

D2.4:

Report on Comparative Findings and Assessment of Risk Factors to Democratic Quality

WP2 – Simulation



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Work Package 2 Lead: Paris-Lodron University of Salzburg (PLUS)

Task Lead: Reinhard Heinisch, PLUS

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Introduction

The rise of populist parties in many European countries and beyond raises important questions on the future of democracy. Is populism a severe threat that must be averted or is populism a needful corrective to liberal democracy? The PaCE projects explores the state of contemporary populism, the reasons for its rise, and possible counter-reactions against negative consequences attributed to this phenomenon. In this report we review recent research on risk factors to the quality of democracy. Doing so, we first identify external factors, mainly on the macro-level, that have been associated with the rise of populism. In a second step, we discuss how populism might impact on the quality of democracy before we finally present first results of our ongoing engagement with computer simulation modelling. Agent-based models allow for new ways of assessing the impact of causal factors on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels and for conducting counterfactual analyses that provide new insights into the development of populism and thus – at least indirectly – into risk factors to the quality of democracy.



Risk Factors Leading to an Increase of Populism

Extant research as well as findings by the PaCE project have identified several risk factors that contribute to an increase in populist attitudes in the mass public and a rise of populist parties (e.g., Smilova et al. 2020).

In this report, we aim to explain in a first step, which factors lead to an increase of the success of populists in a given context. The debate on what explains the rise of populism is still a comparatively recent strand of research and competing and complementary mechanisms are still being analysed both with regard to contextual factors and the individual level. On the contextual level, the debate on the origins and reasons for the success of populism is mostly concerned with providing economic and sociocultural explanations or both. While both factors most certainly interact, research on demand-side explanations for the success of populists and populist parties has thus far not sufficiently recognized this. Berman (2021) provides an overview of the mixture of explanations and concludes that mechanisms leading to populist success need to be analysed by taking all factors into account rather than by searching for a single variable that explains populism.

We discuss the risk factors identified in the literature one by one in the following sections. However, the interaction of the variety of influences on voting for populists is what makes it complex to grasp the full picture.

Contextual Factors

Not surprisingly, a main reason for the increase in populist vote share is attributed to economic changes. The causal mechanism established here is that economic factors such as increasing globalization, technological modernization progress and the financial crisis have led to changes in the labour market and a perceived or objective feeling of economic deprivation and insecurity (e.g., Margalit 2019; Smilova et al. 2020). While not completely separable from economic grievances, cultural anxiety, such as in the context of immigration, seems to trigger a somewhat different mechanism causing to vote for populist parties. However, the relationship between these causes affecting populist voting is not yet fully established (Shehaj et al. 2021).

In the following, evidence for contextual factors enabling an increase in populist attitudes among citizens and in populist vote share, such as the (perceived) country's and own economic situation and changes in the number of immigrants is discussed. These situations often develop to a status of a crisis (Pappas and Kriesi 2015; Hawkins et al. 2017). This also means that the effect of the respective contextual factor is dependent on how a country is affected by the crisis (Pappas and Kriesi 2015) as well as how the individual is affected or perceives to be affected personally. Perceptions about the economic situation in a country matters more than economic hardship per se (Rico and Anduiza 2019). Additionally, the country-specific context has an effect on the types of populism that are more likely to succeed. For example, the interlocking of three crises, a political crisis, an economic crisis, and a migration-driven crisis in Italy, led to a victory of the M5S and the League, thus of a populist party positioned in the middle of the political spectrum and a right-wing populist party, respectively (Caiani 2019). While crises can be able to catalyse attitudes in a society that were already there before, the relationship is not necessarily seen as being a causal one by authors who regard populism in the sense of the ideational approach, such as Mudde (2007) and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012). This is shown in an exemplary way also by Pappas and Kriesi (2015) who compare the effect of the severity a country is hit by an economic crisis



on the increase of populist discourse. The country chapters in their edited volume (Kriesi and Pappas 2015) show different trajectories: While being affected by the economic and financial crisis around 2009 more than most other European countries, Ireland, for example, showed almost no trace of a populist party (O'Malley and FitzGibbon 2015). Austria, by contrast, was by far less affected but still features a strong populist party (Luther 2015). In the UK, UKIP's vote share increased following the crisis (Goodwin 2015). Hence, instead of just analysing the objective criteria of a crisis, the perception of the subjective positions combined with a feeling of status loss is seen as a more precise analytical category, also as the concept of a crisis is seen as being rather vague (Mudde 2007).

