

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON POPULISM: WILL IT BE WEAKENED?

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Summary

- Data shows that populist and nonpopulist governments implemented similar policies to contain the pandemic.
- Nonpopulist governments see stronger increases in popularity.
- Populist governments use the crisis to extend their powers in the political system.
- Populist governments are unlikely to be weakened by the COVID-19 crisis.
- A severe economic crisis might lead to a wave of populist actors getting elected into government.

Keywords: populism, COVID-19, health, public opinion, democracy

1 Introduction

Research shows that the support for populist political actors regularly increases in times of crisis. For example, after the 2008 financial crisis and in 2015 during the increased influx of refugees, populist parties and politicians gained a considerable amount of support by blaming the “elites” for not protecting “the people” against the fallout of the crises. By contrast, it is less clear how populist governments themselves perform in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to examine the performance of populist governments. How will the COVID-19 crisis affect populist leaders in the months to come?

Before addressing this question, we first have to assess what populism is, and what features define a populist government. We follow the definition by Mudde (2004) according to which populists divide the society into two homogeneous antagonistic groups: “the good people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and claim to represent the general will of the people. This definition implies that populism is less of an ideology and more of a political style. While this style is often used for describing opposition parties and candidates, it is also commonly found among governments (see Funke et al., 2020).

Academic discussions focusing on populist governments often suggest that they will ultimately fail, as they are not capable of running a country effectively (see, e.g., Dornbusch and Edwards, 1990; Sachs, 1990). In a similar vein, many now hope that the COVID-19 crisis will unmask the inability of populist governments to provide better policies for “the people” than “the elite,” leading to a global retreat of

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populism. Nevertheless, our analysis shows that the crisis management of populist governments, so far, is fairly similar to the containment strategies of nonpopulist governments. Although nonpopulist governments see a stronger increase in popularity, populists also become more popular. Moreover, we find that populist governments systematically use the crisis to extend their powers through emergency laws. Taken together populist governments are unlikely to be weakened by the COVID-19 crisis.

In the following sections, we first analyze the crisis management by populist governments and nonpopulist governments. Afterwards, we provide insights on the effect of this crisis management on the support for populist governments. Last, we turn to the emergency laws implemented in the course of the crisis management and assess their impact on democratic institutions.

2 Containment policies

To analyze the crisis management, we use a novel database on containment policies (Hale et al., 2020).¹ This allows us to compare the policy measures introduced by populist and nonpopulist governments. The policy measures range from school closures to banning of public gathering, and to travel restrictions. These policies are summarized in an index ranging from 0, when no policies are in force, to 100, when all of these policies are introduced. As the outbreak of the virus occurred at different points in time, we normalize the onset date of the epidemic by analyzing the measures employed in the 25 days before and after the number of COVID-19 deaths passed 10 in a given country.² Figure 1 shows that the policy responses have been very similar for populists and nonpopulists. Although populist governments implemented these containment measures slightly earlier on average, they converged over time as more and more countries introduced stricter measures to counter the spread of the virus. But there is significant heterogeneity in the responses as the US and UK were lagging behind in the immediate response,³ but caught up with other countries. Other populist ruled countries like Poland, Hungary, and India implemented measures rather quickly (Hale et al., 2020). Hence, in the immediate crisis management, the populist governments in our sample—on average—did not respond differently than other governments. However, focusing only on travel restrictions, populist governments were quicker to shut down the borders.

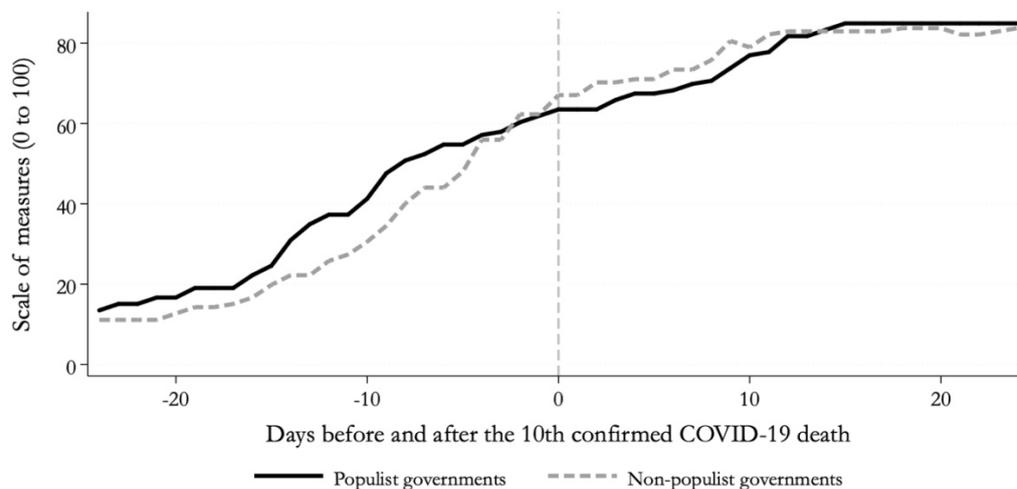
Despite implementing similar policies, the question remains whether the support for populist governments during the crisis is also similar to the one for other governments.

