. So-called left populists—those making appeals for economic redistribution and the inclusion of subaltern groups—are presumed to be the chief drivers of increased popular participation (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). In contrast, right populists are thought to undermine participation because they argue for the exclusion of racial or other minorities, and they may emphasize the economic interests of property owners and the middle class (K. A. Hawkins 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). However, this argument has never been fully fleshed out, and there are reasons to discount the relationship. Leftists tend to redistribute and/or politically include whether or not they are populist (Bohrer II, Pacek, and Radcliff 2000; Pacek and Radcliff 1995). Likewise, right populists might increase turnout by raising the stakes of electoral competition or by capturing disillusioned working class voters from the left that would otherwise stop voting. Many studies suggest that voter turnout in Europe is decreasing (Gray and Caul 2000; Kostadinova 2003; Blais and Rubenson 2013) and that blue collar workers, who traditionally voted for socialist or social democratic parties, are an important part of the right populist constituency in that region (Ivarslaten 2005; Oesch 2008).

Unfortunately, the political-institutional approach does not offer a clear argument for comparison, because scholars using it do not focus on participation. However, given its emphasis on vote-maximization and outsider status, we would argue that it does not see the populist discourse of the leaders as particularly relevant and that it views participation as entirely dependent on the "thick" ideology of the movement. Leftists are more likely to mobilize new participants (generally poor, less-educated voters who would not otherwise participate) than rightist ones (which draw heavily on a wealthy, educated electorate that already participates), but neither of their effects are magnified when combined with populist rhetoric.

Thus:

*H2: Political participation is correlated with the strength of the party's populist discourse, possibly moderated by its political ideology.*

## **Data and Analysis**

To test our hypotheses, we built a unique polity-level dataset that measures the degree of populism of the chief executive along with several democratic outcomes. In total, the dataset

covers 107 leaders in 73 countries from 2000 to the present, although in some countries the coverage is earlier.<sup>2</sup>

The selection of chief executives is based on their inclusion in one of three datasets measuring populist discourse: an initial one from 2006 focusing largely on Latin American chief executives from that time (K. A. Hawkins 2009), a 2011 update of the Latin American data, and a third round in 2013 that covers current chief executives in most of Central and Eastern Europe plus the Central Asian Republics. Together our sample captures much of the current variation in populist and non-populist regimes. The indicator we use measures populism through a content analysis of political speeches, using the ideational definition as its point of comparison. The score for each leader's term is an average of four speeches selecting using a quota sample to ensure comparability across chief executives; sampling techniques and the coding procedure (including the rubric and anchor texts) can be found in Hawkins (2009) and Hawkins and Kocijan (2013). The scale runs from 0 (no populism) to 2 (intense populism). By way of note, intercoder reliability for the dataset is quite high,<sup>3</sup> and correlations with other data from the scholarly literature are also high.

We complement these data with additional country-level controls, such as legislative support for the chief executive's party, left-right orientation, and outsidership. Detailed information on coding and sources is given in the respective sections of the analyses.

We divide our analysis in two parts, along the lines argued in our theoretical section. We first analyze the influence of each chief executive's degree of populism on democratic contestation. We consider three components suggested by the literature on hybrid regimes: the strength of checks and balances, the quality of elections, and civil liberties. We then analyze the influence of the leader's degree of populism on democratic participation, which we measure in terms of voter turnout. Turnout is a key feature of participation in liberal democracy, yet its relationship to populism has not been quantitatively analyzed in any previous work. In contrast, other quantitative studies already demonstrate the connection of populism to mechanisms of direct democracy (Ruth and Welp 2014).

## Part I: Democratic Contestation

We first turn to the analysis of the impact of populism on democratic contestation. We consider three components of democratic contestation suggested by Levitsky and Loxton (2013): the strength of checks and balances (which refers to horizontal accountability), the quality of elections (which refers to vertical accountability), and civil liberties (which guarantee freedom and equality to effectively use vertical accountability mechanisms). Because scores for all of these measures are available on an annual basis, we consider the change in scores across the leader's term in office.

To measure the change in *checks and balances*, we use the Executive Constraints (XCONST) score from the Polity database (Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr 2013), a measure of horizontal accountability that ranges from 1= no constraints on the chief executive to 7 =

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<sup>2</sup> The dataset often provides separate measures for each term of leaders with more than one term in office. For some analyses (e.g. voter turnout) we treat these as independent measures, while for others (e.g. contestation) we average the scores of all consecutive terms to create a single measure for each chief executive.

<sup>3</sup> The 2011 Latin American update has at least 89 percent agreement, a Cohen's kappa of between .66 and .72, and a Krippendorff's alpha of .75 to .82, depending on the coders (K. A. Hawkins 2012). The 2013 Central and East European dataset has 82 percent raw agreement, a Cohen's kappa of .68, and a Krippendorff's alpha of .77. All of these are moderate to high levels of reliability (Krippendorff 2013, 241–42; Landis and Koch 1977).

executive parity or subordination. To measure the change in *quality of elections*, we use the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy Data Set (NELDA) (Hyde and Marinov 2012).<sup>4</sup> We create an index of *electoral vulnerability* based on this dataset, as a proxy of the freedom and fairness of the electoral process (i.e. the level playing field). This index of vulnerability includes the following four items: were there concerns about the freedom and fairness of the election (nelda11), were opposition leaders prevented from running (nelda13), is there evidence that the government harassed the opposition (nelda15), and were there allegations of media bias in favor of the incumbent (nelda16). We code the index to range from 0 to 1 with higher values indicating higher levels of electoral quality. Factors analyses provided in the Appendix show that the items cluster sensibly and reliably on one factor.<sup>5</sup>

To measure the change in *civil liberties*, we use two separate indicators from Freedom House: (1) Civil Liberties, one of the key components of their Freedom in the World index; and (2) the Freedom of the Press (FOTP) score. The Civil Liberties index is itself a composite of four measures: freedom of expression and belief; associational and organizational rights; rule of law; and personal autonomy and individual rights. We reverse their scale so that it runs from 1 (low civil liberties) to 7 (high civil liberties). The FOTP score is collected independently of the Civil Liberties index, although using a similar methodology of expert surveys; we reverse the scale so that it runs from 0 to 100, 100 being the highest level of media freedom.

