

Party Positioning under Populist State Leaders

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Abstract

The implications of rising parliamentary representation of populist parties have been thoroughly studied but little is known about the impact of populist state leaders on party positions. In this article, we study mainstream parties' strategic responses when a populist takes over as the leader of a nation. We use content-analytical data and large language modeling to measure positions expressed in manifestos from parties from 51 democracies between 1989 and 2018. Employing methods for causal inference from observational data, we find that right-wing populist state leaders induce mainstream parties to differentiate their positions on multiculturalism, possibly leading to polarization of the party system. Under left-wing populist leaders, mainstream parties adopt more homogenous or differentiated positions, depending on the policy category and other contextual factors. Parties are generally more responsive in emerging than advanced countries and in presidential than parliamentary systems.

Keywords: election manifesto; equality; multiculturalism; party platform; party system; political competition; welfare

Populist forces have been on the rise during the past decades, to the point that many countries are currently governed by a populist state leader, such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Narendra Modi in India, and Recep Erdoğan in Turkey. The reasons for the success of populists are diverse, including citizens' worries about globalization, rapid technological changes, and rising inequality. The potential repercussions of populist influence are also diverse, ranging from diminished quality of democratic institutions over higher corruption to decreased macroeconomic performance (e.g., Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022). A central question in the literature is how mainstream parties react when populist parties gain strength. In many situations, mainstream parties pursue accommodating strategies, adopting positions that are similar to those of populist parties. For instance, mainstream parties may introduce proposals to restrict immigration, in the hope of winning back voters lost to radical right parties (e.g., van Spanje, 2010; Han, 2015; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2018).

The analysis of party manifestos – sometimes called party platforms or election programs – is central in this research, as parties use these documents to communicate what issues they prioritize and what positions they take (Harmel, 2018).¹ In turn, the range of issues and positions collectively covered by parties participating in an election determines how well a party system represents voters' diverse preferences. The strategic positioning of parties also has implications for legislative and executive processes, for instance, by affecting the chances that parties coalize or find majorities (e.g., Ezrow, 2007).

¹ For instance, a party may state that it finds the issue of immigration important, and that the party's position is to restrict immigration.

As detailed in the next section, the effects of representation of populists in the legislative branch of government on party positions have been thoroughly studied. However, little is known about the impact of populists with executive power. This is an important gap because the implications of legislative vs. executive influence for party competition are fundamentally different, especially when a populist takes over as the leader of a state.² While it is important to understand the behavior of individual parties, our focus is on the impact of populist state leaders on the positions collectively offered by mainstream parties³ participating in an election. Specifically, we study the distribution of party positions, considering that the diversity of positions in a country has first-order implications for voter representation and collective decision-making. We therefore ask: What are the effects of populist state leaders on the distribution of positions offered by mainstream parties?

To answer this question, we analyze party manifestos pertaining to 215 elections in 51 countries between 1989–2018. We focus on two policy categories that are particularly relevant under populism: questions related to *equality/welfare* and *multiculturalism*. Following the literature, we construct measures of party positions by counting the number of statements pertaining to a certain position, based on annotations of election manifestos available in the Manifesto Project Database (Lehmann et al.,

² We use the term state leader to refer to the primary ruler of a country, i.e., the person leading the central government, such as the president, prime minister, or chancellor.

³ Following similar definitions (e.g., Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2018), we use the term mainstream party to describe any non-populist party with an average vote share of at least 5% in our dataset. We exclude small/niche parties mainly because their platforms are not consistently included in the Manifesto Project Database.

2023). The degree of differentiation between two parties is then measured as the difference in position counts. Considering that this “traditional” approach has been criticized for a lack of nuance (e.g., Protsyk and Garaz, 2011; Akkerman, 2015), we also propose a novel approach to capture positions based on semantic differences between party manifestos. Relying on methods from computational linguistics, this approach allows us to capture differentiation strategies not only in terms of *what* positions a party has (as in the “traditional” approach) but also *how* the party proposes to implement a position. Intuitively, with this “semantic” approach, we assume that two parties propose differentiated strategies if relevant statements in their election manifestos are semantically dissimilar.

Estimating the effect of populist state leaders on mainstream parties’ positions is challenging, due to reverse causality and confounding factors. We address the issue of reverse causality by modeling the impact of the *incumbent* state leader on party positions. That is, we can rule out that the content of manifestos in the current election influences election outcomes of the previous election, where the incumbent state leader was selected. To minimize threats due to confounding factors, we use matching techniques and panel data models with time and country fixed effects. Essentially, our research design facilitates a comparison of elections where public sentiments and political and economic conditions are similar, but where some elections take place with a populist as the incumbent state leader and others with a non-populist leader. For example, assume that two countries have similar levels of unemployment, inflation, and economic prosperity; that their democratic institutions are of equal quality; and that populist parties enjoy similar levels of parliamentary representation. However, for idiosyncratic reasons – such as different electoral rules or majority-minority constellations – one country selects a

populist as the state leader while the other does not. In this setup, the populist treatment can be assumed as if randomly assigned.

Our results indicate that right-wing populist state leaders induce mainstream parties to differentiate their positions on multiculturalism, with a tendency towards polarization of the party system. Responses to left-wing populist leaders are context-dependent and may lead party systems to become more homogenous or more differentiated. Overall, the effects are stronger in emerging than advanced countries (likely because political structures are less rigid in the former) and more pronounced in presidential than parliamentary systems (likely because the former type allows for more concentration of power).

We contribute to the literature in several ways. First, we complement studies investigating the reactions of mainstream parties to populist forces in parliament, as detailed in the next section. Our paper differs in that we examine the impact of populist state leaders on parties' differentiation strategies, which allows us to address an important gap in the literature. In addition, while much of the literature focuses on the reactions of individual parties, we study the impact on the party systems as a whole, and hence the diversity of positions available to citizens. Finally, we contribute to the methodology of measuring party positions by using state-of-the-art models for multilingual text analysis to construct and validate nuanced measures of differentiation of positions between parties. These “semantic” measures capture *how* parties propose to implement a position and therefore add another dimension of characterizing positions.

Theory and previous literature

Populist state leaders

Common definitions of populism rely on three elements: Populists claim to represent the will of the people, they position themselves as outsiders who challenge the establishment, and they aim for a restoration of popular sovereignty (e.g., Mudde, 2004). Some scholars emphasize that populists have a distinct approach of communicating with the public, where negativity, emotional appeals, exaggeration, and confrontational language play a central role (e.g., Nai, 2021, Widmann, 2021; Valentim and Widmann, 2023). Populists do not have a common programmatic direction but can be found on the left and right sides of the political spectrum (Stavrakakis et al., 2017). On the left side, populists typically emphasize issues related to economic inequality and redistribution through taxes and public spending. Their agendas tend to focus on economic dimensions, often featuring anti-capitalist and anti-globalization views, finding a main enemy in financial institutions and financial elites. In contrast, right-wing populists often identify ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities as threats to a nation's identity. Consequently, their agendas usually emphasize anti-immigration appeals and demands for cultural homogeneity and cultural integration (Vachudova, 2021).

With a populist as president or prime minister, countries may experience a range of consequences. Due to their "us vs. them" narrative, populist leadership often results in a polarization of the political landscape (Davis et al., 2024), where extreme views become more salient while mainstream opinions fade (Vachudova, 2021). In many cases, populist state leaders act in an authoritarian fashion to preserve their power, which may involve the suppression of opposition and civil society actors, the exclusion of independent experts, the restriction of free media (Huber and Schimpf, 2017; Juon and Bochsler,

2020), and erosion of central bank independence (Gavin and Manger, 2023).

Consequently, the overall quality of democratic institutions and processes declines (e.g., Waldner and Lust, 2018; Bellodi et al., 2024; Peffey and Rohrschneider, 2024), while corruption and nepotism increase (Sasso and Morelli, 2021; Szeidl and Szucs, 2021). In addition, protectionist policies and unsustainable public spending may inflict damage on the macroeconomy, such as persistent declines in output and consumption (Funke et al., 2023).

Party positioning

The literature discusses various factors that may induce parties to change what issues to focus on and what positions to take. This discussion has been strongly informed by the theory of spatial political competition (Downs, 1957; Budge, 1994). In essence, parties change their positions if they believe that an adjustment increases their chances of gaining support among the electorate. Hence, parties may change their positions after an election, as voting results provide signals about voters' preferences. Adjustments are more likely by parties that experience a decline in vote shares and those with aspirations to govern (e.g., Schumacher et al., 2016; Abou-Chadi and Stoetzer, 2020; Breyer, 2023). Similarly, shifts in public opinion and voters' issue priorities can prompt a party to reposition itself, especially when these changes occur among citizens who traditionally support the party (Adams et al., 2004; Ezrow et al., 2010; Klüver and Spoon, 2016). Adjustments of positions may also be induced by organizational changes in parties, such as a change in leadership or shifts in the power balance between party activists and party leaders (e.g., Schumacher et al., 2013). Finally, parties may change their positions depending on the

behavior of their competitors, independent of voters' preferences (e.g., Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Williams, 2015; Abou-Chadi et al., 2020).

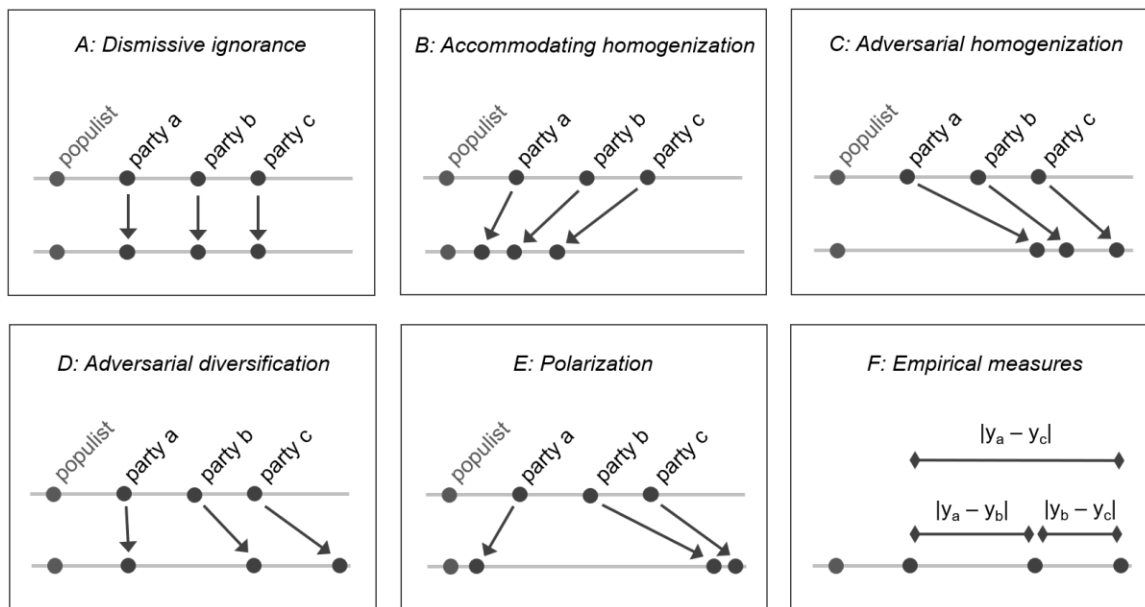
Homogenization vs. differentiation of party systems

In theory, mainstream parties may use different strategies when adjusting their positions (e.g., Meguid, 2005; Atzpodien, 2022). They may decide to ignore the agenda of the populist (dismissive strategy), converge towards this agenda (accommodating strategy), or differentiate from it (adversarial strategy). Collectively, these strategies could lead to a *homogenization* or *differentiation* of choices available to voters in a party system.

