

Measuring Populist Discourse: The Global Populism Database

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Abstract

This research note introduces the Global Populism Database, which measures the level of populist discourse in the speeches of 215 chief executives (presidents and prime ministers) from 66 countries across all continents. The dataset covers 279 government terms and includes more than 1,000 speeches, mostly between 2000 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 causes of populism (such as corruption) and to identify the policy consequences of populism (such as political participation and the erosion of basic democratic freedoms). Among other findings, the database confirms that populism in Western Europe and North America has increased to about the same level as Central Europe and Latin America, but that most populists are still only moderately so; that corruption is an important precondition for populism; and that populism harms liberal democratic institutions while improving some aspects of participation

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Background

With the resurgence of populism around the globe, scholars need data to assess the causes of populism and its consequences as well as tools to mitigate its most negative effects. The lack of consensus around a definition of populism, as well as the anti-behavioralist bent of more traditional populism scholarship, has made it difficult to measure populism with precision, validity, and reliability at any level of analysis. What previously existed were mostly dichotomous (populism=yes/no) measures of chief executives by scholar-experts without any independent verification. Large datasets beyond more than a handful of countries have been practically non-existent (for an exception, see Weyland 1999).

Two developments have altered this situation. First, thanks to a greater effort at cross-regional research, scholars have increasingly identified a few core attributes of populism that figure into most contemporary definitions. The unifying element in definitions of populism today-- whether political-strategic (Barr 2009; Weyland 2017), stylistic (Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy 2009), Essex School (Laclau 2005), or ideational (Mudde 2017)--is ideas. Most scholars agree that every instance of populism has at least a discourse in which the putative will of the common people is in conflict with a conspiring elite. While scholars still disagree about the auxiliary attributes of populism—whether certain types of organization or leadership are more populist, whether the appropriate object of study is performance rather than mere words, or whether populism is more truly captured in left or right ideological forms—nearly all agree that the presence of these ideas is necessary to populism.

Thanks to this growing consensus about definitions, a number of new measures have been created that successfully measure populist ideas. To measure populist sentiments at the individual level, scholars have developed and employed public opinion surveys with items designed to gauge the presence of populist attitudes in society (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; Castanho Silva et al. 2018, Schulz et al. 2017). These generally show that populist attitudes are a coherent set of beliefs that are prevalent at some level in most democracies today and that these attitudes correlate with political behavior and especially vote choice (Akkerman, Zaslove, and Spruyt 2017; Andreadis, Hawkins, Llamazares, and Singer 2019; Castanho Silva, Vegetti, and Littvay 2017; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2017).

However, the oldest and best developed techniques measure the populist rhetoric of politicians through textual analysis. Textual analysis--whether of speeches, manifestos, or other political documents--provides a direct measure of politicians' ideas as communicated to the public. In contrast to surveys, speeches and other political documents are designed with public audiences in mind, and they can be studied for earlier historical periods. Tests have shown the measures resulting from textual analysis are precise and replicable. These allow us to move beyond the impressionistic, dichotomous indicators common in the earlier scholarly literature.

Scholars have used several techniques of textual analysis to measure populism. Unlike traditional ideologies or issue positions that are consciously developed and communicated in a few words, populist ideas tend to be latent and diffuse within a given text. The meanings are also context-dependent, requiring knowledge of the country-government period. Hence, most cross-country datasets rely on human-coded analysis where the unit of measurement is a long passage of text—sentences, paragraphs or whole text—rather than individual words (Hawkins 2009; 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). Machine-learning techniques, by contrast, perform best within highly structured genres, such as party manifestos (Hawkins and Castanho Silva 2018).

The Global Populism Database

Starting in 2006, we began creating a dataset of populist discourse for political leaders using textual analysis of political speeches. The initial effort (Hawkins 2009) covered contemporary and historical Latin American presidents plus a few presidents and prime ministers from other regions. Since then, the database has been expanded several times to more countries and time periods. After recent efforts in 2018-2019 as part of The New Populism project at The Guardian, we rolled out a combined version of our dataset called the *Global Populism Database*.¹

The Global Populism Database (hereafter, GPD) applies a technique known as holistic grading which was designed by educational psychologists to measure diffuse, latent aspects of texts such as tone, style, and quality of argument. The technique, originally used to grade essays in the College Board AP exams, has coders apply an integer grade scale and a rubric to identify rough attributes of texts at each grade. Coders are then trained by repeated exposure to anchor texts, or texts that benchmark scores in the rubric (White 1985; Sudweeks, Reeve, and Bradshaw 2004).