As for independent variables, the main indicator of interest is the level of populist discourse of the chief executive. We run models with two specifications of the relationship between populism and our outcome variables: (1) an unconditional model using the nominal value of the intensity of the populist discourse; and (2) a conditional model that includes an interaction term between the nominal value multiplied by the number of consecutive terms the executive has been in power. The conditional model takes into account the protracted decline of democracy under populist government, an effect that accumulates the longer that the leader is in power. The intensity of the populist discourse (nominal value) has a mean of 0.42 with standard deviation of 0.46; the consecutive terms in power measure has a mean of 1.52 (terms) with standard deviation of 0.79.<sup>6</sup>

Additional controls reflect current theories about the causes of democracy and especially competitive authoritarian regimes. We first include the average level of economic development (measured as logged per capita GDP) and the average economic growth (percent change in GDP), both measured over the leader's time in office. Data come from the World Bank's World Development Indicators database. Although some research suggests that economic development is not as strong a predictor of democracy in the "third wave" as in previous eras (Przeworski et al. 2000), it remains an important control that most studies include (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson

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<sup>4</sup> The NELDA dataset covers more than 2600 election events in 157 countries between 1945 and 2006. The dataset covers three types of elections. Presidential elections, constitutional assembly elections, and legislative elections – here the focus lies on presidential and parliamentary elections.

<sup>5</sup> We also created an index of electoral contestability along the lines suggested by Hyde and Marinov (2012). However, we do not include this index as a dependent variable into our analysis, since descriptive statistics show nearly no variation in our sample on electoral contestability (on a scale ranging from 0 to 1 the index of electoral contestability has a mean of 0.99 with a standard deviation of 0.06). This indicates, that the chief executives in our sample at least do not hinder other competitors from participating in elections. How equally distributed their changes at winning elections are, however, has to be determined by the influence chief executives have on the level playing field in elections, i.e. electoral vulnerability.

<sup>6</sup> We reran our conditional models with years in office instead of consecutive terms. The results are highly robust and the conditional effect of populism on democratic contestation gains statistical significance exactly around the time a chief executive enters his or her second term (e.g. about 5 to 6 years in office).



2005; Boix and Stokes 2003) The first indicator has a mean of 8.67 and standard deviation of 0.96; the second has a mean of 3.96 and a standard deviation of 2.39.

Newer theories of democratization (e.g. Mainwaring and Pérez Liñan 2013), including work on competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010), suggest that we should also consider the presence of democracy in neighboring countries. That is, demonstration effects and diffusion are important. To account for this regional effect, we use an indicator created by Hawkins and Goodliffe (forthcoming). This measure multiplies each dyadic distance by the level of democracy in the partner country, and collapses all dyads into a single mean for each country. We equally weight all partner countries within 500 miles of a country. Levels of democracy in partner countries are measured using the polity2 indicator.<sup>7</sup> The resulting indicator has a mean of 6.29 and standard deviation of 3.61.

A second control is accumulated democratic experience. Existing work on populism and democracy suggests that the democratic consolidation of the country is an important mediating variable (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). We measure consolidation using the total number of years in which the country has been democratic, as of the year the leader was elected. We consider a country democratic in any given year if its polity2 score is 6 or greater, a fairly typical threshold. The mean of this indicator is 26.18 (years) and the standard deviation is 28.68 (years).

A third control is a political leader's influence in the legislature, which we measure as the seat share of the chief executive's party in the parliament and his outsider status. Chief executives that do not possess enough legislative support to push their political agenda through the legislature (either through their political party or their political experience), face strong incentives to change the institutional balance of power if they have the means to do it (see Levitsky and Loxton 2013). The mean of the first indicator is 0.36 and the standard deviation is 0.18; the second has a mean of 0.21 and a standard deviation of 0.41.

The final control is the level of each dependent variable in the year the leader first came to power ( $t_0$ ). We include this lagged value as a way of controlling for scale effects: especially in smaller scales, the ability of a country to increase or decrease in value is a function of how close the initial value is to the end of the scale. That said, most of the dependent variables have a possible range of 7 or more, and some (Freedom of the Press) can go as high as 100. The only variable where this is really a concern is Openness of Executive Recruitment, which ranges 0-4.

Thus, the model is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Contestation} = & \beta_1(\text{Populism}) + \beta_2(\text{Terms}) + \beta_3(\text{Populism*Terms}) \\ & + \beta_4(\text{Logged per capita GDP at } t_0) + \beta_5(\text{GDP growth at } t_0) \\ & + \beta_6(\text{Democracy in Region at } t_0) + \beta_7(\text{Democratic Experience at } t_0) \\ & + \beta_8(\text{Seat share}) + \beta_9(\text{Outsider}) \\ & + \beta_{10}(\text{Lagged dependent variable at } t_0) \\ & + \text{error term} \end{aligned}$$

The estimations are based on OLS and we adjust for robust standard errors clustered by country.

The results in Table 1 show fairly clearly that populism is the best predictor of most changes in contestation – in line with our Hypothesis 1. The effect of populism is conditional on the time a chief executive spends in office. The interaction effect is statistically significant at

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<sup>7</sup> We re-ran all analyses with alternative measures using the Unified Democracy Score instead of Polity, (Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton 2010; for latest data, see <http://www.unified-democracy-scores.org/>) but found no difference in the results for our main variable of interest.