Panel A of Figure 1 illustrates the case where the mainstream parties of a country implement dismissive strategies to maximize their chances in the upcoming election, implying no change in positions and hence no change in the degree of diversity of choices they collectively provide. We argue that there are compelling reasons why this strategy is unlikely in practice. First, when a populist party gains parliamentary influence, it becomes difficult for mainstream parties to ignore the issues and positions of that party without risking losing voter support (Abou-Chadi et al., 2020). This salience effect is arguably much stronger when a populist takes power of the executive, for instance, because media tend to devote more attention to the government – and especially the state leader – than the opposition, and because constitutional or other regulatory features provide the state leader with more resources and opportunities to address the public (e.g., Garz and Sørensen, 2021). Second, the state leader has executive power. This implies that populist leaders cannot only talk about their positions but also implement specific policies related to them, for instance, via presidential orders, through their right to initiate legislation, or by re-structuring, closing, or creating governmental agencies. Many

populist leaders implement radical changes that may threaten the quality of institutions and democracy itself (Huber and Schimpf, 2017; Waldner and Lust, 2018; Juon and Bochsler, 2020). Hence, mainstream parties that value democracy face pressure to innovate. For instance, they may feel compelled to question their previous strategy, think about novel proposals to fix pressing issues, and find new party leaders with new ideas. Hence, dismissive ignorance is an unlikely scenario here.

Figure 1: Theoretical effects of populist state leaders on party competition



Notes: The figure refers to a fictional party system with an incumbent populist state leader, where three mainstream parties (a, b, and c) implement different strategies aimed at maximizing votes in the upcoming elections. The dots denote the location of parties' positions on a policy issue in a spectrum of hypothetical choices. A larger distance between two dots indicates a greater level of differentiation between parties. The arrows indicate adjustments in policy positions between the previous and the upcoming elections. The position of the incumbent populist state leader (and their party) is the one observed by the mainstream parties during the previous elections and assumed to be fixed for the sake of simplicity.

Panel B of Figure 1 depicts a scenario where mainstream parties implement an accommodating strategy, resulting in a homogenization of the party system.

Accommodation is an often-used response in situations where right-wing parties gain parliamentary influence. For example, in many countries, the emergence of radical parties

with platforms focused on cultural conflicts and immigration problems has induced mainstream parties to adopt more restrictive positions on these issues to regain support among voters (Van Spanje, 2010; Han, 2015, Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2018; Chou et al., 2021). Accommodation could also be relevant in our context. When a populist is the incumbent state leader, mainstream parties may attempt to win back votes by converging towards the positions that characterize the populist’s agenda. If that strategy dominates among all parties participating in an election, their positions should overall become more similar, leading to a *homogenization* of choices available to voters.

Panels C and D of Figure 1 illustrate scenarios in which mainstream parties use adversarial strategies to position themselves for the upcoming election. We argue that parties’ incentives to use an adversarial strategy are particularly strong when the incumbent state leader is a populist. Once populists take executive responsibility, they usually face the dilemma that their anti-establishment views are not compatible with effective governance (Adams et al., 2022). That is, populists may have to abandon (parts of) their rhetorical strategy, or they may fail to provide solutions to pressing issues. Either strategy comes at the risk of losing voter support. Given this dilemma, mainstream parties have strong incentives to work on “demystifying” the populist leader by making broken promises salient, pointing out unresolved problems, and emphasizing the inadequacy of the populist’s policy approach – all combined with their own proposals for alternative, better policy options.

The implementation of adversarial strategies can have different implications for the availability of choices in the party system. Panel C of Figure 1 depicts the case where mainstream parties increase the distance to the populist while converging to each other.

This scenario could be relevant if parties believe that the chances of having the populist voted out of office are best when they join forces, for example, because they believe that they reach a necessary majority only by combining their vote shares. In that case, the choices available to voters would be more homogenous.

However, adversarial strategies could also lead to greater diversification of choices (Figure 1, Panel D). That is, mainstream parties may not only seek to distance themselves from the populist, but they may also choose a position that is sufficiently distinct from that of their mainstream competitors. This scenario could be particularly relevant for complex issues that offer plenty of space for differentiation, such as immigration. For instance, if the incumbent populist is in favor of closing the border to all refugees, mainstream party (a) may suggest welcoming all refugees if they apply for asylum while still being abroad, party (b) could propose to open the border for political refugees but not economic migrants, and party (c) may offer to prioritize highly educated migrants.

Finally, it is conceivable that a mix of accommodating and adversarial strategies leads to polarization of the party system (Figure 1, Panel E). In that case, mainstream parties distance themselves from the incumbent populist while adopting positions at the extreme ends of the spectrum. This scenario does not necessarily imply that voters have more choices but that the choices are concentrated in two poles, i.e., where the options available in a party system are presented in a binary manner (either/or, for/against).

Overall, the discussion shows that the effect of a populist state leader on party positions is theoretically ambiguous. It is conceivable that a combination of some or all of the possible strategies applies. For instance, some parties may decide to converge to the populist while others distance themselves; some parties may want to collaborate while

others prefer to adopt unique positions. Hence, it is necessary to empirically investigate whether and in what situations any of the scenarios shown in Panels A to E dominate. Specifically, it is useful to evaluate whether a party system is more likely to become homogenous or differentiated under a populist leader. The reason is that the level of diversity of choices collectively provided by a party system has implications for the representation of citizens' preferences, political participation, and trust (e.g., Ezrow, 2007; Campbell and Heath, 2021). For example, overly homogenous systems offer little diversity of policy alternatives, in which case there could be a disconnect between parties and voters. Highly polarized systems are not optimal either, as parties may have difficulties finding a consensus or may not be able to work with each other because of a lack of agreement about fundamental issues. Normatively speaking, it is optimal if the parties collectively offer diverse policy choices (Benson, 2023). Collective decision-making may be more complicated in that case, due to the difficulties of finding majorities and forming coalitions. Voters may also suffer from choice overload. However, those challenges are secondary, whereas representation and a diversity of choices are of primary importance. Hence, a party system that offers a variety of choices can be considered optimal from a normative perspective (Sartori, 1976; Powell, 1982).

Panel F illustrates the link between our theoretical conceptualization and empirical operationalization. In line with our research objective to study the effects of populist state leaders on the distribution of positions across mainstream parties, our empirical measures are absolute differences in positions y between pairs of parties i and j , as the mean difference over all pairs of mainstream parties n participating in an election yields a measure of dispersion of positions (Andrews and Money, 2009):

$$Y = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{j=1}^n \sum_{i=1}^n |y_i - y_j| \quad (1)$$

Low values of Y indicate a homogenous distribution of positions, whereas high values reflect a differentiated distribution.

Data

To evaluate the effects of populist state leaders on party positions, we compile a dyadic panel dataset that compares mainstream parties participating in the same election, with repeated observations from 215 national and presidential elections between 1989 and 2018 in 51 democracies around the world; see Table A1 in the Supplementary Information for a full list. The included countries and investigation period are determined by the availability of parties' election manifestos with content-analytical data in the Manifesto Project Database. We use the content-analytical data to construct measures of differences in positions based on the "traditional" approach and a novel "semantic approach".

Traditional measures of party positions

We focus on manifestos to evaluate parties' differentiation strategies – rather than parliamentary debates, campaign speeches, or press releases – because manifestos are less likely affected by current events. These documents tend to describe the core topics and ideas pertaining to parties' medium- to- long-run ideologies (Harmel, 2018; Garz and Szucs, 2023). Importantly, the manifesto texts provided by the Manifesto Project Database cover a large set of countries over long periods of time, which is a requirement

to draw generalizable conclusions about the impact of populist state leaders on party positions. Our sample includes all manifestos for which human content annotations are available.⁴ After excluding parties with an average vote share of less than 5% (cp. Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2018), the data include 416 parties and 1,005 manifestos.

We analyze the content of the manifestos in two policy categories: *equality/welfare* and *multiculturalism*. We choose these categories because they are usually of central importance to populists' agenda. As discussed in the theory section, left-wing populists tend to focus on a reduction of economic inequality, especially by expanding the welfare state via increased taxation and public spending. In contrast, most right-wing populists emphasize the need for cultural homogeneity and restrictions on immigration, due to the perceived problems resulting from multiculturalism. In addition, the categories *equality/welfare* and *multiculturalism* generally tend to be the ones in the focus of parties' attention – judging from the corresponding shares of statements tagged in the Manifesto Project Database – and they are important categories previously analyzed in the literature on party positions (e.g., Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2018; Krause and Giebler, 2020).

⁴ According to the Manifesto Project, the data include "... election programmes of all those parties that have won one (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, North America, South Korea, and Western Europe) or two (Central and Eastern Europe, South America) seats in the respective national elections to the lower house. In the case of a presidential election, we code election programmes of all those alliances supporting a presidential candidate who has won at least 5% of votes at the first round of the presidential election. In addition, we code manifestos of those parties that were relevant actors in the past (especially members of ruling coalitions), but which no longer meet our selection criteria due to dramatic vote losses." (Lehmann et al., 2023). However, we exclude Switzerland given the country's political system, as there is no clear state leader.

In this literature, party positions can be measured by subtracting the number or share of negative statements in a category from the number or share of positive statements in that category. For instance, if a manifesto includes many statements highlighting the importance of schools, hospitals, and unemployment benefits, researchers typically assume that this party is in favor of expanding the welfare state. Similarly, if the annotations indicate many positive references to multiculturalism, researchers may conclude that the party favors a multicultural society. To capture positions regarding *equality/welfare*, we subtract the number of quasi-sentences tagged by the Manifesto Project Database as 505 (welfare state limitation) and 507 (education limitation) from the number of quasi-sentences under the codes 503 (equality: positive), 504 (welfare state expansion), and 506 (education expansion). To construct the position measure on *multiculturalism*, we subtract the number of quasi-sentences tagged as 608 (multiculturalism: negative) from those tagged as 607 (multiculturalism: positive).

Semantic measures of party positions

The coding scheme of the Manifesto Project does not assess how parties propose to implement their positions or what their specific policy approach looks like. For instance, the annotations may indicate that two parties are in favor of expanding education, but one party proposes to strengthen universities, whereas the other one prefers to hire more elementary school teachers. Similarly, there could be cases where the annotations suggest that two parties are in favor of multiculturalism, but one party promises to foster the recruitment of high-skilled workers from abroad, whereas the other party wants to legalize undocumented immigrants. Hence, the annotations in the Manifesto Project

Database face limitations when evaluating parties' differentiation strategies (cp. Protsyk and Garaz, 2011; Akkerman, 2015).

For that reason, we re-analyze the content-analytical data of the Manifesto Project Database by using automated text analysis. The basic idea is to compare the statements made by a party in a given category (e.g., equality/welfare) with the statements of another party in the same category. If the content of their statements overlaps, both parties can be assumed to share similar ideas and policy approaches. In contrast, if there is little overlap between statements, the parties offer different views in that category. Automated text analysis has been widely used to compare political texts. For example, a growing literature on political media bias relies on analyses of textual similarities to show that a media outlet and a political party share the same ideology if they use similar language (e.g., Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010; Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017; Garz and Rickardsson, 2023).