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 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

¹ The bulk of data collection projects over the years were funded by Brigham Young University, Universidad Diego Portales, The Guardian Foundation, and the Comparative Populism Project at Central European University. We are grateful for their assistance but emphasize that the resulting measures and any errors in them are our own

(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 sample of texts is a quota sample consisting of four speeches for each term in office: a campaign speech (usually the closing or announcement speech), a ribbon-cutting speech (marking a commemorative event with a small, domestic audience), an international speech (given before an audience of foreign nationals outside the country), and a famous speech (one widely circulated that represents the leader at his or her best). We opted for this over a random sample of speeches to impose limits on the variety and ensure comparability of speeches across leaders, and because we wanted to be sure to include rarer speeches (campaign and famous) that were more likely to contain populism, thus avoiding Type II errors, while still including common speeches (ribboncutting and international) less likely to have populism. Where many speeches are available, we rely on the most recent speech with at least 1-2,000 words (extremely short speeches are difficult to code).²

In our technique, each text is read and coded in its original language; for the majority of cases, each text is coded by two individuals in order to ensure intercoder reliability.³ 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.

The GPD is available as a datafile with documentation in the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LFTQEZ>. Coding rubrics and all speeches will be made available as well. In total it covers 66 countries, with 215 unique chief executives serving a total of 279 terms. The bulk of these are in Europe and the Americas, where coverage is nearly universal, although there are a few additional countries in Asia and Africa where at least a few leaders are covered; within Asia, coverage is most complete for Central Asia, Thailand and India. The coding for most countries in the analysis are between the years 2000 and 2018, although the dataset contains coding for a few historical presidents in Latin America, including Juan Perón of Argentina (for the period 1946-1955), Getúlio Vargas of Brazil (1930-1945 and 1951-1953), Lázaro Cárdenas of Mexico (1934-1940), and José María Velasco Ibarra of Ecuador (1968-1972). Users of older datasets should note that the GPD includes all previously published versions (e.g., Hawkins 2009, Hawkins and Littvay 2019; Hawkins and Selway 2017; Hawkins and Kocijan 2013), but that there have been updates to two countries (the United States and the United Kingdom).

The GPD includes 1,113 speeches, with a total of 2,003 grades assigned. For the 886 speeches graded by at least two coders, Krippendorff's alpha (interval-level) is 0.824, indicating high reliability. This

² Consistent with previous findings (Hawkins 2009, Hawkins and Castanho Silva 2018), in the GPD campaign speeches seem to be the most populist, with an average score of 0.60, followed by famous (0.42), ribbon-cutting (0.21) and international (0.20).

³ While we try to have two coders read and grade each speech, this is not always possible due to funding constraints or the lack of additional native speakers of the language; thus, in some cases there is only one coder. Individual coders still meet with the project coordinators to discuss the scores they assign.

means that we have confidence in the scores assigned by a single coder when a second was not available.

The GPD offers a valuable snapshot of populism at the highest level of government, one that reflects the sympathies of at least a plurality of voters. But it does ignore opposition parties and gives a less-than complete picture of populism at the aggregate level. Since starting the database, we and other colleagues in the Team Populism network have begun a database focused on party leaders in campaign speeches and party manifestos in the coded countries. To distinguish the two databases, we call the latter the Global Populism Database for Parties, or GPD-P. It is also available with documentation at <https://www.teampopulism.com>, but it is presented and discussed in almost its entirety by Hawkins and Castanho Silva (2018), a reason why the current note focuses only on the GPD proper.

A Picture of Populism around the World

The GPD provides an unparalleled comparative overview of populism across most of the democratic world. This overview sometimes modifies but also confirms popular assumptions about populism's spread, intensity, and profile.

The recent growth of populism, especially in the US and Western Europe, has led to talk about a populist wave, but it is still unclear if this is really a global wave and where it is strongest. After all, for decades populism was thought of as an affliction of developing countries. Just looking at static averages, the GPD suggests that populism is still an infrequent problem afflicting developing countries. The GPD covers 92 government terms in Central and Eastern Europe, 86 terms in Latin America and the Caribbean and 55 terms in Western Europe. Of these three world regions, Latin America seems the most populist (0.46), followed by Central and Eastern Europe (0.36), with Western Europe (0.22) being the least populist.

