

Destroying Democracy for the People: The Economic, Social, and Political Consequences of Populist Rule, 1990 to 2017

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ABSTRACT

The recent populist wave has raised questions about the implications of populism for democracy. Some scholars express optimism that populism may be a source of democratic revitalization, bringing about sweeping changes in accordance with the majority will. More often, populism is viewed as a threat to liberal democracy, combining calls for radical change with disdain for core democratic institutions and norms. We consider the possibility that these outcomes may not be mutually exclusive and develop a conceptual typology for understanding the consequences of populist rule. We then use cross-national panel fixed-effects models to analyze the effects of populist leadership between 1990 and 2017. We first examine whether populists have economic and social effects in line with their core aspirations. Left-wing populists are quite effective at implementing their agenda: they reduce income inequality, regulate markets, and incorporate marginalized groups. Right-wing populists are also fairly impactful: for instance, they raise tariffs, cut taxes, and restrict the rights of women and gay people. However, populists of all stripes are associated with the rapid and severe erosion of liberal democratic institutions. Populists, we conclude, often destroy democracy in the name of the people.

KEYWORDS: populism; democracy; liberalism; illiberalism; political sociology

Since the Cold War's end, elections have propelled dozens of populist leaders and parties into power around the world, arousing concerns about the future of liberal democracy. By one estimate, the number of populists in office increased from three in 1990 to 14 in 2017, as shown in [Figure 1](#).¹ Although much scholarly and popular attention focuses on right-wing leaders such as Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, and Viktor Orbán, the number of populists since 1990 divides fairly evenly between the ideological right and left. For every Trump or Modi, there is a Hugo Chávez or Alexis Tsipras.

Scholars debate whether populism represents a potential corrective or an existential threat to democracy. Populism may enhance democracy by giving voice to previously neglected or marginalized groups ([Bonikowski et al. 2019](#); [Juon and Bochsler 2020](#); [Mouffe 2005](#); [Roberts 2012](#); [Rovira Kaltwasser 2012](#)). Others worry that populism undermines minority protections, government constraints, and the rule of law ([Kenny 2020](#); [Kriesi 2014](#); [Müller 2016](#); [Pappas 2015](#); [Taggart 2000](#); [Urbinati 2019](#)). We develop general propositions that consider both possibilities. First, we examine

¹ Populism defies simple definition. We outline its core features and develop a classification of populists below.

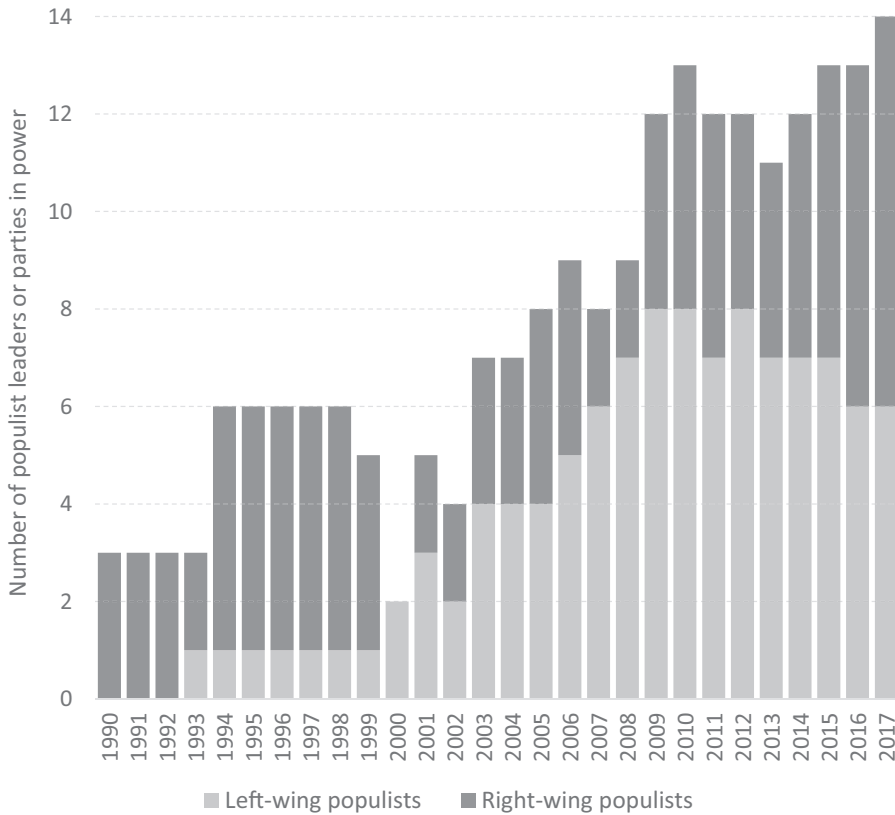


Figure 1. Populists in Power in “Minimally Democratic” Countries Worldwide, 1990 to 2017

whether populists engender substantive changes in line with their rhetorical and ideological positions. Because populists claim to represent the interests of ignored or forgotten majorities, these outcomes may indicate a sort of democratic invigoration. Second, we assess the effect of populism on liberal democratic institutions such as elections, legislatures, courts, and the press. Both questions are of interest in their own right; jointly they paint a picture of the tensions between populism and democracy.

We present cross-national panel fixed-effects regression analyses that examine the multifaceted consequences of populist rule between 1990 and 2017. Our analyses draw on three independent efforts to identify populist leaders and parties around the world (Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2020; Kenny 2017; Kyle and Gultchin 2018; Kyle and Meyer 2020). We find that populists often do enact expected changes. For example, periods of left-wing populist rule are associated with state regulation of markets, downward redistribution of income, and the incorporation of marginalized groups into politics. We find fewer substantive effects for right-wing populists, although results suggest that they curtail the rights of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, deregulate domestic markets, lower taxes, and increase trade barriers. Some of these changes directly challenge core tenets of liberal democracy, as when right-wing populists discriminate against women or left-wing populists violate private property rights. All substantive changes, however, come at the expense of liberal democratic institutions. Both left- and right-wing populists impede free and fair elections, weaken legislative and judicial constraints on their power, and attack press freedoms. We situate these findings within a typology of possibilities, contributing to a better understanding of the relationship between populism and democracy.

POPULISM AND ITS VARIETIES

Populism appears in many guises—left and right, economic and ethnonational, inclusionary and exclusionary—that transcend conventional political and ideological distinctions (Bugarcic 2019a;

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Peters and Pierre 2020). Nevertheless, most scholars agree on its core features and defining elements (Bonikowski et al. 2019:62).

Populism's General Features

Populism is based on symbolic, discursive, and ultimately mythical constructions of “the people” (Canovan 1984; Laclau 2005). Some populists define the people narrowly in ethnic, cultural, national, or religious terms; others purport to champion the economically disadvantaged masses; and still others emphasize the plight of ordinary people irrespective of socioeconomic or demographic characteristics (Brubaker 2017; Canovan 1984; Kriesi 2014; Pappas 2015; Taggart 2000). Despite these differences, conceptualizations of peoplehood always follow a *pars pro toto* logic in which only a subset of the population constitutes the true or authentic people (Bonikowski 2017; de la Torre 2019; Urbanati 2019).

The people are further imagined to be homogenous. They are not a mere agglomeration of individuals, but rather a corporate body with a common identity, collective will, or uniform interests (Bonikowski et al. 2019; Canovan 2002; Mansbridge and Macedo 2019; Mény and Surel 2002; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Müller 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Taggart 2000). Due to this pretension of homogeneity, populists are little concerned with aggregating interests or accommodating differences.

Because definitions of the people are partial, the populist imaginary always includes outsiders, and these outsiders always include elites. An anti-establishment ethos and antipathy toward elites represents another general feature of populism. Populists claim that a small but powerful cadre of elites has usurped power from the people, whose needs and preferences are neglected by existing political arrangements (Bonikowski 2017; Bugarcic 2019a; Canovan 2002; Juon and Bochsler 2020; Mansbridge and Macedo 2019; Mény and Surel 2002; Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Müller 2016; Pappas 2015; Taggart 2000; Urbanati 2019). Populists promise to wrest power from the privileged few and restore it to the people. As with constructions of peoplehood, elites are characterized in different ways, and may include bureaucrats and “establishment” politicians, wealthy business owners and oligarchs, experts and intellectuals, or cosmopolitan and transnational elites (Brubaker 2017; Kriesi 2014; Pappas 2015; Taggart 2000). Excluded “Others” often also include immigrants and racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, but even here populists accuse elites of supporting or favoring these groups at the expense of the people (Bonikowski 2017; Brubaker 2017; Mény and Surel 2002; Moffitt 2016; Müller 2016).

Finally, populists insist that the people should rule directly and without constraint, which by extension applies to themselves as representatives of the people (Bonikowski 2017; Brubaker 2017; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Pappas 2015; Urbanati 2019). The legitimacy of populists derives from the claim that they alone speak and act on behalf of the people (Canovan 1984; Müller 2016). Populists cast themselves as the very embodiment of the people: “*L'état, c'est moi*” becomes, in the words of Hugo Chávez, “*El pueblo soy yo*”—I am the people (Moffitt 2016:51). As the people's sole genuine representative, populists brook no interference or opposition.