We implement the comparison by modeling the semantic similarity of manifesto statements, using Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT), similar to the approach proposed by Ceron et al. (2023). Transformer models tend to outperform previous approaches on most natural language processing tasks, such as text classification, named entity recognition, part-of-speech tagging, and multilingual analysis (Devlin et al., 2018; Licht, 2023). We use a multilingual version of Sentence-BERT designed to evaluate the semantic similarity of texts when different languages are involved. The model was trained in more than 100 languages and supports text comparison both within and across languages (Reimers and Gurevych, 2020). The ability to make cross-language comparisons is important in our context, considering that parties in some countries compete in more than one language (e.g., Belgium). In addition, the

model was trained to catch the meaning of a statement independent of phrasing, which implies that our measure of differentiation of positions primarily captures differences in substance rather than rhetorical differences or different writing styles. The advantage of using a transformer model over other methods used for text comparison (e.g., word2vec) is that context-specific meanings of words are retained. That is, the transformer model generates individual vectors of embeddings for the same word when used in different contexts (e.g., “house key” and “key of a song”).

We retain the full text of all statements (“quasi-sentences”) falling in the policy categories under consideration (i.e., equality/welfare and multiculturalism), as tagged by the coders of the Manifesto Project. These statements (225,291 in total) form a text corpus of 1,963,930 words. We use the multilingual Sentence-BERT to extract the word embeddings and create numerical representations of the statements, based on which we compute the cosine distance for all possible combinations of statements between all pairs of mainstream parties participating in the same election.⁵ For each policy category, we then compute the mean cosine distance between party pairs and rescale the resulting variables to vary between 0 and 1. Values closer to zero indicate that the statements made by a party in a policy category overlap with the statements made by another party in the

⁵ The cosine distance between two vectors X and Z (each representing a different statement) is defined as $cos_dist_{X,Z} = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^n X_i Z_i / (\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n X_i^2} \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n Z_i^2})$, where i indices the elements of the vectors. A value of 0 implies that the statements are identical, whereas a value of 1 refers to statements that are independent (Jurafsky and Martin, 2008). In cases where a party does not make any statements in a given policy category, while the other party does, we set the cosine distance to 1, as their positions in that category can be assumed to be differentiated. In cases where neither party of a pair makes any statements in a given category, we set the cosine distance to 0 because these parties can be assumed to have identical positions.

same category, whereas values closer to 1 reflect little overlap; see Table 1 for summary statistics.

We verify the validity of the approach by qualitatively evaluating randomly selected manifesto pairs from those 19 countries with languages spoken within the co-author team – using the method of close reading (e.g., Grimmer and Stewart, 2013) – and confirm that the cosine distance based on the Sentence-BERT model facilitates an accurate comparison of semantic overlap, both for individual pairs of statements and larger manifesto parts. For the sake of brevity, we illustrate the results of this exercise with English-language manifestos only. Tables A2 and A3 compare random manifesto paragraphs with relatively similar and relatively different content, respectively. For example, Table A2 shows statements about equality and welfare by the Democratic and Republican parties from their manifestos before the 2004 United States elections. Both parties generically talk about the importance of educating children, yielding a relatively low value of the cosine distance (0.44) for these paragraphs. As an opposite example, Table A3 shows two paragraphs related to multiculturalism by the same parties in 2012. Here the Democratic Party talks about immigration, its benefits for the country, and the need for policy reform in that area. In contrast, the paragraph from the Republican Party manifesto discusses questions related to Indigenous Americans, thus addressing a completely different topic. Accordingly, the cosine distance between both paragraphs is relatively high (0.78). Tables A2 and A3 provide further examples from other countries and policy categories, all suggesting the same result: If two parties have similar proposals, the cosine distance takes low values, whereas it takes high values when two parties present different proposals.

Table A4 illustrates how the semantic measure of position differentiation differs from the traditional position measure. The table lists all statements in the welfare state category by the New Zealand National Party and Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand in their 2011 manifestos. According to the traditional measure – which refers to the share of positive statements minus the share of negative statements – both parties would be assumed to have almost identical positions in that area, as they are both in favor of expanding the welfare state. In contrast, with a value of 0.83 (i.e., close to 1), the average cosine distance indicates that both parties are fairly differentiated in the matter. The reason is that the New Zealand National Party primarily talks about the pension system, whereas the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand discusses various aspects of the welfare state, including health, education, housing, and support of local communities. As another example, Table A5 lists all statements in the multiculturalism category by Canada’s New Democratic Party and Conservative Party from their 2015 manifestos. The traditional measure again indicates very similar positions, whereas the average cosine distance (0.64) suggests a moderate to high level of semantic differentiation. Looking at the statements confirms that there is little overlap between the parties: While both of them pledge their support for Indigenous languages and communities, the Conservative Party – but not the New Democratic Party – talks about problems related to immigration (e.g., honor killings, forced marriages) and requirements for Canadian citizenship.

Populist state leaders

For each of the 215 elections in our dataset, we check whether the incumbent state leader appears in the database of populist leaders compiled by Funke et al. (2023). This database categorizes state leaders between 1900 and 2018 in 60 countries as right-wing populist,

left-wing populist, or non-populist based on a systematic literature review of 770 sources. We prefer to use this database over other populism databases because the classification criteria are suitable for both presidential and parliamentary systems as well as advanced and emerging countries. Importantly, the data cover more countries and longer periods of time than alternative sources (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2019; Kyle and Meyer, 2020), which maximizes the number of observations in our analysis dataset.

Using this database, we identify a total of 11 populists acting as incumbent president or prime minister in 22 elections: Boyko Borisov, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Lech Kaczyński, Carlos Menem, Benjamin Netanyahu, Viktor Orbán (all right-wing populists), Robert Fico, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Evo Morales, Alexis Tsípras, and Jacob Zuma (all left-wing populists); see Table A6 for details. We retrieve their party affiliation to match them with the manifesto data and create binary treatment variables that tag those elections where the incumbent state leader is a right- or left-wing populist.

Political, economic, and institutional conditions

To capture a country's overall political and economic climate at the time of an election, we use data from the World Bank's World Development Indicators Database on GDP per capita (at constant 2015 USD), inflation (annual growth rate of the GDP deflator in percent), and unemployment (percent of total labor force). Following Funke et al. (2023), we use the first principal component of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) indices on judicial independence, election fairness, and media freedom as a proxy of the quality of institutions. We use these macroeconomic and institutional indicators to capture potential drivers of populism (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022). It would be desirable to include variables that capture further potential drivers, such as income and wealth inequality,

trade patterns, technological change, migration flows, and geopolitical tensions (e.g., Remmer, 2011; Milner, 2021; Borwein et al., 2024). Unfortunately, data on these and other potentially relevant variables are not consistently available. We, therefore, calculate the aggregate populist vote share (over all populist parties participating in an election), using data from the Global Populisms Project Database. This variable captures public sentiments towards populism independent of underlying drivers. Finally, we create a binary variable that takes the value 1 for party pairs where one party provides a non-populist incumbent state leader, and 0 otherwise. This variable accounts for the possibility that parties modify their strategy when dealing with the state leader’s party (populist or not).

Table 1: Summary statistics (pre-matching)

	Mean (control group, N = 2,025)	Mean (treated group, N = 101)	<i>p</i> -value (difference)
<i>Difference in positions (traditional measures)</i>			
- equality and welfare	8.92	9.79	0.253
- multiculturalism	2.07	3.29	0.000
<i>Difference in positions (semantic measures)</i>			
- equality and welfare	0.52	0.54	0.064
- multiculturalism	0.52	0.54	0.701
<i>Covariates</i>			
Aggregate populist vote share (%)	14.45	40.85	0.000
GDP per capita (USD)	28567.52	15067.86	0.000
Inflation rate (%)	14.72	66.85	0.002
Unemployment rate (%)	9.69	12.16	0.000
Quality of institutions (index)	1.65	1.78	0.150

Notes: Treated observations are those with a populist state leader, while untreated observations are those with a non-populist state leader.

Empirical Strategy

Estimating the effect of populist state leaders on mainstream parties' positions is challenging, due to reverse causality and confounding factors. For instance, the broader patterns in a nation's political and economic landscape as well as voter preferences may simultaneously influence the choice of its state leader and parties' strategies. Similarly, parties' strategies and the content of their manifestos likely influence the choice of state leader.

We tackle these challenges as follows. First, we address the issue of reverse causality by investigating the impact of the *incumbent* state leader on party manifestos. Since the incumbent state leader was determined in the previous election, its selection cannot be influenced by the content of current manifestos. Second, we estimate the effect of populist state leaders on positions in a panel model with two-way fixed effects. Including country and time fixed effects helps to account for the overall tendencies of countries to elect a populist state leader, as well as global trends in populism over time. Third and most importantly, we use propensity score matching (Rosenbaum and Rubin, 1983) to find “statistical twins” for countries with an incumbent populist state leader.⁶ For each treated party pair, we find one or more untreated party pair(s) with a similar propensity score, based on observable factors related to populism: economic conditions (i.e., GDP, inflation, and unemployment), the quality of institutions, and public sentiment towards populism (proxied by populists' parliamentary vote shares). The aggregate parliamentary vote share of populist parties is a particularly powerful matching variable

⁶ Propensity score matching has been frequently used in political science; see Gordon and Yntiso (2022), Bleck et al. (2024), and Blum and Cowburn (2024) for examples of recent applications.

because it allows us to compare elections under similar public sentiment towards populism, but where one election is treated with a populist incumbent state leader and the other is not. This approach is similar in spirit to Abou-Chadi and Krause’s (2018) approach, who use a regression-discontinuity design to compare parties that have similar vote shares but differ in their representation in parliament due to electoral thresholds. A regression-discontinuity design is not possible in our context though because the selection of the state leader is not always based on a quantifiable assignment rule but the result of negotiations between certain parties, which is why we rely on a matching approach.

Table 2: Differences between treated and untreated observations after matching

Covariate	Absolute difference in means	<i>p</i> -value
Aggregate populist vote share (%)	0.931	0.563
GDP per capita (USD)	390.194	0.743
Inflation rate (%)	27.662	0.593
Unemployment rate (%)	0.203	0.776
Quality of institutions (index)	0.063	0.142

Notes: N = 2,083. Matching based on propensity scores.

We provide a detailed description of the matching procedure in the Supplementary Information. In short, we first use a probit model to estimate the impact of the political, economic, and institutional variables mentioned above on the likelihood of observing an incumbent populist state leader in a given election, yielding propensity scores for each treated and control observation. We then use kernel matching to compute weights that minimize the observed differences between treated and control groups. In contrast to alternative methods, such as coarsened exact matching or nearest neighbor matching, the kernel approach has the advantage that it retains the most control observations in the dataset. In our case, we lose 43 control observations because they are considered too

different from the treated observations, leaving us with 2,083 observations for the analysis. As Table 1 shows, prior to matching, we observe significant differences in means of most variables between treated and control observations. After the matching, these differences disappear (Table 2), which suggests that the matching yields a dataset that is balanced on observables.