However, the GPD also allows us to look across time. Figure 1 shows the average level of populist rhetoric between 1998 and 2018, where we have the highest concentration of scores. 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 of average populism: from 2002 until 2018, the global average has remained steady at around 0.4. However, we do observe interesting regional variation. Western Europe and North America show the increase that has attracted international attention. From a low start in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the line steadily increases until it touches 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, corresponding with the wave of left-wing populism associated with the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela--which may now be in recession. And while Central and Eastern Europe shows a slight initial increase, this tapers off earlier, starting in the mid-2000s, although the levels there remain relatively high. The overall picture is a growing convergence across the three regions since 2010. We think this picture makes sense. As we

show in a moment, populism comes in various ideological flavors that tend to be regionally concentrated; each of these may be the products of very different contexts.

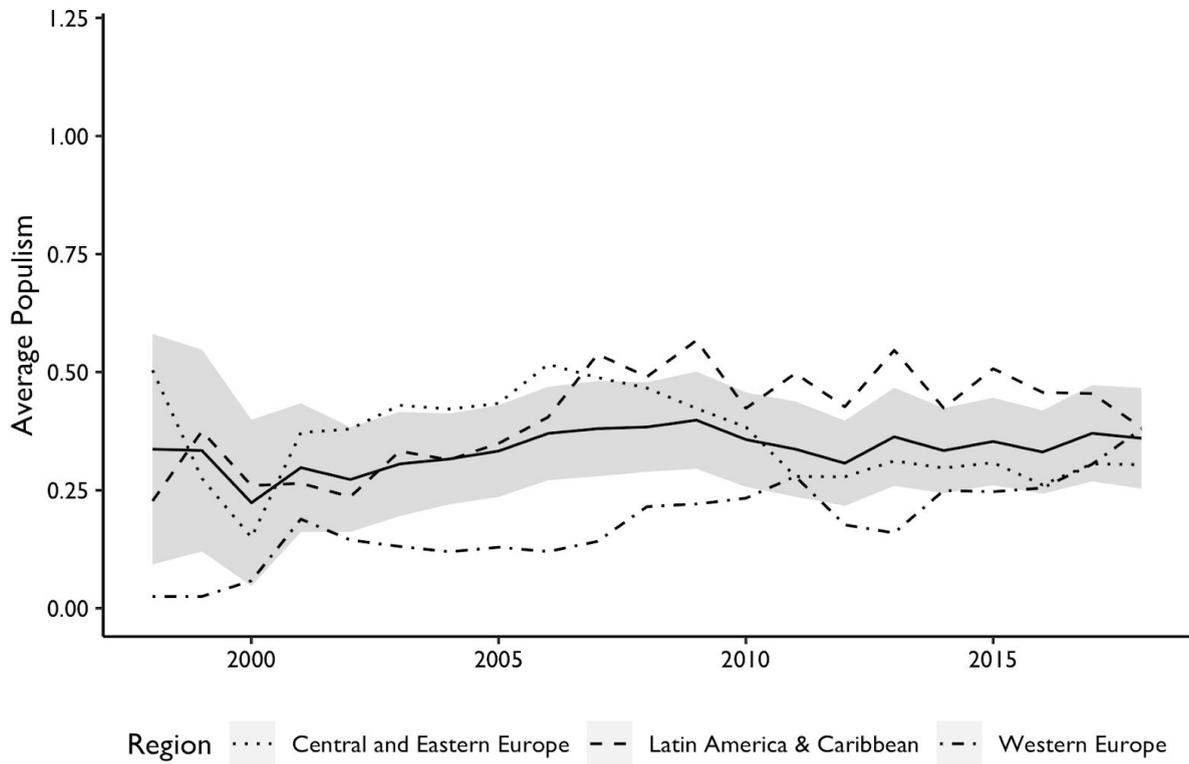


Figure 1: Average Levels of Populism in Chief Executives' Speeches and 95% CI's over time