These individual-level attitudes regarding a crisis were also investigated qualitatively by the PaCE project in "Democracy Labs". These events were carried out (remotely) in Italy, Iceland, Spain, and Scotland, with a focus on the COVID-19 crisis. Citizens were invited to express their views on how the government handled the crisis and what could be improved for future pandemics or other crises with regard to communication, economic interventions, and societal consequences. "The public should be treated with respect and intelligence, nuanced guidance and policing according to different types of population" (Cziker et al. 2021) stated one participant reflecting on the perceived relationship between government and citizens.

This interrelationship of causes and the heterogeneity in both how strongly a country is affected by contextual changes and how individuals perceive it, means that a single factor does not automatically lead to an increase of populist voting. But if certain contextual factors emerge and become salient in the citizens' opinion and the supply of populism is realistically available, the probability of populist success increases. This also explains the heterogeneity of assumed reasons for populist success across different countries as well as the variety of forms of populism that emerge from it. While in most Western European countries the successful populist parties, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), owe their success to making anti-immigration policies their trademark, parties like Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece reacted to a demand for economic policies in the economic and financial crisis (Halikiopoulou 2020a). How the current Corona pandemic will affect the various types of populism is an open question.

The salience of the issue of immigration in the mind of the citizens that became most prominent in the context of refugees coming to Europe in 2015 can increase the probability to vote for populist parties either for reasons of perceived economic competition and fear of unemployment or as a threat by the cultural identity of the mostly Muslim immigrants (Shehaj et al. 2021). Both combinations are further exaggerated by a perceived lack of integration into the country and society, for which the elite is blamed by populists (Zasllove 2004). What all contextual factors, economic situation, immigration, and, most recently, the pandemic have in common is the status as a form of crisis (Smilova et al. 2020). The financial and economic crisis that began in 2007, the refugee crisis in 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 were all taken up by populist actors as an issue of great salience to gain support by framing 'the corrupt elite' as clashing with the interests of 'the ordinary people' and presenting simple solutions to the respective crisis, mostly with the help of a strong leadership (Moffitt 2015; Halikiopoulou 2020b; Margalit 2019; Shehaj et al. 2021).

Individual Level Factors

The rather complex interrelationship between predictors of success of populism calls for an analysis on the individual level of citizens to establish the mechanisms of interactions of individual-level perceptions of the developments on the contextual level. Being a much more straightforward task, assessing the degree of populism of political parties as well as the parties' behaviour have been in the focus of contemporary research on populism for a long time. Only recently, measuring populism on the demand-side became possible by the development of a new set of survey questions measuring populist attitudes (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018; Akkerman et al. 2014). The number of expert surveys including measures of supply-side populism continues to increase and so do survey items that measure populist attitudes in the mass public. The latter are already included in many national election studies but so far, unfortunately, hardly in Europe-wide surveys (Dolezal and Fölsch 2021).

That populist attitudes can be measured separately does not mean that they exist in a vacuum but may instead be seen as an expression of pre-existing attitudes and characteristics of voters (Hawkins et al. 2017; Habersack et al. 2021). Thus, populist attitudes have themselves roots in emotional predispositions (Rico et al. 2017) as well as in their specific (nativist) policy preferences (Ivarsflaten 2008; Rooduijn et al. 2021), sociodemographic characteristics (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020), and conceptions of democracy as well as in interactions of these factors (Heinisch and Wegscheider 2020).

