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Do Populist Parties Increase Voter Turnout?

Evidence from over 40 Years of Electoral History in 31 European Democracies*

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Abstract

While some consider populist parties to be a threat to liberal democracy, others have argued that populist parties may positively affect the quality of democracy by increasing political participation of citizens. This supposition, however, has hitherto not been subjected to rigorous empirical tests. The voter turnout literature, moreover, has primarily focused on stable institutional and party system characteristics – ignoring more dynamic determinants of voter turnout related to party competition. To fill this double gap in the literature, we examine the effect of populist parties, both left and right, on aggregate-level turnout in Western and Eastern European parliamentary elections. Based on a dataset on 315 elections in 31 European democracies since 1970s, we find that turnout is higher when populist parties are represented in parliament prior to an election in Eastern Europe, but not in Western Europe. These findings further our understanding of the relationship between populism, political participation and democracy.

Keywords

Voter turnout, Representation, Time-series cross-sectional analysis, Political Participation, Populist parties

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1 Introduction

Since the late 1990s onward, the number of politically relevant populist political parties in Europe has increased considerably. With varying degrees of success, populist (radical) right and populist (radical) left parties have established themselves as important players in European democracies (Mudde 2007; March 2011; Van Kessel 2015; March and Keith 2016).

As populist parties have gained electoral success and, in some cases, have been able to form government coalitions, political scientists have turned to the question what the ascendancy of populism means for the quality of liberal democracy. More often than not, populist parties are considered to be a threat to the stability of liberal democracies. Given that populists regard ‘the people’ as a pure and homogeneous entity sharing one ‘general will’ (Mudde 2004) that needs to be translated into policy, populism is considered to be antithetical to democratic pluralism and the rule of law. Therefore, authors such as Müller (2016, p. 3) conclude that ‘populism tends to pose a danger to democracy’ – see also Abts and Rummens (2007). And, indeed, Huber and Schimpf (2017), Houle and Kenny (2018), Ruth (2018), and Kenny (2019) find that populist leaders and parties can have a negative impact on the separation of powers, the rule of law and minority rights.

Notwithstanding such widespread fears about populist politics, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) stress potential positive effects of populism. They argue that populist parties can also be a ‘corrective for democracy.’ According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, p. 83), ‘populism tends to favor political participation.’ Populist movements and parties are postulated to voice the concerns of citizens who have been previously mis- or underrepresented by the political establishment. Populist parties are thus considered to be capable of mobilizing previously underrepresented citizens. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) hypothesize therefore that populist parties can increase voter turnout in national elections. The existing evidence, however, on the effects of populist parties on turnout is inconclusive (Huber and Ruth 2017; Houle and Kenny 2018; Spittler 2018).

At the same time, the literature on voter turnout often focused on institutional and party system-related determinants (Blais 2006; Geys 2006; Cancela and Geys 2016; Stockemer 2017). Regarding political parties, the turnout literature has primarily focused on variables such as the (effective) number of parties and the competitiveness of elections, thereby neglecting more dynamic party competition determinants of voter turnout (see Blais 2006; Stockemer 2017).

As the limited extant research on the relationship between populist parties and political participation has come to divergent conclusions (Huber and Ruth 2017; Houle and Kenny 2018; Spittler 2018), our study assesses the effect of populist parties on voter turnout for a variety of operationalisations and model specifications. Specifically we ask the question: *Do populist parties increase turnout in parliamentary elections?*

Given that individual-level voter turnout data suffers from problems related to social desirability and recall bias (Karp and Brockington 2005; Holbrook and Krosnick 2010; Smets and Ham 2013), this study focuses on the aggregate-level turnout in national elections, with an election in a given country as our unit of analysis. Studying aggregated voting behaviour is important because ‘individual idiosyncrasies cancel each other and allow the estimation of models with greater explanatory power’ (Matsusaka and Palda 1999, p. 442).

To examine whether populist parties affect aggregate-level turnout we have compiled a data set of 329 national parliamentary elections in European democracies since 1970 from the *ParlGov* database (Döring and Manow 2016), the *Comparative Political Data Set (CPDS)* (Armingeon et al. 2016) and further sources.

Populist parties may also affect newer democracies differently than established democracies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) – particularly given that political participation is less stable in transitional democracies (Kostadinova and Power 2007; Kostelka 2017). In our analysis, we therefore also distinguish between Western and Central and Eastern European (CEE) democracies. Given that left-wing and right-wing populist parties

couple their populism with entirely different host ideologies and attract different voters (Rooduijn et al. 2017), we also assess whether the results are driven by left-wing or right-wing populist parties.

Our time-series cross-sectional analyses reveal that populist parties, however operationalised, do not affect voter turnout in West European democracies. These are sobering findings to those who claim populist parties have a participatory effect on West European democracies. In Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, we find robust evidence that parliamentary representation of populist parties does affect voter turnout. This finding qualifies from previous findings (Huber and Ruth 2017; Houle and Kenny 2018), which found no effect of populist party supply on voter turnout, and points to the importance of carefully assessing multiple possible operationalisations as well as model specifications.

2 Theory

2.1 The Ramifications of Populism for Liberal Democracy

Increasingly, political parties characterized as ‘populist’ have achieved democratic representation. While some define populism as a political strategy (Weyland 2001; Kenny 2019) or a political style (Moffitt and Tormey 2014), we regard populism as a set of ideas (see Hawkins et al. 2018). The ideational approach considers populism to be a discourse or ideology that sees politics as a moral struggle between two juxtaposed homogeneous groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and as an expression of the general will of the people (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004; Hawkins 2009; Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Applications of the ideational approach have established empirically that populist ideas are present in party communication and ideology (Hawkins 2009; Rooduijn et al. 2014) and in citizens’ attitudes (Akkerman et al. 2014; Geurkink et al. 2019).

Populism comes in many different guises (Huber and Schimpf 2017; Van Hauwaert and

Van Kessel 2018). Populist radical right parties combine populism with nativism and authoritarianism. Nativism considers non-native elements in society, such as people and ideas, a threat to the nation. Authoritarianism denotes the belief that society should be strictly ordered by means of punitive measures (Mudde 2007). The populist radical right usually defines ‘the pure people’ in ethnic or cultural terms and considers the ‘liberal political establishment’ as the ‘corrupt elites’. By contrast, the populist radical left combines populism with a fundamental critique of market-liberalism and new public management (March 2011; Ramiro and Gomez 2017). For the populist radical left, ‘the people’ are an amalgam of ordinary citizens threatened by corporations and neoliberal elites.