$p < 0.01$  or better in all of the models.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the more (consecutive) terms a populist chief executive stays in office the more he/she is associated with declining checks and balances, declining electoral vulnerability, declining civil liberties, and declining media freedom. The fit of these models is considerably high for executive constraints with an  $R^2$  of 0.69 and still within the range of model fits in political science studies for electoral vulnerability ( $R^2 = 0.43$ ), civil liberties ( $R^2 = 0.37$ ), and press freedom ( $R^2 = 0.47$ ).

In contrast, no other control variable stands out across all of the models. The null finding for level and rate of economic development except for the civil liberties model will not surprise readers who are skeptical of the current impact of economic development on democracy. However, other readers may be surprised at the result for regional effects, which has been found elsewhere to be a strong predictor of regime change, while we find only a moderate positive effect on electoral quality and civil liberties in our models. As results show (available on request), regional effects are in fact highly significant predictors of the *nominal* level of these components of democracy. However, this strong association vanishes here when we consider the *change* in democracy. We re-tested this result using several specifications of the model (including a straightforward bivariate association between regional effect and the change in democracy) and using different measures of regional effect, including the change in regional effect between the beginning and end of the executive's term, but the results were nearly always insignificant. This suggests that the effects of democratic diffusion are not felt very quickly (our dataset consider average time spans of only 5 years) or that the effects are only felt during critical junctures that are overlooked during the years our dataset covers (1994-2013).

### *Results*

With respect to the influence of the outsider status, we find a significant negative association with three of our dependent variables: executive constraints, civil liberties, and press freedom. This further demonstrates the need to differentiate the effects of a leader's rhetoric and a political leader's outsider status on democratic contestation.

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<sup>8</sup> We also conducted Likelihood Ratio tests to check if the interaction effect adds explanatory power to the respective models. LR test shows that the interaction term between populist discourse and consecutive terms in office does significantly increase the explanatory power of the executive constraints model ( $p < 0.000$ ), the electoral vulnerability model ( $p < 0.01$ ), the civil liberties model ( $p < 0.000$ ), as well as the press freedom model ( $p < 0.000$ ).

**Table 1: Models of Change in Democratic Contestation**

Variable	Executive Constraints		Electoral Vulnerability		Civil Liberties		Press Freedom	
<b>Populism</b>	<b>1.595</b>	***	<b>0.182</b>	**	<b>0.779</b>	***	<b>11.644</b>	***
	0.403		0.087		0.240		2.806	
<b>Terms</b>	<b>0.311</b>	***	0.008		0.064		<b>2.041</b>	*
	0.100		0.034		0.081		1.075	
<b>Populism*</b>	<b>-1.260</b>	***	<b>-0.130</b>	***	<b>-0.628</b>	***	<b>-10.284</b>	***
<b>Terms</b>	0.247		0.049		0.112		1.523	
<b>GDP pc (log)</b>	-0.064		-0.012		<b>0.147</b>	**	0.336	
	0.058		0.031		0.066		0.864	
<b>GDP growth</b>	-0.002		-0.012		<b>0.059</b>	***	-0.020	
	0.015		0.010		0.020		0.250	
<b>Democracy (region)</b>	-0.040		<b>0.022</b>	**	<b>0.033</b>	*	0.164	
	0.031		0.011		0.018		0.263	
<b>Democratic Experience (log)</b>	-0.043		0.013		0.025		0.343	
	0.072		0.034		0.071		0.747	
<b>Party Seat Share</b>	-0.284		-0.141		-0.240		<b>-5.801</b>	*
	0.249		0.108		0.274		3.306	
<b>Outsider Status</b>	<b>-0.199</b>	*	0.022		<b>-0.178</b>	*	<b>-3.131</b>	**
	0.110		0.040		0.094		1.230	
<b>Executive Constraints (t<sub>0</sub>)</b>	<b>-0.148</b>	**						
	0.072							
<b>Electoral Vulnerability (t<sub>0</sub>)</b>			<b>0.501</b>	***				
			0.163					
<b>Civil Liberties (t<sub>0</sub>)</b>					<b>0.205</b>	***		
					0.065			
<b>Press Freedom (t<sub>0</sub>)</b>							<b>0.132</b>	***
							0.048	
<b>Constant</b>	<b>1.742</b>	***	-0.041		<b>-2.079</b>	***	-11.004	
	0.580		0.252		0.716		9.108	
<b>N</b>	100		95		100		100	
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.69		0.43		0.37		0.47	

Note: \* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

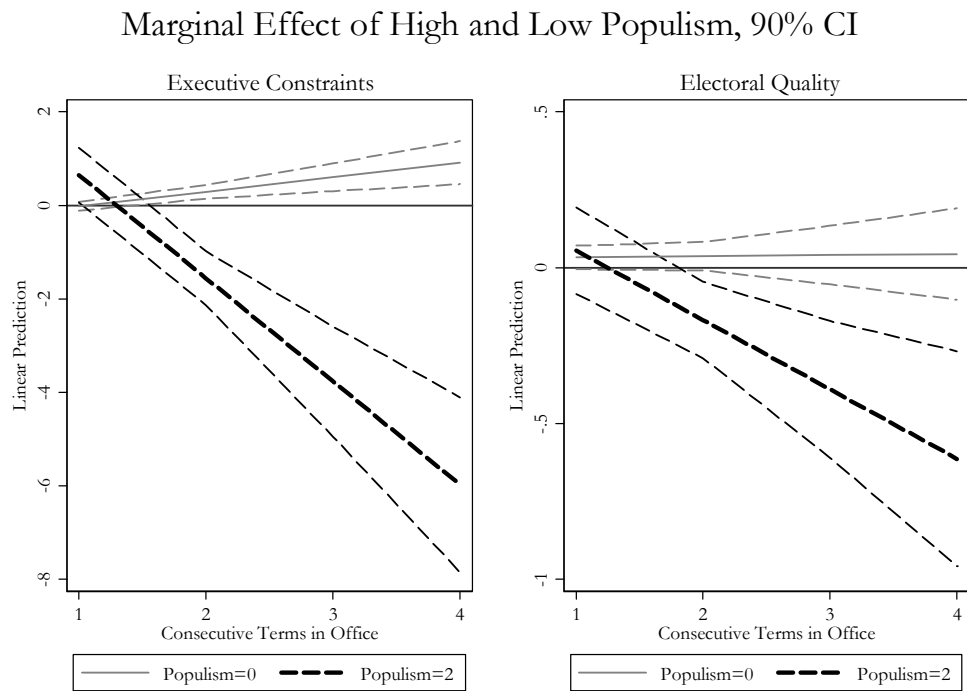
To illustrate the interaction effects of populism and terms in office on contestation, we show marginal effects plots in Figures 1a & 1b. A similar pattern appears for all four outcome variables. A high populism score has an increasingly negative (and highly significant) effect on executive constraints, electoral vulnerability, civil liberties, and press freedom the longer the chief executive remains in office. The effect gains significance right about the time the first reelection takes place (confidence bands intersecting with the 0 line on the y-axis). Hence, if populist executives manage to get reelected for a second (consecutive) term, they are more likely to embark on a mission to erode institutional checks that hinder them to push their political agenda through. Non-populist executives, on the contrary, have a null or increasing (but relatively low) positive effect on executive constraints and civil liberties.