Varieties of Populism

Scholars routinely note populism's chameleonic quality. As a “thin-centered” ideology, it thickens in combination with host ideologies, ranging from socialism to nationalism (Bonikowski et al. 2019; Bugarcic 2019a; Kriesi 2014; Mény and Surel 2002; Moffitt 2020; Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000). The substantive content of populist claims, including the identities of the people and their adversaries, therefore varies greatly.

Theory and research often distinguish left- and right-wing variants of populism (de la Torre 2019; Funke et al. 2020; Huber and Schimpf 2016; Juon and Bochsler 2020; Moffitt 2020; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Weyland 2013). We follow this approach, while recognizing that populists do not always fall neatly on the left–right ideological spectrum. We compare populists on two substantive dimensions: economic and social. Economically, populists range from socialist to neoliberal; others combine free-market policies in some domains with government controls in others. Socially, populists can be inclusive or exclusive (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Some emphasize social

justice and seek to expand political participation; others restrict membership and participation to select groups of people, often defined in ethnoracial or religious terms.

The primary agenda of left-wing populists is economic. They view society as an arena of conflict between the poor masses and the economic elites who exploit and oppress them. Left-wing populists generally embrace inclusive and heterogeneous understandings of peoplehood that transcend racial, ethnic, and social distinctions (Bugaric 2019b; Huber and Schimpf 2016; Mouffe 2018; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Müller 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Roberts 2012; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Often, the people are defined negatively—that is, residually—in terms of what they *are not* instead of what they *are*. In one expansive construction, the people comprise anyone who is not part of the ultra-rich “one percent.” Despite their racial, ethnic, and even national diversity, the people’s economic interests are regarded as uniform, and typically include preferences for resource redistribution and market regulation. Left-wing populism has been common in Latin America (e.g., Chávez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia) but also includes the Syriza Party in Greece, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, and Jacob Zuma in South Africa, among others.

Right-wing populists are far more exclusionary, restricting peoplehood along racial, ethnic, nativist, or religious lines (Bonikowski 2017; Bonikowski et al. 2019; Huber and Schimpf 2016; Mouffe 2005; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Right-wing populists invert the definitional logic of left populism, identifying the people positively and their enemies residually. To belong in the favored in-group, one must possess the “correct” traits—a particular nationality or phenotype, perhaps, or faith in the true religion—as specified by the populist. Anyone lacking these credentials is, by definition, an outsider. A pure and *gemeinschaftliche* community stands opposed to a variety of super- and subordinate adversaries, foreign and domestic: job-stealing immigrants, minorities claiming special privileges, sovereignty-usurping globalists, and cosmopolitan elites who disparage the common people (Brubaker 2017). Right-wing populists have assumed power in countries such as Turkey (Erdoğan), Hungary (Orbán), and India (Modi).

The social agenda of right-wing populists is chauvinistic and discriminatory. They assert the superiority of their nation on the world stage and privilege “indigenous” citizens over immigrants and minority groups at home. Economically, right-wing populists can be more difficult to peg, as their policies are often more pragmatic than principled (Kenny 2020; Mudde 2007; Rovny 2013). Many use neoliberal policies to undermine entrenched political and bureaucratic elites (Weyland 1999); others promise to protect domestic workers and business interests from global competition (Brubaker 2017; Fabry 2019; Mudde 2007). Attitudes toward social welfare are similarly diverse, with some calling for steep cuts and others expanding benefits to select groups. Social programs may also serve as a form of patronage, in which populists exchange benefits for political support.

THEORIZING THE CONSEQUENCES OF POPULIST RULE

Is populism a corrective or a threat to democracy? The literature is equivocal, at turns hopeful that populists can address the neglected demands of the masses and fearful that they will erode core democratic institutions. We discuss these perspectives and link them to testable hypotheses.

Populism Invigorates Popular Democracy

In one view, populism has the potential to invigorate democracy by making it more responsive to the “silent majority” and their interests (Bugaric 2019b; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). According to conventional theories of democratic politics, leaders and parties pursue platforms that represent voter preferences (Adams 2012; Pitkin 1967). When existing parties fail to address these concerns, opportunities arise for new leaders or parties to capture votes (Dalton 2018).

Populism illustrates this realignment process. Populists claim to champion the people’s will against the special interests of establishment elites or minority groups, speaking to concerns mainstream politics ignore. In Western Europe, for instance, many citizens oppose immigration and European integration, issues they feel are inadequately addressed by existing parties (Backlund and Jungar 2019). Populists pledge to increase the representation of excluded groups, revitalize mass participation in politics, and put the majority’s preferences squarely on the political agenda (Juon and Bochsler 2020; Roberts 2012). They offer the promise of dramatic and decisive change from a corrupt, unresponsive,

or ineffective status quo. It may therefore be possible to interpret the rise of populism as an indicator of responsive democracy.

One tractable aspect of democratic responsiveness is whether populists generate substantive reforms that match their ideological positions. Such an outcome would be consistent with the view that populists give voters an alternative to existing parties and usher in tangible changes on behalf of the people. Outcomes would vary depending on the kind of goals articulated by different types of populists and the nature of the people they claim to represent.

Left-wing populists.

Left-wing populists make economic inequalities and social injustices the focus of their messaging. They propose to reorganize the economy around the needs and interests of the masses, which may include the downward redistribution of income, expansion of social welfare programs, and nationalization of industries. Regulating markets, businesses, and trade on behalf of workers is another central pillar of left-wing platforms. Anti-globalization rhetoric is also common, with populists denouncing transnational corporations, international economic institutions such as the World Bank and World Trade Organization, and American imperialism.

Hypothesis 1a: Left-wing populists will redistribute income downward, impose stricter economic regulations, and adopt protectionist trade policies.

The social policies of left-wing populists tend to be inclusive rather than exclusive (Bugarcic 2019b; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Müller 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). We would not expect them to restrict the rights of women, immigrants, LGBT people, or racial and ethnic groups. On the contrary, we might find improvements along these lines, in keeping with promises to expand political participation. Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales offer examples of inclusive populism, as each sought to incorporate disenfranchised groups—peasants, workers, the poor, indigenous peoples—into politics (de la Torre 2016; Moffitt 2016, 2020; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Roberts 2012). Likewise, the Syriza Party in Greece created a pathway to citizenship for immigrants and extended marriage and adoption rights to LGBT people (Douzinas 2019; Moffitt 2020). Thus, in addition to their expected economic effects, we anticipate left-wing populists will protect marginalized groups from discrimination and incorporate them into politics.

Hypothesis 1b: Left-wing populists will expand the rights and political participation of women, sexual minorities, and marginalized ethnic groups.

Right-wing populists.

Cultural, nationalist, or right-wing populists campaign on promises to return control of society back to the authentic people. For them, diversity threatens the interests and identity of a homogenous citizenry. They focus on curbing immigration and restricting minority rights while elevating the “true” people and their interests. Jingoistic sloganeering—Jean-Marie Le Pen’s “*les français d’abord*” (the French first) or Donald Trump’s “America First”—epitomize these agendas, as does dehumanizing rhetoric. An official in Hungary’s Fidesz party once likened Roma to “animals” who are “not fit to live among people” (*The Guardian* 2013). In India, the president of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party referred to Muslims as “infiltrators” who “are eating away at our country like termites” (Frayer 2019).

Right-wing populists celebrate traditional (but often imagined) social orders rooted in religion and patriarchy. In pledging to restore “traditional” family values and gender roles, they may call for returning women to the home and attack LGBT rights (Graff et al. 2019; Hadler and Symons 2018; Velasco 2020). The misogynistic and homophobic platform of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party, designed to attract conservative religious voters, is a case in point (O’Connell 2020). So is the inflammatory rhetoric of Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, who once remarked that he is “proud to be homophobic” (Simões 2018).

Hypothesis 2a: Right-wing populists will curb immigration, suppress women’s and LGBT rights, and foment discrimination.

Whether such outcomes can be regarded as “democratic,” hinges, of course, on one’s definition of democracy. They are certainly not indicators of *liberal* or socially inclusive democracy; quite the contrary, restricting the rights of women, sexual minorities, and other marginalized groups runs directly counter to liberalism. They may, however, qualify as democratic in a purely majoritarian or *illiberal* sense (Plattner 2019; Zakaria 1997).²

On economic matters, right-wing populists often espouse ideologically inconsistent views. One variant combines xenophobia with neoliberalism (Fabry 2019; Kiely 2020; Roberts 1995). Another supports laissez-faire competition in domestic markets while erecting barriers against “unfair” competition in the global economy (Brubaker 2017; Mudde 2007). Donald Trump imposed steep tariffs on imports while attacking “job-killing” regulations and cutting taxes on the wealthy. Similarly, Viktor Orbán vowed to “protect ordinary folk from multinationals” while implementing “savage cuts to the welfare state” (Müller 2016:59). Such policies invert the postwar era’s embedded liberalism compromise (Ruggie 1982). Instead of balancing free trade with interventions designed to reduce unemployment, stabilize markets, and expand welfare protections, right-wing populists often combine economic nationalism with internal deregulation and spending cuts.

Hypothesis 2b: Right-wing populists will increase tariffs and regulate cross-border economic transactions while cutting taxes and liberalizing domestic markets.

One may disagree with these policy positions. The underlying point, however, is that populism may serve as a vehicle for addressing and implementing majority preferences that have been short-circuited by conventional party systems or unrepresentative institutions.