More often than not, populist parties have been characterized as a danger to the functioning of democracy (see for instance Abts and Rummens 2007; Downs 2012). Key components of the ideational definition of populism are at odds with pluralist conceptions of society. It is antithetical to the idea of representative democracy which gives primacy to pluralist political contestation and, as such, poses a challenge to party government as a pillar of representative democracy (Caramani 2017). Populists’ Manichean conception of politics between the good people and the evil elite indicates an intrinsic antithesis between populism and pluralism that is apparent in all populist parties (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p.83). Nevertheless, ethnic conceptions of ‘the people’ and disdain for minority rights voiced by populist radical right parties are particularly at odds with pluralist values in liberal democracy (Mudde 2007).

In recent years, the relationship between populism and liberal democracy has been subjected to empirical scrutiny. Examining the link between populism and horizontal accountability in Latin America, Ruth (2018) shows that populist presidents have eroded checks and constraints on the executive (see also Houle and Kenny 2018). This is in line with the populist conception that the people’s will should be translated into politics (by the populist leader) in an unmediated, undistorted fashion. Relying on Weyland’s (2001) definition of populism, Kenny’s (2019) analysis of 91 countries shows that pop-

ulist government rule is associated with the erosion of media freedom. As populist chief executives are less concerned with the longevity of their party beyond their rule, they are not incentivised to safeguard the rules of the game that would facilitate re-election when in opposition.

Focusing on Europe, Huber and Schimpf (2017) find that the presence of right-wing populist parties is associated with a decline in minority rights, whilst left-wing populist presence is associated with higher levels of minority rights. In addition, Huber and Schimpf (2017) find that populist presence is associated with lower levels of mutual constraints. Developments of democratic backsliding attested in Hungary and Poland under the populist Fidesz and PiS governments give further case-level evidence of the negative effects of populism on liberal democracy (Rupnik 2016).

Despite the detrimental effects of populism on democracy, some argue that populism may also exert positive effects on the quality of democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 83). The positive potential of populism resides in two interrelated factors: voicing underrepresented political concerns and mobilizing political participation. Populism can function as a ‘democratic corrective’ since populist parties can give a voice to societal groups previously excluded from or underrepresented in politics. While some scholars argue that populism therefore is a response to the growing distrust in politics (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Betz 1994), others argue that populism is a response to excessive depoliticized decision-making – produced by European integration and the collusion of mainstream parties (Mair 2007). Huber and Ruth (2017) find that populist parties increase the equality of participation as the gap between voters with higher and lower socio-economic status decreases. Yet, as the distribution of turnout can vary independently of overall levels of participation, the question whether populist parties mobilize the electorate remains open.

2.2 Populism and Voter Turnout

The voter turnout literature has primarily focused on rather stable country and party-system feature. Meta-analyses of aggregate-level voter turnout studies crystallized the most important determinants of turnout (Blais 2006; Geys 2006; Cancela and Geys 2016; Stockemer 2017). Institutional characteristics such as compulsory voting and the co-occurrence of concurrent elections positively affect turnout. The importance of elections, determined by the type of election (first-order vs. second-order elections) and the decisiveness of an election (i.e. the number of seats or posts filled in one election) also positively affect turnout. Mandatory registration requirements negatively affect turnout. Evidence on the participatory effect of proportional representation systems or majoritarian electoral systems, however, is mixed (cf. Cancela and Geys 2016; Stockemer 2017). With respect to socio-economic factors, extant research has established that countries with smaller populations tend to have a higher turnout (Stockemer 2017).

Stockemer's (2017) meta-analysis of 135 studies finds that election-specific variables are often neglected in macro-level turnout studies. In particular, the literature has so far scarcely examined the ways in which party-political factors affect voter turnout (but see Anderson and Beramendi 2012). Hence, our focus on the supply-side effects of party politics on turnout fills an important gap in this literature.

There is some evidence, however, that political supply factors can affect turnout. Meta-analyses show that increased campaign expenditures by political parties induce higher voter turnout (Geys 2006; Cancela and Geys 2016). Research suggests that when election outcomes are very close, turnout tends to be higher (but see Cancela and Geys 2016; Stockemer 2017). Political fragmentation also is argued to affect turnout as a higher number of parties is to boost turnout because it broadens voters' choice palettes.¹ Yet, the empirical evidence that a higher number of parties affects turnout is mixed (Cancela and Geys 2016; Stockemer 2017). These studies of political supply determinants of turnout

¹However, it has also been argued that greater party system fractionalization has negative consequences for turnout as it increases election complexity and blur the clarity of choice for a government (Blais 2006; Geys 2006).

share the central assumption that voters are more likely to be drawn to the polling booth when party competition makes elections meaningful. In other words, voters are more incentivised to vote when the stakes are higher.

Applying these conclusions from the turnout literature to the case of populist parties, populist parties arguably increase the urgency of elections – both for potential populist voters and for their opponents. Indeed, populist parties may increase the clarity of choice in an election as they emphasize previously ignored issues and adopt a clear position on that issue. Theoretical support for this mechanism comes from issue competition theory, which predicts electoral benefits for parties that emphasize publicly salient issues that were previously ignored by other competitors (Carmines and Stimson 1986; Meguid 2008).

De Vries and Hobolt (2012) have found that parties which advanced a previously depoliticized issue, the issue of European integration, tend to benefit electorally. While selective issue emphasis might motivate voters to change their vote, it can also increase the probability of non-voters to turn out to vote (Geys 2012).

Non-voters are hard to reach as they experience low external political efficacy (Dyck and Lascher 2009), are less interested in politics (Denny and Doyle 2008), and are less satisfied with democracy (Rich and Treece 2018). This suggests that only remarkable political circumstances likely motivate non-voters to vote. Yet, populist parties' candidates are said to be 'charismatic', make emotional appeals to 'true people' and do not shy away from using unconventional communication strategies (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). Their distinctive communication style likely increases their news value. And indeed, media coverage of populist parties has been shown to increase their electoral support (Murphy and Devine 2018). Moreover, populist parties are found to use less complex language, which increases voter comprehension about their policy stances (Bischof and Senninger 2018). Hence, populist are arguably the most-likely political actor to stimulate previous non-voters to turn out.

Populist parties may also spur political participation by invoking forms of ‘counter-mobilization’ – drawing ‘anti-populist’ non-voters to the polling booth. In their individual-level study of radical right populism and reported voting, Immerzeel and Pickup (2015) show that radical right populist parties in Western Europe motivate highly educated and politically interested citizens to vote – voters likely to be opponents of (radical right) populist parties.