#### *Robustness Checks*

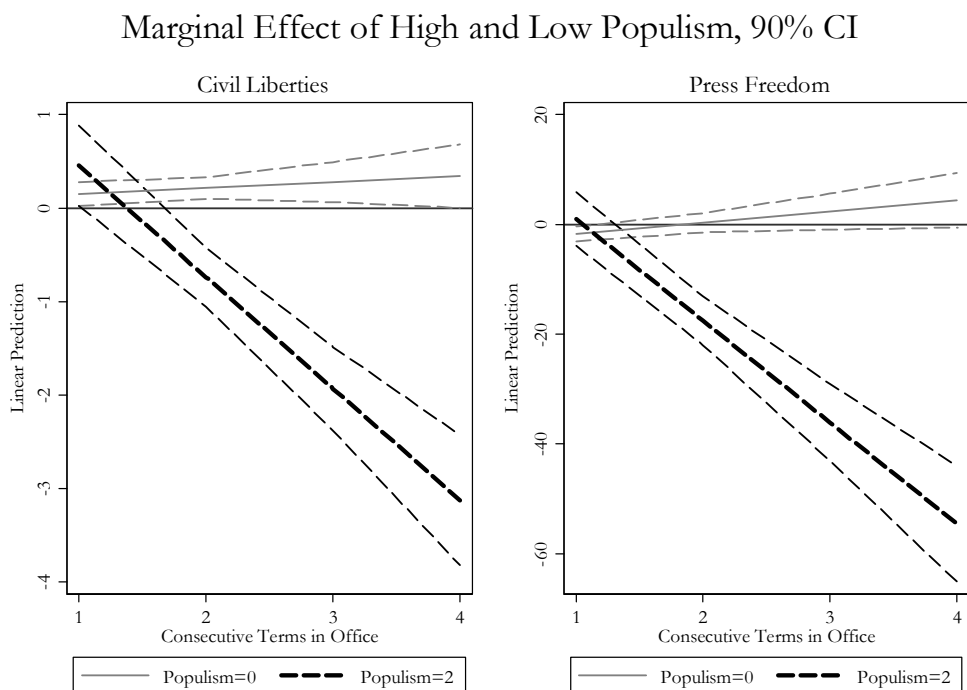
To probe the robustness of our findings we reran the analysis with several other indicators, both on the left hand and the right hand side of our equation. With respect to the former, we include the polity2 indicator from the Polity dataset (which runs from -10 to 10) to test the association between populism and an overall decline in the quality of democracy. Unfortunately, we cannot similarly include the component indicators from Freedom House's Freedom in the World index because these are unavailable before 2002. As an additional check, we also test our arguments using information from the Democracy Barometer (Merkel et al. 2014) dataset that provides disaggregated information on several functions of democracy.

As a robustness check on some of the control variables we also consider the absolute value of these indicators at the end of each leader's time in office. Moreover, because the statistical models calculate only the direct effect of democratic experience on democratic change, we re-ran these models with the interaction of populism and democratic experience, a better test of a moderating effect. As the results show (available on request), the effects are basically nil.

**Figure 1a: Populism, Horizontal Accountability, and Electoral Quality**



**Figure 1b: Populism, Civil Liberties, and Press Freedom**



## Part II: Democratic Participation

We next test the impact of populism on voter turnout, a core aspect of democratic participation. In all models that follow, we measure turnout as the percent of the voting age population casting a ballot in the national election, and we gauge turnout in all elections in which the leader stood for office. Because turnout has to be measured at the beginning of each leader's term (many leaders do not run for reelection), and because we usually cannot compare the current leader's discourse to that of the previous leader, we do not consider the *change* in turnout except in a limited way later in this section. Also, since several countries in the dataset have more than one election, we use standard errors clustered by country. The total number of elections in the sample is 174, although we lose about 30 observations with different controls.

The first of our key independent variables is the level of populism, as measured with our speeches data. Because we are considering turnout at the beginning of the term, we measure populism in two different ways: as the average score across all four speeches in the sample, but also as the score of just the campaign speech, one of the four types of speeches in the sample. Because the campaign speech is the only pre-election speech in the sample, it is a more *valid* indicator; however, as a lone speech it is subject to much greater problems of *reliability*, and for some leaders it is simply unavailable. Hence, we test both measures. For the four-speech average, the populism score ranges from 0.0 to 1.9, with a mean of 0.43 and a standard deviation of 0.48; for the campaign speech alone the range is 0.0 to 2.0 with a mean of 0.62 and standard deviation of 0.63. This follows the expectation that campaign speeches are more populist than executive political discourse generally (K. A. Hawkins 2009).