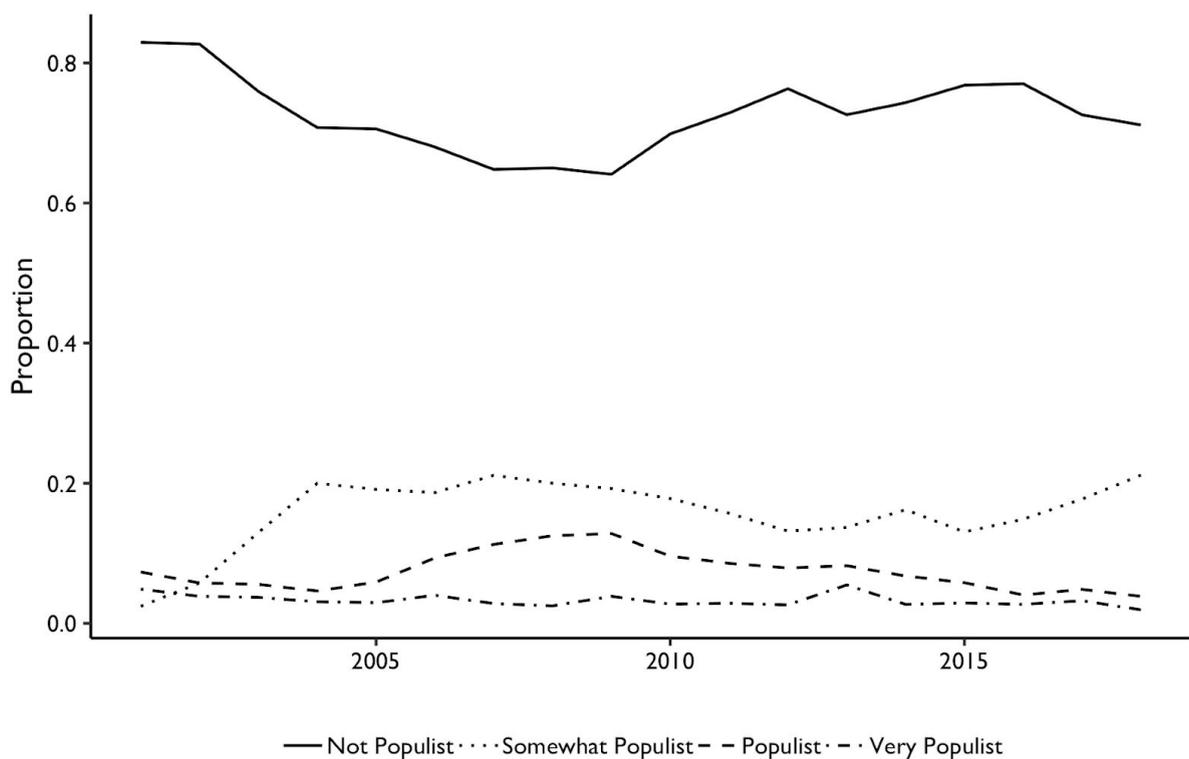


Figure 2: Categories of leaders' populism over time

A related question is whether the growth (and occasional decrease) in populism reflects a change in the number of highly populist leaders or only moderately populist ones; after all, the GPD allows for gradations of populism across individual government terms. Borrowing from a similar classification in *The Guardian's* The New Populism series, 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 academic and public debate over the global rise in populism are responding to is not an increase in the number of highly populist leaders. To be clear, new populist leaders have emerged in recent years, as we highlight in the next paragraph. But at the highest levels there is still enough attrition that there has been no long-term secular increase. Thus, it is not the case that the entire world has suddenly filled with many Hugo Chávezes, but that more diluted forms of populist discourse have begun to appear in more countries around the world.

Given the time series nature of our dataset, we can also examine over-time shifts in the populist rhetoric of leaders who have served multiple terms. Some scholars argue that populists tend to moderate their positions once in office (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2013). While this may be true overall, we find that there are important exceptions. In Figure 3, we display results for five leaders who have stayed at least three terms in office. Four are notorious populists and one is a prototypical non-populist (Angela Merkel). For the most populist leaders, shifts in the level of populism in their rhetoric do not appear to follow any particular pattern. Erdogan became much more populist over the years. He started out as almost zero, and by his fourth term as president is now at similar levels as Morales or Chávez in their heydays. Chávez sustained a consistently high level of populist rhetoric for all his time in office. In the case of Morales, the drop in populist rhetoric by his second term may be partially due to measurement error: the value for his second term was calculated from only three speeches and excluded a campaign speech, and as we have already seen, campaign speeches are usually more populist. Orban's first term (1998-2002) was not populist, while his return to office (2010-14 and 2014-18) shows higher means. Erdogan's and Orban's increases could be explained by the emergence of contextual facilitators of populism during their terms in office, which would lead the two to adopt this kind of discourse (Kocijan 2015).