All in all, we therefore hypothesize that *the supply of populist parties in a given parliamentary election positively affects aggregate-level voter turnout.*

In recent years, a number of studies have also turned to the relationship between populism and electoral participation. Yet, the existing evidence on the impact of populist parties on turnout remains inconclusive. Examining 19 Latin American countries from 1982 to 2012, Houle and Kenny (2018) find no effect of populists in government or populists winning the election on turnout. Turning to the European case, Huber and Ruth (2017) examine the effect of electoral participation, incumbency and parliamentary presence of populist parties on voter turnout in 31 European countries from 1990 to 2014. Huber and Ruth find no effect of populism on electoral participation, incumbency or parliamentary presence of populist parties on turnout. Also no effect on average is found when distinguishing between left-wing, centrist, and right-wing populist parties. Spittler (2018) studies 30 European countries in the same time period from 1990 to 2014 but limits his study to right-wing populist parties. By contrast, Spittler (2018) finds a positive effect of the seat share of populist right-wing parties on representation. Yet, Spittler’s measure of participation includes items related to the equality of participation – conflating voter turnout and equality of representation.

2.3 Specifying the Effect of Populist Parties on Turnout

While these studies have made important steps in examining the relationship between turnout and populism, a lot of country- and party-level variation is left unexplored. While

we do not formulate distinct hypotheses, we acknowledge that average effects can mask differential effects in terms of geographical context and in terms of party type.

It is possible that the relationship between the presence of populism and turnout is different in Western European (WE) countries and in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Scholars have noted the relatively high levels of turnout in CEE countries in the first election following the transition to democracy (Kostadinova and Power 2007; Kostelka 2017).

While turnout in most transition democracies fell to levels similar to the ‘standard turnout rate’ in established democracies, turnout in post-communist democracies dropped significantly below this standard turnout rate in subsequent elections in the period of democratic consolidation (Kostelka 2017). Falling turnout in the consolidation period can be explained by disillusion over the benefits of democratization.

This might be especially the case considering that citizens hold democracy in lower esteem as they have been socialized in authoritarian ways of thinking (Neundorf et al. 2017). Disillusion with democracy in the consolidation period arguably enhances the mobilization potential of populist parties. Populists attack the political establishment that does not take the interests of the true people to heart. In addition, populists convey less pluralist notions of political representation in their supposition that the true people share a single general will that is best expressed by one *vox populi*: the populist party in question.

In addition, CEE countries have been noted to suffer from party system instability as well as electoral volatility (Tavits 2008). Tavits finds that volatility in CEE countries is a response to changes in the supply of political parties, rather than the other way around. In other words, changes in the supply of parties affects, on average, voter behaviour. Hence, it is possible that changes in populist party supply also affect average voter behaviour in terms of turnout. What is more, Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2009) find that in many post-communist democracies the support for democracy is an important

issue both in terms of positions and issue salience. Such contestation over democracy may be another reason why populist parties contesting the newly democratized political establishment may affect turnout. After all, populism can be seen as an alternative form of representation that stands in contrast with party government (Caramani 2017). For these reasons, we assess the differential effect of populist parties on turnout in WE and CEE countries.

On the party-level, the ideology of the populist party may affect its propensity to enhance voter turnout. Populism is often seen as a thin-centred ideology that parties combine with different attaching or host ideologies (Mudde 2004). The host ideology determines whether the nature of the populists' people is construed in cultural or ethnic terms, as is the case with right-wing populist parties, or whether the people are imagined in socio-economic terms, as is the case with left-wing populists. Research shows that left-wing and right-wing populist parties mobilise different types of voters on the basis of different political claims (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018). As left-wing populists' non-ethnic notion of the people is more inclusive of nature, Huber and Ruth (2017) argue, but find no evidence for the supposition, that left-wing populist parties are more inclined to boost turnout as they may appeal to a greater segment of the population. Yet, it can also be argued that right-wing populist parties are more likely to boost turnout, because they have addressed issues that have been previously ignored such as migration. Populist left parties, by contrast, compete predominantly on the left-right dimension (March 2011). Therefore, our analysis also examines the effect of left- and right-wing populist parties separately. This will also allow us to disentangle the effect of parties' populism from their host ideology.

2.4 Operationalising the Effect of Populist Parties

While operationalising the effect of populist parties on election turnout might seem straightforward, there are many different ways in which the effect of populism can be conceptualized. Indeed, existing studies examining the effect of populism on turnout rely

on different operationalisations. In their analysis of Latin American democracies, Houle and Kenny (2018) estimate the presence of a governing populist party concurrent with the election ($t=0$) as well as the concurrent presence of a populist party that wins the election. The (mere) participation of populist parties is not taken into account. Spittler (2018) examines the effect of the total seat share of populist parties prior to the election. Huber and Ruth (2017) analyse the participation of populist parties in the election and code whether the populist party is in government, in the opposition, or a new party. As these studies employ differing operationalisations with mixed results, we consider here a more comprehensive range of operationalisations of populist party supply.

Arguably, in its simplest form the expectation of a positive effect of populist parties on turnout denotes the hypothesis that the *electoral participation of a populist party in parliamentary elections increases voter turnout*. After all, the fact that a populist party is on the ballot might motivate previously disenfranchised non-voters to cast their vote. In this vein, the option of voting for a populist is sufficient for mobilizing hitherto disengaged citizens to participate, or for inviting counter-mobilization.

The participatory effect of populist parties may be a function of their novelty in the party system – and not only its populist ideology. Argued this way, only newly established populist parties can produce the supposed participatory effect. In this version of the hypothesis, it can be postulated that the *electoral participation of a new populist party leads to increases in aggregate-level voter turnout*.

However, the fact that a populist party participates in parliamentary elections does not necessarily mean it can viably affect the political agenda. One can argue therefore that when a populist party achieves parliamentary representation, it has better chances of affecting voter turnout. Dinas et al. (2015) argue that entering parliament is a key resource for the electoral survival of new parties. When entering parliament, a (populist) party receives public funding, more media attention and attains a stake in policy-making (Dinas et al. 2015). Parliamentary representation signals to voters the electoral viability of the party – making it more likely to affect policy in the long term. These resources are

important for subsequent elections as they likely receive more media exposure. Parliamentary representation is linked to institutional advantages such as media exposure on public broadcasting services. In the Netherlands, for instance, only parties represented in the lower or upper house receive broadcasting time for political advertisement during election campaigns. Parliamentary presence also likely affects the professionalization of a populist party's campaign as the party matures as an organization. An alternative formulation of the hypothesis is therefore that *the parliamentary presence of a populist party prior to the election spurs aggregate-level voter turnout*. Dinas et al. (2015) also find that entering parliament is particularly important for new parties in newly democratized countries as party branding is weak and need for signaling is high. This might suggest that especially in CEE countries the representation of populist parties will affect turnout.

While the above operationalisations are all dichotomous, it is also possible that a populist party's effect on turnout depends on their size. After all, the size of a party signals the political weight of a party to the voters. Hence, a populist party's vote share is the continuous counterpart of the participation-based operationalisation. The ensuing hypothesis stipulates that *the higher the vote share a populist party prior to the election, the higher aggregate-level voter turnout*. A continuous variable that corresponds to a party's parliamentary representation is a populist party's seat share. The corresponding hypothesis then is that *the greater the seat share of a populist party, the higher aggregate-level turnout*.