As discussed in the theory section, populism's impact may depend on the left-right ideology it combines with (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). The model anticipates this by including the ideological placement of the leader on a left-right scale, which we interact with the populism score. We measure ideology using a general left-right placement measure from the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project (DALP) expert survey (Kitschelt et al. 2009). We also use the dataset to measure left-right placement sub-dimensions with two batteries of questions: three questions measuring an economic policy dimension (Cronbach's alpha = 0.948), and two questions measuring a cultural policy dimension (Cronbach's alpha = 0.808). Question wording and analyses of these batteries is found in the Appendix. Because the DALP dataset does not include Belarus or Montenegro, we use Benoit and Laver's (2006) and Szöcsik and Zuber's (2015) datasets for these countries, respectively.

For our other control variables, we consider six that are widely discussed in the voter turnout and populism literature:

- whether voting is mandatory (1=yes, 0=no).
- whether the election was a foundational one (1=yes, 0=no).
- the electoral rules for legislative elections, run as a series of dummy variables (0=plurality, 1=mixed, 2=PR). Plurality rules are the baseline (omitted) category.
- the total population (logged)
- per capita GDP (PPP, logged)
- region (1=Europe, 0=other).

Data on mandatory voting are drawn from International IDEA, while data on the electoral rules come from the Electoral System Design Project supplemented for post-2010 elections with the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. Population and per capita GDP come from the World Bank's World Development Indicators database (downloaded in 2014).

Thus, the model is:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Voter turnout} = & \beta_1(\text{Populism}) + \beta_2(\text{Ideology}) + \beta_3(\text{Populism*Ideology}) \\ & + \beta_4(\text{Mandatory voting}) + \beta_5(\text{Founding elections}) + \beta_6(\text{Electoral rules}) \\ & + \beta_7(\text{Logged population}) + \beta_8(\text{Logged per capita GDP}) \\ & + \beta_9(\text{Europe dummy}) \\ & + \text{error term}\end{aligned}$$

with standard errors adjusted for clustering by country.

### *Results*

Model results using OLS are presented in Table 2 and Figures 2 and 3. Of the standard controls, only mandatory voting shows up as statistically significant. The typical effect of mandatory voting on turnout is large, about 4.5 percent of the voting-age population (calculated for a one-standard deviation shift in this indicator); this is not unusual for turnout models.

As to our main independent variables, ideology has a strong negative association with turnout, indicating that leftist parties significantly increase participation compared to moderate or rightist parties (this effect is present for the overall left-right dimension, as well as the economic and social subdimensions). However, the effect of ideology is moderated by populism. If populism is high, the effect of rightist ideological positions on participation increases. Likelihood ratio tests (not shown here) indicate that the added effect of this interaction is statistically significant. Figure 2 gives a graphical overview of these interaction effects for the left-right dimension, the economic subdimension, and the social subdimension (using populism measures from the election and across terms).<sup>9</sup> The results of each model are identical, showing that among non-populist parties, leftists are clearly more likely to be associated with higher turnout, but that populism does not matter for these parties. Rather, populism increases turnout among moderate and right-wing parties, bringing them up to the level of left-wing parties.

The results of the interaction are counter-intuitive, showing that populism matters for turnout only among moderate or right-wing parties; left populist parties are not noticeably more likely to increase turnout. This result turns the literature on populist participation on its head. It suggests that the apparent increase in participation among left-populist movements such as the current ones in Latin America is spurious: *any* leftist party would be associated with higher turnout. Thus, radical left activists who argue that their movements are the only path toward political participation are offering a false dichotomy.

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<sup>9</sup> Although the 90% confidence intervals of some lines in Figure 4 are slightly overlapping, Goldstein and Healy (1995), Payton, Greenstone and Schenker (2003), and Bolsen and Thornton (2014) all demonstrate that the proper confidence interval for comparing differences between regression lines is roughly 83%. When 83% confidence intervals are used, the lines no longer overlap.

