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Populist demand, economic development and regional identity across nine European countries: exploring regional patterns of variance

Steven M. Van Hauwaert ^{a,b}, Christian H. Schimpf ^{c,d} and Régis Dandoy ^{e,f}

^aDepartment of Political Science, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Mainz, Germany; ^bDepartment of Politics, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK; ^cGESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Mannheim, Germany; ^dGESS - University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany; ^eCenter for Local Politics, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium; ^fWaseda Institute for Advanced Studies, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan

ABSTRACT

Today, populism has gradually become one of the most talked about, most studied phenomena, both within and beyond academia. Most studies of populism focus on its conceptualisation, operationalisation, measurement or its outcomes. However, adding to the growing empirical analysis of populism, we propose to study populism as a regional-level phenomenon and explain regional patterns of variation in the populist demand. To do so, we develop a series of theoretical arguments from, which we subsequently test empirically. Specifically, we argue that higher levels of regional populism demand are associated with (i) economic hardship, (ii) strong institutional autonomy, (iii) strong territorial identity, and (iv) greater distance to elites. We construct a populist index for 143 regions across nine countries and combine this with a unique and rich regional database. While we find that populism holds distinct regional patterns and there is support for classic predictors like economic hardship, we are also able to provide some unique insights into the regional foundations of populism, most notably the predictive power of regional identity and the distance to national elites.

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KEYWORDS Populism; elites; regions; demand side; subnational variation

Introduction

Populism has become an intricate and consistent part of both American and European democracies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Recently, this has been exemplified by the success of populist parties in

CONTACT Steven M. Van Hauwaert  vanhauwaert@politik.uni-mainz.de  Department of Political Science, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Mainz, Germany; Department of Politics, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK

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the 2014 EP elections, the presidential election in the USA and the Brexit referendum in the UK. While scholars continue to provide contributions regarding its conceptualisation (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Aslanidis 2015; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Mudde 2004; Weyland 2001), its theoretical framework (Albertazzi 2008; Mény and Surel 2000, 2002; Rooduijn 2014; Stanley 2008; Taggart 2000, 2002), its measurement (Hawkins 2009; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Pauwels 2011; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011), its role in party development (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart 2007; Mény and Surel 2002; van Kessel 2015) and its effect on different aspects of [liberal] democracy (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; 2018), recent studies also shift their analytical focus towards the populist breeding ground or - differently put - the populist potential available for mobilisation (e.g. Akkerman et al. 2014; Akkerman et al. 2017; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Hawkins and Riding 2010; Stanley 2011, 2018; Jacobs. et al. 2018; Hawkins et al. 2018a; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018). Our study looks to complement this particular interpretation of populism in several ways.

Mostly, the literature describes such demand-side populism as a ubiquitous and pervasive phenomenon with elevated and systemic levels. We can identify four crucial caveats. First, evidence of populist aptitude comes mostly from single-country perspectives, like in the Netherlands, Slovakia and the USA. Second, most studies remain theoretical. Third, while the existing literature frequently refers to 'crisis' to explain the variance in populist potential, it overlooks some alternative mechanisms. Fourth, existing studies assume that populist demand is widespread, but systematically undervalue patterns of variation within countries. They often consider a broad and harmonised populist potential, rather than to recognise lower-level patterns of variance in this potential. For example, we can observe substantial differences in populism between Eastern and Western Germany, as well as between capital and peripheral regions in Spain and the UK.

With these caveats in mind, we formulate the following research questions: (i) to what extent do we find empirical support for a widespread and harmonised populist potential, (ii) to what extent can we observe between- and within-country patterns of variance in such populist potential, and (iii) if such patterns exist, what correlates can help us shed some light on them? In essence, rather than investigating the variance between individuals, this study primarily focuses on a more aggregated expression of populist demand. Differently put, the central purpose of this study is explorative and, more specifically, to evaluate the populist potential across European regions, thereby complementing an increasing number of studies that

focus exclusively on individual-level differences in populism (Mélendez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018).

To this end, we use cross-sectional data from nine countries to develop an index of populist demand (potential) for 143 separate regions. In a first step, we descriptively examine noticeable within-country (regional) patterns of variance. In a second step, we explore the relationship with a set of proposed correlates of regional-level expressions of populist potential, mainly focusing on economic and regional identity variables. While such an analytical framework is typically formulated on the national level, we theorise this latter set of variables to have a unique regional-level contribution, thereby simultaneously proposing a novel regional-level approach to the study of (patterns in) populist potential. Combined, this allows us to formulate an exploratory account of regional-level populist potential and provide some provisional insights into its within-country patterns of variance. In a final step, we reflect on these findings, their implications for the empirical study of (demand-side) populism, and where their restrictions lie.