Populism Threatens Liberal Democracy

In contrast to this sanguine take on the revitalizing potential of populism, the bulk of the literature is more circumspect. At best, scholars view populism as *both* a corrective *and* a threat to democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Populism reveals the “two faces of democracy” (Canovan 1984). Although overtures to the people and their interests are consistent with the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty, another side to populism rejects liberal democratic institutions and procedures (Taggart 2000).

While populists generally pay lip service to majoritarian or popular democracy, they tend to be sharply critical of government constraints and the rule of law, which they criticize for impeding their ability to undertake drastic and decisive change on behalf of the people. The system is stacked against the people and their interests: Elections are rigged, state institutions are corrupt, courts and legislative bodies are unrepresentative.

Consider the case of Peru, where Alberto Fujimori used allegations of corruption among party elites as a pretext for his autogolpe in 1992. When political opposition stymied his attempts to liberalize the economy, Fujimori suspended the constitution, dissolved Congress, and purged the nation’s courts (Roberts 1995).³ Poland offers another example. Purporting to rid the judicial system of corruption, the Law and Justice Party passed a law in 2017 forcing 40 percent of Supreme Court justices into retirement, the vacancies filled with party loyalists (Lyman 2017).

Populists often portray democratic institutions as impediments on the people’s rule. To them, the separation of powers reflects a distrust of the people, courts illegitimately obstruct popular sovereignty, and parliaments fragment the people’s will. Meanwhile, journalists and mainstream media outlets are depicted as elitist purveyors of “fake news” (Kenny 2020). On the left, Chávez shuttered nearly three dozen radio stations in 2007, alleging their failure to comply with government regulations. The move, he said, would democratize the media, which “belong to the people and not the bourgeoisie” (Colitt and Martinez 2009). On the right, Erdoğan gutted press freedoms after a failed coup in 2016, with Turkey accounting for one-third of all journalists imprisoned worldwide that year (Weise 2017).

² By the same token, left-wing populists who expand political rights and participation while infringing property rights also fail to meet some definitions of liberal democracy. In Mukand and Rodrik’s (2020:770) typology, for example, a democracy is “liberal” only if it protects civil, political, and property rights.

³ Fujimori’s decision to close Congress garnered widespread popular support, allowing him to claim the veneer of democratic legitimacy.

Another populist theme depicts the political establishment as beset by cronyism and beholden to special interests. Although populists often posture as incorruptible outsiders who promise to “drain the swamp,” once in power they routinely use public office for personal benefit. According to one estimate, nearly half of all populist leaders who held power since 1990 have been indicted on corruption charges (Kyle and Mounk 2018). Müller (2016) goes so far as to contend that corruption and mass clientelism are constitutive features of populism.

The upshot is that democracy may give rise to its own gravediggers. Populists who are catapulted into political office democratically may increase their own power and mount an assault on liberal institutions.

Hypothesis 3: Populists will undermine democratic institutions, reduce media freedoms, increase corruption, and establish clientelist relationships.

The Consequences of Populism: A Typology

Debates over the relationship between populism and democracy can be clarified by treating each possibility separately. First, do populists produce changes that address the putative demands of the people? Second, do populists systematically erode democratic procedures and institutions? These dimensions intersect to produce a typology of outcomes outlined in Figure 2.

Democratic revitalization.

One optimistic—and in some cases, perhaps logically incompatible—possibility is that populists generate changes in line with their stated aims, without eroding liberal democratic institutions. The overall picture would be one of democratic responsiveness in which elected leaders bring about promised reforms. Yet to the extent populists pursue illiberal ends—restrictions on women’s or LGBT rights, for example, or the confiscation of private property without due process—it becomes difficult to interpret their attainment as a form of democratic revitalization, even if such goals are widely supported. We discuss the possibility that majority preferences may themselves undermine liberal democracy below.

Cynical opportunism.

A competing image is of a “bait and switch” (Drake 1992). Here, aspiring authoritarians use populist rhetoric to sway frustrated voters and win elections, absent any sincere intention to implement promised changes. Once elected, populists instead use their position to neutralize political opposition and undermine constraints on their power. In Hungary, for example, Orbán gerrymandered voting

		Erosion of democratic procedures & institutions	
		Low	High
Implementation of rhetoric & policy agendas	High	<p><i>Democratic revitalization</i></p> <p>Populists make good on their promises for economic and social reform, without undercutting democratic norms and institutions</p>	<p><i>Destroying democracy “for the people”</i></p> <p>Populists achieve ambitious political agendas by overriding institutional constraints, or they enact popular changes that are themselves anti-democratic</p>
	Low	<p><i>Ineffectual or unrealistic promises</i></p> <p>Populists neither damage democracy nor deliver tangible reforms: they may be inept as leaders, unrealistic in their ambitions, or constrained by checks and balances</p>	<p><i>Cynical opportunism (“bait and switch”)</i></p> <p>Populist rhetoric amounts to empty promises made by aspiring authoritarians to win elections; once in office they subvert democratic institutions to gain power and resources</p>

Figure 2. Potential Interpretations of Populist Policy Changes and Democratic Decline

districts to help ensure his party retained a parliamentary supermajority (Kingsley 2018). In this case, we would expect little substantive change—beyond, perhaps, the occasional symbolic concession—but substantial attacks on democratic institutions.

Ineffectual or unrealistic promises.

A third possibility is that populism has little or no effect on the status quo. Populists may be inept as leaders, unrealistic in their ambitions, constrained by robust checks and balances, or thwarted by bureaucratic inertia. This constellation of findings would suggest that populists are neither distinctive nor particularly transformative.

Destroying democracy “for the people.”

Finally, populist leadership may be associated with *both* substantive reforms *and* democratic decline. We consider two potential dynamics. First, radical changes may prove difficult to achieve through conventional political processes. Populists may be effective in generating change precisely because they are willing to circumvent or override democratic institutions. According to the leader of Poland’s Law and Justice Party, Jarosław Kaczyński, stacking the courts with loyalist judges was necessary “to ensure there are no legal blocks on government policies aimed at creating a fairer economy” (Sobczak and Pawlak 2016). To realize their lofty agendas, populists must first sweep away the checks and balances that encumber them.

Democratic declines might also follow directly from the core aspirations of populists and their supporters. Far-right populists, in particular, often pursue illiberal and undemocratic goals. Many of Trump’s supporters endorsed major violations of democracy and human rights such as “locking up” political opponents, “caging” immigrant children, and restricting LGBT rights. Large portions of the electorate, swayed by populist demagoguery or misled by disinformation campaigns, may endorse such abuses.

This conceptual typology motivates our analyses and provides a framework for interpreting the results that follow. By focusing on the empirical effects of populism, we contribute to a better understanding of its nature, which has remained frustratingly elusive.

DATA AND METHOD

We examine the relationship between populist leadership and a range of economic, social, and political outcomes using data for roughly 100 countries between 1990 and 2017. Our study encompasses the post-Cold War period and captures the recent global wave of populism (Norris and Inglehart 2019). The appendix lists sampled countries.

Dependent Variables I: Substantive Outcomes

Focusing on economic and social outcomes, our first set of analyses considers whether populists achieve some of the substantive aims associated with their rhetoric. Table 1 describes these measures, reports descriptive statistics for them, and identifies data sources. To facilitate comparison of effect sizes across outcomes, we standardize all dependent variables to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

Economic intervention and regulation.

We hypothesized that left-wing populists will regulate the economy and redistribute income to the poor. To measure income inequality, we use Gini scores for disposable income (i.e., after taxes and transfers), with higher values indicating greater inequality (Solt 2019). We also assess redistributive effort, defined as the percentage change in market and disposable income inequality in a country (again as measured by Gini coefficients). Another variable considers whether unemployment rates decline under populist rule (World Bank 2020).

Left-wing populists are also expected to regulate markets, whereas right-wing populists often favor (domestic) liberalization. We assess these claims using a pair of measures: the Fraser Institute’s (2019) Economic Freedom of the World index, with higher scores corresponding to less government regulation of the economy, and a measure of state ownership and control of capital from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al. 2020), rescaled so that higher scores mean greater