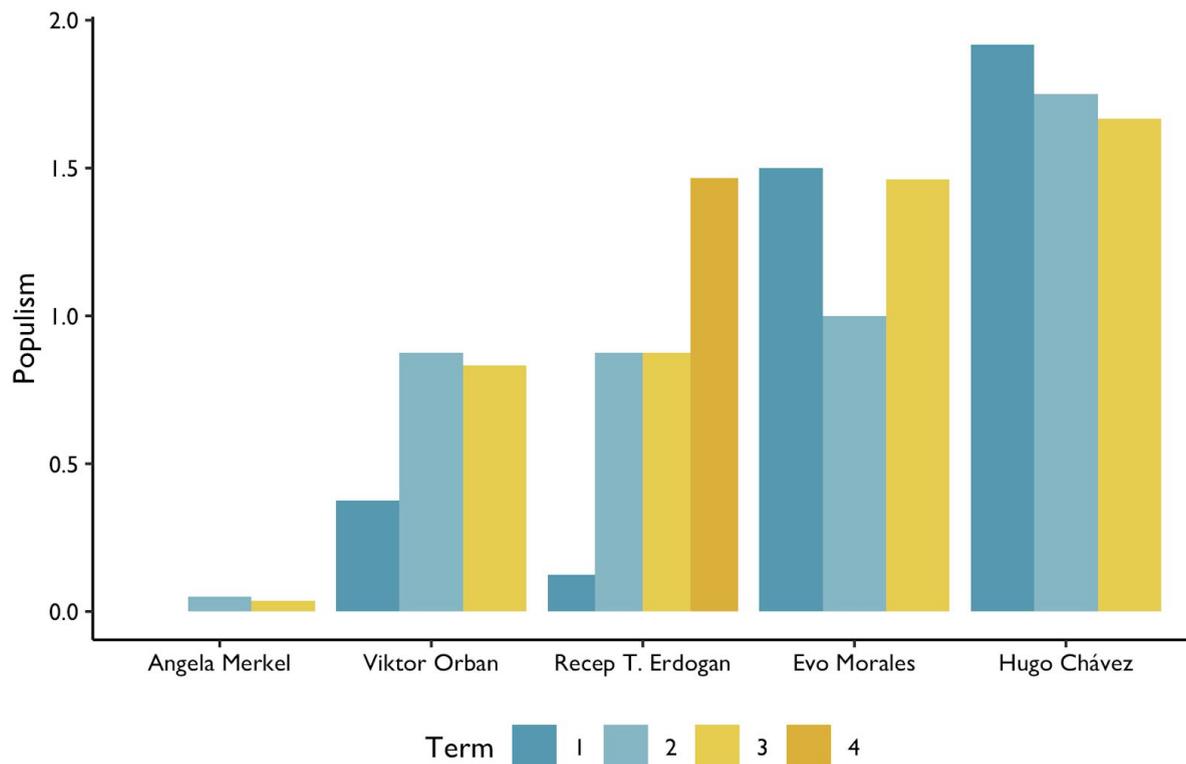


Figure 3: Populism Over the Terms of Five Selected Leaders

The GPD allows us to break down the level of populism by other factors. For example, scholars have shown that men are much more likely than women to support radical right populists in Europe (Givens 2004), even though populist attitudes generally tend to be gender-neutral or only show only a slight male bias (Hawkins and Littvay 2019; Rico and Anduiza 2017). Do we see similar trends among populist leaders? In fact, the GPD shows a strong gender difference, with the overall average for male chief executives being significantly higher than it is for females. As seen in the left-hand side of Figure 4, no female leader gets an average score at or above 1.0; only men are at the highest ends of the populist distribution. The mean difference (0.37 for men, 0.21 for women) is statistically significant in a Welch two-sample t-test ($t = 2.09$, $df = 21.05$, $p = 0.049$).

Populism scholars have also been concerned with the “thick” ideological profile of populists, or their positions on traditional ideological issue dimensions (e.g., left and right). While some see these positions as definitional (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Norris and Inglehart 2017), 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)⁴ and the Chapel Hill Survey for European Parties (Bakker et al. 2015), as well as consultation with in-country experts. The

⁴ Available at <http://ninaw.webfactional.com/prepps>.

measure is necessarily rough (there is no issue-based indicator that covers all countries), but it provides at least a rough cut at the question.⁵