Populism as a demand-side phenomenon

Despite some remaining differences, most scholars converge around a shared conceptual understanding of populism as ‘a specific set of ideas’ (Hawkins 2009; Hawkins *et al.* 2018b). This ‘ideational’ approach allows for the analysis of different expressions of populism and the specification of the various key concepts that harmonise these ideas. Throughout this study, we limit our analysis to one such expression, namely populism as a thin centred ideology. More precisely, we define populism as

(...) an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.¹ (Mudde 2004: 543)

The three essential components of populism are the sovereignty of the people, the opposition to an elite, and a Manichean division of the world (Hawkins *et al.* 2018b).

While there is a growing amount of public debate and academic research on populism, both primarily focus on providing insights into the supply-side of populism. For example, recent studies focus on populist

¹The ‘thin-centred’ part indicates that populism provides some “individually shaped coat hangers” other ideologies can use to build on Freedman (1997: 5), while it simultaneously promotes some degree of abstractness that proves rather beneficial for cross-contextual comparisons (cf. Sartori 1970).

leaders (Hawkins 2003, 2009, 2010; Hawkins and Castanho Silva 2018), populist parties (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011; van Kessel 2015), the relationship between populism and democracy (Huber and Schimpf 2016, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 2018; Müller 2016) and populism in government (Taggart and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015; Wear 2008). Typically, these supply-side interpretations of populism mainly focus on organisational and institutional aspects of politics.

At the same time, there is a consensus amongst scholars that the supply-side cannot be successful without a strong demand-side (both interact). Only a few studies have investigated the origins of varying support for populism at the individual level (cf. Spruyt *et al.* 2016), or how supply and (populist) demand interact and influence the success of populist parties (Mélendez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2017; Rooduijn 2018; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018). Seeing that the demand-side remains understudied, this paper focuses on the former aspect. To supplement initial studies of populist demand at the individual level, we examine the nature of the phenomenon on the regional level (cf. *supra*). That is, we are interested in the regional differences in populist potential, which we conceive of as the extent to which the population of a certain region can be mobilised or exploited by (populist) actors based on moral anti-elite and general will sentiments. Some studies do address this and almost unanimously suggest a populist potential exists in both Europe (Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018) and the Americas (Hawkins and Riding 2010; Mélendez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).² Most studies take a national-level outlook, but some do go beyond this and identify patterns at the supra-national or continental level (Kenny 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Taggart and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015; Hawkins *et al.* 2018b).

While these initial empirical studies provide insights into the general state of populism as a demand-side phenomenon, they primarily focus on the individual-level expressions of populism and thereby only provide limited insights into (i) more aggregate within- or between-country patterns of variation, and (ii) some of the more contextual factors that can be associated to these patterns of variation. Mainly, if existing studies are correct in assuming that populist potential is equally widespread within a country, we should not be able to observe any substantial differences between communities or regions. However, Pollock *et al.* (2015), for instance, indicate that – more

²Some of these studies are even more specific and argue that a populist demand translates into ‘populist attitudes’. This would then result in an individual-level analysis of the populist demand. While we recognise this is undoubtedly a relevant field of study, neither the concept of ‘populist attitudes’, nor the individual-level analysis of populism falls within the scope of our study.

often than not – populist views amongst younger Europeans reflect local and regional concerns. At the same time, both Taguieff (1998) and Perrineau (2014) argue that one of the reasons of the *Front National*'s dispersed [electoral] success across France is a distinct and stable regional cleavage that corresponds to regional differences in far right and populist potential. Translated to our study, we would thus expect that a general populist demand varies depending on regional specifics. In fact, a detailed inspection of our regional populist demand index indicates notable variation in populist potential within some countries [cf. Appendix Table A1]. For example, the Basque Country and Catalonia (Spain), PACA and Nord-Pas-de-Calais (France) and the Greek islands have more populist potential than their respective national counterparts.