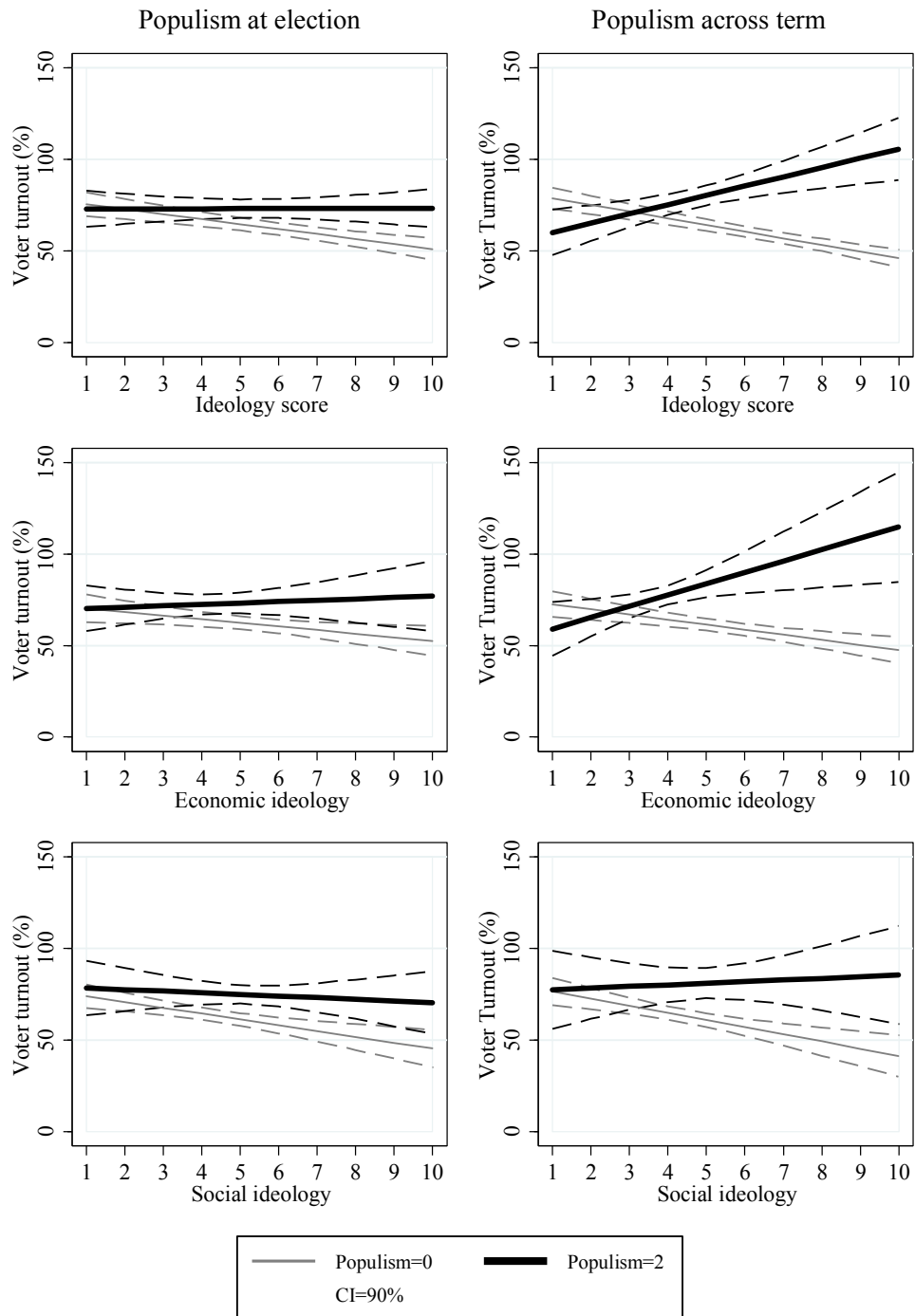
**Table 2: Voter Turnout Model Results**

Variable	Ideology Score* Populism At Election	Economic Ideology* Populism At Election	Social Ideology* Populism At Election	Ideology Score* Populism Across Term	Economic Ideology* Populism Across Term	Social Ideology* Populism Across Term
Populism At Election	-2.68	-1.40	1.13			
Populism Across Term				<b>-13.65*</b>	-11.24	-1.92
Ideology Score	<b>-2.71***</b>			<b>-3.64***</b>		
Populism* Ideology Score	1.38			<b>4.35***</b>		
Economic Ideology		<b>-1.98*</b>			<b>-2.78**</b>	
Populism* Economic Ideology		1.36			<b>4.49**</b>	
Social Ideology			<b>-3.18**</b>			<b>-3.90***</b>
Populism* Social Ideology			1.14			2.40
Mandatory Voting	<b>12.08***</b>	<b>13.73***</b>	<b>12.56***</b>	<b>11.13***</b>	<b>12.19***</b>	<b>12.65***</b>
Founding Election	4.86	4.81	4.73	2.92	3.80	2.50
Population (logged)	0.28	-0.09	0.49	0.05	-0.55	0.51
Per Capita GDP (logged)	0.19	0.29	1.33	1.13	0.66	1.53
Mixed Electoral Rules	-6.13	-7.43	-4.16	-8.23	-9.35	-4.74
Proportional Representation	-2.36	-3.27	0.62	-5.60	-5.89	-0.74
Europe Dummy	2.76	3.81	2.69	0.30	2.93	2.90
Constant	<b>70.82*</b>	<b>70.12*</b>	53.35	<b>74.26**</b>	<b>79.95**</b>	55.15
N	133	136	136	142	146	146
r2	0.32	0.25	0.30	0.39	0.30	0.36