These various operationalisations of the populist party effect rely on slightly different theoretical assumptions about the relationship between the supply of political parties and voter turnout. As these assumptions concerning political supply and turnout have not been tested previously, we argue that it is important to test them all – in conjunction with the above-mentioned country-level and party-level variation.

3 Research Design

To test these expectations we constructed a dataset of all national parliamentary elections (to the lower house) in European democracies from 1970 until 2017.² We have chosen a time-frame that includes all relevant populist parties in Western Europe and allows for the observation of elections without populist parties for all countries while maintaining a balance of sample sizes between Western and Central and Eastern Europe, where we observe democratic elections from 1990 onwards. To ensure that the chosen time frame does not drive the results, we also replicate our analyses for the period 1990-2017 with similar results.³ The data on election results come from the *ParlGov* database (Döring and Manow 2016), which provides information on which parties ran in national parliamentary elections and their results for many European countries.

For each election and party competing in it, we coded whether a party in that election should be considered populist based on the literature. We classify populist parties using the ideational definition of populism (Hawkins et al. 2018). Our coding is based primarily on the classifications provided by Van Kessel (2015) as well as from Mudde (2007) and March (2011). In addition, we consider, on the left, the *Workers' Party of Belgium (PVDA-PTB)* (Pauwels 2014) and the Spanish party *Podemos* (Ramiro and Gomez 2017) to be populist parties. As populism can be associated with different host ideologies, we distinguish between populist left and right parties based on the party family categorization provided by *ParlGov*. For a full overview of parties, which we have coded as populist see Table A.2 in the online appendix.

Note that we do not simply make a binary distinction between populist and non-populist parties but that we consider for each election whether a party based on its profile at that time should be considered populist. For instance, the *Freedom Party of Austria* has competed elections since the 1950s but only is considered to be populist since Jörg Haider took over the party leadership in 1986, and thus was coded by us accordingly.

²Table A.1 in the online appendix shows all countries and elections included.

³See section A.8 in the online appendix.

We aggregate to the election-level to obtain various operationalisations of populist party supply at the aggregate level, as discussed in the theory section. The variable `Populist Participation` is a dummy variable indicating whether at least one populist party competed in a given election. The variable `New Populist Party` captures whether at least one new populist party competed in an election for the first time. This operationalisation would be able to capture a novelty effect if such an effect exists. The variable `Populist Representation` captures whether at least one populist party held a seat in parliament at the time of the election. The variable `Populist Vote Share` measures the percentage of the vote that all populist parties combined received in the previous election and the variable `Populist Seatshare` measures the fraction of seats all populist parties combined hold after the previous election.

Our dependent variable, `Turnout`, also comes from *ParlGov*.⁴ It is the rate of turnout in a national parliamentary election expressed in percentages. We use turnout among the registered population. Geys (2006) cautions that ‘defining turnout as a ratio limits the range of this variable to the 0-100% interval. Using simple OLS estimation may lead to predictions outside this range.’ However, this is not the case for our models as can be seen in Table A.4 in the online appendix. Hence, we use OLS panel regression models on the originally scaled variable rather than using a logistic transformation. We add additional control variables measured at the election-level.

Research has shown that `Trade Openness`, a measure of globalization, is negatively associated with turnout (Steiner 2010). Under globalization, governments have less room to manoeuvre, diminishing the perceived efficacy of government and the perceived difference between parties (Hellwig 2008; Hellwig 2001) – which should affect both party choice and the decision whether to vote at all. Globalization and its alleged effects have been an important campaign issue for populist parties – both right, think France’s *Front National* or the *United Kingdom Independence Party*, and left, think *Podemos* in Spain or *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy. Therefore, if we fail to account for a country’s exposure

⁴We fill in a missing value, Switzerland 2015, with data from *International IDEA*.

to global markets we would induce a negative bias in our estimate for populist party presence. We operationalise **Trade openness** as the total level of trade, sum of import and export, measured as a percentage of GDP in current prices of a country in a given year on the basis of obtained from the World Bank data.

Unemployment is a strong predictor of turnout both on the individual and the aggregate level cross-sectionally, unemployment increases are associated with an increase in turnout (Burden and Wichowsky 2014). While radical right voters are not more likely to be unemployed than mainstream votes, left populist parties tend to attract unemployed citizens (Rooduijn et al. 2017). Thus, if we were to omit unemployment from the specification this would potentially lead to overestimation of the effect of populist parties on turnout. The national **Unemployment** rate is measured as the percentage of the civilian labour force, obtained from the European Commission’s macroeconomic database AMECO.

The variable effective number of political parties (**ENPP**) counts the number of parties that make up a party system taking into account their relative sizes (Laakso and Taagepera 1979). A greater choice of parties is associated with higher turnout. At the same time, a greater number of available parties should also make it harder for newcomers, including populist parties, to make a successful *début*. Such a relationship would induce a negative bias if we were to omit ENPP. At the same time, a populist party obtaining parliamentary representation increases the number of political parties. In that setting failing to control for ENPP would induce a positive bias in our estimates. We calculate the ENPP on the basis of seat shares as apparent in the *ParlGov* data because we are interested in the number of *electorally viable* parties.

Moreover, another important variable in the turnout literature is the closeness or competitiveness of a given election. When elections are particularly close, turnout is hypothesized to be higher. Yet, as Stockemer (2017) reports, the evidence for this hypothesis is mixed. We measure the **Electoral competitiveness** on the basis of *ParlGov* data by calculating the difference in vote share of the two largest parties in a given election. We take the logarithm of that difference to take into account that small margins matter more than

large margins of victory – that means we expect a non-linear effect on turnout.

In addition, we control for a country’s `Population` size measured at the time of the election. A lower population size is associated with higher turnout (Cancela and Geys 2016; Stockemer 2017). If the `Population` size is smaller, the decisiveness of a single vote is argued to increase (Cancela and Geys 2016). We measure the `Population` size using data obtained from the Comparative Political Data Set (CPDS) (Armingeon et al. 2016)).

We also include variables pertaining to institutional constraints. The aggregate-level turnout literature has particularly examined institutional variables pertaining to the electoral system. While it is often hypothesized that proportional representation (PR) boosts turnout, Stockemer’s (2017) meta-analysis shows that the existing evidence is mixed. Nevertheless, we include a dummy variable measuring whether a country has a PR system or not – as a more permissive electoral system also facilitates parliamentary entry of new (populist) competitors. In addition, studies often include a variable measuring the district magnitude, a variable for which the existing evidence is also mixed (Stockemer 2017). We include a variable measuring the logarithm of `District magnitude`. Lastly, the existing literature established a clear link between compulsory voting and higher turnout (Cancela and Geys 2016; Stockemer 2017). Therefore, we include a dummy variable indicating whether voting in a country for a given election was compulsory.