Table 1. Z-transformed Measures of Economic and Social Outcomes

Variables	Min.	Max.	Obs.	Source(s)
Economic intervention and regulation				
<i>Income inequality:</i> Gini coefficients for inequality in disposable income (after taxes and transfers).	-1.84	2.49	2,030	Solt (2019)
<i>Redistribution effort:</i> Percent change in market (pre-tax and transfer) and disposable (post-tax and transfer) income inequality.	-2.39	1.95	2,030	Solt (2019)
<i>Unemployment rate:</i> Share of the labor force that is without work but available for and seeking employment.	-1.39	5.30	2,137	World Bank (2020)
<i>Economic freedom index:</i> State adherence to free-market policies in terms of private property protections, size of government, sound money policies, foreign trade regulations, and domestic economic regulation.	-4.39	1.97	2,055	Fraser Institute (2019)
<i>State ownership:</i> State ownership and control of capital (including land) in the industrial, agricultural, and service sectors. (Rescaled so higher scores correspond to greater ownership and control.)	-3.00	5.22	2,135	Coppedge et al. (2020:173)
<i>Taxes on individuals:</i> Total revenue from income, capital gains, and profit taxes on individuals as a share of gross domestic product.	-1.13	4.58	1,812	UNU-WIDER (2021); Teorell et al. (2022)
<i>Taxes on international trade:</i> Total taxes on import and export duties, profits of export or import monopolies, exchange profits, and exchange taxes as a percentage of total government revenue.	-0.74	6.44	1,655	World Bank (2020)
<i>Mean tariff rate:</i> Unweighted average of effectively applied rates for all products subject to tariffs.	-1.27	12.78	1,560	World Bank (2020)
<i>Economic globalization:</i> Index summarizing the degree of trade and financial globalization.	-2.77	2.14	2,191	Gygli et al. (2019)
Social inclusion and exclusion				
<i>Women in parliament:</i> Share of seats in the lower or unicameral chamber of a country's national legislature held by women.	-1.60	3.32	2,135	Coppedge et al. (2020); IPU (2022); World Bank (2020)
<i>Power distributed by gender:</i> How equitably is power distributed between men and women? (Higher scores indicate greater gender equality.)	-3.28	2.59	2,135	Coppedge et al. (2020:193)
<i>Gender equality in civil liberties:</i> Women and men enjoy equal access to justice, private property rights, freedom of movement, and freedom from forced labor.	-3.25	1.68	2,064	Coppedge et al. (2020:199)
<i>Power distributed by sexual orientation:</i> How equitably is power distributed by sexual orientation (i.e., between heterosexuals and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender members of the polity)?	-2.50	2.61	2,191	Coppedge et al. (2020:43)
<i>Legal LGB inclusion:</i> Index of laws protecting the rights of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people: decriminalization of homosexuality, open military service, non-discrimination in employment, public accommodations, adoption rights for same-sex couples, legal marriage recognition, constitutional non-discrimination provisions.	-1.34	2.09	1,968	Flores and Park (2018)
<i>Discriminated population:</i> Size of all discriminated ethnic groups as a share of the total population. Discrimination refers to active, intentional, and targeted unjust treatment of group members by the state.	-0.24	6.86	2,173	Bormann et al. (2021)

Table 1. Continued

Variables	Min.	Max.	Obs.	Source(s)
<i>Migrant stock</i> : Number of international migrants as a percentage of the total population. (Measured quinquennially between 1990 and 2019; intervening years are linearly interpolated.)	-.82	5.54	2,191	United Nations (2019)
<i>Refugee stock</i> : Number of refugees as a percentage of the total population.	-.21	18.75	1,996	World Bank (2020)

All variables standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Min. = minimum; Max. = maximum; Obs. = number of country-year observations.

state intervention. We further expect populists on the left and right to adopt opposing policies on individual taxation ([Teorell et al. 2022](#); [UNU-WIDER 2021](#)), with the former increasing taxes to fund social programs and the latter cutting taxes in line with conservative fiscal policies.

Regulations on international trade are a different story, as populists on both the left and right often vow to protect domestic workers or business interests from foreign competition. To capture these effects, we include variables for taxes on international trade, measured as a share of total government revenue ([World bank 2020](#)); mean tariff rates, calculated for all traded goods ([World bank 2020](#)); and economic globalization, an index summarizing levels of trade and financial globalization in a country, with higher scores indicating greater liberalization ([Gygli et al. 2019](#)).

Social inclusion and exclusion.

Another set of outcomes assesses the inclusive or exclusive orientation of different populisms. Many right-wing populists call for the restoration of the “traditional” family, to the detriment of women and sexual minorities, whereas left-wing populists often seek to expand rights and participation for these groups. We analyze three measures of women’s rights and political participation: the first is the share of seats in a country’s lower or unicameral legislative chamber held by women ([Coppedge et al. 2020](#); IPU 2022; [World Bank 2020](#)); the second, from V-Dem, considers whether political power and influence is distributed equally between men and women (with higher scores indicating greater equality); and the third, also from V-Dem, rates gender equality in respect for civil liberties (access to justice, property rights, freedom of movement, and freedom from forced labor, again with higher scores indicating greater equality).

Two additional variables consider the legal and political status of sexual minorities. An index of legal inclusion refers to the protection and empowerment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people, with higher scores reflecting greater recognition of LGB rights ([Flores and Park 2018](#)). These laws range from decriminalization of homosexuality and non-discrimination in employment to legal marriage recognition and adoption rights for same-sex couples. Another measure, from V-Dem, describes the distribution of political power between heterosexuals and LGBT people, with higher scores reflecting greater parity.

We test whether populist rule affects ethno-racial discrimination using a variable from the Ethnic Power Relations dataset that gives the size of discriminated ethnic groups as a share of the total population, where discrimination refers to active, intentional, and targeted unjust treatment of group members by the state ([Bormann et al. 2021](#)). We also consider animus toward foreigners. Right-wing populists may seek to restrict immigration, which they argue corrupts the nation, corrodes its values, or takes jobs from citizens. A measure of migrant stock as a percentage of the population ([United Nations 2019](#)) explores this possibility. An analogous variable gives the share of refugees in a country.

Dependent Variables II: Democratic Outcomes

Alongside economic and social outcomes, we analyze the effect of populism on liberal democratic institutions: free and fair elections, institutional checks on executive authority, press freedoms, executive corruption, and clientelism. Our measures, summarized in [Table 2](#), come from the V-Dem database and are also z-transformed.

Table 2. Z-transformed Measures of Liberal Democratic Institutions

Variables	Min.	Max.	Obs.	Source
<i>Clean elections:</i> Elections are free and fair, with no evidence of registration fraud, systematic irregularities, government intimidation of the opposition, vote buying, or election violence.	-3.72	1.09	2,191	Coppedge et al. (2020:47)
<i>Legislative constraints:</i> The legislature and other government agencies are capable of questioning, investigating, and exercising oversight over the executive.	-3.09	1.07	2,130	Coppedge et al. (2020:49)
<i>Judicial constraints:</i> The executive respects the constitution and complies with the judiciary; courts are independent (e.g., judges do not simply adopt the government’s position regardless of their sincere view of the record).	-3.31	1.09	2,191	Coppedge et al. (2020:49)
<i>Press freedom:</i> Factor analysis of seven items: government censorship; media routinely criticize government; media represent a wide range of political perspectives; government harassment of individual journalists; media self-censorship; media bias against opposition parties or candidates; media corruption.	-3.75	2.09	2,135	Coppedge et al. (2020:187-191)
<i>Executive corruption:</i> Executive officials or agents grant favors in exchange for bribes or kickbacks; they steal, embezzle, or misappropriate public funds or state resources for personal use. (Reverse-coded so that higher scores reflect less corruption.)	-2.02	1.29	2,191	Coppedge et al. (2020:279)
<i>Clientelism index:</i> Clientelist relationships include the targeted distribution of resources (goods, services, jobs, money, etc.) in exchange for political support. Higher scores indicate greater clientelism.	-1.37	2.30	2,191	Coppedge et al. (2020:273-274)

All variables standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Min. = minimum; Max. = maximum; Obs. = number of country-year observations.

A clean elections index summarizes the absence of voter registration fraud, systematic irregularities, government intimidation of political opposition, vote buying, and election violence. Two variables measure constraints on executive authority: one rates the ability of legislatures to question, investigate, and oversee the executive; the other gauges judicial independence and executive compliance with the constitution and high courts. To construct a measure of press freedom, we conduct a principal components factor analysis of seven items that rate lack of government censorship and harassment of journalists; lack of media bias, corruption, and self-censorship; and the ability of media outlets to represent diverse political perspectives, including those critical of the government.⁴ We assess whether populists engage in systematic corruption using a measure of bribes, kickbacks, theft, embezzlement, and misappropriation of public funds, with higher scores reflecting “cleaner” (i.e., less corrupt) executives. Finally, a clientelism index considers whether leaders exchange goods, services, jobs, money, or other resources for political support.

Independent Variables: Populist Rule

Although most scholars agree on the fundamental characteristics of populism, a definitive inventory of populist leaders and parties does not yet exist. We generate a list by triangulating three independent efforts to identify and classify populists who rose to power through elections (Funke et al. 2020; Kenny 2017, 2020; Kyle and Gultchin 2018; Kyle and Meyer 2020).

The first source is the *Populists in Power* database (Kyle and Gultchin 2018; Kyle and Meyer 2020). Based on a survey of more than 60 peer-reviewed social science journals, Kyle and colleagues identified 46 populist leaders or parties that held executive office between 1990 and 2018 across 33

⁴ Rotated factor loadings on these items range from .900 to .934, with an Eigenvalue of 5.88 (proportion of explained variance = .84; Cronbach’s alpha = .97). Analyses available upon request.

“minimally democratic” countries, defined as those scoring 6 or higher on a scale ranging from –10 (least democratic) to 10 (most democratic) (Marshall 2020).⁵ They coded a leader or party as populist if three or more peer-reviewed sources referred to it as such, and used dominant rhetoric to classify populists as socio-economic (characterized by a reverence for the common worker), cultural (emphasizing race, ethnicity, religion, nativity, or related identities), or anti-establishment (pitting ordinary people broadly against corrupt elites). Kyle and Gultchin (2018:45–53) present a description of the database and classification rubric.