We use the matched dataset to estimate the impact of incumbent populist state leaders on the distribution of positions of mainstream parties in a given policy category:⁷

$$Y_{i,j,e,c,t} = \alpha_1 Pop_{e,c,t}^{left} + \alpha_2 Pop_{e,c,t}^{right} + \alpha_3 L_{i,j,e,c,t} + \theta_c + \vartheta_t + \varepsilon_{i,j,e,c,t} \quad (2)$$

where $Y_{i,j,e,c,t}$ is the absolute difference in positions $|y_i - y_j|$ between a pair of parties i and j participating in election e in country c and year t . Pop^{left} and Pop^{right} are binary treatment indicators, so that α_1 and α_2 capture the effects of left- and right-wing incumbent populist state leaders. Following Equation (1), a negative sign of α_1 and α_2 indicates a decrease in mean differences between parties – implying a more homogenous distribution of positions – whereas a positive sign indicates the opposite. The binary indicator L takes the value 1 for party pairs with a non-populist state leader, and 0 otherwise. θ_c and ϑ_t are country and year fixed effects. We compute standard errors that are clustered by election – consistent with the level of treatment – to account for

⁷ The model resembles a difference-in-differences design with multiple time periods. Unfortunately, our data do not support evaluating the existence of pre-treatment trends because countries may jump in and out of treatment. In addition, we do not have any pre-treatment observations from countries where a populist is already in power at the beginning of the sample. Similarly, it is not feasible to trace the effects of populist state leaders over time, as most of them serve or are observed for one term only (cp. Table A6).

correlation between party pairs participating in the same election (Cameron and Miller, 2015).

Results

Main Results

Estimation results are summarized in Table 3. Accordingly, we do not find any significant effects of incumbent populist state leaders on the distribution of mainstream parties' positions regarding equality and welfare, neither when using the traditional position measure (Column 1) nor in the case of the semantic measure (Column 3). These null effects are consistent with dismissive ignorance (Panel A in Figure 1) or a combination of strategies shown in Panels B to E in Figure 1, where diverse reactions of parties cancel each other out.

Table 3: Impact of populist leadership on party positions

	Traditional measure		Semantic measure	
	(1) Equality and welfare	(2) Multiculturalism	(3) Equality and welfare	(4) Multiculturalism
Left populist	-2.434 (1.810)	-0.628* (0.358)	0.060 (0.053)	-0.249* (0.147)
Right populist	0.606 (1.751)	1.200** (0.534)	0.031 (0.024)	0.295*** (0.097)
Mean of dep. variable	9.194	2.515	0.531	0.516
SD of dep. variable	6.879	4.094	0.092	0.445
Adj. R ²	0.167	0.190	0.306	0.394

Notes: Based on matched data on 2,083 party pairs. The dependent variables in Columns (1) and (2) capture the differences in policy positions between party pairs in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the difference of counts of relevant statements in their manifestos. The dependent variables in Columns (3) to (4) capture the degree of differentiation between pairs of parties in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the average cosine distance between parties' manifesto statements pertaining to the categories. All models include country fixed effects, year fixed effects, and binary variable indicating party-pairs with a state leader (output omitted). Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by election.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

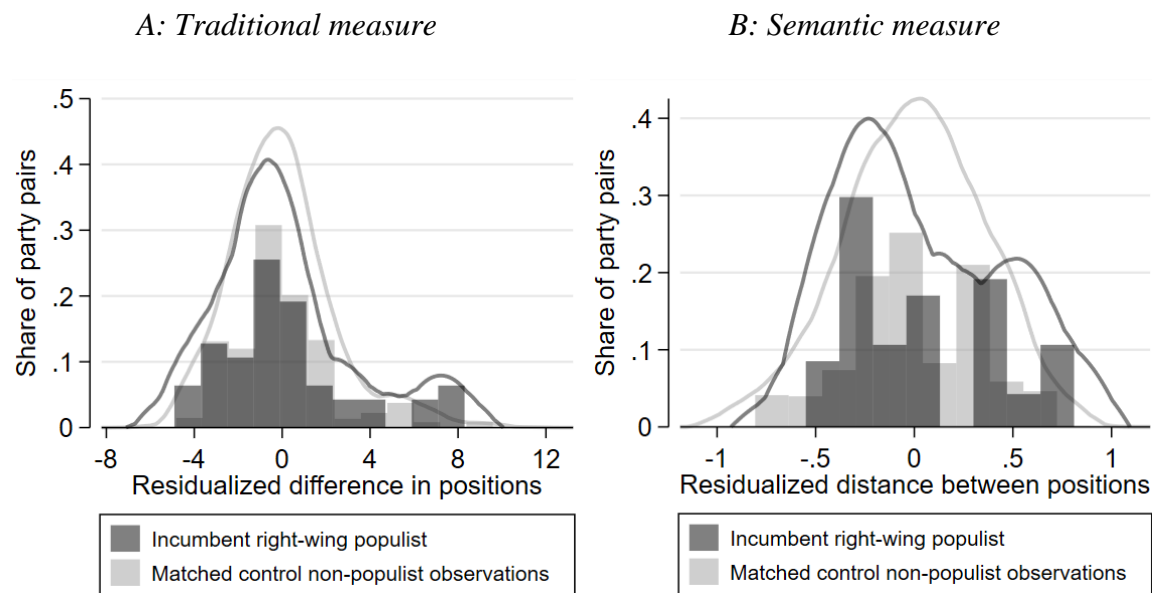
However, we find a marginally significant effect (at the 10% level) of left-wing populist state leaders on positions regarding multiculturalism. According to Column (2), the difference in positions between mainstream parties decreases by 0.628 points, which corresponds to an effect size of $0.628 / 4.094 = 0.15$ standard deviations of the traditional position measure. The size of this effect is substantially larger in the case of the semantic position measure (i.e., $0.249 / 0.445 = 0.56$ standard deviations according to Column 4). These effects are consistent with (accommodating or adversarial) homogenization, as shown in Panels B and C in Figure 1.

Columns (2) and (4) further indicate that right-wing populist state leaders cause mainstream parties to differentiate their positions on multiculturalism, compared to matched elections with a non-populist incumbent state leader. The effects are significant at the 5% and 1% levels and amount to $1.200 / 4.094 = 0.29$ (traditional measure) and $0.295 / 0.445 = 0.66$ (semantic measure) standard deviations. This result is consistent with adversarial diversification (Figure 1, Panel D) and polarization (Figure 1, Panel E).

To get a sense of whether party systems become more diversified or polarized under right-wing populist state leaders, we plot the distribution of differences in positions on multiculturalism in Figure 2. The figure offers visual support that positions tend to be more polarized in elections with right-wing populist incumbents than in matched elections with non-populist leaders. That is, when the incumbent state leader is a right-wing populist, the distribution tends to be bimodal, with one cluster of party pairs with relatively small differences in positions and another cluster where differences are relatively large. This pattern is more compatible with polarization than diversification

because the distribution of positions in a diversified system would be unimodal and comparatively flat.⁸

Figure 2: Distribution of party positions on multiculturalism



Notes: The graphs show the distribution of position differences/distances between party pairs, using the residuals from regressions that are identical to Equation (2) but without treatment indicators. Smaller values on the x-axis indicate more similar positions between parties, whereas larger values reflect more differentiated positions. The solid lines are Kernel density plots.

Throughout Table 3, the effect sizes tend to be about three times larger for the semantic position measures than the traditional position measures (e.g., effect sizes of 0.15 vs. 0.56 and 0.29 vs. 0.66 standard deviations). Considering that the traditional position measures are based on counting positive and negative statements, while the semantic measures

⁸ Figure A3 shows the distribution pertaining to left-wing populist incumbents, also suggesting tendencies towards polarization. However, in line with the negative coefficient on left-wing populist leaders in Table 3, Columns (2) and (4), the distribution is more concentrated than in the case of right-wing populist incumbents.

account for differences in meaning, the larger effect sizes imply that parties not only differentiate on *what* positions to take but also more subtly on *how* to implement a position.

The results are robust to various modifications of the baseline specification. In Tables A7 and A8, we present results based on alternative approaches to Kernel matching, i.e., inverse probability weighting and entropy balancing. The estimates are fairly similar to the baseline specification, which indicates that our results are not sensitive to the choice of matching method. Table A9 shows that we obtain similar results when we do not winsorize the matching variables but use their original values. In the baseline specification, we cluster the standard errors by election, at the same level as the treatment assignment. Tables A10 to A12 report standard errors clustered by country, clustered by party pair, and not clustered but robust to heteroskedasticity, respectively. Overall, the alternative computations yield standard errors that tend to be somewhat larger when using the traditional position measures, but all modifications confirm the impact of populist state leaders on positions regarding multiculturalism when using the semantic measures. Tables A13 and A14 show that the results do not substantially change when we add indicators for countries' development status (advanced vs. emerging) or political system (parliamentary vs. presidential) to the set of matching variables. According to Table A15, we obtain qualitatively similar results when we collapse the data to the level of treatment, i.e., run the regressions at the election level – with mean differences in positions as dependent variables – rather than at the level of party pairs. Finally, Figure A2 summarizes the results of a placebo exercise that involves 1,000 regressions with randomly created “fake” treatment dummies. For all position measures,

the distribution of coefficients from these placebo regressions is centered around zero, which offers reassurance that the actual treatment effects are no statistical artifact.

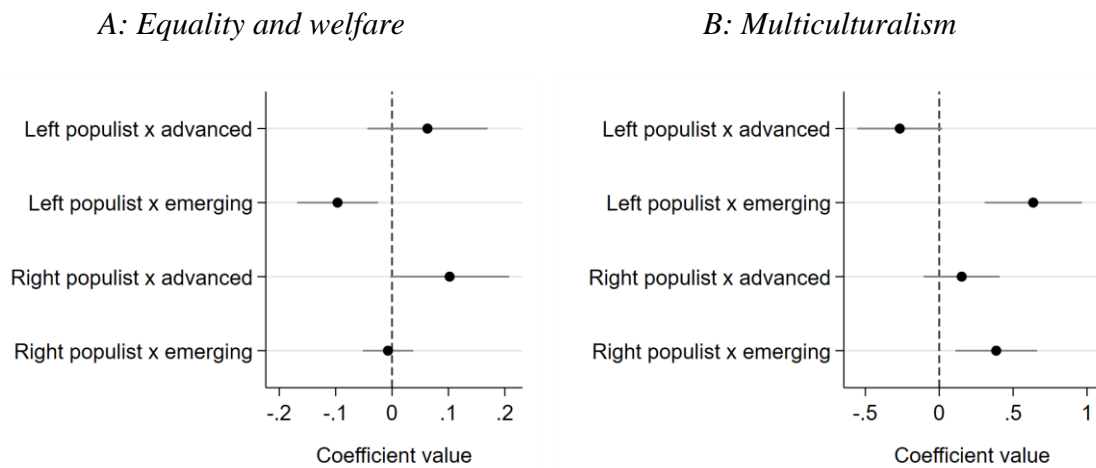
Context-specific effects

Historically, populism has been primarily considered a phenomenon in emerging economies. More recently, there also have been trends towards populism in advanced economies. Previous research shows that parties' reactions to political and economic conditions may differ in both types of countries (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022). As our sample includes both advanced and emerging economies, it is therefore useful to investigate whether populist state leaders have differential effects on party positions, depending on a country's level of economic development. For that purpose, we categorize the countries in our sample as either advanced or emerging, utilizing the classification provided by the International Monetary Fund.

Figure 3 summarizes the estimation results when using the semantic position measures. According to Panel A, we find that the positions of mainstream parties in emerging countries regarding equality and welfare become more homogeneous when the incumbent state leader is a left-wing populist. As Panel B shows, the effects of populist state leaders on positions regarding multiculturalism tend to be somewhat stronger in emerging than in advanced countries.⁹ An explanation for the differential effects could be that parties in emerging countries are often younger and more prone to change than parties in advanced countries.