While some between-country differences in turnout may indeed be due to populist parties, we take a more conservative approach by using fixed effects to minimize the possibility of bias through unobserved confounders as far as possible. We estimate country fixed effects via the within-transformation. All time-varying variables are thus estimated relative to the country mean and variables that do not change over time are also controlled for. Substantively, what we are interested in is the difference that a populist party makes for turnout for a given election. For instance, we ask: how much lower or higher turnout would have been without any populist party competing the election. Given the structure of our data, fixed-effects and first-differences estimation are best suited to address these

causal questions.

First differences models also effectively cancel out all, both observable and unobservable, time-constant confounders. Calculating first differences removes considerable variance in the dependent and independent variables. While this reduces the risk of Type 1 Error due to too small standard errors, first differencing also implies a change in focus. Substantively, what we estimate with Δ Populist Participation is whether the new emergence of a populist party increases turnout in that election (and whether its disappearance reduces turnout). With Δ New Populist Party we assess the change in the emergence of a new populist party. Correspondingly, with Δ Populist Representation we test for the effect of a populist party attaining (or losing) parliamentary presence. Δ Populist Vote Share and Δ Populist Seat Share assess effect of the difference in populist parties' vote or seat share on changes in turnout. Hence, while the fixed effects models in levels focus on the (continued) presence of populist parties, the first differences models focus on change. Standard errors in all models are clustered by country. We also estimate both model specifications employing the Prais-Winsten transformation to deal with serial correlation in the dependent variable to probe the robustness of our results.

We also control for time trends in all models since there is a clear time trend in both our dependent and key independent variable: a negative trend in turnout and a positive trend in presence and success of populist parties.⁵ If we were to ignore these trends, this would leave us with a negative bias. In the models presented in Table 1 and corresponding tables in the online appendix, we included temporal dummies, one for every five-year period which roughly corresponds to the average term length in Europe. In the online appendix, we also present models with yearly fixed effects which allow for more fine-grained temporal shocks at the expense of efficiency in estimation.

As discussed, we also conduct additional subgroup analyses accounting for heterogeneity on the country- and party-level. We include separate analyses for Western European (WE) and Central and East European (CEE) countries. Assessing these regions sepa-

⁵See also Figure A.1 and Table A.3 in the online appendix.

rately facilitates interpretation and provides for a more conservative estimate of the effect of populism in CEE countries, where we simply cannot draw on many observations.

Finally, we also distinguish between populist left and populist right parties. Using `ParlGov`'s party family categorization we code 'Right-wing' and 'Conservative' parties that are considered to be populist as populist right parties and parties that are 'Communist/Socialist' or 'Social democrat' and considered to be populist as populist left parties. For all operationalisations of our independent variable of main interest, we estimate models differentiating whether the key independent variable pertains to left or right populist parties, or both. For the key independent variable measured as dummy variables, the reference category contains elections that saw no populist party competing or present in parliament.

To summarize, we test whether populist parties exert an effect on turnout on a time-series cross-sectional dataset of 315 elections between 1970–2016 in 31 European countries using multiple operationalisations of the populist party variable and employing multiple model specification strategies. We present the results of our analyses in the next section.

4 Results

Table 1 displays the results for five operationalisations of our key independent variables: `Populist Participation`, `Populist Representation`, `New Populist Party`, `Populist Vote Share` and `Populist Seat Share`. All models include election-specific control variables. The models also include country fixed effects and five-year period fixed effects. The five-year period fixed effects make sure we control for potentially important contextual factors such as political or economic crises.

Model 1 shows the effect of `Populist Participation` in a given election with aggregate-level turnout in that election. This variable signifies that at least one populist party was on the ballot in a given election. The estimate shows that `Populist Participation` has

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Populist Participation	-0.47 (1.23)				
Populist Representation		1.68 (0.95) ⁺			
New Populist Party			0.51 (0.96)		
Populist Vote Share				0.02 (0.04)	
Populist Seat Share					0.02 (0.04)
ENPP	0.65 (0.65)	0.56 (0.64)	0.55 (0.67)	0.72 (0.64)	0.72 (0.64)
Unemployment	-0.30 (0.15) ⁺	-0.24 (0.16)	-0.29 (0.14)*	-0.25 (0.15)	-0.25 (0.16)
Trade Openness	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Population	-0.16 (0.19)	-0.23 (0.18)	-0.18 (0.18)	-0.20 (0.17)	-0.20 (0.17)
Compulsory Voting	3.02 (1.89)	3.78 (1.90) ⁺	3.03 (1.90)	3.31 (1.95) ⁺	3.29 (2.01)
PR	-4.85 (5.17)	-5.64 (5.23)	-5.09 (5.35)	-5.21 (5.34)	-5.20 (5.33)
log(District Magnitude)	3.69 (1.47)*	3.91 (1.45)*	3.67 (1.49)*	3.73 (1.50)*	3.72 (1.50)*
log(Electoral Competitiveness)	0.30 (0.57)	0.34 (0.57)	0.29 (0.57)	0.34 (0.55)	0.36 (0.57)
Country / Period Fixed Effects	✓/ ✓	✓/ ✓	✓/ ✓	✓/ ✓	✓/ ✓
R ²	0.46	0.47	0.46	0.47	0.47
N	312.00	308.00	312.00	308.00	308.00

Standard errors in parentheses

⁺ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 1: OLS Regressions of Turnout on Populist Participation, Populist Representation, New Populist Party, Populist Vote Share, and Populist Seat Share. All models include country and 5-year period fixed effects.

no statistically significant effect on aggregate-level voter turnout. Model 1 echoes the findings of Huber and Ruth (2017), who also did not find a significant effect of populist parties participating in election.

Model 2 assess the effect of `Populist Representation` on turnout. `Populist Representation` denotes that at least one populist party had achieved parliamentary representation prior to the election. The results indicate a positive effect of populist parties represented in parliament prior to the election that is statistically significant at the 0.1 level. Substantively, `Populist Representation` increases aggregate-level turnout by 1.7 percentage points.

Model 3 analyses the effect of the presence of a `New Populist Party` on voter turnout. The variable measures whether a populist party participated in the elections for the first time. The estimate shows a non-significant positive effect on turnout. Lastly, Model 4 and 5 show the effect of `Populist Vote Share` and `Populist Seat Share`, respectively. These variables assess the effect of the sum of votes/seats won in the previous election. Both estimates display a very small coefficient size and are not statistically significant. The finding that the variable `Populist Representation` has a substantial and significant effect on turnout but `Populist Seat Share` does not, suggests that passing the threshold of achieving parliamentary representation is decisive, not the number of seats. Arguably, the benefits of parliamentary representation for a populist party are not proportional to the parties' strength in terms of seat shares.

