

**Populism and Intra-Party Democracy –
Do They Practice What They Preach?**

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Populism and Intra-Party Democracy – Do They Practice What They Preach?

Populism is characterized by anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a discourse emphasizing a moral struggle between “good people” and “the elite.” Translating these features into party organizations may suggest that populist parties are internally democratic, and perhaps less personalized in structure. Using the recently published Populism and Political Expert Survey (POPPA) that develops party-specific populism scores, we are the first to address the important question of how populist parties are organized, and specifically how populist ideology and party organization are linked. Despite the people-centric claims that populists often make, the results highlight that populist parties gravitate toward personalized leaders and thus develop less democratic intra-party structures. This research note contributes to our understanding of populist parties or party organizations.

Keywords: Populism; Intra-Party Democracy; Party Organization; Political Parties

Populism is now a central topic in the media, and academic and policy communities (e.g., Mudde 2004; Akkerman et al. 2017; Busby et al. 2019; Rooduijn 2019; Wuttke et al. 2020). Whether it is the Dutch Party for Freedom, the French National Rally, or the Freedom Party of Austria, populist parties gain a disproportionate amount of media coverage (e.g., Bos et al. 2010) and they influence the political discourse at home and abroad in significant ways (e.g., Rydgren 2005; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Koopmans and Muis 2009; Meret and Siim 2013). Populism is usually defined as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the people and the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004: 543). The general will is seen as homogeneous and singular, and the people should make significant political decisions – not elites (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2018; see also Huber and Schimpf 2016). In its current state, representative democracy does not meet these populist expectations (Mény and Surel 2002), provoking populists to demand that the people “be given their voices back and that people should therefore have more influence on the political decision-making process” (Rooduijn 2014, 576). As a result, the role of elites is not to use their electoral mandates to make independent decisions or to guide public debates, but “to listen to the people and translate what they find important into policy” (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017, 194). Thus, populist ideology is ultimately people centric.

This establishes a link to the literature on how and why *party organizations* or *intra-party democracy* matter. Intra-party democracy comes in the form of large selectorates in party leadership elections (e.g., Lehrer 2012; Schumacher et al. 2013; Bischof and Wagner 2017) or as broad participation of party membership in policy decisions (Schumacher and Giger 2017; see also von dem Berge et al. 2013). For example, parties may grant their members the right to elect the party leader, to select candidates for general elections, or to hold referenda on coalition agreements. Defining features of intra-party democracy are ultimately that intra-party decision-making is decentralized and inclusive (Ware 1996), enabling the rank-and-file membership to hold the leadership accountable by blocking their way to

office. Watts and Bale (2019) analyze the British Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn and demonstrate how the concept of populism is applicable to intra-party politics: in their specific context, rank-and-file party members are “the people” and party leaders are the elites. Consequently, intra-party populism requires rank-and-file members to be involved in major party decisions, such as the selection of party leaders, candidates, or to guide significant policy choices of the party.

In light of this, we are the first to address the core question of how populist ideology and party organization are linked. Populism, by its definition rests on anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a Manichean discourse that actively proclaims a moral struggle between “good people” and “the elite” (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, 8; Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2018). Considering the key features of intra-party democracy, populist parties should be less personalized – and more intra-democratic – if their ideology is consistent with how they structure their party organizations. Credibility is an additional factor here: a populist party that is internally *undemocratic* is arguably neither credible nor consistent. Furthermore, voters punish parties for taking inconsistent positions (e.g., Hersh and Schaffner 2013). The proposition that populists should favor intra-party democracy also mirrors recent comparative scholarship showing that people with more populist views are less likely to support constitutional boundaries on the scope of direct democracy (Mohrenberg et al. 2020). Similar dynamics may be at work within parties as well, namely, that populist-party members will demand that key decisions are taken by the party sovereign, i.e., the party’s membership rather than the “elitist” leadership.

Design

The main data source for our empirical evaluation of the relationship between populism and intra-party democracy is the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) by Meijers and Zaslove (2020). This data set is one of the most reliable and precise approaches for measuring populism and it covers up to 250 political parties in 28 European countries that were represented in parliament in 2017/2018. The large party-coverage is another advantage of the data set, but the POPPA data are purely

cross-sectional and, thus, time-invariant. While this may seem like a disadvantage initially, since longitudinal data would inform us how parties' populism varies across years, note that our dependent variable hardly varies over time either: the intra-party structure of political parties (see Schumacher and Giger 2017). As a result, cross-sectional data are sufficient for our purposes and, as discussed in Meijers and Zaslove (2020), POPPE outperforms other data sources in terms of accuracy, validity, and coverage. As we rely on POPPE as our main data frame, the unit of observation in our analysis is taken from them as well, i.e., the political party in 2017/18. The data are hierarchical with some parties nested in the same country. To account for dependencies stemming from this multi-level structure of the data, we cluster the standard errors at the country level and employ random-intercept models with a country-level as well as a party-family intercept. Unobserved heterogeneity at the respective levels of our data is thus controlled for.