To examine such contextual, yet lower-level differences, we shift our analytical focus to the regional level and explore how regional differences relate to the varying levels of populist demand. Our choice for the regional level is not only pragmatic.³ After all, existing studies have already identified a close interdependence between regionalist and populist ideologies (van Kessel 2015). In some instances, the populist demand is combined with demands for more decentralisation and regional autonomy (e.g. *Lega Nord* in Italy, *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium, *Scottish National Party* in the UK). Given the shared dualistic nature of populism and regionalism (or a regionalist interpretation of nationalism), we could even argue that the latter serves as the host ideology to which populism can attach itself (cf. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). The success of such actors, most notably on the right, confirms that both populist and regionalist ideologies are likely to be self-reinforcing, rather than mutually exclusive. Therefore, the results of our study do not only contribute to the literature on (demand-side) populism in general, but also speak to the studies that connect regionalism to populism on the supply side. With that in mind, we formulate four expectations regarding the regional correlates of regional expressions of demand-side populism.

³From a theoretical perspective, one could also study demand-side populism from a local (Pollock *et al.* 2015) or state perspective (cf. Akkerman *et al.* 2014). However, politics at the regional level, esp. regional elections, are increasingly important (Thorlakson 2016) and can even shape national politics (cf. Schakel 2013). To this extent, regions provide meaningful contexts that may shape peoples' views. Furthermore, as the world becomes more connected, the state – as the dominant political entity – has become less critical (Agnew 2013). At the same time, regions closely intertwined with the state, but their relation to the state has undergone significant changes in the wake of these developments as evident by the growing number of regionalist and separatist movements in Europe (Applegate 1999). Thus, regions do constitute meaningful entities to study in particular after observing that certain populist parties, like the Italian *Lega Nord* and the *Vlaams Belang*, began as [and to some extent still are] regionalist parties (cf. McDonnell 2006).

Regional patterns of variation in the populist demand

Typically, sociological accounts of populism look at legitimacy crises faced by traditional societal actors, often brought on by economic and political crises (Navia and Walker 2010; Oxhorn 1998; Roberts 2007; Taggart 2002; Weyland 2006). While Rooduijn (2014) argues that economic crisis is a crucial, even necessary, factor for the rise and success of populism, more comprehensive accounts question this 'essential' component and suggest the puzzle might be more complicated and the causal story context-related (Kriesi and Pappas 2015).

Nonetheless, we recognise that economic scarcity and limited economic resources can contribute to resentment or disaffection towards politics and the ruling elites, with the latter being a crucial component of populism (Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013). For example, Ford and Goodwin (2014) find that a sizeable populist potential translated into a UKIP vote in both areas with higher economic deprivation (unemployment) and working class communities. This association should mainly be present when economic disadvantages are visible and/or relative, for example in the form of social or economic deficits or losses (Johnston *et al.* 2000). This type of deprivation then reinforces the dualistic and antagonistic relationship with the more prosperous elites. Therefore, we expect regions that experience a lack of or declining economic opportunities to have higher levels of populist demand.

While we theorise and recognise the importance of such relatively 'traditional' correlates, we also set out to examine if and how the populist demand relates to more cultural, political and institutional features of sub-national entities. The primary rationale for this rests on the combination of the two founding elements of populism as an ideational construct, namely a horizontal feeling of belonging to 'a people' and a more vertical anti-elite feeling. In general, we argue that populist demand should be stronger in sub-national territories that display a specific (regional) identity or set of characteristics, especially when compared with the features of the (national) elite. After all, regional uniqueness, much like nationalism, promotes the within and demotes the outside, thereby advancing the dualism and antagonism that is crucial for the activation of a populist potential.

Building on this general rationale, we formulate three expectations regarding the relationship between populism and distinctive regional characteristics. The first concerns the degree of regional autonomy. Throughout Europe, decentralisation has gradually increased the role

and importance of the regional level (Pallarés and Keating 2003; Hough and Jeffery 2006; Thorlakson 2007, 2016; Swenden 2014). A strong and decentralised set of regions may ultimately lead to region-specific and unique political dynamics that could contribute, or even trigger, a particular socio-political demand (Lublin 2012; Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Massetti and Schakel 2013; Quaranta 2013), much like that for populism. Specifically, we expect decentralisation and the resulting institutional autonomy for the regions to not only be the result of a rejection of national politics, but also to be related to higher levels of regional populist demand. Furthermore, strong and independent regional institutions could enter into conflict with national actors, especially if the region possesses significant self-rule powers (as opposed to shared rule instruments). A notable example of this rationale is the voice and opinion expressed by Scotland after the Brexit referendum in the UK. In short, we expect institutional autonomy to relate to regional populist demand levels positively.