In short, while populist parties simply participating in an election seems to have no effect on turnout, the findings imply that populist parties being represented in parliament prior to the election substantially affects turnout. Yet, to what extent are these findings robust to different model specifications? What is more, do these average effects mask differences between WE countries and CEE countries and in the effect of populist left and populist right parties? To answer those questions, we plot the coefficients of our key independent variables in Figures 1 to 3.

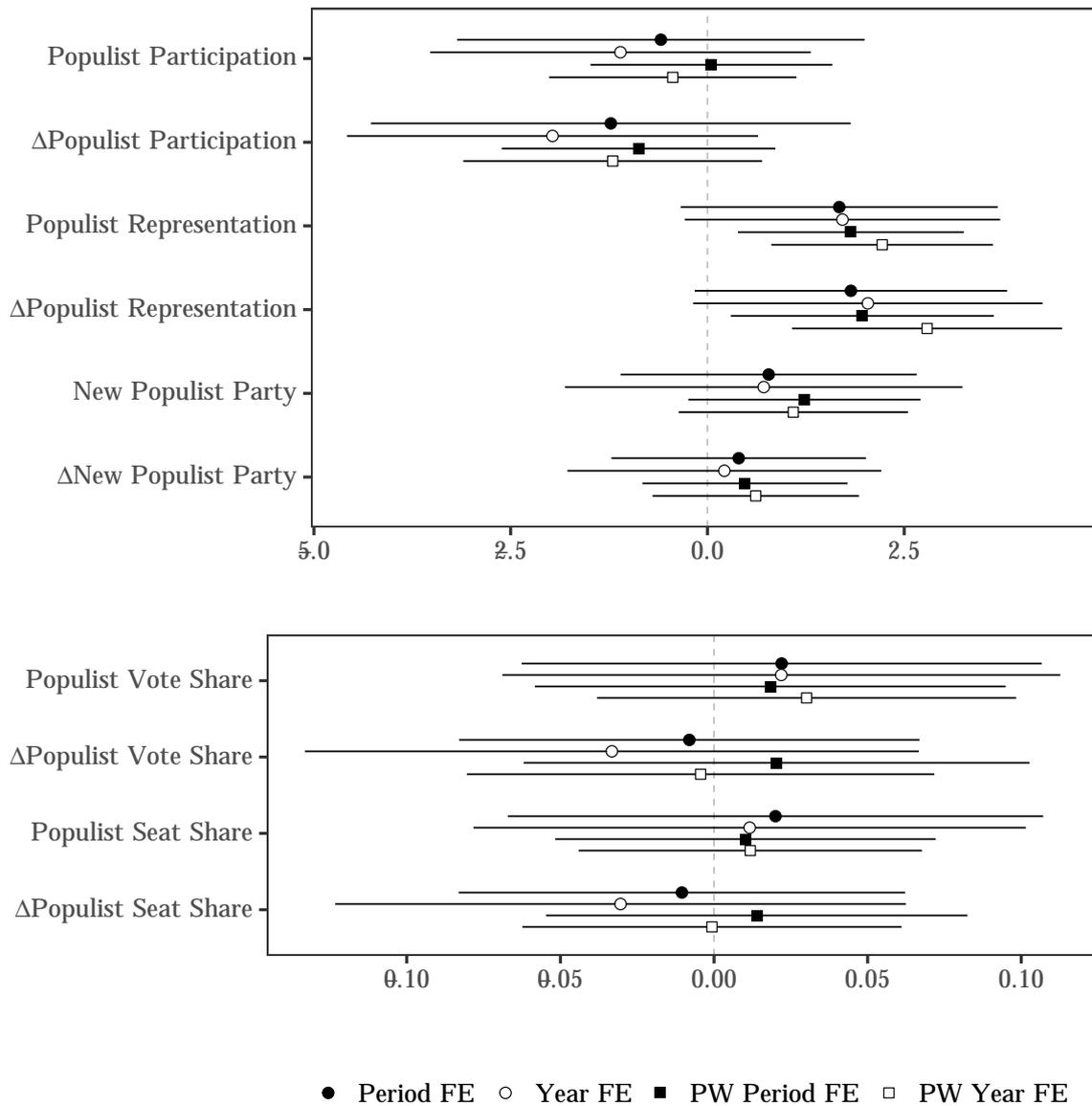


Figure 1: Coefficients for (Δ) Populist Participation, (Δ) Populist Representation, (Δ) New Populist Party, (Δ) Populist Vote Share, and (Δ) Populist Seat Share from fixed effects models (levels) and first differences (Δ) . OLS estimation with period fixed effects. Horizontal lines are 95 % confidence intervals.

Figure 1 shows the coefficients of our five key variables of interest for different model specifications. We report both the OLS models and the first-differences models. The variables preceded by the Δ sign show the effect of change in the independent variable on change in the dependent variable. In addition, we report four different model specifications of these variables. The coefficients labelled ‘Period FE’ graphically depict the results measured with period fixed-effects shown in Table 1. The label ‘Year FE’ replicates this model with more stringent yearly fixed effects. We also estimate pooled OLS regression models with Prais-Winsten transformation to account for serial correlation. While uncertainty in the estimates is smaller when using the Prais-Winsten transformation (as indicated by the 95% confidence intervals) the point estimates (denoted by dots) are substantively similar across models.

As the coefficients for `Populist Representation` and (Δ) `Populist Representation` achieve statistical significance at the 0.1 or 0.05 levels across model specifications, the variable `Populist Representation` warrants closer inspection in our subsequent analyses.