A second framework is Funke et al. (2020), which identifies 50 populist executives from a sample of nearly 1,500 leaders covering 60 of the world’s largest national economies between 1900 and 2018. The defining feature of populism for these scholars is anti-establishment or anti-elite rhetoric, and they delineate left- and right-wing varieties. Left-wing rhetoric is chiefly economic and includes attacks on capitalists and capitalism, demands for redistribution, critiques of economic globalization, or calls for economic nationalism. Right-wing populists target perceived threats to national identity and culture: foreigners, ethnic or religious minorities, and the cosmopolitan elites alleged to support them. Funke et al. (2020) provide a list of populist episodes (p. 14) and an appendix that documents and justifies coding decisions (pp. 75–153).

Kenny (2017, 2020) offers a third source of data on populists in power between 1980 to 2014, restricted to democratic countries as defined in the Democracy and Dictatorship dataset (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010). He sorts populists according to economic ideology using the Database of Political Institutions (Beck et al. 2001), which classifies executive leaders or parties as left (e.g., communist, socialist, social democratic, left wing), right (e.g., conservative, Christian democratic, right-wing), or center (e.g., liberal). Kenny (2020:266–267) gives details on coding, and the appendix identifies particular cases.

Using these sources, we generated a composite classification that codes leaders or parties as populist only if they appear in at least two databases. Table 3 lists all instances classified as populist in each database since 1990, as well as our consolidated classification. We follow Funke et al. (2020) and Kenny (2017) in identifying left- and right-wing populists (only two of Kenny’s populist leaders were coded as centrist). There is broad agreement across sources as to the ideological orientation of populist leaders or parties, although Table 3 points out the few discrepancies that do occur. Recoding these discrepancies did not affect our substantive results. Collectively, the three databases yield 53 populist leaders or parties in power since 1990, of which 32 appear in at least two databases (with 15 appearing in all three).⁶

We use this consolidated classification to measure spells of left- and right-wing populist leadership. These variables count the consecutive number of years a populist leader or party of each ideological orientation held executive office or controlled a country’s government, resetting to zero when the populist leaves power. We measure the length of leadership spells on the assumption that the effects of populism may take time to accumulate. The longest consecutive spell of left populist leadership in our sample is Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez at 15 years; on the right, it is Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at 14 years.

Control Variables

Our regression models include a battery of potentially confounding variables.

Non-populist leadership spells.

We adjust our estimates for periods of non-populist leadership on the left and right to determine whether populists are indeed distinctive or if “host” ideologies better account for the outcomes we analyze. We identify the ideological orientation or party identification of non-populists using the Database of Political Institutions (Cruz, Keefer, and Scartascini 2021), an updated version of the resource Kenny (2020) used to classify populist leaders and parties.

Democracy stock.

Although our sample is restricted to minimally democratic countries, liberal democratic institutions may prove more resilient in countries that have been democratic longer. A measure of democracy

⁵ We also adopt this scope condition. Although populists must have assumed power in countries meeting or exceeding this threshold, democracy scores may sink below it during their tenure in office.

⁶ More than half of the populists appearing in only two sources were excluded from the third for structural rather than substantive reasons. For example, several leaders in both Kyle et al. and Funke et al. came to power after Kenny’s observation period ended in 2014.

Table 3. Composite Populist Classification Based on Three Independent Classifications of Populists

Country	Leader or Party	Kyle and Meyer (2020)	Funke et al. (2020)	Kenny (2017)	Consolidated
Argentina	Cristina Fernández de Kirchner	Socio-economic	Left	Left	Left
Argentina	Néstor Kirchner	Socio-economic	Left	Left	Left
Argentina	Carlos Menem	Anti-establishment	Right	Right	Right
Bolivia	Evo Morales	Socio-economic	Left	Left	Left
Brazil	Fernando Collor de Mello	Anti-establishment	Right	Left	Right ⁺
Bulgaria	Boyko Borisov	Anti-establishment	Right	Right	Right
Ecuador	Abdala Bucaram	Socio-economic	Right	--	Left ⁺
Ecuador	Rafael Correa	Socio-economic	Left	Left	Left
Ecuador	Lucio Gutierrez	Socio-economic	--	Right	Left ⁺
Greece	Andreas Papandreu	--	Left	Right	Left ⁺
Greece	Syriza	Socio-economic	Left	--	Left
Hungary	Viktor Orbán	Cultural	Right	Right	Right
India	Narendra Modi	Cultural	Right	--	Right
Israel	Benjamin Netanyahu	Cultural	Right	--	Right
Italy	Silvio Berlusconi	Anti-establishment	Right	Right	Right
Japan	Junichiro Koizumi	Anti-establishment	Right	Right	Right
Korea, Rep.	Roh Moo-hyun	--	Right	Center	Right
Nicaragua	Daniel Ortega	Socio-economic	--	Left	Left
Paraguay	Fernando Lugo	Socio-economic	--	Left	Left
Peru	Alberto Fujimori	Anti-establishment	Right	Right	Right
Philippines	Joseph Estrada	Anti-establishment	Left	Left	Left
Philippines	Rodrigo Duterte	Cultural	Right	--	Right
Poland	Law and Justice Party	Cultural	Right	--	Right
Slovakia	Robert Fico	Cultural	Left	--	Left ⁺
Slovakia	Vladimir Mečiar	Cultural	Right	--	Right
South Africa	Jacob Zuma	Socio-economic	Left	--	Left

Table 3. Continued

Country	Leader or Party	Kyle and Meyer (2020)	Funke et al. (2020)	Kenny (2017)	Consolidated
Thailand	Thaksin Shinawatra	Socio-economic	Right	Left	Left [†]
Turkey	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Cultural	Right	Right	Right
United States	Donald Trump	Cultural	Right	-- [*]	Right
Venezuela	Rafael Caldera	Anti-establishment	--	Right	Right
Venezuela	Hugo Chávez	Socio-economic	Left	Left	Left
Venezuela	Nicolás Maduro	Socio-economic	Left	-- [*]	Left
Belarus	Alexander Lukashenko	Anti-establishment	--	-- [*]	--
Czech Republic	Andrej Babiš	Anti-establishment	--	-- [*]	--
Czech Republic	Miloš Zeman	Anti-establishment	--	--	--
Georgia	Mikheil Saakashvili	Anti-establishment	--	--	--
North Macedonia	Nikola Gruevski	Cultural	--	--	--
Poland	Lech Wałęsa	Anti-establishment	--	--	--
Romania	Traian Băsescu	Anti-establishment	--	--	--
Serbia	Aleksandar Vučić	Cultural	--	-- [*]	--
Slovenia	Janez Janša	Cultural	--	--	--
Sri Lanka	Mahinda Rajapaksa	Cultural	--	--	--
Thailand	Yingluck Shinawatra	Socio-economic	--	--	--
Zambia	Michael Sata	Socio-economic	--	--	--
Indonesia	Joko Widodo	--	Left	-- [*]	--
Peru	Alan García	--	Left	--	--
Bulgaria	Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha	--	--	Right	--
Colombia	Álvaro Uribe Vélez	--	--	Right	--
Guatemala	Otto Pérez Molina	--	--	Right	--
Indonesia	Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono	--	--	Center	--
Pakistan	Benazir Bhutto	--	--	Left	--
Peru	Alejandro Toledo	--	--	Right	--
Suriname	Dési Bouterse	--	--	Left	--

^{*} Leader assumed power after Kenny's observation period ended in 2014.

[†] For these entries, identification as "left" or "right" was inconsistent across databases; robustness checks determined that our results are not sensitive to these differences.

-- The populist leader or party is not included in the corresponding database.

stock gives the total number of years since World War II (or, for newer countries, independence) for which a country scored 6 or higher on the Polity 5 combined polity score (Marshall 2020).

Post-communism.

An indicator for post-communist countries, coded 1 during the first five years following regime transition and 0 otherwise, accounts for the potential fragility of democratic institutions in these countries, which may render them more susceptible to populist demagoguery.

Economic development.

A measure of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, rendered in constant 2010 U.S. dollars and logged to reduce skew, captures a country's level of economic development (World Bank 2020). This variable accounts for the long-observed relationship between economic development and the stability of democratic institutions (e.g., Lipset 1959; Przeworski et al. 2000).

Population.

World Bank (2020) also supplies a measure of population size (logged), a standard control variable in cross-national analyses. On the one hand, democracy may be more difficult to sustain in populous countries; on the other hand, pressures arising from large or small populations may thrust populists into power (Auerswald and Yun 2018).

World society linkage.

A variable counting the (logged) number of country linkages to international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), coded from the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Union of International Associations 1990–2018), is a standard proxy for exposure to world culture, including globally institutionalized cultural and political models of liberal democracy.

Violent conflict.

Two indices of civil and international conflict come from the Major Episodes of Political Violence database (Marshall 2019). Conflict may prolong populists' tenure in office (Kyle and Mounk 2018), and it also affects many of the substantive outcomes we analyze: for example, it reduces respect for basic human rights (e.g., Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999) and erodes levels of political tolerance (e.g., Hutchison 2014).

Non-violent protest.

A variable from Banks and Wilson (2018) records the annual number of peaceful public gatherings of at least 100 people for expressing opposition to government policies or authority. It is logged (after adding a constant of 1) to reduce skew. Protest activity might simultaneously catapult populists into power and pressure governments to enact policy changes.⁷ Moreover, the same grievances—real or perceived—that galvanize protests might also drive voters to support populist candidates or parties.