The idea of the politicisation of territorial cleavages relies in early works on party systems (Livingston 1956; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Lijphart 1977; Rokkan and Urwin 1983). Territorial cleavages are, for example, based on a distinct regional culture, history, language, economy and ethnicity. Scholars have observed that in regions with distinctive territorial identities, regional electoral results are more likely to deviate from national election results (Jeffery and Hough 2009; Dandoy and Schakel 2013). When elections are held in areas with distinctive territorial identities, voters are more likely to disconnect themselves from the national arena and make different vote choices in the regional context. This is not only related to regions being considered 'less important' from a political and electoral perspective (Reif and Schmitt 1980) but mostly stems from the belief that regional individuality and whatever corresponding interests must be advanced on the regional level. A distinct and unique territorial identity serves as a clear contrasting mechanism with the national elites and thereby emphasises the vertical component of populism. Consequently, we expect the populist demand will be different across regions both in line with and because of varying unique territorial identities.

Being at the periphery of the national political system is to a large extent related to one's perception of being part of a distinct group, in an unequal position compared to the elite and the establishment. This means populism incorporates the notion of 'distance' (Jagers and Walgrave 2007), i.e. a close distance between oneself and his/her people but also a larger gap between the people and the elite. We propose that this distance may be symbolic, i.e. based on a different culture or language, or on a

different way of doing politics – or simply geographic, i.e. based on the physical location of an agent (the people) compared to the elite/s. While this distance can be between an individual and the elite, we can also understand it as the distance between a community or a region and the elite. In other words, while we can interpret this distance as an individual component of populist potential, we contend that it can also be part of a more aggregated group feeling. Mainly, this latter observation suggests that populist potential will be stronger in sub-national territories located at the periphery and where estrangement and conflict between ‘the region’ and elites are largest.

Data, instrument and method

For this study, we combine two datasets. First, we use data from a cross-national web-based survey ($n = 18368$), conducted between June and August of 2015. The dataset includes samples ($n = \pm 2000$) from nine European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, UK) and 143 regions.⁴ Drawing from these, we calculate our indices of regional populist demand [cf. supra]. Furthermore, for our correlates, we also rely on Eurostat’s regional databases.⁵

Dependent variable

We use eight items that allow us to examine populism throughout all our regions (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$).⁶ The questions use Likert-scales, with the low end indicating an aversion to populism and the higher end a

⁴For each country, demographic quotas were set before fieldwork in order to obtain nationally representative samples. YouGov initially fielded panel samples for the UK, Germany, France and Sweden, with the remaining countries (Poland, Italy, Spain, Greece, Switzerland) being fielded shortly after that by country-specific panel providers. For these nationally representative samples, YouGov draws a sub-sample of the panels that is representative in terms of age (adults), gender, social class and type of newspaper (upmarket, mid-market, red-top, no newspaper), and invites this sub-sample to complete a survey. For more detailed information regarding this *active sampling strategy*, we refer to Twyman (2008) and the YouGov website. For an overview of the regions by country, including the number of individuals per region, see Table A1 in the Online Appendix.

⁵We recode some of the regions since these are not fully identical between our datasets. Most notably, we reduce the number of regions in Sweden to a limited number of five broader regions. For this particular reason, we check the robustness of our results by excluding Sweden from all our analyses; yet, our results remain largely the same. For more information on the regional division, we refer to Table A1 in the Online Appendix.

⁶For the results of a general confirmatory factor analysis of our populist items, we refer to Table A3 in the Online Appendix. A measurement invariance test (equal means) suggests our populist items have a similar meaning across countries ($\text{Prob} > \chi^2 = 0.000$; $\text{RMSEA} = 0.087$; $\text{CFI} = 0.950$). A significant likelihood ratio test between the variant and invariant models returns a p -value < 0.001 and confirms that populism has the same model form in our nine countries under analysis. For country-by-country descriptive statistics, we refer to Table A5 in the Online Appendix. For a more detailed analysis of these eight items, using item response theory, see Van Hauwaert *et al.* (2018).

propensity towards populism.⁷ Drawing from these items, we take a two-fold analytical approach. First, we specify an aggregated populism index to reflect the variance in the sample by region, using averaged factor scores from a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).⁸ Second, we use these region-specific CFA estimates to examine these patterns of variance.