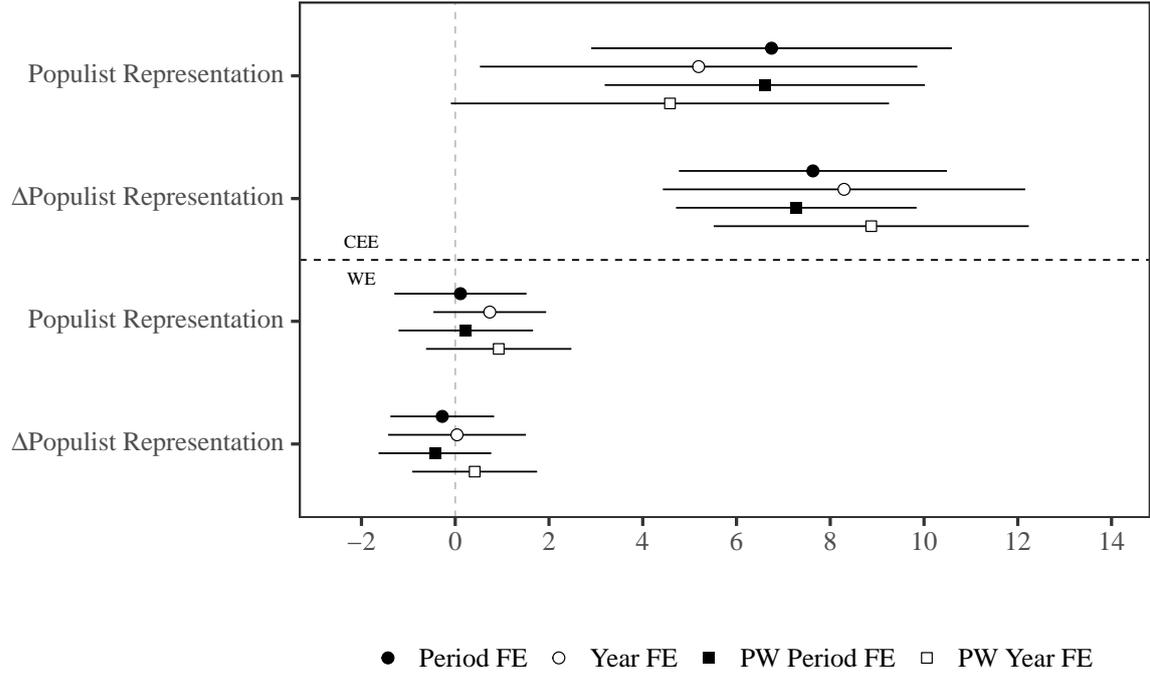


Figure 2: Coefficients for `Populist Representation` and Δ `Populist Representation` estimated on Central and Eastern European (CEE) and Western European (WE) sub-samples in four different model specifications: OLS estimation with period or year fixed effects and Prais-Winsten regressions with period or year fixed effects. Horizontal lines are 95 % confidence intervals.

Figure 2 replicates the previous analyses for `Populist Representation` for two sub-samples: Central and Eastern Europe (upper panel) and Western Europe (lower panel). The results show that the positive effect of `Populist Representation` on turnout is completely driven by CEE cases. In addition, the effect in CEE countries is statistically significant at conventional levels. On the other hand, we find no statistically or substantively significant effect of `Populist Representation` on turnout in Western Europe across all model specifications. As Figure 2 shows the effect is robust to the different model specifications outlined above. Attesting the robustness of these results, jackknife analyses and sensitivity analyses showed that the results are not driven by particular cases or by particular countries in the CEE sample.⁶

In light of these results, we explore whether left-wing or right-wing populist parties ac-

⁶Tables for these analyses can be found in the online appendix: A.23, A.26 and A.27.

count for the positive effect of prior parliamentary representation on turnout in CEE in Figure 3. To do so, we replace our original `Populist Representation` dummy variable with two dummy variables indicating whether populist left parties or populist right parties are present in a given election, while no populist party in parliament is the reference category. The results in the online appendix show that the effect of populist parliamentary representation is not driven by either left-wing or right-wing populist parties. Instead, it is the joint effect of these parties that accounts for the effect.⁷ Tables A.19 to A.22 in the online appendix show that in Western Europe neither left nor right populist parties affect turnout – across multiple model specifications.

All in all, these results then allow us to accept the hypothesis that the prior parliamentary representation of populist parties positively affects turnout in Central and Eastern European countries.

⁷Although Figure 3, summarizing results from Tables A.19 to A.22, in the online appendix suggests that left-wing populist parties drive the participatory effect in CEE countries, these results are not robust to the country-specific sensitivity analysis. Similarly, the country-specific sensitivity for the effect right-wing populist party representation show that the exclusion of certain countries affects the stability of the results. As noted above, however, Table A.26 in the online appendix shows that the effect of `Populist Representation` is robust to all country-specific sensitivity analyses.

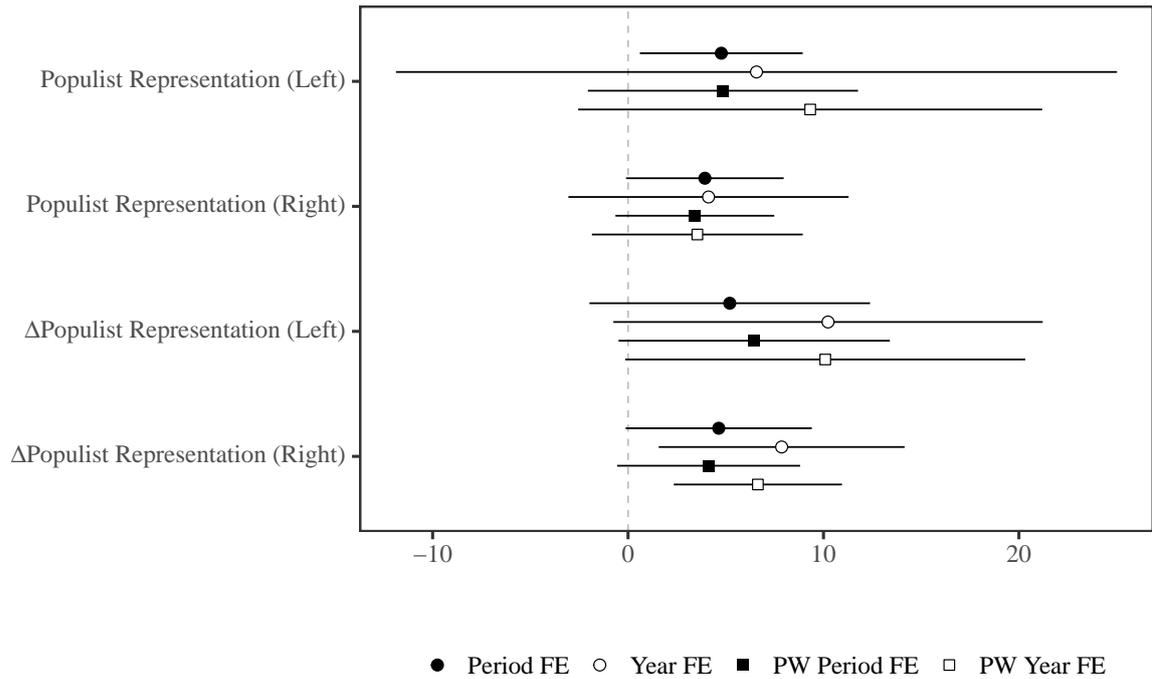


Figure 3: Coefficients for Populist Representation (Left), Populist Representation (Right), Δ Populist Representation (Left) and Δ Populist Representation (Right) estimated on Central and Eastern European sample in four different model specifications: OLS estimation with period or year fixed effects and Prais-Winsten regressions with period or year fixed effects. Horizontal lines are 95 % confidence intervals.