Public opinion.

Levels of popular support for populism, liberal democracy, and substantive policies likely reflect currents of public opinion in a country. Data limitations make it difficult to gauge public opinion directly in large-scale cross-national studies, so we control indirectly for its major social and demographic determinants. Following the work of Ronald Inglehart and associates (e.g., Inglehart 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019), we adjust estimates for educational attainment, measured in years for adults (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation 2015, 2020; Coppedge et al. 2020); secularity, defined as the percentage of a country's population identifying as not religious (Brown and James 2019);⁸ and the age structure of the population, modeled as a quadratic function of median age (United Nations 2019).⁹

⁷ We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this possibility.

⁸ Annual data on religious composition ends in 2015; we carry values forward to extend the time series.

⁹ Median age is measured quinquennially between 1990 and 2019; we use linear interpolation to fill missing values for intervening years.

Time.

To adjust for secular trends in our data, we include a linear time counter. Year-specific intercepts produced comparable results.

Legislative gender quotas.

When modeling women's share of legislative seats, we adjust for the existence and strength of gender quotas, with indicators for quotas without sanctions, weak sanctions, strong sanctions, and reserved seats for women, all interpreted relative to no legislative gender quota (Coppedge et al. 2020).

Method

We estimate fixed-effects regression models that control for time-invariant country differences such as region and colonial history. Fixed-effects models discard between-country variation, which involves comparisons across heterogeneous cases, in favor of isolating within-country changes over time. We base significance tests on clustered standard errors that are robust to heteroscedasticity, autocorrelation, and model misspecification, and lag independent and control variables by one year.

To diagnose potential selection biases, we conducted placebo analyses as described in Dobbin, Schrage, and Kalev (2015). These analyses entertain the possibility that democratic erosion precedes and facilitates the rise of populists to power, in which case populism would be a consequence rather than a cause of de-democratization. Across all dependent variables, we estimated models that omit years with populist incumbents and incorporate a binary variable set to 1 during the three years preceding the assumption of populist to power. Only five of the 46 estimated coefficients (two types of populists for each of 9 economic, 8 social, and 6 democratic outcomes) were statistically significant at $p < .05$, suggesting that selection biases do not pose a major problem. According to these results (not reported but available upon request), left-wing populists were more likely to assume power in countries with rising income inequality, declining immigrant populations, and less executive corruption. Right-wing populists tended to appear when tariffs were low and political power was distributed unequally by gender.

RESULTS**Do Populists Deliver on their Promises?**

Table 4 begins by analyzing whether populists bring their economic rhetoric to fruition. Our first two models address inequality and redistribution. As expected, periods of left populist rule significantly reduce income inequality and increase downward income redistribution. Redistribution also increases the longer non-populist governments on the left are in power, albeit far less extensively compared to populists. Right-wing populists do not systematically affect these outcomes, although their non-populist counterparts preside over modest increases in income inequality and less downward redistribution. Model 3 shows that unemployment rates decline when left-wing populists control government, but not when other types of leaders or parties are in charge.

Models 4 and 5 consider our measures of economic regulation: the Fraser Institute's economic freedom index and V-Dem's measure of state ownership and control of the economy. Left populists increase economic regulation (i.e., they reduce "economic freedom") and expand state ownership, whereas right populists increase economic freedom (i.e., they deregulate the economy). Non-populist executives on the left and right engage in modest deregulation, while right-wing non-populists reduce state ownership and control of the economy.

Turning to Model 6, we find that taxes on individuals increase under left-leaning governments, regardless of populist orientation (although the estimate for left populists falls just shy of statistical significance at $p = .054$), whereas right-wing populists lower income taxes. Populists on the left also raise taxes on trade, as shown in Model 7. Trade protectionism as measured by average tariff rates is a feature of both left and right populism (Model 8). Finally, trade and financial globalization decreases under left populists (Model 9).

All told, these results lend considerable support to Hypothesis 1a: left-wing populists redistribute income downward, reduce unemployment, regulate markets, erect trade barriers, and shield national economies from economic globalization, doing so far more systematically than their non-populist

Table 4. Fixed-Effects Regression Models for the Effect of Populist Spells on Economic Intervention and Regulation, 1990 to 2017

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Income inequality	Income redistribution	Unemployment rate ^a	Economic freedom	State ownership	Taxes on individuals	Taxes on int'l trade	Mean tariff rate	Economic globalization
Left-wing populist spell	-.043*** (.012)	.015*** (.003)	-.043* (.018)	-.117*** (.029)	.154*** (.030)	.013+ (.007)	.062* (.025)	.070** (.023)	-.070*** (.016)
Right-wing populist spell	.009	.002	.003	.065***	.006	-.017**	-.004	.048*	.001
Left non-populist executive spell	(.010)	(.006)	(.020)	(.024)	(.036)	(.006)	(.026)	(.018)	(.021)
	-.004	.003***	.009	.017*	-.008	.009*	-.003	-.002	.006
Right non-populist executive spell	(.004)	(.001)	(.008)	(.008)	(.007)	(.003)	(.007)	(.007)	(.006)
	.005*	-.002*	.000	.017**	-.022*	.002	-.001	-.001	.005
Democracy stock	(.002)	(.001)	(.007)	(.005)	(.011)	(.003)	(.005)	(.006)	(.005)
	-.003	.002	.033*	-.029	.006	-.016+	-.000	.017	.015
Post-communist	(.011)	(.004)	(.015)	(.036)	(.019)	(.008)	(.033)	(.034)	(.012)
	-.076	.026	.180+	-.941***	.178	.044	.467*	-.474	.012
GDP per capita (ln)	(.050)	(.024)	(.105)	(.124)	(.180)	(.082)	(.192)	(.385)	(.144)
	.034	-.005	-.1.121***	.079	.160	-.053	-.680	-.1.492+	.024
INGO linkages (ln)	(.117)	(.051)	(.259)	(.189)	(.237)	(.144)	(.435)	(.847)	(.185)
	.162	.029	1.039**	1.282***	-.1.021***	-.168	.898	-.514	1.206***
Anti-gov't demonstrations (ln)	(.112)	(.047)	(.357)	(.291)	(.288)	(.152)	(.628)	(.792)	(.271)
	-.010	.003	.081**	-.058**	.049+	.033**	.078*	.013	-.036*
Civil conflict	(.010)	(.004)	(.025)	(.021)	(.029)	(.012)	(.038)	(.033)	(.014)
	-.013	.008	.021	-.102*	.002	.015	-.078	-.079+	.002
International conflict	(.014)	(.006)	(.021)	(.041)	(.023)	(.014)	(.051)	(.046)	(.028)
	-.019	.016	.123***	-.217***	-.096	-.007	-.055	.058	-.044+
Population (ln)	(.026)	(.010)	(.022)	(.032)	(.095)	(.043)	(.071)	(.043)	(.023)
	.133	.033	1.031+	.015	-.271	-.228	-.1.679*	-.390	.314

Table 4. Continued

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Income inequality	Income redistribution	Unemployment rate ^a	Economic freedom	State ownership	Taxes on individuals	Taxes on int'l trade	Mean tariff rate	Economic globalization
Educational attainment (years)	(.280) .069*	(.134) .031	(.584) .051	(.466) .195+	(.622) -.042	(.336) .071	(.661) -.037	(.971) .056	(.444) .021
Percent non-religious	(.033) -.001	(.023) .006**	(.096) -.011	(.104) -.033**	(.075) .024+	(.047) -.011	(.098) .015	(.085) -.010	(.061) -.002
Median age	(.004) -.183***	(.002) .016	(.010) -.020	(.012) .102	(.013) .043	(.007) .035	(.011) -.247+	(.007) -.355**	(.007) .069
Median age, squared	(.044) .002***	(.017) -.000	(.071) .001	(.108) -.003*	(.097) -.000	(.033) -.001+	(.138) .003	(.126) .004**	(.058) -.000
Linear time	(.001) -.001	(.000) -.008	(.001) -.054*	(.001) .051	(.001) -.014	(.001) .026*	(.002) -.007	(.001) -.006	(.001) -.022
Constant	(.012) -.988	(.005) -1.424	(.021) -14.456	(.040) -11.671	(.025) 9.032	(.012) 4.785	(.036) 32.153**	(.049) 29.230	(.016) -15.897*
Model F statistic	(4.851) 5.586***	(2.360) 4.481***	(9.022) 7.592***	(7.296) 21.546***	(11.291) 5.279***	(5.125) 5.466***	(10.347) 5.212***	(23.059) 14.926***	(7.829) 24.504***
R-squared (within)	.331	.198	.207	.619	.293	.114	.363	.390	.603
N country-years	2030	2030	2137	2055	2135	1812	1655	1560	2191
N countries	101	101	105	102	104	93	91	97	106

^a Coverage for this variable begins in 1991.

Robust standard errors, clustered on countries, in parentheses. Independent and control variables except time lagged one year. Dependent variables are z-transformed. Models include intercepts for countries. + p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 (two-tailed).

counterparts. Results also offer qualified support to Hypothesis 2b: right-wing populists deregulate markets, lower taxes on individuals, and impose tariffs on international trade. However, non-populist governments on the right display a somewhat more consistent conservative track record on income inequality, redistribution, and market liberalization.