Notes: \* p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001



**Figure 2: Marginal Effect of Populism and Ideology on Turnout**

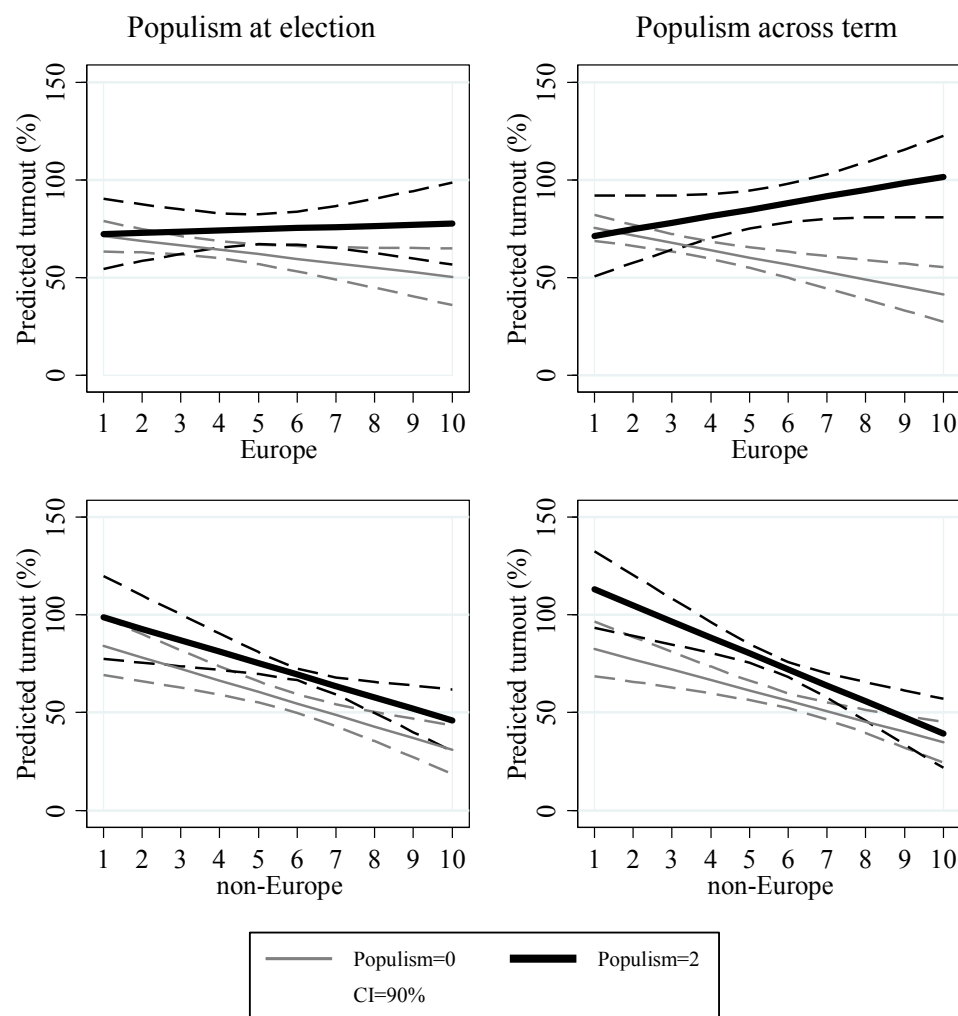


### *Robustness Checks*

It may be that some of the effect we observe is due to regional effects, since left populists are more common in Latin America and other parts of the developing world. To test this, we ran a

series of triple interactions including a regional control variable (a European dummy). Generally, these tests failed to turn up any interesting results; the interaction of populism and left-right ideology has a persistent effect across Europe and other regions. The one exception is in the social subdimension models, where likelihood ratio tests indicate that the model fit increases with a three-way interaction between populism, ideology, and region. Results for just these models are displayed in Figure 3. Essentially, these show that right populism defined in sociocultural terms is not associated with increased turnout outside of Europe. We are not surprised by this finding, however, as it confirms that the sociocultural dimension is not an issue that populist parties compete on in most of them in the developing world.

**Figure 3: Marginal Effect of Populism, Sociocultural-Dimension, and Region on Turnout**

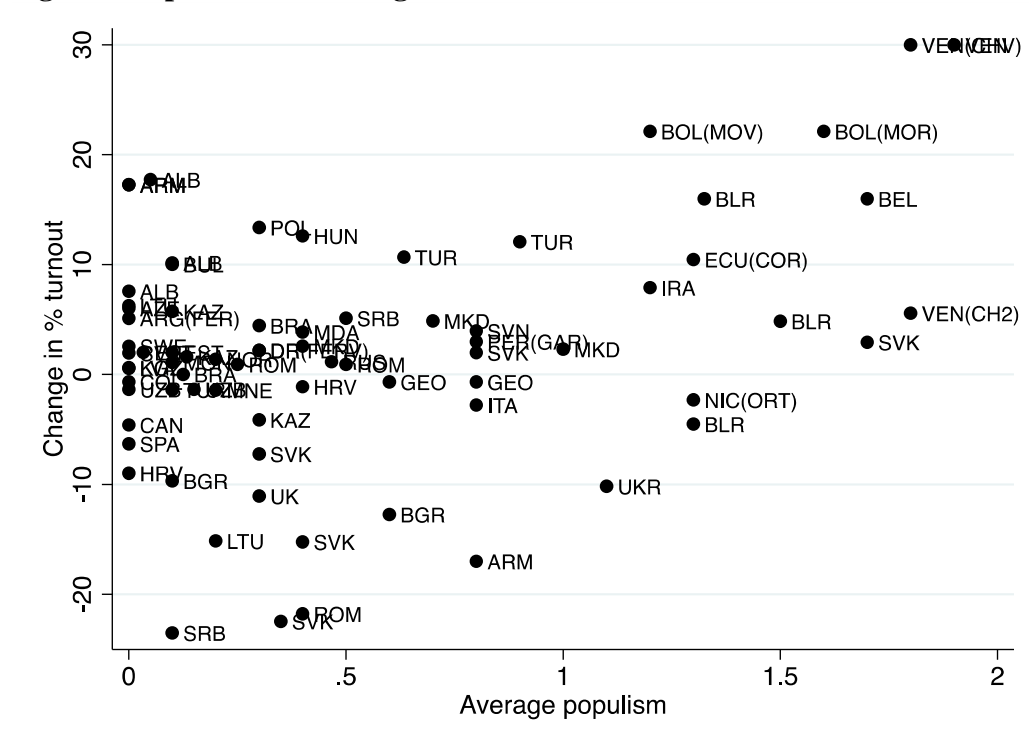


We also test for causal sequencing. It is possible that higher turnout causes populist candidates to get elected, rather than the other way around; after all, higher turnout tends to bring out poorer and less educated voters (Pacek and Radcliff 1995), and these would often be the ones voting for populists. To gauge this, we measure the change in turnout across the terms of leaders,

after they are in office, and compare it with their level of populism across their term. In calculating this change, we look only at the leaders' initial elections and the last one they personally participated in; thus, we include elections they lost as well as those they won. This allows us to include leaders in a number of parliamentary governments, as well as those in presidential systems that allow some kind of reelection. Because many leaders in our dataset only stood for election once, we end up with 56 observations.

The results in Figure 4 show that turnout does tend to increase during the terms of populist chief executives. The pattern is slightly curvilinear, with a number of non-populist leaders also showing increases in turnout across their terms, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe. But among highly populist leaders, the change in turnout is nearly always positive, and the greatest changes in turnout are associated with the most highly populist leaders (Chavez and Morales). Overall, the correlation is  $r = .34$  ( $p < .01$ ).