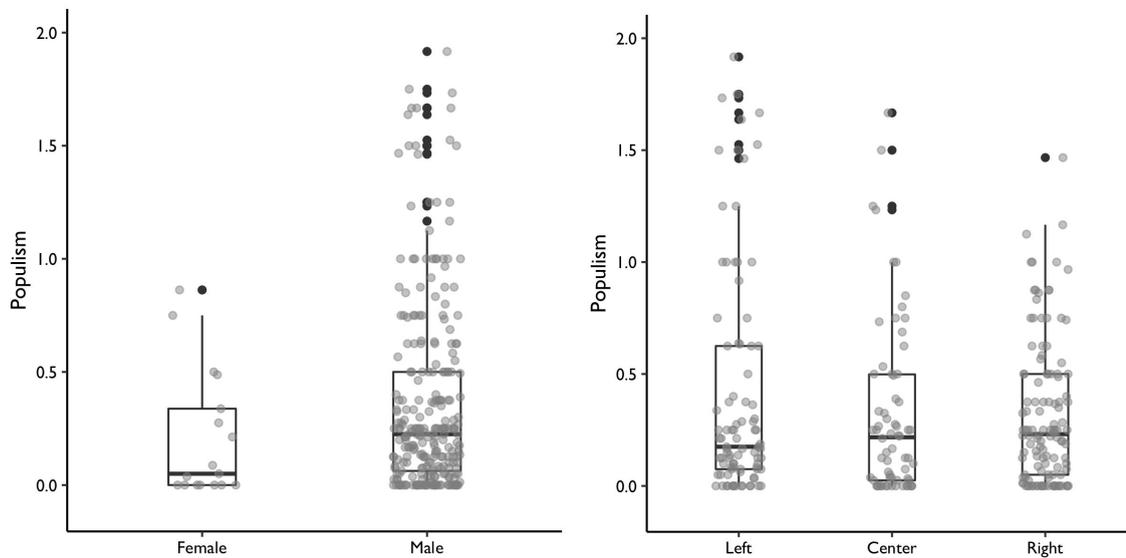


Figure 4: Gender and Ideological Distribution of Populist Discourse

The results in Figure 4 confirm the agnostic view. The average level of populism for left-of-center leaders is 0.41, while that of right-wing leaders is 0.32; however, in a two-sample t-test this difference is not statistically significant ($t = 1.50$, $df = 140.92$, $p = 0.136$). Further, neither of the two sides is significantly different from centrists. Granted, our left-right indicator does not differentiate between moderate and radical ideologues - say, a center-right leader such as David Cameron and a radical right one as Viktor Orban. In these cases, previous research has found that ideological extremism is more associated with populism (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017).

The Dataset at Work

An equally important use for the GPD is to test theories on populism's causes and consequences. Although this note is intended to showcase the database rather than rigorously test theories, we present some scatterplots indicating the relationship between populism and a few of its known correlates, serving as a demonstration of how the data can be used and of its convergent validity. Data for all correlates comes from the Varieties of Democracy project, version 8 (V-dem, Coppedge et al. 2018) which offers the most comprehensive dataset on political variables across space and time, meaning we lose almost none of our observations in the analysis.

⁵ Our default indicator is the left-right indicator (*dw*) from DALP, with party averages split into three categories: *left* if the party is at least 0.5 standard deviation below the unweighted mean of the dataset, *right* if it is at least 0.5 standard deviation above the mean, and *centre* if the party is in-between 0.25 standard deviation above and 0.25 standard deviation below the mean. For borderline cases (parties coded between 0.25 standard deviation and 0.5 standard deviation either side of the mean), we adjudicate using either CHES (Europe) or PREPPS (Latin America). For a small number of observations not included in any of these datasets, our coding relies on online descriptions of parties and consultations with country experts.

There are multiple theories about why populist leaders emerge in some countries and at some times but not others. One of the most prominent is the ideational argument, according to which populism emerges in the context of legitimacy crises that arise from failures of governance such as widespread, systematic corruption (de la Torre 2000; Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels 2017). Earlier tests of these arguments using smaller versions of the dataset can be found in Hawkins (2010), as well as a recent test using different data for populism across the party system (Castanho Silva 2018). The GPD, however, allows for these tests on a much broader scale.

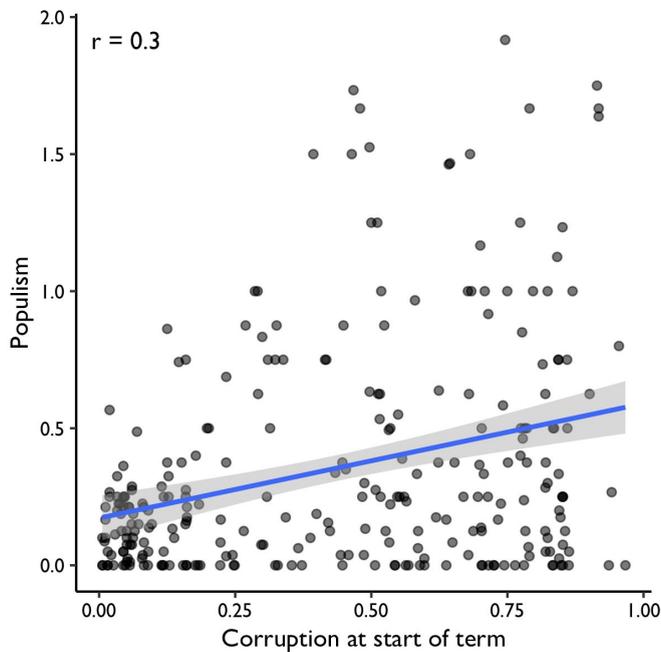


Figure 5: Relationship between Corruption and Populism with OLS Line and 95% Confidence Intervals.