Bakker et al. (2016) and Fatke (2019) show how voting for populist parties is in parts affected by psychological causes, specifically by emotional predispositions of individuals. More precisely, low agreeableness was found to be associated with voting for populist parties. Low levels of agreeableness are associated with distrust in other individuals, intolerance, and unwillingness to cooperate with others (Bakker et al. 2016). Fatke (2019) though found the effects of personality traits on vote choice to differ between countries and the strengths of the associations to vary. Thus, there is evidence of psychological roots that are associated with voting behaviour, but they should not be overinterpreted in the current status of their measurement.

Much as the psychological mechanisms, research on the relationship between populism and specific policy preferences, most commonly a form of nativism, is still in an early stage. Even though most successful right-wing populist parties combine their form of populism with nativism, it is still debated what features both concepts share, how distinct they are and on what grounds the combination exactly works. Rooduijn et al. (2021), for example, find mixed evidence for the question if populists are (always) nativists or not.

With regard to the sociodemographic profile of populist citizens, research is also still far from exhausted. Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2020) show that cross-national and cross-regional differences exist. In Europe the populist citizens “tend to be male, older, lower educated, not in the capital region, and unemployed” (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020), while no such evidence was found for Latin America.

Populist citizens' attitudes towards democracy, though, seems to be homogeneous: Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2020) find that these citizens are politically engaged and do not want to overthrow the democratic system but rather democratize democracy. Heinisch and Wegscheider (2020) find that populist citizens tend to be against representative forms of democratic decision-making altogether, because it supposedly cannot regard for the assumed general will of the people. This holds for both left-wing and right-wing populists.



Understanding the conceptions of democracy of populist citizens is an important step towards the effects that populism has on democracy and democratic quality, which we discuss in the second section of this report.

Due to this complexity, a single reason for voting for a populist party cannot be realistically assessed. In addition to the varieties of populism on the supply-side in the form of parties on different points within the political left-right spectrum, individuals might vote for populist parties because they are populist or because of the specific policies the party offers (Caiani 2019; Loew and Faas 2019; Spruyt et al. 2016).

Differences between Western and Central/Eastern Europe

Due to historical and contextual differences, the success of populist parties and their respective positional arrangement differs between countries, specifically as a consequence of their varying levels of involvement in a crisis. The heterogeneity of regional contexts in Europe become especially visible when contrasting Western and Central/Eastern European contexts and when comparing the development of populism in both regions (Smilova et al. 2020).

An important difference can be found in the role of immigration. As shown above, populist success in Western Europe can be linked to growing numbers of immigrants and asylum-seekers in interaction with a fear of relative losses due to the perceived competition, for example on the job market and social services. Central/Eastern Europe, in contrast, is not subject to immigration. Instead, post-communist nationalism allows populist parties to connect to the nativism and authoritarianism of the right-wing populist parties in Western Europe (Pirro 2014).

Santana et al. (2020) find that while negative attitudes towards immigration are less important in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe and the perceived economic deprivation does not have any effect on populist voting at all in Eastern compared with Western Europe, other issues are more salient and increase the probability of voting for a populist party in Eastern Europe, such as higher degrees of Euroscepticism and higher levels of political trust. The latter can be explained with populist parties being in government for a longer period of time already in Hungary and Poland. The respondents might thus think of the preferred populist parties when thinking about trust in politicians, political parties, and the national parliament. The fact that economic deprivation is not found to be a significant predictor of populist success, much less a sufficient one, is underlined by the Polish case, which did not experience an economic recession in the crisis and where PiS nevertheless came to power (Smilova et al. 2020; Markowski 2016).