Correlates

We include both short- and long-term economic development indicators. We operationalise the former, using GDP per capita at current prices for each region and the latter by calculating the percentage of long-term unemployed as a share of the total working-age population.⁹ Concerning the degree of institutional and political autonomy of a region, we include several indicators originally developed by Hooghe *et al.* (2010) (cf. also Hooghe *et al.* 2016). Their Regional Authority Index (RAI) measures the degree of regional autonomy according to two main dimensions. On the one hand, self-rule indicators comprise measures of the strength and scope of regional administrative and political institutions, competencies, as well as fiscal and borrowing powers. On the other hand, shared rule indicators concern the extent to which a region participates in the national decision-making process via intergovernmental meetings and its impact on the federal legislation, revenues, borrowing constraints and constitutional change.

To measure regional identity, we include two territorial identity indicators, namely regional language and regional history (Fitjar 2010a, 2010b).¹⁰ The regional language index captures the importance and peculiarity of regional languages, i.e. whether there is an indigenous regional language that is different from the dominant language in the country. A historical sovereignty index measures the extent to which the territory possesses a history of independence and if the region has been part of the country since its formation.

Finally, we include two variables that indicate the periphery and remoteness of regions based on geographic criteria. The first indicator concerns the distance (in kilometres) between the regional capital and national

⁷For the exact wordings and descriptive statistics, see Table A2 in the Online Appendix.

⁸We recognise that CFA scores generally do not meet the aggregation criteria for necessary and sufficient conditions that constitute populism (cf. Wuttke *et al.* 2017). The set of items available to us, however, were not build to account for the multidimensionality that populism entails (e.g. Castanho Silva *et al.* 2018). Hence, we proceed here using the CFA scores.

⁹Long-term unemployment (more than 12 months unemployment) is preferred to the total unemployment figures as it better reflects the structural economic situation of the region and is not influenced by short-term conjuncture and seasonal fluctuations.

¹⁰The authors have collected scores for Poland, Switzerland and the UK regions.

capital. The second indicator involves the distance (in kilometres) between the regional capital and Brussels, the principal seat of the European Union. We utilise both as proxies for the distance between a regional population and their respective national and European elites.

In our models, we control for a series of covariates that, theoretically, are related to both our independent as well as our dependent variable. First, education is often considered a status marker and one of the core strata influenced by this are the lower educated (Stubager 2013). While some scholars see less or absence of (higher) education as an essential indicator of far right potential (Arzheimer 2009; Bornschier 2010), recent scholarship specifies this claim by arguing lower education is particularly indicative of populist potential (Bovens and Wille 2010; Elcharhus and Spruyt 2016). Thus, education levels are likely to be linked to the outcome variable. At the same time, it is easy to see how education levels may vary with economic situations (Hanushek and Woessmann 2012; Barro 2013) and core/periphery structures. Therefore, we include levels of education based on the percentage of the regional population between 25 and 64 years that reached tertiary education as a control.

Further, the growing populist potential and the widespread populist demand are often closely associated with the cultural threat posed by immigration (Golder 2003; Semyonov *et al.* 2006) and – to a lesser extent – to the economic challenges posed by immigration (March 2011). As immigration – and hence the size of a particular out-group – increases, it becomes easier to capture and mobilise the rejection (blame) of a particular elite, either from an economic or a nationalist rationale. Thus, immigration levels may be related to the outcome variable, but also core/periphery and economy variables. We account for immigration levels through the share of foreign-born residents in a given region.¹¹

Closely related to both immigration concentration and economic development is the crime rate (Rosenfeld and Messner 2009). At the same time, crime also relates to the populist demand, as it could account for varying dis/affection with politics and elites. Therefore we include the number of burglaries per capita for each region. Finally, we include region-specific variables and control for the size of the region (square kilometres) and

¹¹While our indicator (based on the proportion of the total population with a country of birth different from the current country of residence) does not take into account migrants from the second and third generations and considers national citizens born abroad as part of this share of population, we believe it to be a good proxy to assess the variation of immigrants in the structure of the regional population.

the regional population to account for the overall magnitude of the region.¹²

Method

To explore the relationship between our regional level variables and the regional expression of populist potential in our sample, we initially rely on more descriptive methods, but subsequently, we also fit a multivariate OLS model. We fit two different models, one excluding the controls and one including the controls.¹³ However, we should stress the explorative intentions of our models. Rather than looking to draw major inferential claims from our results, our goal is to detect potential relationships between regional factors and a changing populist demand that future studies can then explore in more detail and with more inferentially-oriented methods.

Empirical insights into the regional populist demand

As a first step, [Figure 1](#) shows the variance of populist demand in our sample between regions graphically. While we can observe a relatively pervasive populist demand in our sample, there is also considerable variation within each country.