We retest one of these earlier findings here. Figure 5 correlates the level of populism of a leaders' term with their value in the V-Dem Political Corruption Index for the beginning of their term. This variable measures "how pervasive is political corruption", and ranges from 0 (low) to 1 (high). In line with earlier findings, we observe a moderately strong relationship between corruption and populists coming to power, $r = 0.30$. The pattern in the figure suggests that corruption may be a necessary or facilitating condition for the emergence of populist leaders, in that no instances of populist/very populist leaders are found in countries with low levels of corruption, although there are a number of countries with high levels of corruption that still lack populist leaders. Other conditions may provide a fuller explanation of the emergence of populist leaders, such as economic privation or a cultural backlash (Betz 1994; Norris and Inglehart 2017). All of these possibilities could be tested with the GPD.

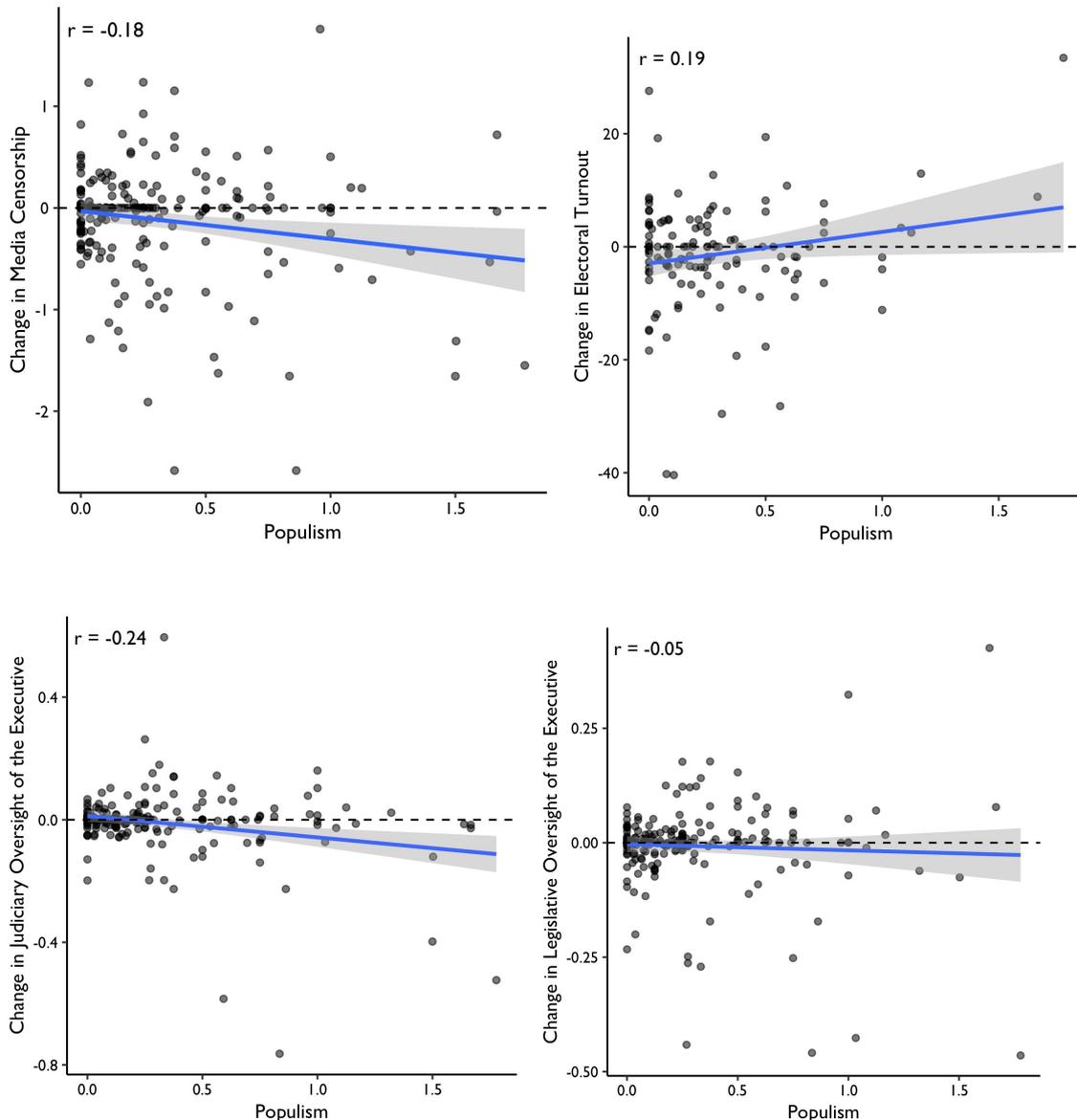


Figure 6: Populism and Its Correlates, with OLS lines and 95% Confidence Intervals.