Populism and the Quality of Democracy

Having reviewed various factors that can result in a rise of populist parties and attitudes, the potential consequences of populism are still an open question. How does populism affect the quality of democracy? In her review of current research, Akkerman (2017) identifies three broad views in the literature (see also Giebler and Werner 2020):

One group of authors regards populism as a severe anti-democratic threat. As a matter of fact, political actors opposing populist parties and politicians as well as various media outlets and political activists tend to equate populism with authoritarianism or, typically in a historical perspective, even with fascism. From a theoretical perspective that understands populism as a democratic – if illiberal – political programme or *Weltanschauung*, such an interpretation is problematic. On the other hand, however, populism might indeed be a severe threat because it rarely appears in a “pure” populist form but is often combined with anti-democratic elements.

A second group of authors interprets populism as an anti-liberal threat. In this view, populism, as defined by the ideational approach (Mudde 2017), is a genuine democratic force but endangers liberal principles such as minority rights, the separation of power, and the rule of law. Unrestricted majority rule is certainly a risk factor to democratic quality and liberal principles such as personal freedom. This threat to liberal democracy, it is argued, is the direct consequence of the way populism defines the demos: “For populism, the people should be understood as a homogeneous community with a shared collective identity. For liberal democracy, in contrast, the people should be understood as an irreducible plurality, consisting of free and equal citizens” (Rummens 2017, 554). Populism is therefore a threat to liberal democracy, never a corrective, but populism can act as a “symptom which signals that something is going wrong in the representative process” (Rummens 2017, 563).

The third group of authors, finally, strongly differs in its interpretation of the impact of populism as it regards populism not as a threat but as a corrective to liberal (or representative) democracy. In this perspective, populism might reduce the power of political, economic or other elites and especially the influence of technocrats, another form of political representation opposed to principles of liberal democracy (Caramani 2017). Authors who see potentially positive effects of populism often relate them to specific kinds of populism and regard inclusionary (left) populism to be different from exclusionary (right) populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Different kinds of populism (Ivaldi et al. 2017) are thus associated with different risks to democratic quality.

Populism’s impact on the quality of democracy is thus seen differently in the research literature. These differences are partly the result of a different understanding of populism. In a normative perspective, these divergent assessments are also the result of differences in the preferred trade-off between democratic and liberal principles. Moreover, the different assessments and empirical findings in the literature are also the consequence of several intervening factors that moderate the influence populism has for the quality of democracy. Extant research has identified factors such as the role of populist parties in government or opposition, whether populists govern (or act) in consolidated or new democracies, and whether populist parties combine their populism, understood as a thin ideology, with socialist (left) or nativist (right) host ideologies (see Huber and Schimpf 2017, 335). In such a perspective, risk factors for democratic quality depend on various contextual and actor-specific factors that need to be accounted for.



The actual effect populism has on the quality of democracy has been analysed in various ways. Researchers have used different measures of democracy and explored whether populism decreases or increases the overall quality of democracy. Others have focussed on the role of populism concerning the level and equality of participation. Again, others have dealt with questions of representation and asked what populists do when in power or how populism affects democratic institutions such as parliaments and the public discourse in general.

Overall Quality of Democracy

Whether populism affects the overall quality of democracy is the most fundamental question of any debate on risk factors. Using various indices that quantify the level of democracy in a country at specific points in time, Huber and Schimpf (2017) stress the importance of intervening factors such as the level of democratic consolidation or the specific role populist parties play in the system of government (see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Consolidated democracies such as Austria, Huber and Schimpf argue, seem to be hardly affected by a government including a populist radical-right party, which also acts as junior partner only. The quality of democracy in East-Central Europe seems to be affected by populist governments as decreasing scores for both Slovakia (Smer) and Hungary (Fidesz) demonstrate. In Venezuela, by contrast, the populist government has led to the breakdown of democracy. Ruth-Lovell et al. (2019, 24) report that populist governments “tend to erode the level of the electoral, liberal and deliberative model of democracy”.