Our dependent variable pertains to parties' organization – and, precisely, their degree of intra-party democracy. The POPPA data set comprises a relevant item here, which is framed as: “some political parties practice more intra-party democracy than others, i.e., party members play a role in decision making, there is room for internal debate, decision-making is inclusive of various factions and organizational layers within the party.” Experts could rate parties on a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 standing for a very high level of intra-party democracy (0 stands for no intra-party democracy at all). After accounting for missing values, 229 parties are evaluated in the data set and the intra-party democracy variable has a mean value of 4.83 (standard deviation of 1.93).

The main explanatory variable, *Populism Score*, captures the degree of populism for each political party in the data as taken from POPPA. It is based on factor regression scores of four dimensions of populism and ranges theoretically between 0 (a party is not at all populist) and 10 (a party is very populist). Unlike other data sets, POPPA employs a multi-dimensional concept of populism. Specifically, the four dimensions that the *Populism Score* comprises are: Manichean discourse (parties might see politics as a moral struggle between good and bad), the indivisibility of people (parties consider the ordinary people to be indivisible, i.e., homogeneous), the general will of the people (parties consider the

ordinary people's interests to be singular), and centrism (parties believe that sovereignty should lie exclusively with the ordinary people). After accounting for missing values, *Populism Score* provides data for 236 parties in 26 states and has a mean value of 4.39 (standard deviation of 2.65). Aggregating this information to the country level, some states score quite high, e.g., Greece or Italy, while others are generally not characterized by strongly populist parties (e.g., Germany) although outliers within the system may exist (e.g., the German AfD scores 9.437 on *Populism Score*).

The random intercepts in our models likely address a large number of potential-bias sources. Having said that, we also include one more substantive control: the median voter. Lehrer (2012, see also Schumacher et al. 2013; Bischof and Wagner 2017), for instance, reports that the median voter conditions the impact of intra-party democracy on party-policy shifts. We thus incorporate a variable on the median voter into our estimations and use Eurobarometer data to this end. We rely on the 2018 surveys or, if data were not available for a county that year, the most recent survey since 2018. The Eurobarometer's survey item asks respondents to place themselves on a left-right scale from 1 (left) to 10 (right). The final variable has a mean value of 5.836 with a standard deviation of 0.894.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the main findings. The first model is the hierarchical linear model, and we include random intercepts for countries and party families. The second model also includes the median voter item. First, *Populism Score* is negatively signed and highly significant in either estimation. The inclusion or exclusion of *Median Voter* does not affect this finding – in any case, the median voter variable is statistically insignificant in Model 2.¹ The negative sign implies that, all else equal, more populist parties tend to be less intra-democratic. In Model 1, for example, the effect size suggests that *Intra-Party Democracy* decreases by about 0.43 units for each unit-increase of *Populism Score*. The substantive effect of the latter based on Model 2 is summarized in Figure 1: for low levels of populism,

¹ This may not be surprising as this variable highly correlates with the country-level random intercept. Leaving out the country-level random intercept leads to a point estimate of 0.111 ($p=0.38$) for the *Median Voter* marginal effect.

the predicted value of *Intra-Party Democracy* is at around 7. However, toward the maximum of *Populism Score*, the predicted values of our dependent variable approach a value of 2. Hence, there is a strong, significant, and substantively meaningful relationship between populism and party organizations in that they are negatively associated with each other.

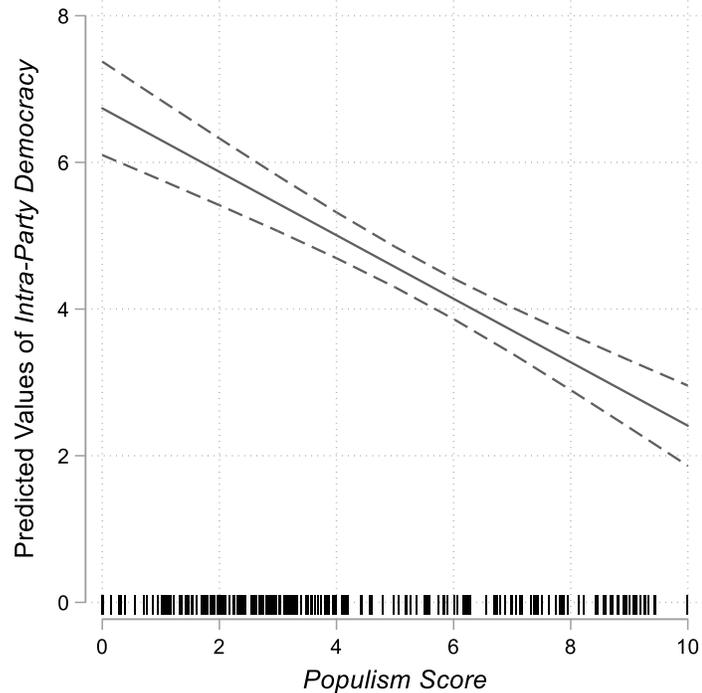
Table 1. Populism and Intra-Party Democracy