Much has also been said about the consequences of populism. Many scholars are concerned that populism's Manichaean outlook encourages populist leaders and their followers to undermine civil liberties, the quality of elections, and horizontal accountability (Abts and Rummens 2007; Levitksy and Loxton 2013). A few scholars argue that populism may have more beneficial consequences by encouraging political participation and the democratic representation of neglected groups (Canovan 1999; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). While more sophisticated tests would have to be conducted, we can present a few correlations that test both perspectives. In Figure 6 we look at how certain components of democracy have changed over the period leaders were in office. This time, each dot is not an individual term but a leader: for those who stayed more than one term, 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. The levels of populism are averaged across consecutive terms to get one number for each leader.

The top-left panel contains the difference in efforts of media censorship by the government, from V-Dem, between end and beginning of leaders' terms. Lower values in the scale indicate that "attempts to censor [print or broadcast media] are direct and routine", so that negative values indicate that the index was lower at the end of the term than at the beginning, denoting a deterioration of media freedom during the leaders' administration. We see a small negative correlation between that and the level of populism a leader displays in office, with $r = -.18$.

The two lower panels investigate another frequent correlate of populist administrations: (attacks) on horizontal accountability (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, Levitsky and Loxton 2013). The variables from V-Dem measure how much the executive respects the constitution and judicial decisions, how independent the judiciary is (left-bottom), and how much the legislature and government agencies are able to exercise oversight over the executive (right-bottom). In these measures, higher values denote more independent judiciary and legislatures, respectively, so that negative values indicate a deterioration in horizontal accountability over the leaders' term(s) of office. We observe a strong deterioration in judicial capabilities of oversight during populist administrations ($r = -.24$), but not legislative oversight. One might hypothesize that the judiciary, whose members are often appointed by the executive, might be more susceptible to a quick takeover by a populist administration or that populists often come to power with large legislative majorities, in which case there is no need to reduce legislatures' competence.

The top-right panel examines the relationship between populism and turnout in national elections. The argument for populism's beneficial effect on democratic participation is not so widely accepted, but the claim is that populism is an important antidote to liberal democracy's failures because it forces forgotten issues onto the public agenda and incorporates segments of the citizenry that have generally enjoyed less political access. Historically, this has taken place through campaigns to expand suffrage or boost turnout, but it also occurred through the creation of new participatory or deliberative institutions such as citizen initiative, referendum, and recall, or by granting new channels for policy input to civil society (Canovan 1999; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Ruth and Welp 2015). We do find a positive and significant ($p < .05$) impact: the more populist the administration, the higher the turnout in national elections at the end of their term of office by comparison to the beginning. While this speaks to only one aspect of democratic participation, it suggests that the possible positive aspects of populism are worth more studies.

Conclusion

The Global Populism Database offers a valuable tool for testing arguments about populism's causes and consequences by providing a precise, replicable, valid measure of populism in leadership rhetoric around the world. In this research memo, we describe our coding strategy and showcase its features. Among its most salient advantages is its scope--it includes 66 countries with good coverage over the past 20 years. While scholars who use an ideational approach to populism will find it especially valuable, analysts using other approaches can still use the data (either the quantitative measures, the qualitative speech transcripts or both), combining the data with measures of populism's other features, thus moving beyond the dichotomous, impressionistic analysis that characterizes much of the

quantitative work in populism studies. Moreover, this dataset will continue to be updated, as new leaders come to power (for example, we do not include Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro), and to cover more countries -- an expansion project for the Middle East is already planned, to help understand populism in non-democratic contexts (Hawkins and Kocijan, forthcoming).

Using the dataset, we show that populism in most parts of Latin America has not shifted dramatically in recent years, although the departure of Correa from the Ecuadorian presidency has resulted in some change; perhaps change is coming as well to countries where populist government has run a full and terrible course (Venezuela) or where leaders face challenges in competitive elections (Bolivia).

We are also able to tentatively test a number of common arguments about populism. For example, we show that corruption remains an important correlate of populism, and 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 (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015). However, future studies should test whether these findings hold more for parties of the left than the right, and whether they grow stronger across time.

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