⁹ Figure A4 shows equivalent results when using the traditional position measures. We find hardly any differences between advanced and emerging countries here, possibly because the traditional measures fail to capture nuanced differences in party positioning.

Figure 3: Differential effects of populist state leaders, by countries' development status

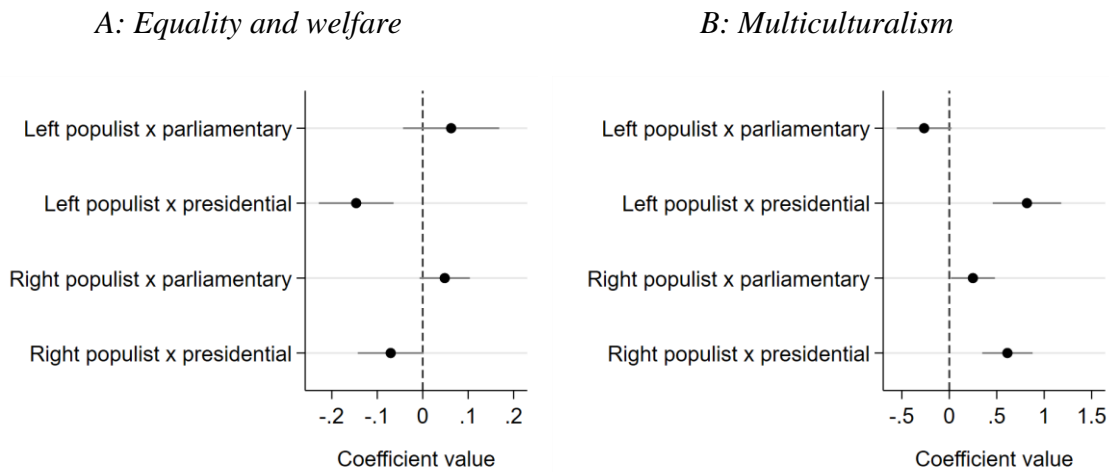


Notes: The graphs show regression results from specifications similar to Equation (2) but where we interact the treatment indicators with binary indicators for advanced vs. emerging country, using matched data. All effects are relative to the reference category – elections with non-populist incumbent state leaders. The dependent variables are semantic position measures. The spikes denote 95% confidence intervals, based on standard errors clustered by election.

Another useful split refers to potential differences between parliamentary vs. presidential democracies, as the different systems may facilitate different levels of concentration of power at the state leader. In parliamentary systems, the cabinet and legislators tend to work relatively closely with each other, whereas there is more independence in presidential systems. This independence may allow a populist president to dominate the national discourse, which in turn may induce differential responses by mainstream parties. We categorize the countries in our sample as parliamentary or presidential, based on the Database of Political Institutions provided by Scartascini et al. (2021).

Figure 4 shows corresponding estimates based on semantic position measures.¹⁰ According to Panel A of the figure, the positions of mainstream parties on equality and welfare become more homogeneous in presidential democracies under right- and especially left-wing populist leaders. Regarding multiculturalism (Panel B), both left- and right-wing populist leaders in presidential systems induce mainstream parties to differentiate their positions. Overall, these findings suggest that parties' differentiation strategies are more responsive to populist leadership in presidential than in parliamentary systems.

Figure 4: Differential effects of populist state leaders, by countries' political system



Notes: The graphs show regression results from specifications similar to Equation (2) but where we interact the treatment indicators with binary indicators for parliamentary vs. presidential system, using matched data. All effects are relative to the reference category – elections with non-populist incumbent state leaders. The dependent variables are semantic position measures. The spikes denote 95% confidence intervals, based on standard errors clustered by election.

¹⁰ See Figure A5 for the corresponding estimates based on traditional position measures.

Conclusion

This article analyzes the impact of populist state leaders on the positions of mainstream parties. For that purpose, we compile a comprehensive dataset on elections, party manifestos, state leaders, and political and economic conditions in 51 democracies between 1989 and 2018. Focusing on the policy categories *equality/welfare* and *multiculturalism*, we complement the traditional approach of measuring party positions with a novel approach that quantifies nuanced differences in positions based on a semantic analysis of manifestos with large language models.

Using panel data and matching techniques, we find that right-wing populist incumbent state leaders induce mainstream parties to differentiate their positions on multiculturalism, with tendencies towards polarization. This effect occurs across countries and political systems but is more pronounced in emerging than advanced countries, and it is stronger in presidential than parliamentary systems. The effects of left-wing populist leaders on positions are context specific. Depending on a country's political system and development status, these state leaders may induce mainstream parties to adopt more homogeneous positions (in questions related to equality/welfare) or more differentiated positions (in questions pertaining to multiculturalism). Comparing results between traditional measures of party positions and our semantic measures, we generally find stronger effects when using the latter, which suggests that parties respond more by adjusting *how* they propose implementing a position than adjusting *what* positions to advocate.

These findings are not without limitations. First, as with any method for causal inference from observational data, our matching approach facilitates a causal interpretation of the results only if the identifying assumptions are met. In our case,

identification of the causal effect hinges on including the correct observables for the matching and that no unobserved confounders drive both the selection of state leaders and the content of party manifestos. Unfortunately, it is neither possible to test this assumption, nor is it possible to compile complementary evidence based on a randomized controlled trial in our case. Second, our analysis is limited to the policy categories of equality/welfare and multiculturalism. Arguably, these are the most relevant categories in our context, but we encourage future research to expand the investigation to other areas. Third, our results do not speak to the reactions of individual parties but pertain to the distribution of positions in a country's party system as a whole. Further research is necessary to investigate in which areas and under what conditions a populist state leader causes positions of mainstream and populist parties to converge or diverge. Fourth, populist state leaders may cause parties to reposition themselves not only by modifying their manifestos, but the availability of positions offered to voters may also be affected through the entry and exit of parties. Unfortunately, our data does not support analyzing this channel, as manifestos of parties that participate in an election but fail to receive sufficient votes are not consistently included in the Manifesto Project Database. Future research may leverage alternative data sources to study parties' entry and exit.

While it is important to understand the circumstances under which populist state leaders induce party systems to become more homogenous or more differentiated, it is not always clear what the optimal level or form of differentiation of positions across parties is. More differentiation could be beneficial for voter representation but too much differentiation could create choice overload in the electorate and complicate collective decision-making due to difficulties in finding majorities. Hence, the impact of populist state leaders on the distribution of party positions is not generally "good" or "bad",

normatively speaking. An important exception is our finding that positions on multiculturalism are more polarized under populist leaders. There is ample evidence that polarization may harm democratic processes and impose high costs on society (e.g., Benson, 2023). In this regard, our results add further evidence of the harmful consequences of populism.

In contrast to parliamentary speeches or media interviews, positions expressed in party manifestos do not reflect short-run reactions by mainstream parties but are indicative of lasting decisions to adopt new positions. Most parties go through lengthy internal processes – including discussions among members and functionaries – before approving any changes at a board meeting or party convention. Thus, the impact of populist state leaders described in this article is not short-lived but alters party systems in the long term.

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Supplementary Information to “Party Positioning under Populist State Leaders”

Details on propensity score matching

This appendix section provides additional details on the propensity score matching conducted in the empirical part of the paper. We predict the likelihood that the incumbent state leader is a populist as a function of the aggregate populist vote share, GDP per capita, the inflation rate, the unemployment rate, and the first principal component of Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) indices on judicial independence, election fairness, and media freedom. In countries treated with a populist state leader, we use the pre-treatment values of these variables for all remaining elections to ensure that shifts in mainstream parties’ positions are attributed to the treatment rather than changes in public sentiments, macroeconomic conditions, and institutional factors. When conducting the matching, we omit all party pairs that include the party of a populist leader or else it would be difficult to interpret the results in a causal manner. To eliminate the effect of outliers, we winsorize the top and bottom 10% of the matching variables on a yearly basis.

To estimate average treatment effects, we denote $Y(1)$ as the potential outcome if a party pair is treated and $Y(0)$ if not. The average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) is represented by:

$$ATT = E[Y(1)|A = 1] - E[Y(0)|A = 1] \quad (A1)$$

where $A \in \{0,1\}$ indicates the treatment status. The first term can be estimated from the data, whereas the counterfactual term $E[Y(0)|A = 1]$ is not observed. $E[Y(0)|A = 1] \neq E[Y(0)|A = 0]$ if selection into treatment is non-random. However, A can be considered independent of $Y(0)$ after conditioning on all covariates x that jointly affect this selection and the potential outcome

(Frölich, 2004). Therefore, to estimate the *ATT*, we need an assumption of mean independence in means under no treatment (Wooldridge, 2010, p.911) represented as:

$$E[Y(0)|x, A] = E[Y(0)|x] \quad (A2)$$

When dealing with a situation where the data contains multiple covariates x , estimating the counterfactual mean using nonparametric regression of the potential outcome Y on x can be a computationally challenging task, especially in the untreated group (Frölich, 2004). For that reason, Rosenbaum and Rubin (1983) suggest an alternative approach, which involves creating a one-dimensional function based on x , called the propensity score (*pscore*). The propensity score is the conditional probability of a party pair being treated given the observed characteristics x :

$$pscore = P(A = 1|x = x) \quad (A3)$$

Propensity score matching implies that each treated party pair is matched to one or more treated party pair(s) that are closest based on the observed characteristics x , for which the estimated *pscore* as defined in Equation (A3) can be used.

Once the *pscore* is estimated, there are different methods to implement the matching, such as one-to-one matching, kernel matching, inverse probability weighting, and entropy balancing. There is no clear-cut rule of which method to use (Huber et al., 2013). For our baseline specification, we use kernel matching because this method retains most control observations for the analysis. That is, with kernel matching, we assign an individual weight to each party pair in the control group based on the *pscore*, such that the weighted mean of control observations is used to estimate the counterfactual to the treated party pair. However, we confirm that our results remain the same when using alternative methods.

After applying the kernel ridge estimator to estimate the *ATT*, we follow Rosenbaum and Rubin (1983) and compare the distribution of propensity scores between treated and control

observations. As Figure A1 shows, the propensity scores of treated and control observations have visually distinct distributions before the matching but exhibit sufficient overlap afterwards. In addition, as shown in Table 2 in the main text, the covariates appear to be balanced after the matching. That is, we do not detect statistically significant differences in means between the treated and control groups. These two results together support a weak version of the ignorability condition required for causal inference (Wooldridge, 2010, p. 911).