	Model 1	Model 2
Populism Score	-0.43* (0.05)	-0.43* (0.05)
Median Voter		0.04 (0.12)
Constant	6.78* (0.31)	6.48* (0.79)
Observations	228	219
Log Pseudolikelihood	-419.03	-403.52
Random Intercepts	Yes	Yes

Table entries are coefficients; robust standard errors clustered at the country level in parentheses; the dependent variable is *Intra-Party Democracy*; * $p < 0.01$.

Linking these findings back to the theoretical discussion above, while it is clearly difficult to claim causality in light of the data constraints, the mere fact that a negative relationship does exist is puzzling, counterintuitive, and emphasizes that populists may not “practice what they preach.” Recall that populism is essentially anti-politics, claiming to pursue a new morale that opposes the establishment and “corrupt elites” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012: 8) and the actors at the center of political decision-making and power (Hay and Stoker 2009; Huber 2020). Linking these features to the defining characteristics of intra-party democracy, it would only be consistent that more populist parties are internally more democratic: a general, broad, and influential participation of the party members seems in line with the *volonté générale* (Mudde 2004). Instead, our evidence highlights that the relationship is in the opposite direction: populist parties are less democratic internally, and they are often accompanied by personalist party leaders (see Table A2 in the appendix).

Figure 1. Substantive Effects of *Populism Score*



Notes. The dashed lines are 95 percent confidence intervals; rug plot along horizontal axis depicts distribution of *Populism Score*.

In personalized leadership, a leader’s political weight significantly exceeds her party’s political weight (Pedersen and Rahat 2020). Although there certainly are populist parties without a strong leader, our findings emphasize that populist parties apparently have – albeit not consistent with their own core ideological characteristics – an affinity for personalist and charismatic leaders (Weyland 2001). This sheds light on another, yet related inconsistency surrounding populist parties and their membership base: “the current heartland of the populists does support democracy, but they do not want to be bothered with politics all the time. Indeed, [...] citizens do not put much value on actually participating themselves in political life.’ True, they want to be heard in the case of fundamental decisions, but first and foremost they want leadership. They want politicians who know (rather than ‘listen to’) the people, and who make their wishes come true” (Mudde 2004, 558).

In the appendix, we discuss several additional analyses. First, despite some endogeneity concerns, we control for parties' positions on EU integration, migration, nationalism, and law-and-order, respectively. Second, we replace the dependent variable with an item on personalized styles of party leadership and find results, which are consistent with what we report above: more populist parties are more personalized. Third, we jackknife the standard errors. Finally, although populism is not tied to specific ideological positions and there are both left-wing and right-wing movements (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017; Akkerman et al. 2017; Huber and Schimpf 2017), we distinguish between right and left-wing parties and find that populism is associated with low levels of intra-party democracy in both groups.

Conclusion

Do populists practice what they preach? This research reports that this is not the case when it comes to the organization of their own party. Despite an ideology highlighting the general will and “anti-elitism,” populist parties are not democratic internally, but place a strong emphasis on personalized leadership. This finding has important implications for our knowledge of populism and intra-party democracy. First, we contribute to the study of populist parties by showing that it is ultimately the undemocratic features of populism that dominate intra-party organizations. Empirically, we add to existing work by making use of newly released data and cross-validating it. Despite its importance as a concept for understanding the politics of developed democracies, party-specific measures of populism have been imprecisely estimated until the release of POPPA. With a consensus definition of populism, Meijers and Zaslove (2020) prompt experts to specifically rate all political parties along dimensions of populism to develop a continuous measure of party populism across Western democracies.

Third, there is a burgeoning literature that aims at “unpacking” parties by focusing on their organizations. These studies evaluate parties' organizations and their influence on various aspects of political representation, including coalition formation (e.g., Pedersen 2010), cabinet portfolio allocation (e.g., Bäck et al. 2016), and how they influence government termination (Greene 2017). Here, we show

that populism is crucial for understanding party organizations, because populist leaders tend to inhabit hierarchical party organizations. The findings, taken together, matter as the connection of populism to party organization can influence a wide range of political outcomes. For example, we would expect a governing coalition of the Freedom Party of Austria – a highly populist party – and the Austrian People’s Party – a largely internally democratic party – to dissolve faster than many other kinds of governing coalitions. And indeed, one such coalition was short-lived and dissolved after only two years in 2019.

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