5 Conclusion

The ascendance of populist political parties has been characterized by many political scientists and commentators as a veritable threat to representative democracy (Abts and Rummens 2007). Research has found that populist politicians and parties can indeed put free and open political contestation into jeopardy (Huber and Schimpf 2017; Houle and Kenny 2018; Ruth 2018; Kenny 2019). While not explicitly contradicting such alarming claims, some authors, such as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), posit that populism may also have some positive effects on liberal democracy. Populist parties can articulate grievances of underrepresented segments of society and they can increase democratic accountability by politicizing issues that were kept off the political agenda by established political actors (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p.80-86). Above all, populist parties

are said to foster greater political participation by bringing previous non-voters to the polling booths.

This contribution has taken the assertion that populist parties can be a ‘corrective for democracy’ seriously. While many scholars have suggested a positive link between populist politics and increased political participation (Mair 2007; Mouffe 2005; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Meny and Surel 2002; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Betz 1994), the scarce existing research on this topic has produced mixed findings (Huber and Ruth 2017; Houle and Kenny 2018; Spittler 2018). Using a variety of time-series cross-sectional regression modelling techniques, we estimated the effect of populist parties on the aggregate level of voter turnout for 315 national parliamentary elections between 1970–2016 in 31 European countries.

We find that a populist party participating in a given election does not affect the average level of voter turnout in that election. Neither did we find a significant effect of a new populist party participating in an election on turnout, or an effect of populist vote or seat share. We do, however, find robust empirical support for a positive effect of the parliamentary presence of populist parties on turnout in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. No effect of populism on turnout was established for Western Europe (WE). These results qualify the conclusions of Huber and Ruth (2017) who argue that populist party support does not affect electoral participation.

Our findings strongly suggests that scholars of populism should take into account multiple operationalisations of populist party supply in future research. Further, it is important to be attentive to context. In line with Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), our results suggest that the effect of populism on democracy is strongly contingent on contextual factors. Arguably, the positive effects of populist parties on turnout in CEE countries in the period from 1990 until 2017 suggests that voters in nascent democracies are more susceptible to supply-side factors.

Research on voter turnout in the CEE region has put forward the hypothesis that voters

during the democratic consolidation period were disillusioned by the efficacy of democratic rule (Kostadinova and Power 2007; Kostelka 2017). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) also argue that populism may particularly have positive effects on democracy during the transition period from authoritarian rule to democracy. The people-centred appeal of populist parties can motivate non-voters to partake in the electoral process. Our findings then are also important for the literature on democratization and democratic consolidation (see e.g. Rovira Kaltwasser 2012).

But to what extent are these findings for CEE generalisable? The participatory effect of populism could well apply to other nascent democracies in Latin America and South-East Asia. Party system instability, high volatility, a lack of experience with party government, and so-called polity contestation over regime types are conducive to a populist mobilization effect. Yet, initial evidence suggests that populists did not have a participatory effect in Latin America (Houle and Kenny 2018). Moreover, Kostelka (2017) argues that only in post-Communist democracies turnout might have dropped because of voters' disillusionment with democracy. This suggests that the post-Communist experience in the period of democratic consolidation might have been particularly conducive to a populist mobilization effect. Future individual-level research should therefore explore the relationship between democratic disillusionment and voter turnout in new democracies in Europe, Latin America, and South East Asia.

The fact that the participation of a populist party does not affect the propensity of non-voters to go the polling booths in CEE countries but that their prior presence in parliament does, suggests that only when populist parties pose a credible electoral threat to the political establishment, a higher number of voters in CEE countries are prepared to cast their ballot. One could argue that this is surprising given that the theoretical arguments in the literature on the participatory effect of populist parties are based on the premise that populist parties, in fact, can give voice to under-represented segments of society and that they then can actually politicize issues which have been kept off the agenda. However, this finding is in line with recent research highlighting the importance

of parliamentary presence of populist parties for the dynamics of party competition (Dinas et al. 2015; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018). Parliamentary representation endows nascent parties with crucial additional resources necessary for campaigning and, perhaps most importantly, with increased media exposure that ensures their future political survival.

In addition, the finding that newly participating populist parties did not affect turnout suggests that the effect of populism, in CEE countries, is not a function of the populist parties' newness. In addition, our finding that both left and right populist parties contribute to the participatory effect suggest that the effect is not driven by the populist parties' host ideologies pertaining to nativism or re-distributional politics.

In short, our findings demonstrate a positive effect of parliamentary representation of populist parties on voter turnout at the country-level in CEE countries. This is an important finding for the literature of populism as it shows that the success of populist parties can have system-wide effects beyond the party system. The literature on populism has focused a long time on conceptualizing and explaining populist parties and their support. These findings fit in the growing research agenda that examines the consequences of populist politics for the functioning of representative democracy (Hawkins et al. 2012; Rooduijn et al. 2014; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). And while higher levels of political participation are arguably desirable for a well-functioning representative democracy, it is not clear that increased turnout due to populist success is a signal for a healthy democracy (see Huber and Schimpf 2016). Increased turnout due to more politically disenchanted voters in the booths might also signal crucial challenges for Europe's representative democracies.

It remains unclear, however, whether the effects found point to the fact that more non-voters go to the polling booth when populist parties have been successful because they vote for such populist parties, or whether voters that oppose populist parties choose to come out and vote due to the increased stakes of the election. After all, our measure of voter turnout is aggregated at the country-election level. This does not allow us to examine the specific motivations of individual voters. While this is a strong limitation

of this study, it is important to emphasize that individual-level turnout studies relying on survey data with self-reported turnout levels suffer from severe validity problems (see Immerzeel and Pickup 2015). Recall bias and social desirability issues lead respondents to over-report their election turnout in great numbers. Hence, it is not feasible to address the question of individual-level turnout on the basis of standard voter and election surveys. Validated voter surveys, which are based on official voting records, are a potential solution to the problem of response bias, yet this data is costly to collect and therefore only scarcely available.

Our finding that populist parties can, in fact, increase general levels of turnout is an important first step in disentangling the relationship between the supply of populist politics and electoral participation of citizens. Due to the nature of our data, it was not feasible to draw conclusions about differential effects of populism on turnout in different countries. A next step to examine the populism-turnout nexus further would, therefore, be to examine the variation in the supply of populist candidates as well as in turnout at sub-national units within countries. Such analyses could also assess the impact of candidate-level determinants of turnout. In addition, future research of populism and turnout in CEE countries should examine whether boosts in turnout also affected populist voting. Such evidence would bolster claims that populists attract previously disenfranchised voters - rather than inviting counter-mobilization.

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