Additional tables and figures

Table A1: List of countries and elections in the sample

Country	Elections				Elections		
	First year	Last year	Number		First year	Last year	Number
Argentina	1989	2013	6	Latvia	2006	2018	5
Armenia	2007	2018	4	Lithuania	2000	2016	3
Australia	2004	2016	5	Luxembourg	2004	2013	3
Austria	1999	2017	6	Mexico	2003	2018	6
Belgium	2007	2014	3	Moldova	2014	2014	1
Bolivia	2009	2014	2	Montenegro	2001	2016	3
Bosnia-Herzegovina	2002	2018	4	Netherlands	2006	2017	4
Bulgaria	2009	2017	4	New Zealand	1993	2017	8
Canada	2004	2015	5	North Macedonia	2002	2016	6
Chile	1989	2017	6	Norway	2005	2017	4
Croatia	2000	2016	6	Poland	1993	2015	5
Cyprus	2006	2016	3	Portugal	1999	2015	3
Czech Republic	2006	2017	4	Romania	1996	2016	6
Denmark	1998	2015	5	Russia	1993	2011	4
Estonia	2007	2015	3	Serbia	2012	2016	3
Finland	2007	2015	3	Slovakia	1990	2016	6
France	2012	2017	2	Slovenia	2004	2018	5
Georgia	1990	2016	3	South Africa	1994	2014	4
Germany	1998	2017	6	Spain	2000	2016	5
Greece	2004	2015	7	Sweden	2006	2018	4
Hungary	2002	2018	5	Turkey	2002	2018	5
Iceland	2003	2017	6	Ukraine	1994	2014	6
Ireland	2007	2016	3	United Kingdom	2015	2017	2
Israel	2003	2015	5	United States	2004	2016	3
Italy	2008	2018	3	Uruguay	2014	2014	1
Japan	2017	2017	1				

Table A2: Examples of manifesto paragraphs with relatively similar content

Domain	Party	Text	Cosine distance
Equality and welfare	Democratic Party (US), 2004	Now, as never before, education is the key to opportunity, essential to a strong America. So we believe in an America that offers the best education to all our children - wherever they live, whatever their background. Period. We believe in an America where every child comes to school ready to learn.	0.44
	Republican Party (US), 2004	Education: No Child Left Behind. Public education, access for every child to an excellent education, is a foundation of a free, civil society. The children who enter schools today will leave as young adults, full of dreams for the future.	
Multiculturalism	New Zealand National Party, 2017	Māori businesses are increasingly influential and internationally connected and they are an important part of New Zealand’s story and economic success. Te Reo Māori and Māori culture are significant assets that promote the unique identity and place of Māori in New Zealand and our presence in the global community. We are working with Māori to address social challenges and making significant progress on Treaty settlements.	0.38
	New Zealand Labour Party, 2017	Supporting Te Reo Māori in schools: The survival and future of Te Reo Māori as a thriving language is a core value for Labour because we believe it is a unique taonga for New Zealanders. It is also fundamental to our national identity, and it provides an important gateway to better understanding the rich history and culture of Aotearoa. The Māori language forms part of the broader cultural identity and heritage of New Zealand.	

Notes: The cosine distance is based on word embeddings extracted via a pretrained S-BERT sentence transformer model. The measure is bound between -1 and 1. Larger positive values indicate high levels of overlap.

Table A3: Examples of manifesto paragraphs with relatively different content

Domain	Party	Text	Cosine distance
Equality and welfare	Conservative Party (UK), 2015	We will continue to raise the quality of children’s social work, by expanding training programmes, such as Frontline, and creating new opportunities to develop the next generation of leaders in the field. We will continue to tackle all forms of bullying in our schools.	0.75
	Labour Party (UK), 2015	We will reform the Work Capability Assessment and focus it on the support disabled people need to get into work. We will give an independent scrutiny group of disabled people a central role in monitoring it. And we will introduce a specialist support programme to ensure that disabled people who can work get more tailored help.	
Multiculturalism	Democratic Party (US), 2012	Immigration. Democrats are strongly committed to enacting comprehensive immigration reform that supports our economic goals and reflects our values as both a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. The story of the United States would not be possible without the generations of immigrants who have strengthened our country and contributed to our economy.	0.78
	Republican Party (US), 2012	Honoring Our Relationship with American Indians: Based on both treaty and other law, the federal government has a unique government-to-government relationship with and trust responsibility for Indian Tribal Governments and American Indians and Alaska Natives. These obligations have not been sufficiently honored.	

Notes: The cosine distance is based on word embeddings extracted via a pretrained S-BERT sentence transformer model. The measure is bound between -1 and 1. Larger positive values indicate high levels of overlap.

Table A4: Comparison of traditional and semantic position measures (equality and welfare example)

New Zealand National Party, 2011	Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2011
<p>[+] ... on delivering shorter waiting times</p> <p>[-] We've been straight-up and said that in its current form, Labour's gold-plated KiwiSaver scheme isn't affordable.</p> <p>[+] ... continuing all Working for Families payments at current levels ...</p> <p>[+] Number 8, we will give seniors financial certainty by keeping the age of eligibility of NZ Superannuation at 65 [+] and steadily increasing the amount of Super paid each week as a result of our personal tax cuts. [+] I pledge to keep NZ Super at 66% of the average after-tax wage. [+] Labour hasn't made that pledge. [+] Labour hasn't put aside the funds for that pledge. [+] Labour is hoping our seniors won't notice. [+] Well, I won't play games with our senior citizens.</p> <p>[+] ... and we will make sure their Super payments rise every single year.</p> <p>[-] Number 9, we will encourage people to save for their retirement, [+] by retaining KiwiSaver, with contributions at the 2% plus 2% level. [-] We'll make KiwiSaver a 2 2 plan.</p> <p>[+] Number 10, we will provide a safety net for those who are unable to work, by passing a law to maintain and inflation-index all benefit payments, [-] while encouraging those who can work to go back to work.</p> <p>[+] I believe in the welfare state. [+] I personally benefited from it when I was growing up and I will never turn my back on it. [-] So we will do what it takes to get those who can work back to work.</p>	<p>[+] ... a decent health and education system ...</p> <p>[+] Did the health system invest in keeping her well, with healthy food choices, [+] warm dry housing, [+] and early intervention to catch threats like diabetes and dental problems before they develop.</p> <p>[+] But if your parent is on an invalid or sickness benefit, you don't get that extra help.</p> <p>[+] Who do you trust to invest in preventative health care rather than waiting till you are sick?</p> <p>[+] Insulation of all state houses.</p> <p>[+] More money for COGS.</p> <p>[+] Quit smoking assistance.</p> <p>[+] ... not least of which is a \$1 billion fund to upgrade homes, right across the country, making them warm and dry, with lower power bills.</p>
<p>Difference between shares of pos. and neg. statements: $12.57 - 4.68 = 7.89$</p>	<p>Difference between shares of pos. and neg. statements: $8.33 - 0.00 = 8.33$</p>
<p>Semantic measure (cosine distance): 0.83 (i.e., fairly different)</p>	

Notes: The table shows all statements from the manifestos tagged by the Manifesto Project as "welfare state". Brackets indicate whether a statement was coded as positive (welfare state expansion; CMP code 504) or negative (welfare state limitation; CMP code 505). The shares of positive and negative statements are relative to the total number of coded statements in a party's manifesto.

Table A5: Comparison of traditional and semantic position measures (multiculturalism example)

New Democratic Party (Canada), 2015	Conservative Party of Canada, 2015
<p>[+] ... we will introduce a comprehensive action plan to foster immigration to Francophone minority communities across the country.</p> <p>[+] Furthermore, the ability to not just maintain but revitalize Indigenous culture and languages requires focused effort and investment. [+] The NDP will: Support initiatives to revitalize Indigenous languages by establishing ...</p> <p>[+] ... a National Indigenous Languages Revitalization Fund and a National Indigenous Languages Institute with a total new investment of \$68 million over four years.</p>	<p>[-] Sadly, there are some newcomers who embrace the promise of Canada, but not those values that make this country great, and who import certain brutal practices – most often affecting women and girls – that have no place here, or anywhere. [-] The tragic truth is that certain practices, such as female genital mutilation, so-called honour killings, polygamy, and early and forced marriages, are taking place within some cultural communities in Canada.</p> <p>[+] ... and support minority language communities in Canada.</p> <p>[+] Increasing funding to support the preservation and promotion of traditional Aboriginal languages. [+] Ongoing support for Aboriginal post-secondary bursaries in partnership with Indspire, an Aboriginal-led national charity dedicated to helping First Nations students receive post-secondary education.</p> <p>[+] Our Conservative Government introduced the First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act to improve K-12 educational outcomes for First Nations students. [+] The legislation was rooted in a historic agreement with the Assembly of First Nations and was backed by significant new funding for core education programming, including language and cultural programming. [+] A re-elected Conservative Government remains committed to working with willing First Nations partners and provinces to improve First Nations educational outcomes so that students living on reserve are better placed to reach their full potential.</p> <p>[-] A majority of Canadians believe that new citizens should be seen and heard at the moment they join the Canadian family. [-] That's why, this past June, our Government introduced a bill requiring all individuals seeking to become Canadians to show their faces while taking the Oath of Citizenship. [-] We believe it's critically important that, at the moment an individual joins the Canadian family, they do so freely and openly, rather than hiding their identity. [-] A re-elected Conservative Government will reintroduce and pass the Oath of Citizenship Act requiring citizenship candidates to be seen and heard when reciting the Oath in community with others, to confirm their commitment as new citizens to Canada's laws and values.</p>
<p>Difference between shares of pos. and neg. statements: $0.53 - 0.00 = 0.53$</p>	<p>Difference between shares of pos. and neg. statements: $0.39 - 0.39 = 0.00$</p>
<p>Semantic measure (cosine distance): 0.64 (i.e., fairly different)</p>	

Notes: The table shows all statements from the manifestos tagged by the Manifesto Project as “welfare state”. Brackets indicate whether a statement was coded as positive (CMP code 607) or negative (CMP code 608) toward multiculturalism. The shares of positive and negative statements are relative to the total number of coded statements in a party’s manifesto.

Table A6: Populist leaders in the sample

Country	From	To	Name	Orientation	Party	In-sample elections as incumbent (yyyymm)
Argentina	1989	1999	Menem	Right	Justicialist Party	199505 199910
Argentina	2007	2015	Fernandez	Left	Front for Victory	200906 201110 201310
Bolivia	2006	2018	Morales	Left	Movement for Socialism	200912 201410
Bulgaria	2009	2013	Borisov	Right	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria	201305
Bulgaria	2014	2017	Borisov	Right	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria	201703
Greece	2015	2018	Tsipras	Left	Syriza	201509
Hungary	2010	2018	Orban	Right	Fidesz	201404 201804
Israel	2009	2018	Netanyahu	Right	Likud	201503
Poland	2005	2007	Kaczynski	Right	Law and Justice	200710
Slovakia	2006	2010	Fico	Left	Direction – Slovak Social Democracy	201006
Slovakia	2012	2018	Fico	Left	Direction – Slovak Social Democracy	201603
South Africa	2009	2018	Zuma	Left	African National Congress	201405
Turkey	2003	2018	Erdogan	Right	Justice and Development Party	200707 201106 201506 201511 201806

Notes: The sample excludes those elections and incumbent populist leaders where annotated manifestos are not available.