[Figure 1](#) indicates that within-country distributions vary to a certain extent. On the one hand, regional populist demand in the UK, Sweden and Greece is narrowly distributed across our sample, while in other countries – and particularly Italy and Switzerland – the regional populist demand varies much more. What strikes as interesting here is the strong territorial cleavage structure of these two latter countries. If there is genuinely a close connection between regionalism and populism, it is entirely possible that a broader range amongst regional variables (such as the RAI) is also responsible for the regional dispersion in

¹²For descriptive statistics of all covariates, see Table A4 in the Online Appendix. For descriptive statistics of our dependent variable by country, see Table A5 in the Online Appendix.

¹³Because we only focus on the regional level, no hierarchical structure permit for more advanced modelling techniques. This is particularly the case because our data set only includes nine countries, thereby rendering multi-level modelling highly problematic (cf. Stegmueller 2013). However, we do take into account the possibility that there may be systematic country differences in our analyses by also fitting a model with country fixed effects (cf. Table A7 in the Online Appendix). Both models provide us with similar substantive results, thereby indicating the robustness of our results. To further test the robustness of our results, we also provide an analysis with individual-level correlates, using a fixed-effects model. In this model, we test how, on the individual level, respondents' populism demand varies by regional factors identified to relate to general populism demand. For the results of this model, we refer to Table A8 in the Online Appendix. Furthermore, we provide bootstrapped statistics (cf. Table A6 in the Online Appendix) from 1,000 randomly drawn samples to take into account potential outliers.

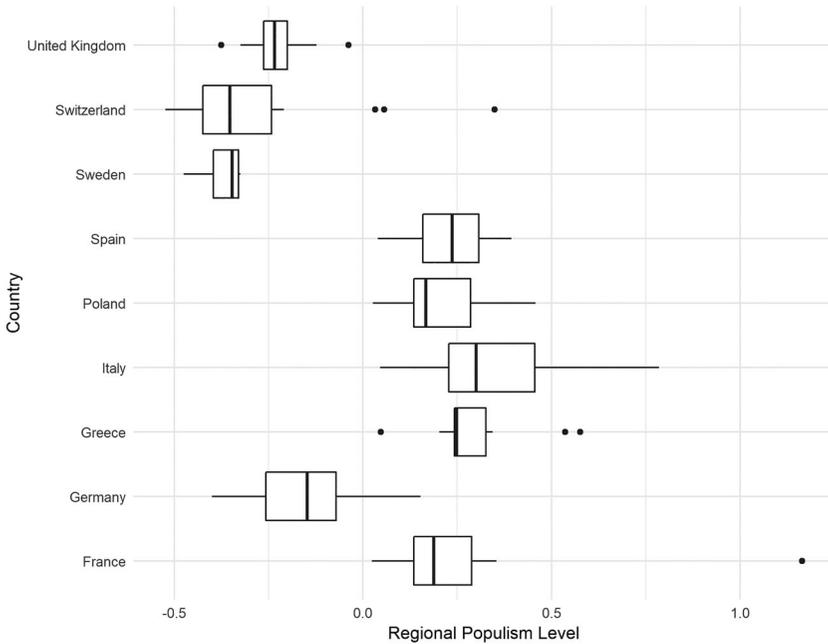


Figure 1. Distribution of populist demand by region and country.

populist potential in Italy (between North and South) and Switzerland (between Zurich, Bern and the more rural cantons). Altogether, this strengthens our rationale to investigate aggregate levels of populist demand, mainly to understand the overall patterns in the data that underlie this observation, as well as the nuances in how populist potential differs and spreads between regions.

We use these patterns of variance to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the regional populist demand and its correlates. In [Table 1](#), we present the results from our OLS models. Overall, these results align with some of our initial theorisations about some of the correlates of regional populist demand (models 1 and 2). In what follows, we briefly reflect upon our empirical results.

Considering economic development first, we find that higher levels of regional unemployment relate to higher levels of populist demand in our data. Also, higher levels of regional GDP/capita relate to lower levels of populist demand in the examined regions. Both findings match the theoretical expectation and indicate that fewer economic opportunities in a region, as well as what can perhaps be construed as economic decline, is associated with higher levels of regional populist demand.

Table 1. Factors related to regional populist demand.