¹ Our sample consists of 14 countries. We choose these countries based on size and the extent of the crisis in the country. The countries included in our sample are Austria, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Spain, the UK, the US. In six of these countries, we identify a populist government (Brazil, Hungary, India, Poland, the UK, and the US). This coding of populist governments is based on Funke et al. (2020).

² The 10th confirmed death is a common measurement in assessing the beginning of the epidemic in a country (see Financial Times, via Internet (12.05.2020): <<https://www.ft.com/content/c4155982-3b8b-4a26-887d-169db6fe4244>>. The graph is similar when using the 100th confirmed infection.

³ Bloomberg, “Boris Johnson's Coronavirus Response Is a Fiasco.” Via Internet (12.5.2020): <<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-03-25/coronavirus-boris-johnson-s-response-has-been-a-fiasco>>. Washington Post, “2 months in the dark: the increasingly damning timeline of Trump’s coronavirus response.” Via Internet (12.5.2020): <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/07/timeline-trumps-coronavirus-response-is-increasingly-damning/>>.

Figure 1:
Containment measures by populist and nonpopulist governments



Notes: The figure shows the scale of containment measures employed by populist (solid black line) and nonpopulist governments (dashed grey line) before and after the 10th confirmed COVID-19 death. The scale ranges from 0 (no measures) to 100 (all possible measures).

Source: Hale et al. (2020); own illustration.

3 Popular support

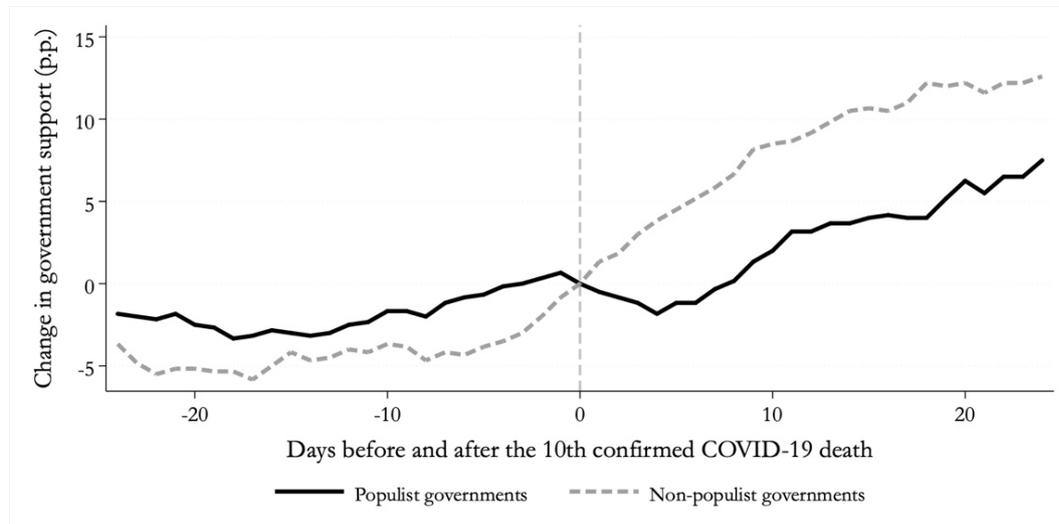
Immediately after the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, the question was voiced in public and academic discussions whether the support for populist governments would be diminished by the crisis. To provide first evidence on this question, we collected data on the support for populist and nonpopulist governments during the crisis. Similar to the previous graph, we normalize the date by measuring the support from the day when the number of COVID-19 deaths passed 10. Figure 2 shows the evolution of the support for populist and nonpopulist governments.