Table A7: Impact of populist leadership on party positions (matching based on inverse probability weighting)

	Traditional measure		Semantic measure	
	(1) Equality and welfare	(2) Multiculturalism	(3) Equality and welfare	(4) Multiculturalism
Left populist	-1.704 (1.978)	-0.654* (0.341)	0.042 (0.044)	-0.260* (0.140)
Right populist	0.292 (1.822)	1.339*** (0.494)	0.032 (0.026)	0.256*** (0.097)
Mean of dep. variable	9.297	2.553	0.537	0.502
SD of dep. variable	6.962	4.227	0.091	0.449
Adj. R ²	0.171	0.192	0.276	0.384

Notes: Based on matched data on 2,083 party pairs. The dependent variables in Columns (1) and (2) capture the differences in policy positions between party pairs in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the difference of counts of relevant statements in their manifestos. The dependent variables in Columns (3) to (4) capture the degree of differentiation between pairs of parties in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the average cosine distance between parties' manifesto statements pertaining to the categories. All models include country fixed effects, year fixed effects, and binary variable indicating party-pairs with a state leader (output omitted). Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by election.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A8: Impact of populist leadership on party positions (entropy balancing)

	Traditional measure		Semantic measure	
	(1) Equality and welfare	(2) Multiculturalism	(3) Equality and welfare	(4) Multiculturalism
Left populist	-1.638 (1.891)	-0.611* (0.353)	0.039 (0.040)	-0.243* (0.139)
Right populist	-0.438 (1.714)	1.325*** (0.466)	0.025 (0.025)	0.257*** (0.098)
Mean of dep. variable	9.326	2.589	0.537	0.504
SD of dep. variable	7.007	4.252	0.091	0.447
Adj. R ²	0.166	0.191	0.275	0.371

Notes: Based on matched data on 2,083 party pairs. The dependent variables in Columns (1) and (2) capture the differences in policy positions between party pairs in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the difference of counts of relevant statements in their manifestos. The dependent variables in Columns (3) to (4) capture the degree of differentiation between pairs of parties in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the average cosine distance between parties' manifesto statements pertaining to the categories. All models include country fixed effects, year fixed effects, and binary variable indicating party-pairs with a state leader (output omitted). Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by election.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A9: Impact of populist leadership on party positions (no winsorizing of matching variables)

	Traditional measure		Semantic measure	
	(1) Equality and welfare	(2) Multiculturalism	(3) Equality and welfare	(4) Multiculturalism
Left populist	-2.240 (1.755)	-0.754** (0.305)	0.038 (0.038)	-0.285** (0.119)
Right populist	0.381 (1.829)	1.149** (0.497)	0.022 (0.022)	0.262*** (0.092)
Mean of dep. variable	9.247	2.420	0.536	0.477
SD of dep. variable	6.793	4.073	0.091	0.450
Adj. R ²	0.150	0.201	0.322	0.440

Notes: Based on matched data on 2,110 party pairs. The dependent variables in Columns (1) and (2) capture the differences in policy positions between party pairs in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the difference of counts of relevant statements in their manifestos. The dependent variables in Columns (3) to (4) capture the degree of differentiation between pairs of parties in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the average cosine distance between parties' manifesto statements pertaining to the categories. All models include country fixed effects, year fixed effects, and binary variable indicating party-pairs with a state leader (output omitted). Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by election.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A10: Impact of populist leadership on party positions (standard errors clustered by country)

	Traditional measure		Semantic measure	
	(1) Equality and welfare	(2) Multiculturalism	(3) Equality and welfare	(4) Multiculturalism
Left populist	-2.434 (1.940)	-0.628 (0.437)	0.060 (0.044)	-0.249* (0.134)
Right populist	0.606 (1.970)	1.200*** (0.263)	0.031 (0.028)	0.295** (0.113)
Mean of dep. variable	9.194	2.515	0.531	0.516
SD of dep. variable	6.879	4.094	0.092	0.445
Adj. R ²	0.167	0.189	0.306	0.393

Notes: Based on matched data on 2,083 party pairs. The dependent variables in Columns (1) and (2) capture the differences in policy positions between party pairs in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the difference of counts of relevant statements in their manifestos. The dependent variables in Columns (3) to (4) capture the degree of differentiation between pairs of parties in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the average cosine distance between parties' manifesto statements pertaining to the categories. All models include country fixed effects, year fixed effects, and binary variable indicating party-pairs with a state leader (output omitted). Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by country.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A11: Impact of populist leadership on party positions (standard errors clustered by party pair)

	Traditional measure		Semantic measure	
	(1) Equality and welfare	(2) Multiculturalism	(3) Equality and welfare	(4) Multiculturalism
Left populist	-2.434 (2.223)	-0.628* (0.361)	0.060 (0.042)	-0.249* (0.131)
Right populist	0.606 (1.889)	1.200 (0.732)	0.031 (0.020)	0.295*** (0.095)
Mean of dep. variable	9.194	2.515	0.531	0.516
SD of dep. variable	6.879	4.094	0.092	0.445
Adj. R ²	0.167	0.190	0.306	0.394

Notes: Based on matched data on 2,083 party pairs. The dependent variables in Columns (1) and (2) capture the differences in policy positions between party pairs in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the difference of counts of relevant statements in their manifestos. The dependent variables in Columns (3) to (4) capture the degree of differentiation between pairs of parties in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the average cosine distance between parties' manifesto statements pertaining to the categories. All models include country fixed effects, year fixed effects, and binary variable indicating party-pairs with a state leader (output omitted). Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by party pair.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A12: Impact of populist leadership on party positions (heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors)

	Traditional measure		Semantic measure	
	(1) Equality and welfare	(2) Multiculturalism	(3) Equality and welfare	(4) Multiculturalism
Left populist	-2.434 (1.962)	-0.628 (0.454)	0.060 (0.042)	-0.249** (0.120)
Right populist	0.606 (1.914)	1.200 (0.768)	0.031 (0.020)	0.295*** (0.095)
Mean of dep. variable	9.194	2.515	0.531	0.516
SD of dep. variable	6.879	4.094	0.092	0.445
Adj. R ²	0.167	0.190	0.306	0.394

Notes: Based on matched data on 2,083 party pairs. The dependent variables in Columns (1) and (2) capture the differences in policy positions between party pairs in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the difference of counts of relevant statements in their manifestos. The dependent variables in Columns (3) to (4) capture the degree of differentiation between pairs of parties in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the average cosine distance between parties' manifesto statements pertaining to the categories. All models include country fixed effects, year fixed effects, and binary variable indicating party-pairs with a state leader (output omitted). Heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A13: Impact of populist leadership on party positions (adding development status – advanced vs. emerging – to the matching variables)

	Traditional measure		Semantic measure	
	(1) Equality and welfare	(2) Multiculturalism	(3) Equality and welfare	(4) Multiculturalism
Left populist	-2.460 (1.632)	-0.766* (0.409)	0.039 (0.045)	-0.234* (0.131)
Right populist	0.016 (1.602)	1.572** (0.616)	0.032 (0.028)	0.195** (0.093)
Mean of dep. variable	9.340	2.554	0.530	0.508
SD of dep. variable	6.976	4.189	0.093	0.443
Adj. R ²	0.189	0.202	0.357	0.414

Notes: Based on matched data on 2,083 party pairs. The dependent variables in Columns (1) and (2) capture the differences in policy positions between party pairs in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the difference of counts of relevant statements in their manifestos. The dependent variables in Columns (3) to (4) capture the degree of differentiation between pairs of parties in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the average cosine distance between parties' manifesto statements pertaining to the categories. All models include country fixed effects, year fixed effects, and binary variable indicating party-pairs with a state leader (output omitted). Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by election.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A14: Impact of populist leadership on party positions (adding political system – parliamentary vs. presidential – to the matching variables)

	Traditional measure		Semantic measure	
	(1) Equality and welfare	(2) Multiculturalism	(3) Equality and welfare	(4) Multiculturalism
Left populist	-1.262 (1.909)	-0.462 (0.428)	0.038 (0.032)	-0.226* (0.124)
Right populist	0.590 (1.924)	1.315** (0.554)	0.025 (0.023)	0.270*** (0.100)
Mean of dep. variable	9.259	2.535	0.529	0.507
SD of dep. variable	6.908	4.113	0.090	0.442
Adj. R ²	0.141	0.184	0.318	0.398

Notes: Based on matched data on 2,083 party pairs. The dependent variables in Columns (1) and (2) capture the differences in policy positions between party pairs in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the difference of counts of relevant statements in their manifestos. The dependent variables in Columns (3) to (4) capture the degree of differentiation between pairs of parties in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the average cosine distance between parties' manifesto statements pertaining to the categories. All models include country fixed effects, year fixed effects, and binary variable indicating party-pairs with a state leader (output omitted). Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by election.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A15: Impact of populist leadership on party positions (election-level regressions)

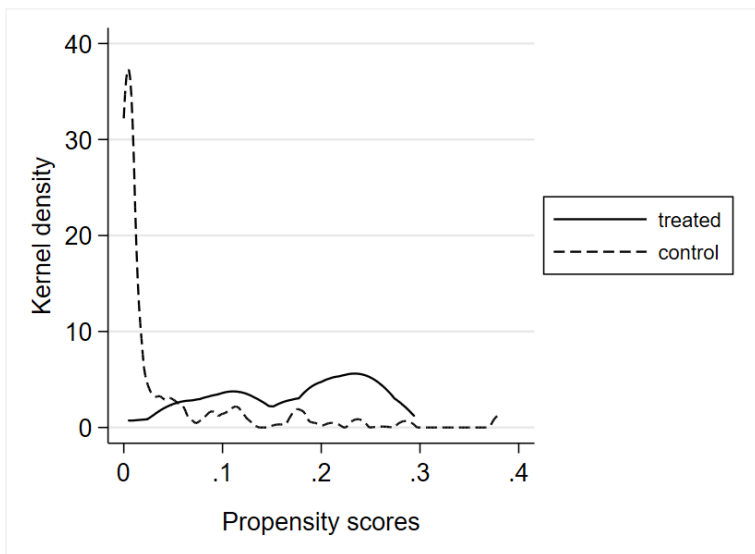
	Traditional measure		Semantic measure	
	(1) Equality and welfare	(2) Multiculturalism	(3) Equality and welfare	(4) Multiculturalism
Left populist	-2.087 (1.976)	-0.476 (0.420)	0.056 (0.050)	-0.244* (0.135)
Right populist	1.137 (2.085)	1.434*** (0.279)	0.025 (0.027)	0.302** (0.119)
Mean of dep. variable	9.171	2.527	0.531	0.518
SD of dep. variable	3.490	2.032	0.061	0.314
Adj. R ²	0.619	0.826	0.613	0.750

Notes: Based on matched data collapsed by 215 elections. The dependent variables in Columns (1) and (2) capture the differences in policy positions between party pairs in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the difference of counts of relevant statements in their manifestos. The dependent variables in Columns (3) to (4) capture the degree of differentiation between pairs of parties in the policy categories stated in the column headers, measured as the average cosine distance between parties' manifesto statements pertaining to the categories. All models include country fixed effects and year fixed effects. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by country.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Figure A1: Distribution of propensity scores