In a study comparing Latin American countries, Huber and Schimpf (2016b) found positive effects on the quality of democracy when populists were in opposition and especially in countries where democracy was less consolidated. Negative effects of populism, these authors show, occur when they are in power. In Europe, where populism is most often found on the right of the political spectrum, populist radical right parties also have a negative effect on democratic quality when they are part of the government, but there is no evidence for a positive effect when they are in opposition (Huber and Schimpf 2016a).

In a similar study, Vittorio and Morlino (2021, 32), presented such mixed results as well and additionally stressed the impact the Great Recession had: “(...) up until the beginning of the economic crisis in in the late 2000s, populism’s impact on polyarchic institutions appears to have been marginal, even in those cases where populism played a relatively important role, and the political system was jeopardized by corruption scandals (e.g. in Italy)”. Afterwards, the authors identify a “democratic deterioration” caused by exclusionary populist rule, but only in Eastern Europe, namely Poland and Hungary. Exclusionary populism in the West as well as inclusionary populism in general, which is rather rare throughout Europe, does not have a clear impact on the quality of democracy, these authors maintain.

An extreme threat to the quality of democracy is finally represented by state capture through populist actors of which Hungary (Fazekas and Tóth 2016) and to a lesser extent Poland (Kozarzewski and Białowski 2016) and Serbia (Bochsler and Juon 2020) are the best-known cases. There, the leader coordinates vast patronal and partisan networks that exert control over the judiciary, national financial institutions, the national media, education institutions, including universities, as well as the key administrative apparatus. A further consequence entails using the state bureaucracy to restrict civil society organisations and the opposition. Attempts at eliminating the neutrality of state vis-à-vis political parties was also in evidence in the US during the Trump



administration (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) and has clearly transformed Latin American regimes such as Venezuela and Nicaragua from merely populist to naked authoritarian (De La Torre 2018).

Participation

The effect of populism – either of populist attitudes or of populist actors – on political participation is another way by which researchers have assessed its impact on the quality of democracy. Empirical research, however, has so far produced mixed results. Some studies show that populist attitudes increase political involvement and thus decrease unequal participation based on factors such as education or income (Anduiza et al. Rico 2019). Experimental research has shown that anti-elitist messages are particularly mobilizing factors whereas anti-immigrant messages delivered by political elites rather have demobilizing effects (Hameleers et al. 2018). Ardag et al. (2020), by contrast, found no effect related to populism at all.

Studies on turnout using aggregate data have observed differences between Western and Eastern Europe as the presence of populist parties leads to higher turnout only in the East (Leininger and Meijers 2020). Immerzeel and Pickup (2015), by contrast, found young and East European citizens to be rather demobilized by the emergence of successful populist radical right parties whereas in Western Europe these parties tend to mobilize already politically interested groups.

Populists, finally, might also affect how people can participate. Research shows that populist-leaning citizens strongly prefer direct democracy (Mohrenberg et al. 2021). Populist parties too often refer to direct-democratic procedures when in opposition but when in power they hardly empower people by introducing institutional reforms such as direct democracy (Akkerman 2017, 174).

Representation

Populism, its defenders have argued, might lead to a better representation of voters in parliament and/or government. Regarding the congruence of voters' and political elites' (candidates) attitudes, a study on Greece found rather mixed results though (Andreadis and Stavrakakis, 2017). Comparing populist attitudes and party positions in thirteen European countries, by contrast, Dolezal reported high levels (2021).

Do populists represent their voters when in power? Akkerman (2017) identified nine parties that participated in a total of 17 cabinets either as a formal coalition partner or formal external supporter in Europe since 2000. While “government participation [of populists] is still remarkably understudied” (Akkerman, 2017, 172), he nevertheless sees fundamental freedoms and rights in danger but only in less consolidated democracies such as Latin America and Eastern Europe, but not in Western Europe. Populists, Akkerman maintains, “give a voice to those groups that prefer more exclusive policies in relation to immigrants or people with an immigrant background” (Akkerman, 2017, 175).