Space constraints preclude a full discussion of control variables, which generally have plausible effects. For example, unemployment rates decline with per capita GDP (Model 3), economic regulation increases during periods of civil and international conflict (Model 4); and economic globalization intensifies with world-cultural integration as measured by INGO linkages (Model 9).

The analyses in [Table 5](#) focus on the politics of inclusion and exclusion, which are also fundamental to populist claims. Estimates for left-wing populism are in the hypothesized directions, indicating greater inclusiveness, but only four of eight coefficients are statistically significant. Left populism is associated with increased representation of women in national legislatures (Model 1), greater political equality and legal inclusion for LGB(T) individuals (Models 4 and 5), and larger refugee populations (Model 8). These findings are consistent with Hypothesis 1b, which predicted that left-wing populists would expand the rights and political participation of marginalized groups.

We find somewhat less evidence that populists on the right engage in social exclusion. Gender equality in respect for civil liberties declines the longer right-wing populists are in power (Model 3), as do legal rights for LGB people (Model 5, albeit at $p=.066$). Hypothesis 2a, therefore, finds only modest support in our analyses. Among non-populist governments, those on the left distribute power more equitably by gender and sexual orientation (Models 2 and 4), while those on the right curtail immigration (Model 7). The effects of control variables, where present, again make sense. For instance, women occupy a higher share of parliamentary seats in countries with stronger gender quotas, LGBT rights are better respected in secular societies, and the discriminated population is smaller in long-established democracies.

These analyses suggest that left-wing populists deliver on their core economic promises to redistribute income, regulate the economy, and protect domestic workers from external competition. They also promote the inclusion of marginalized groups into the polity, although these effects are somewhat weaker. Socially, right-wing populists show signs of restricting the rights of women and LGBT people, consistent with their rhetoric. Economically, they combine some neoliberal policies (e.g., deregulation of domestic markets and lower taxes on individuals) with trade protectionism (higher tariffs). Nevertheless, compared to their counterparts on the left, right-wing populists are less successful in implementing their social and economic agendas.

Do Populists Undermine Democracy?

[Table 6](#) examines the consequences of populism for democratic institutions. Model 1 considers the clean elections index. Although populist candidates may energize voters by making appeals to the forgotten masses, once in power they undermine the integrity of elections. The associated effect sizes are quite large: after a decade in power, our model predicts that left populists will have reduced clean election scores by nearly a full standard deviation, all else being equal; for right populists, the decline is two-thirds of a standard deviation. Likewise, both left and right populists erode legislative and judicial constraints on their authority, again with large estimated effects (Models 2 and 3). Populism is also associated with attacks on the media: periods of left- and right-wing populism correspond to large declines in press freedoms (Model 4). When it comes to corruption and patronage, right-wing populists stand out. Executive corruption worsens and clientelism increases the longer populists on the right are in power (Models 5 and 6), although here effect sizes are relatively modest.

In sum, populist leaders and parties on both ends of the ideological spectrum systematically undermine democratic elections and attack liberal democratic institutions, consistent with Hypothesis 3. And many of the substantive changes enacted by populists often wind up being quite superficial on closer inspection. For example, populists on the left expand women's representation in national legislatures while simultaneously undermining legislative constraints on executive authority. On the right, populists implement reforms that increase "economic freedom" while also engaging in clientelist relationships that violate free-market principles.

Since 1990, populism is one of the strongest predictors of democratic performance. Non-populists on the left or right have little systematic effect on democratic outcomes in our analyses, but those

Table 5. Fixed-Effects Regression Models for the Effect of Populist Spells on Social Inclusion and Exclusion, 1990 to 2017

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Women in parliament	Power distributed by gender	Gender equality in civil liberties	Power distributed by sexual orientation	Legal LGB inclusion ^a	Discriminated population	Migrant stock	Refugee stock
Left-wing populist spell	.093* (.039)	.023 (.018)	.021 (.025)	.028* (.014)	.069** (.022)	-.006 (.011)	.004 (.007)	.025* (.010)
Right-wing populist spell	.009 (.015)	-.037 (.025)	-.029*** (.005)	-.017 (.013)	-.038+ (.020)	-.003 (.004)	-.007 (.016)	.045 (.029)
Left non-populist executive spell	-.003 (.007)	.019* (.008)	-.001 (.002)	.009* (.005)	.006 (.006)	-.007 (.004)	-.001 (.002)	.002 (.003)
Right non-populist executive spell	.007 (.007)	.005 (.005)	.001 (.002)	.003 (.004)	-.001 (.007)	-.008+ (.004)	-.008** (.003)	-.005 (.006)
Democracy stock	-.014 (.027)	-.003 (.013)	.004 (.009)	-.020 (.018)	.054*** (.015)	-.057* (.023)	.012 (.008)	.008 (.013)
Post-communist	.264 (.172)	.161* (.067)	.126 (.140)	.197* (.077)	.054 (.145)	.030 (.034)	.138* (.057)	-.011 (.062)
GDP per capita (ln)	-1.49 (.241)	-1.02 (.230)	-.068 (.120)	.028 (.185)	.144 (.311)	.176+ (.103)	-.028 (.109)	-.148 (.157)
INGO linkages (ln)	.384 (.281)	.176 (.201)	.418** (.133)	.466* (.187)	.534 (.362)	-.195 (.163)	.106 (.154)	.190 (.239)
Anti-gov't demonstrations (ln)	-.015 (.021)	-.064** (.022)	-.015 (.013)	-.054** (.018)	.003 (.028)	-.006 (.008)	.023* (.011)	.038 (.025)
Civil conflict	.009 (.038)	.011 (.021)	-.013 (.011)	.017 (.019)	.018 (.033)	.022 (.059)	-.005 (.009)	-.022 (.017)

Table S. Continued

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Women in parliament	Power distributed by gender	Gender equality in civil liberties	Power distributed by sexual orientation	Legal LGB inclusion ^a	Discriminated population	Migrant stock	Refugee stock
International conflict	-.038* (.015)	.025 (.027)	-.025 (.050)	.030+ (.015)	-.160*** (.021)	-.036 (.039)	.115+ (.068)	-.150 (.179)
Population (ln)	-.029 (.415)	.182 (.343)	.444+ (.252)	.775* (.374)	-.959 (.592)	.048 (.278)	.372 (.435)	.755 (1.100)
Educational attainment (years)	.074 (.083)	.024 (.062)	-.025 (.042)	-.075 (.048)	.012 (.112)	-.012 (.023)	.051 (.070)	-.061 (.075)
Percent non-religious	.010 (.010)	.009 (.008)	.001 (.004)	.020** (.007)	.026* (.013)	-.001 (.004)	.022** (.008)	-.008 (.008)
Median age	.040 (.069)	.047 (.066)	.065+ (.036)	-.096 (.059)	.012 (.097)	.012 (.046)	-.156*** (.045)	-.043 (.085)
Median age, squared	-.000 (.001)	.000 (.001)	-.001+ (.001)	.002** (.001)	-.000 (.002)	.000 (.001)	.003*** (.001)	.001 (.002)
Linear time	.045 (.028)	.007 (.019)	-.002 (.010)	.016 (.021)	-.011 (.024)	.045+ (.023)	-.014 (.012)	-.025 (.024)
Gender quota, no sanctions	.119+ (.063)							
Gender quota, weak sanctions	.363** (.130)							
Gender quota, strong sanctions	.697*** (.125)							
Reserved seats for women	.266 (.281)							

Table 5. Continued

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Women in parliament	Power distributed by gender	Gender equality in civil liberties	Power distributed by sexual orientation	Legal LGB inclusion ^a	Discriminated population	Migrant stock	Refugee stock
Constant	-2.863 (7.319)	-5.009 (7.136)	-10.436* (4.353)	-14.737* (6.118)	8.601 (11.369)	-.790 (4.517)	-5.250 (7.443)	-11.662 (17.382)
Model F statistic	21.494***	4.818***	8.258***	14.509***	16.926***	1.298	4.988***	1.105
R-squared (within)	.620	.273	.332	.466	.548	.200	.369	.032
N country-years	2135	2135	2064	2191	1968	2173	2191	1996
N countries	104	104	100	106	93	105	106	103

^a Coverage for this variable ends in 2016.

Robust standard errors, clustered on countries, in parentheses. Independent and control variables except time lagged one year. Dependent variables are z-transformed. Models include intercepts for countries. + p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001 (two-tailed).