A: Before matching



B: After matching

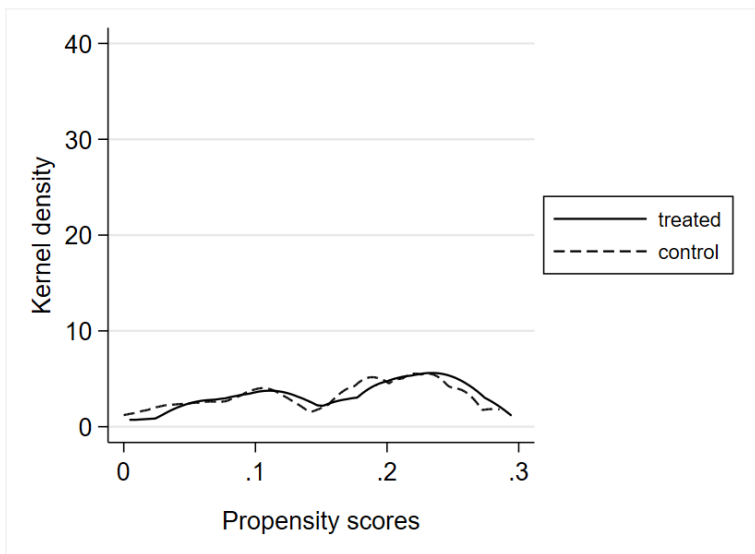
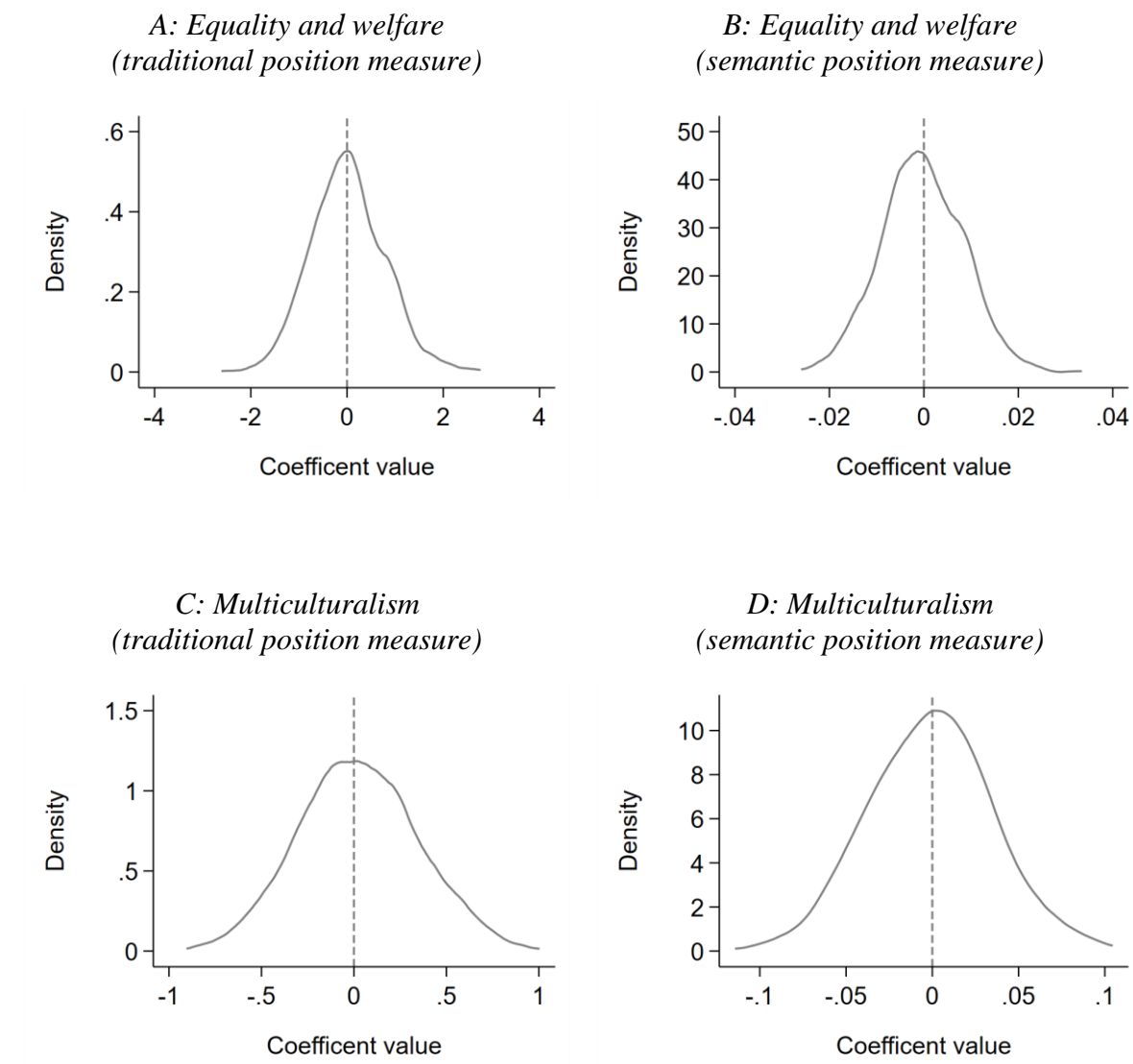
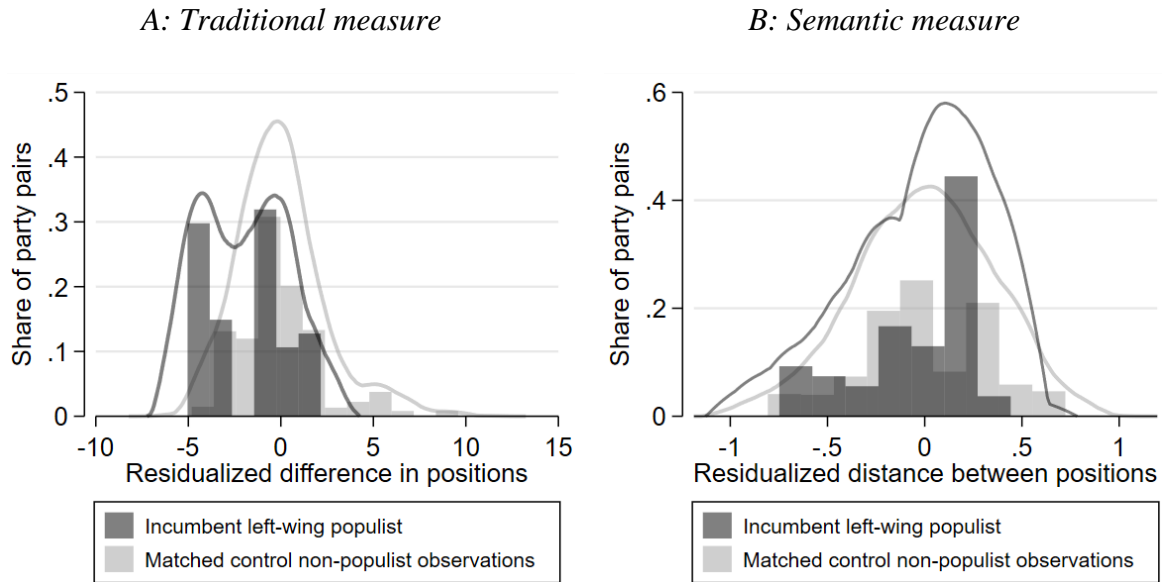


Figure A2: Placebo estimates



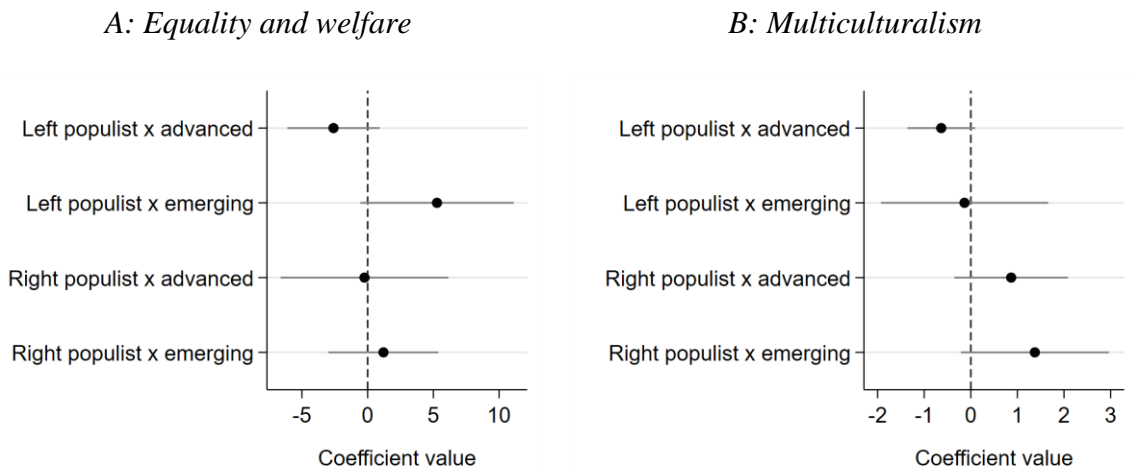
Notes: The figure shows kernel density plots of the distribution of coefficients from re-estimating the baseline specification 1,000 times with randomly drawn placebo treatments. The placebo treatment indicators are binary variables with an average treatment probability of 4.75% (following the true probability of treatment with an incumbent populist state leader in the dataset). The regressions use matched data on 2,083 party pairs.

Figure A3: Distribution of party positions on multiculturalism (left-wing populist state leaders)



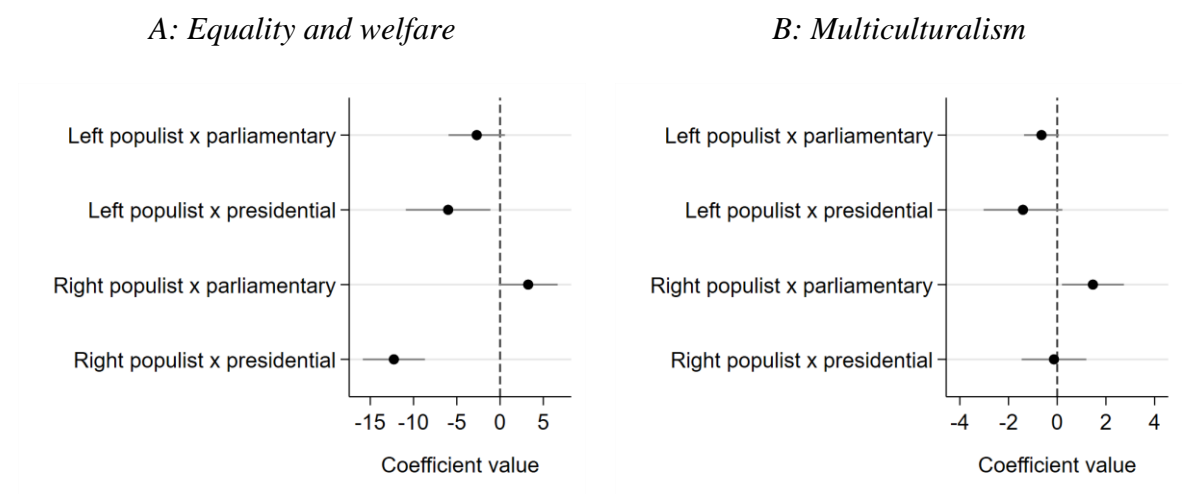
Notes: The graphs show the distribution of position differences/distances between party pairs, using the residuals from regressions that are identical to Equation (2) but without treatment indicators. Smaller values on the x-axis indicate more similar positions between parties, whereas larger values reflect more differentiated positions. The solid lines are Kernel density plots.

Figure A4: Differential effects of populist state leaders, by countries' development status (traditional position measures)



Notes: The graphs show regression results from specifications similar to Equation (2) but where we interact the treatment indicators with binary indicators for advanced vs. emerging country, using matched data. All effects are relative to the reference category – elections with non-populist incumbent state leaders. The dependent variables are traditional position measures. The spikes denote 95% confidence intervals, based on standard errors clustered by election.

Figure A5: Differential effects of populist state leaders, by countries' political system (traditional position measures)



Notes: The graphs show regression results from specifications similar to Equation (2) but where we interact the treatment indicators with binary indicators for parliamentary vs. presidential system, using matched data. All effects are relative to the reference category – elections with non-populist incumbent state leaders. The dependent variables are traditional position measures. The spikes denote 95% confidence intervals, based on standard errors clustered by election.

Appendix References

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