Indirect effects: public discourse and impact on mainstream parties

Populism not only has direct effects on the quality of democracy, especially when in government – and above all in less consolidated democracies. Populist attitudes are associated with a belief in conspiracy theories (Castanho Silva et al. 2017) and populism in general has also negative effects on public discourse. Populist actors, above all from the right, especially use social media to spread their messages with “attacks on the media elite and ostracism of others” (Engesser et al. 2017). But there are also potentially positive side effects as the strength and polarizing character of populist parties increases the news-value of political institutions such as parliaments which results in more coverage of politics and thus – indirectly – might provide a better basis for an informed electoral choice (Miklin and Dolezal 2021).

Another rather indirect effect of populism is the way mainstream parties react to the rise of their populist competitors. Based on previous studies on patterns of party competition (e.g., Meguid 2005) Albertazzi et al. (2021) distinguish three strategies: dismissive (mainstream parties do not react at all), adversarial (mainstream parties oppose populists), and accommodative (mainstream parties take over populist positions and/or build coalitions with these parties).

In their study of the development in Austria, Heinisch et al. (2021, 75) apply this typology and find both extreme types of strategies applied: “a policy of complete isolation and marginalization as well as full-fledged cooperation in government”. The conservative ÖVP’s strategy of cooperation is the result of strategic and programmatic factors, as it allowed the party after the 1999 election, when it was only the third strongest party, to break out from its role as junior partner in the Grand Coalition with the SPÖ. Moreover, the ÖVP step by step moved closer to the FPÖ in programmatic terms in the fields of immigration, security – and at least partly also with respect to Europe. The migration crisis of 2015/2016, which particularly affected Austria, once again reinforced this strategy which was personalized by the ÖVP’s new leader – and subsequent chancellor – Kurz. The SPÖ, by contrast, has tried to isolate the FPÖ (at least on the federal level of government).

Simulation: A New Approach for Analysing Risk Factors

How can we systematically assess the effects of risk factors for the quality of democracy? Research has been typically based on cross-sectional or time-series analysis to explore the causal effects certain risk factors have. Researchers have, as shown above, used measures of the overall quality of democracy and explored whether and how they are influenced by populists in government or opposition depending on contextual factors such as the previous level of democracy (Huber and Schimpf 2016b, 2016a). Others have used individual level survey data or aggregated data on turnout to assess the link between populist attitudes and populist messages on the one and mass participation on the other side.

An alternative approach to assess how populism or factors associated with populism affect the quality of democracy is the use of agent-based simulation. An agent-based model (ABM) simulates the actions and interactions of autonomous agents, which can represent both individuals (e.g., voters) or collective entities (e.g., parties), in order to understand the behaviour of the system under investigation. Specific advantages of this approach are the capability to explicitly model individual behaviour, include heterogeneous decision-making



processes, and integrate quantitative and qualitative data from a range of sources. It also allows for exploring what-if scenarios and counterfactual reasoning. The PaCE project (WP 2) uses real world data on voters' attitudes and party preference, on the position of political parties, and the salience of issues in the mass public and combines this with theories on voters' decision-making (Lau et al. 2018) and parties' strategic moves in the political space (Muis and Scholte 2013, Laver and Sergenti 2012).

In a recent paper, Meyer et al. (2021) simulate the development in Austrian party politics between the national elections of 2013 and 2017, a period that was affected by the refugee crisis of 2015/2016 and the above-mentioned leadership-change in and shift to the right by the conservative ÖVP. The best available model uses a mix of voter strategies and successfully reproduces the trends in opinion polls, namely the rise of the ÖVP. Subsequent simulations will not only use what-if scenarios based on different voter strategies (such as the relative importance of rational choice) but will focus on what-if scenarios concerning real-world developments such as the refugee crisis and the leadership and programmatic change of the ÖVP. This will be compared to the development in Germany, where mainstream parties are confronted with populism not only on the right (AfD) but also on the left of the political spectrum (Linke).



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