**Figure 4 Populism and Change in Turnout**



## Conclusion

In this article we set out to answer the question what are the consequences of populism for democracy? We applied the insights of a new, ideational approach to populism that has been gaining traction, especially among European and U.S. scholars. In line with this approach we defined populism minimally, as a set of ideas, and specified more carefully the causal mechanisms that link populism to democracy. We formulated two hypotheses: one that focuses on the consequences of populist ideas for liberal elements of democratic contestation (H1), which we measured with four different indicators, and another that focuses on the consequences of populism for democratic participation (H2), which we measured in terms of voter turnout.

Our findings with respect to democratic contestation confirm the first hypothesis. For all our dependent variables measuring the change in democratic contestation, populist discourse has an increasing negative and statistically significant effect, especially in interaction with the number of terms a leader is in office. This effect is large and holds even after controlling for the outsider status of the leader. Thus, populism not only has a negative effect on democratic contestation, but this effect can be explained largely in terms of populism's ideational content.

In contrast, our findings with respect to democratic participation are somewhat counter-intuitive. We find that populism matters for turnout, an important finding for the ideational approach. But it does so primarily under moderate or right-wing parties; left populist parties are not noticeably more likely to increase turnout. This effect remains robust for the general left-right dimension as well as the economic policy dimension even after controlling for regional effects.

We see two clear implications for scholars and policymakers. One is that populism, and especially populist *ideas*, should be taken seriously. Its association with core democratic institutions is powerful. Contrary to the critics of ideational theories, populist discourse does not appear to be cheap talk or idle words. Second, we think the burden of proof is on scholars who argue for the positive effects of populism on democratic participation. Of course, our results do not tell us what it is about right-populist parties that drives increasing turnout (incorporation of alienated sectors? Polarization?) but they do suggest that the populist left lacks any great advantage over the non-populist left at mobilizing and empowering citizens.

We also see a *non-implication* of our findings. We do not feel these provide a justification for containing or isolating populist movements. What causes populism and how to appropriately respond to it are both complicated questions (and, if our findings are correct, questions worth exploring). But populist movements win power because they represent serious citizen demands for better democratic representation. Containing populist movements, rather than responding to them through effective policy innovation, seems unlikely to blunt their effects in anything but the short term.

## Appendix

### *Electoral vulnerability index*

Our index of electoral vulnerability is based on the following four items from the NELDA dataset (Hyde and Marinov 2012): were there concerns about the freedom and fairness of the election (nelda11), were opposition leaders prevented from running (nelda13), is there evidence that the government harassed the opposition (nelda15), and were there allegations of media bias in favor of the incumbent (nelda16). We did a principal component analysis (Varimax orthogonal rotation) to check if these four items cluster sensibly and reliably on one factor. The results can be found in the following Table A-1:

**Table A-1: Principal Component Analysis of Electoral Vulnerability\***

Variable	Factor Loading	Uniqueness
Nelda11 Freedom and fairness	0.780	0.392
Nelda13 Prevented from running	0.611	0.626
Nelda15 Harassed the opposition	0.660	0.564
Nelda16 Media bias	0.731	0.465
Eigenvalue	1.95236	

\*Shaded cells indicate factor loadings of .50 or greater.

### *Left-right positions*

We use questions from the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project to gauge left-right ideological positions for each leader's party. Although the DALP dataset gauges party ideology across many issues, we analyze general left-right placement and the economic and social subdimensions of ideology and show that the results are the same no matter what component of ideology is considered. We create our measures with the following questions:

#### General dimension:

##### D6 - Overall Left-Right Placement

[1] Party is best located at the "left" of the national political spectrum based upon its overall policy positions and ideological framework.

[10] Party is best located at the "right" of the national political spectrum based upon its overall policy positions and ideological framework.

#### Economic dimension:

##### D1 - Social spending on the disadvantaged

[1] Party advocates extensive social spending redistributing income to benefit the less well-off in society.

[10] Party opposes extensive social spending redistributing income to benefit the less well-off in society.

##### D2 - State role in governing the economy

[1] Party supports a major role for the state in regulating private economic activity to achieve social goals, in directing development, and/or maintaining control over key services.

[10] Party advocates a minimal role for the state in governing or directing economic activity or development.

##### D3 - Public spending

[1] Party supports extensive public provision of benefits such as earnings-related pension benefits, comprehensive national health care, and basic primary and secondary schools for everyone.

[10] Party opposes an extensive state role in providing such benefits and believes that such things as health insurance, pensions, and schooling should be privately provided or that participation in public social insurance programs should be voluntary.

#### Social dimension:

##### D4 - National identity

[1] Party advocates toleration and social and political equality for minority ethnic, linguistic, religious, and racial groups and opposes state policies that require the assimilation of such groups to the majority national culture.

[10] Party believes that the defense and promotion of the majority national identity and culture at the expense of minority representation are important goals.

##### D5 - Traditional authority, institutions, and customs

[1] Party advocates full individual freedom from state interference into any issues related to religion, marriage, sexuality, occupation, family life, and social conduct in general.

[10] Party advocates state-enforced compliance of individuals with traditional authorities and values on issues related to religion, marriage, sexuality, occupation, family life and social conduct in general.

Preliminary factor analysis of the DALP survey questions (principal components analysis, with Varimax orthogonal rotation) shows that the factor loadings of the economic and social questions are nearly entirely within their own group. The factor loading of the general score is divided nearly equally between the economic and social factors, indicating that the general left-right score is an in-between score of the two dimensions.

**Table A-2 Principal Component Analysis of DALP Left-Right Questions\***

Variable	Factor Loadings		Uniqueness
	Economic sub-dimension	Social sub-dimension	
D1 Social spending	0.93	0.12	0.11
D2 State role in economy	0.95	0.13	0.09
D3 Public spending	0.93	0.19	0.10
D4 National identity	0.27	0.87	0.18
D5 Traditional authority	0.04	0.93	0.14
D6 Overall left-right placement	0.69	0.60	0.16
Eigenvalues	3.19	2.03	

\*Shaded cells indicate factor loadings of .50 or greater.

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