	Dependent variable:	
	Populist Demand	
	(1)	(2)
Unemployment	0.023*** (0.006)	0.030*** (0.006)
Economy (GDP/capita)	-0.047*** (0.010)	-0.027* (0.014)
Selfrule	0.024*** (0.009)	0.0003 (0.011)
Sharedrule	-0.027*** (0.006)	-0.022*** (0.007)
Distance – Capital	0.0003*** (0.0001)	0.0002** (0.0001)
Distance – Brussels	-0.0001* (0.0001)	-0.0001* (0.0001)
Identity (Language)	0.062*** (0.022)	0.070*** (0.022)
Identity (Sovereignty)	0.011 (0.027)	0.034 (0.028)
Education		-0.008*** (0.003)
Share of Foreigners		0.005 (0.005)
Region Size		-0.00000 (0.00000)
Population		-0.000 (0.000)
Burglary/capita		-0.003** (0.001)
Constant	-0.123 (0.085)	0.362** (0.163)
Observations	143	143
R ²	0.556	0.604
Adjusted R ²	0.530	0.564
Residual Std. Error	0.207 (df = 134)	0.199 (df = 129)
F Statistic	20.977*** (df = 8; 134)	15.123*** (df = 13; 129)

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Note: Standard Errors in Parentheses; Results come from OLS Regression Models – model 1 without controls. For bootstrapped statistics for model 2, see Table A.6.

Regarding regional autonomy, we expected higher levels of autonomy to be related to higher levels of populist demand. From model 1, we observe that the degree of institutional autonomy of a region is related to levels of demand-side populism: High levels of self-rule (i.e. strong institutions competencies and fiscal powers) relate to greater populist demand. In contrast, however, shared rule (i.e. the extent to which a region participates in the national decision-making process) is significant and negatively related to regional populism. We can interpret this as a region-based counterweight to the dominance of the elite and the establishment. Via shared-rule mechanisms, citizens may perceive they have a direct say in the national political arena. We note

that in model 2, the indicator for the degree of institutional autonomy (self-rule) appears to be no longer related to regional populist demand in the sample when taking into account other correlates.

In general, the rejection of the elites, regardless of their form and composition, is a crucial component of populism. Since the most typical embodiments of those elites are the national political class and the EU, we expected that regions further away from their country capital or Brussels should display higher levels of populist demand. Our results in [Table 1](#) indicate this holds for both distances to the national and European capitals, as both are associated with higher regional levels of populism. The further a region is located from the national or European capital, the higher its populist potential in our data. Given how we theorised these distances to indicate a certain disconnect to domestic (European) politics and national (European) elites, we thus argue that as this proposed gap between people and elites increases, quite unsurprisingly, regional levels of populism also increase.

Finally, we also expected that culturally distinct regions would be more prone to be associated with higher levels of populist demand. The results in [Table 1](#) remain somewhat ambiguous regarding this expectation. A region with a clear regional language displays higher levels of regional populism. This is in line with our initial expectation that the feeling of being distant from, and dominated by, national elite reinforces the case of different languages at the regional and national levels. In contrast, regional history does not appear to be meaningfully related to populist demand on the regional level. We would suggest this is the case because history draws from a (very) long-term cultural identity. Thus, it is probably less appealing than more particular distinctive cultural elements, such as the regional language.

Lastly, we briefly look at some of the additional correlates we included in our second model. Here, we observe that only the level of education relates meaningfully to our regional-level operationalisation of the populist demand. Such an observation does not surprise us, given that initial studies demonstrate that populism is typically a phenomenon most prominent amongst lower educated layers of the population (cf. Elchardus and Spruyt 2016). Moreover, thus far education is one of the few predictors of populism scholars can find agreement on, and our analysis mainly supports such academic convergence. Additionally, while most scholars agree on its individual-level value, we further confirm its more aggregate value as well. Overall, we conclude that lower levels of education are associated with higher levels of populism, which indicates that regions

where levels of tertiary education are lower (e.g. rural regions), there is typically more populist potential. This also means that, despite having both indicators for education and economic inequalities in our analysis (two concepts that are often in concert with one another), we still find significant and independent effects on regional levels of populism. All other controls are statistically insignificant.¹⁴

Discussion and conclusion

Most academic research focuses on the supply-side analysis of populism (parties, movements, leaders, governments, democracy, etc.). While some recent studies do engage in complementary analyses of the demand-side of populism, they primarily focus on individual-level mechanisms and measurement. Whereas most of these studies draw from the individual level to argue that populism is typically pervasive and shows elevated levels across (advanced) democracies, we shift our focus to an aggregate level analysis and set out to examine to what extent we can observe potential patterns of variance in populist potential both within and between countries across Europe. This kind of aggregate but exploratory study of demand-side populism and its intricate patterns of variance is unique and new to the field. We draw from some of the initial theorisations that discuss broader patterns of populism to examine and provide a first exploratory account of how and why the populist demand may vary across European regions and which factors are most typically related to such patterns of variance.