Table 6. Fixed-Effects Regression Models for the Effect of Populist Spells on Democratic Participation and Institutions, 1990 to 2017

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Clean elections	Legislative constraints	Judicial constraints	Press freedom	Executive corruption	Clientelism index
Left-wing populist spell	-0.097** (.031)	-0.164** (.054)	-0.123** (.043)	-0.113*** (.028)	-0.028 (.024)	.016 (.026)
Right-wing populist spell	-0.068** (.022)	-0.102*** (.028)	-0.111* (.046)	-0.101*** (.027)	-0.053** (.016)	.030* (.012)
Left non-populist executive spell	.004 (.005)	.006 (.006)	-0.000 (.004)	.011* (.005)	.001 (.004)	-0.004 (.003)
Right non-populist executive spell	-0.006 (.008)	.011* (.005)	-0.000 (.004)	.003 (.004)	-0.001 (.004)	.000 (.003)
Democracy stock	-0.008 (.022)	-0.014 (.024)	-0.013 (.019)	-0.016 (.022)	-0.022 (.021)	.011 (.012)
Post-communist	.274+ (.149)	.213** (.074)	.149 (.103)	.355** (.109)	.201* (.087)	-0.159* (.067)
GDP per capita (ln)	-0.347 (.238)	-0.101 (.249)	-0.262 (.204)	-0.213 (.204)	.308+ (.179)	.038 (.143)
INGO linkages (ln)	.313 (.315)	.392 (.258)	.470* (.211)	.448* (.218)	.226 (.245)	-0.392* (.196)
Anti-gov't demonstrations (ln)	-0.043* (.018)	.004 (.018)	.012 (.017)	-0.061** (.022)	.007 (.019)	.015 (.012)
Civil conflict	-0.038 (.040)	-0.001 (.039)	-0.026 (.044)	-0.039 (.044)	-0.002 (.029)	.006 (.029)
International conflict	-0.038 (.045)	-0.037 (.026)	-0.048 (.031)	.011 (.056)	.008 (.014)	.003 (.012)
Population (ln)	-1.473* (.573)	-1.201** (.445)	-0.871* (.409)	-0.832* (.395)	-0.239 (.412)	.204 (.327)
Educational attainment (years)	.035 (.071)	-0.068 (.069)	-0.015 (.068)	.041 (.061)	-0.086 (.072)	.095+ (.051)

Table 6. Continued

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Clean elections	Legislative constraints	Judicial constraints	Press freedom	Executive corruption	Clientelism index
Percent non-religious	-.003 (.007)	-.001 (.007)	-.002 (.005)	.005 (.009)	-.007 (.006)	.001 (.005)
Median age	.223* (.089)	.102 (.106)	.144 (.087)	.100 (.075)	.002 (.059)	-.093* (.045)
Median age, squared	-.004** (.001)	-.003+ (.001)	-.003* (.001)	-.003* (.001)	-.000 (.001)	.001 (.001)
Linear time	.038 (.027)	.048+ (.027)	.033 (.020)	.040+ (.023)	.027 (.024)	-.005 (.014)
Constant	21.201* (9.238)	17.386* (7.108)	11.625+ (6.188)	11.489+ (6.532)	.740 (6.206)	.136 (5.024)
Model F statistic	3.582***	3.784***	2.122*	4.890***	3.123***	2.216**
R-squared (within)	.192	.229	.217	.255	.113	.143
N country-years	2191	2130	2191	2135	2191	2191
N countries	106	104	106	104	106	106

Robust standard errors, clustered on countries, in parentheses. Independent and control variables except linear time lagged one year. Dependent variables are z-transformed. Models include intercepts for countries. + p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 (two-tailed).

effects that do appear are associated with stronger liberal democratic institutions. The effects of control variables are similarly sporadic, but generally conform with expectations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our analyses address two related questions. First, are populist leaders successful in converting their political rhetoric and agendas into practice? Second, do populists undermine aspects of liberal democracy designed to ensure fair elections and curb abuses of power?

Our findings suggest a qualified affirmative answer to the first question. We find evidence that left-wing populism is associated with increased regulation of markets, lower income inequality, and greater social inclusion. Effect sizes in these areas are generally substantial, consistent with the idea that populists usher in sweeping social change.

Also consistent with expectations, we find that right-wing populism is associated with the political marginalization of women and LGBT individuals, economic deregulation, and trade protectionism. This pattern of findings maps broadly onto common right-wing populist themes, such as those expressed by Donald Trump.

Compared to the large and robust effects of left-wing populism across a range of economic and social outcomes, right-wing populist effects were less pronounced and rather inconsistent. There are several possible interpretations. First, our measures may simply fail to capture many of the changes populists on the right espouse. Consider immigration: we might find stronger effects had we a measure of anti-immigration policies, which can be enacted rapidly. Second, right populism often lacks ideological coherence over time and across the globe. Many right-wing populists advocate the deregulation of domestic markets while increasing regulations on cross-border economic transactions. Others embrace welfare chauvinism, expanding social benefits but restricting them to native-born citizens (Moffitt 2020). Social outcomes might be similarly inconsistent. In Europe, for example, some far-right populists use liberal rhetoric on gender equality and gay rights to attack Muslim immigrants (Duina and Carson 2020; Moffitt 2020). Finally, right-wing populists might be less effective or sincere in their rhetoric.

Populism is not associated with every substantive outcome we examined, but the overall impression suggests that populists indeed take some steps toward fulfilling their stated goals. Populist rhetoric is not mere empty talk and must be taken seriously. Populism cannot be dismissed as *only* a political performance or discursive style, even if “bad manners” and folksy talk continue to form part of the populist playbook (Moffitt 2016, 2020).

Populism also undercuts liberal democratic institutions. Our measures of clean elections, executive constraints, and press freedoms decline substantially when populist leaders or parties hold power. The fact that both left and right populists attack democratic institutions strongly implies that populism itself, irrespective of “host” ideology, poses a grave threat to liberal democracy. And, right-wing populists go even further in implementing policy changes that directly violate liberal democratic norms, such as restricting the rights of women and the LGBT community.

In terms of our typology, this constellation of findings—important substantive changes coupled with democratic erosion—accords with the idea that populists destroy democracy “for the people.” Populists on the left reduce income inequality, increase economic regulation, and expand state control over the economy, all presumably in the interests of the people they claim to represent. Nevertheless, they also interfere with elections, dismantle restrictions on their authority, and attack press freedoms. For their part, right-wing populists assail democratic institutions while enacting substantive changes that are themselves antithetical to liberal democracy. Given their comparatively weaker substantive effects, one could make the case that populists on the right are closer to bait-and-switch opportunists who make outsized promises as candidates but then subvert democracy once in office. Populist appeals to the people and their interests may serve primarily as a strategic pretext for pursuing, winning, and maintaining power (Moffitt 2020). Further research is needed, as our measures may understate the substantive effects of right-wing populism.

Scholars repeatedly characterize populism as an elusive phenomenon that is difficult to pin down. We make no claims to resolve this issue, but by showing what populism *does* empirically, we help to elucidate what populism *is* ontologically. The typology outlined in Figure 2 may help spur further productive research in this vein.

When taking stock of our findings, the usual methodological caveats apply. Our study uses observational data, and it is possible we have overlooked factors that simultaneously give rise to populism and explain the outcomes we analyze. That said, several things increase confidence in our results. First, we include country fixed effects that address time-invariant omitted variables such as region, colonial legacy, and dominant religion. Second, our models are well specified, incorporating time-varying controls that address obvious competing explanations. Third, populists in our sample emerge in a diverse array of countries. We might be more hesitant in drawing general conclusions if populism were limited to a distinctive set of cases. Finally, supplementary analyses failed to uncover serious or systematic selection biases.

In sum, our study lends credence to characterizations of populism as a threat to democracy. Populists often follow through on their promises, but they do so at the expense of liberal democracy. Some populists disregard or undermine democratic institutions as a means to implement transformative social or economic agendas that may otherwise be compatible with democracy. For others, the destruction of liberal democratic norms is itself the agenda, with calls to eliminate minority protections, attack press freedoms, and dismantle executive constraints attracting widespread support among the electorate. Democracy suffers either way, whether incidentally, instrumentally, or more alarmingly because that is precisely what many of “the people” seem to want.

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APPENDIX SAMPLED COUNTRIES

(Italicized entries indicate that the country had a populist leader at some point during the observation period)

Albania	Estonia	Lebanon	<i>Philippines</i>
<i>Argentina</i>	Fiji	Lesotho	<i>Poland</i>
Armenia	Finland	Liberia	Portugal
Australia	France	Lithuania	Romania
Bangladesh	Gambia	Luxembourg	Russia
Belarus	Georgia	Madagascar	Senegal
Belgium	Germany	Malawi	Sierra Leone
Benin	Ghana	Malaysia	<i>Slovakia</i>
<i>Bolivia</i>	<i>Greece</i>	Mali	Slovenia
<i>Brazil</i>	Guatemala	Mauritius	Solomon Islands
<i>Bulgaria</i>	Guinea-Bissau	Mexico	<i>South Africa</i>
Burkina Faso	Guyana	Moldova	Spain
Burundi	Haiti	Mongolia	Sri Lanka
Cabo Verde	Honduras	Myanmar	Sweden
Canada	<i>Hungary</i>	Nepal	Switzerland
Chile	<i>India</i>	Netherlands	<i>Thailand</i>
Colombia	Indonesia	New Zealand	Timor-Leste
Comoros	Iraq	<i>Nicaragua</i>	Trinidad and Tobago
Costa Rica	Ireland	Niger	Tunisia
Croatia	<i>Israel</i>	Nigeria	<i>Turkey</i>
Cyprus	<i>Italy</i>	North Macedonia	Ukraine
Czech Republic	Jamaica	Norway	United Kingdom
Denmark	<i>Japan</i>	Pakistan	<i>United States</i>
Dominican Republic	Kenya	Panama	Uruguay
<i>Ecuador</i>	Kyrgyzstan	<i>Paraguay</i>	<i>Venezuela</i>
El Salvador	Latvia	<i>Peru</i>	Zambia