The figure reveals that nonpopulist governments—on average—benefited from the pandemic as their support increased since the outbreak of COVID-19. We can see a similar pattern for populist governments. The displayed increase in support points to the so-called “rally ‘round the flag” effect, which describes the short-run support for a country’s leader in managing a crisis (see Mueller, 1970).

However, immediately after the crisis erupted, we find a drop in the average support for populist governments, as well as a surprisingly slow increase in support over the course of the crisis. The displayed difference is especially noteworthy as populist governments were more popular before the COVID-19 outbreak. In fact, the only populist in government whose support grew strongly during the crisis is Boris Johnson in the UK. Contrary to that, the support for Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro plummeted after the outbreak. Other populist leaders, like Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Viktor Orbán, and the governing Polish PiS party witnessed only minor increases in their popular support.

Populist governments are—on average—seemingly not able to capitalize on the crisis compared to nonpopulist governments. This might be due to the fact that the COVID-19 crisis can only hardly be attributed to the failure of “the elites” or blamed on an identifiable subgroup of the population. This

Figure 2:
Change in support for populist and nonpopulist governments



Notes: The figure shows the average cumulative change in support for populist (solid black line) and nonpopulist governments (dashed grey line) in the days before and after the 10th confirmed COVID-19 death. The change in support is calculated by using the change in the net government approval, and—where no approval data was available—change in the polling data. The net approval data comes from Morning Consult. The polling data is taken from Politico.

Source: Morning Consult (2020); Politico (2020); own illustration.

makes it difficult for populist actors to gain from the crisis. Further, populism is usually accompanied with political polarization of society (see Urbinati, 2017). This increased polarization makes it less likely that people change their opinion on populist politicians, preventing party realignment.

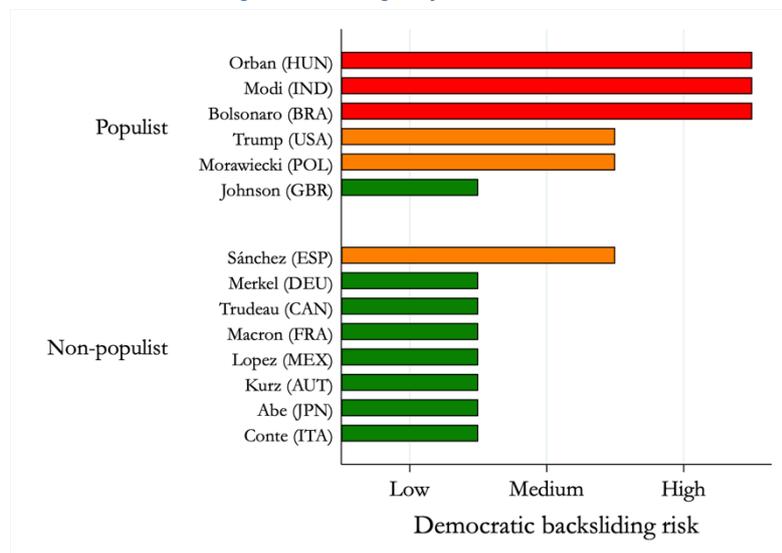
The lower increase in support for populists implies that political pressure on these governments may rise to reopen the economy sooner if the lock down continues. Thus, populist governments may roll back the containment policies earlier than nonpopulists.

4 Democratic institutions

Over the course of the COVID-19 crisis many parliaments enacted emergency laws. This kind of mandate gives the respective government the rights to implement policies faster to contain the pandemic and prevent an economic fallout. But it also allows them to implement controversial policies that limit political competition by suspending the political system’s checks and balances.

As shown in the previous sections, populist governments implemented similar containment measures as nonpopulist governments. To analyze the scope of the emergency laws that accompany these measures, we use the novel Pandemic Backsliding Index (Lührmann et al., 2020) that classifies whether the introduced emergency laws pose a risk to the political system’s checks and balances. Figure 3 presents the democratic backsliding risk of the emergency laws introduced by governments.

Figure 3:
Democratic backsliding risk of emergency measures



Notes: The figure shows the democratic backsliding risk of the emergency laws introduced by governments. The risk scores can be low (green), medium (orange) or high (red).

Source: Lührmann et al. (2020); own illustration.