The general conclusion from our empirical analyses is that the aggregate populist demand (measured as a regional phenomenon) is relatively stable across regions in the data used here. While we do find some preliminary indications of similarities and differences in populist potential between and within countries, the broader range of populist potential remains relatively limited, with few to no outliers. At the same time, however, we observed enough variation between regions in our sample to wonder how populist potential relates to other variables or phenomena. An initial OLS model provides some preliminary evidence that populism has some unique regional-level correlates that we can observe across European regions and countries. Our findings also suggest that traditional correlates of populism are very much at play on the regional level. Specifically,

¹⁴Since some studies indicate that immigration is only associated to (right-wing) populism in the case of economic hardship (e.g. [Arzheimer 2009](#); [Golder 2003](#)), we also tested for the interaction between immigration and economic indicators, but substantive results remained identical.

both long- and short-term proxies of economic development indicate that a deteriorating economic environment is favourable for a region's populist potential. We also find that when regional identities are stronger and more outspoken, the populist potential is more likely to be high. In line with this, we also find evidence that when regions are located further away from both national and European capitals, a populist potential is more elevated.

In sum, the analyses we provided throughout this study should receive proper consideration upon interpretation. The resulting arguments and findings are the first step towards a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the aggregate populist demand and its explanatory mechanisms. This study is the first of that kind and seeks to open up new avenues of research into this unexplored puzzle. For example, we can speak to the fact that many populist parties draw from specific regions for their support (e.g. Lega Nord in Northern Italy, Vlaams Belang in Antwerp, Die Linke in Eastern Germany, etc.). Future research that elaborates on the relationship between aggregate populist potential and different expressions of political participation may thus consider that due to an essential regional component of the populist demand, it may play a greater role in some regions as opposed to others. Furthermore, subsequent studies may test the extent to which the regional-level variables that we identified as correlates of regional populist demand also shape individual-level interpretations of the populism demand, i.e. populist attitudes. In other words, future research should examine to what extent the regional context also matters for the individual level of populist demand.

The results of our study bear implications for (i) those who examine the causes of populism and its potential on the individual level, and (ii) those who consider populism to be a contributor of political behaviour, particularly in the form of voting or general political participation. To explain the observed variation, we drew on existing arguments for the national level from the populism literature (economic development), as well as new explanations from regional studies (e.g. regional identity). While we can provide some general insights into the empirical puzzle of populism, our study clearly shows some essential avenues for more in-depth analysis. Most importantly, our notion of geographical distance proved to be an important one, but it leaves unstudied other interpretations of 'distance', like cultural, symbolic and education and socio-economic. Perhaps more generally, seeing how we can highlight some explanatory mechanisms, we believe it is essential to increase our attention to the regional level of

analysis, especially since we shift our future attention to the value of political mechanisms (e.g. cleavages) that might underlie populism.

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Notes on contributors

Steven M. Van Hauwaert (vanhauwaert@politik.uni-mainz.de) is the principal investigator of the Global Public Opinions Project (GPOP). His primary research interests are in the fields of comparative political behaviour and public opinion, as well as populism and political extremism. His most recent academic contributions have appeared in *Acta Politica*, *Comparative European Politics*, *Electoral Studies*, the *European Journal of Political Research*, *European Societies* and the *Journal of European Integration*. He is also an associate editor of the ECPR journal *Political Research Exchange* (PRX).

Christian H. Schimpf (Christian.Schimpf@gesis.org) is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences (University of Mannheim). He is also a data processing specialist with the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) Secretariat at the GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Mannheim. His research interests include comparative political behaviour, populism, and public opinion. His research has been published, among others, in *Political Studies* and *Local Government Studies*.

Régis Dandoy (Regis.Dandoy@UGent.be) is a researcher at the Center for Local Politics at the Ghent University and at the Waseda Institute for Advanced Studies at the Waseda University and guest professor at the FLACSO-Ecuador. His main research interests deal with Belgian politics, comparative federalism, local and regional elections, e-voting and party manifestos.

ORCID

Steven M. Van Hauwaert  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4758-4213>

Christian H. Schimpf  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4049-7758>

Régis Dandoy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3593-0024>

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