This shows that five out of six populist governments introduced laws that pose a medium or high risk to democratic institutions. For example, in India the legislature has been suspended indefinitely.⁴ In Hungary, the government is now able to rule with decree,⁵ and the Polish government implemented a new law extending the state of emergency beyond the scope permitted by the constitution.⁶ Similarly, the declaration of Donald Trump indefinitely circumvented legal constraints on his executive powers without Congressional approval and was arguably unmerited by current developments of the crisis.⁷ But free speech and free press are also under attack in populist governed countries. For example, Brazil suspended the constitutional right to receive requested information from the government and the Hungarian government reserved the right for itself to determine what is a punishable “misinformation.”⁸ Only the emergency laws introduced by Boris Johnson in the UK are ranked as low risk. From the nonpopulist governed countries, only Spain is ranked at medium risk.

⁴ CNN, “India’s parliament adjourns in wake of coronavirus lockdown.” Via Internet (12.5.2020): <https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-outbreak-03-23-20-intl-hnk/h_9ca1e0e579b25b920f6d3f291a515986>.

⁵ The Guardian “Hungary passes law that will let Orbán rule by decree.” Via Internet (12.5.2020): <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/hungary-jail-for-coronavirus-misinformation-viktor-orban>>.

⁶ American Chamber of Commerce in Poland, “Anti-Crisis Shield to limit the negative effects of the pandemic. Via Internet (12.5.2020): <<https://amcham.pl/news/anti-crisis-shield-limit-negative-effects-pandemic>>.

⁷ Washington Post, “House passes resolution to nullify Trump’s national emergency declaration.” Via Internet (12.5.2020): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/house-sponsor-of-resolution-to-nix-emergency-declaration-acknowledges-uphill-battle-on-overriding-expected-trump-veto/2019/02/26/22104532-39d2-11e9-aaae-69364b2ed137_story.html>.

⁸ Committee to Protect Journalism, “Brazil restricts access to government information amid COVID-19 emergency.” Via Internet (12.5.2020): <<https://cpj.org/2020/03/brazil-restricts-access-to-government-information-.php>>. The Guardian, “Hungarian journalists fear coronavirus law may be used to jail them.” Via Internet (12.5.2020): <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/03/hungarian-journalists-fear-coronavirus-law-may-be-used-to-jail-them>>.

Although populist governments introduce similar measures to contain the spread of the virus, they disproportionately used the crisis to increase their powers in the political system. From this one could conclude that populist governments might ultimately be weakened, as their moderate increase in support makes them more vulnerable to decreasing public support due to the economic fallout after the crisis is over. Nevertheless, populist governments might exit the crisis more strengthened due to systematic erosion of democratic institutions through emergency laws.

5 Conclusion and outlook

In this paper we studied how populist governments are affected by the COVID-19 crisis. We provided three key insights to this question. First, populist and nonpopulist governments implemented similar policy measures to counter the spread of the virus. Second, while nonpopulist governments were—on average—able to increase their support during the crisis, populist governments regularly only witnessed moderate increases in support, suggesting that populist governments might become weakened through the crisis after all. Third, populist governments use the crisis to strengthen their position in the political system by subverting democratic institutions through emergency laws, a finding that clearly sets them apart from other governments in our sample.

These findings suggest that populist governments will not be weakened by the crisis in the short-run. Whether they will be weakened in the long-run will heavily depend on the economic policies they implement to counter the economic fallout of the crisis, as well as the suspension of emergency powers after the crisis is over.

But can we expect more populist governments to emerge from the crisis? Current polling of populist opposition parties and candidates shows decreasing support in most of the countries. For example, the German Alternative für Deutschland and the Italian Lega Nord have both lost 5 percentage points since the onset of the crisis.

In the long run, we might, however, see a new surge in populist governments around the world, if the fallout of the crisis is not handled effectively or exploited by populists in opposition. Although blaming “the elite” is less credible for the COVID-19 crisis itself, blaming the elite for the mismanagement of the economic crisis after the pandemic is contained is more straightforward, and could lead to a surge in populist governments similar to the aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis. People’s voluntary behavior and policies aiming to mitigate the spread of the virus limit economic activity in the short-run. A recession, thus, seems certain for this year, but there is large uncertainty surrounding the speed of the economic recovery, and a lot may depend on economic policies. A severe economic crisis might thus not only weaken populists in government but also lead to a wave of populist actors getting elected into government.

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