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## Is the populist Robin Hood a fairy tale? Parliamentary attention to social welfare

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### ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, populist parties rose to prominence across Europe, campaigning on the promise to do something about growing economic inequality by funding social welfare programs. We investigate if the pro-welfare reputation of European populist parties, either on the left or the right, is well deserved. We draw on a dataset of questions asked by members of parliament from nine European democracies over three decades. We want to know if members of populist parties spend more of their question time asking about social welfare than members of mainstream parties. Empirical analyses reveal no meaningful difference: populist parties ask about welfare but do not devote a larger share of their questions to the topic than non-populist parties, and rising economic inequality does nothing to change this dynamic. If anything, populist parties ask about welfare less. Our results suggest that populists talk the talk but – once elected – do not walk the walk.

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In the last decades, populist parties across Europe went from the margins of the political and party systems to the mainstream, especially in their radical right form (Akkerman et al., 2016; Bale & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021).<sup>1</sup> Populist parties are present in virtually every Parliament across the continent, including the European Parliament, and currently occupy positions of power in countries such as Austria, Hungary, Italy, and the Netherlands, to name just a few. There are many reasons behind this growth, from the change in personal values (Ignazi, 1992) to democratic dissatisfaction (Kitschelt, 2002), collective memory (Manucci, 2020) and the credibility of populist actors (van Kessel, 2013), with both the media and the established parties playing a crucial role

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(de Jonge, 2021; Heinze, 2022). Here, we address a specific aspect of why populist parties became so appealing to the electorates of most European countries: their focus on welfare issues in the aftermath of the Great Recession.

We focus on social welfare – all those policies designed to provide a safety net for vulnerable populations (e.g., transfers to individuals and families who are below a certain income level, food security and social services) – because it concerns the redistribution of resources between societal groups, thus tapping into the populist dichotomy of the ‘virtuous people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite’ (Bergman, 2022). In their rhetoric, welfare serves therefore as a battleground where the interests of the underprivileged majority clash against the exploitative practices of the disconnected elite. Other related topics such as housing or labour market policy could be explored too, but they do not map as cleanly onto the ‘people vs. elite’ Manichean and moral division of populism (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016; Waldron, 2021). Moreover, populists frequently link welfare eligibility to a symbolic dimension of politics that includes notions of national belonging and morality while debates about housing or employment do not necessarily feed on this symbolic and identity dimension. Hence, a combination of material and symbolic dimensions makes welfare a fertile ground for studying the dynamics of populist rhetoric and ideology (Ketola & Nordensvard, 2018).

We postulate that one of the reasons behind the electoral success of populist parties, both right – and left-wing, is their *Robin Hood Effect*: fighting for the rights and welfare of the common people and those impoverished by the crisis in opposition to ‘greedy, rich, unaccountable elites’ who impose austerity and cut benefits for those in need. We connect several strands of literature, including populism, agenda setting, and representation, analysing how often populist and non-populist parties discuss issues related to welfare in parliament in nine European countries from the 1990s to the 2020s and thus offering a new perspective on how populism can thrive in times of crisis.

The link between populism and crises was already considered by some classic works on the topic (Laclau, 1977; Taggart, 2000), and it has been the object of renewed interest in recent years (Moffitt, 2015; Pirro & Van Kessel, 2017; Roberts, 2015; Rooduijn, 2014). Crises provide a window of opportunity for parties outside of power to gain traction by focusing on the failures of mainstream parties. Specifically, the economic crisis that affected the entire world in 2007–2008 and that in Europe continued until the mid-2010s as a debt crisis, brought to the surface discontent, anger, and disillusion that, in turn, produced a crisis of representation that fuelled populism (Froio & Little, 2016; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Magalhães, 2014; Pontusson & Weisstaner, 2018; Ramiro & Gomez, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

We know, for example, that during or immediately after recessions countries are more likely to give power to populist parties: the deeper the recession, the more likely it is that populists will gain political support and

possibly assume power (Stankov, 2017). The Great Recession, for example, created a large mass of unemployed workers while austerity fuelled a sense of discontent among voters, particularly in countries deeply affected by austerity measures (Stavrakakis et al., 2018; Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017). The rise of inequality has therefore undermined the sense of fairness, providing fertile grounds for anti-establishment parties. Populists were particularly able to exploit citizens' discontent, giving a voice to the groups suffering most from the recession and who felt that nobody was representing them (Hernández & Kriesi, 2016; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016).

As soon as the economic crisis started to fade away, another emergency shook Europe: the so-called '*migrant crisis*'. In 2015 and 2016 many countries actively sought to restrict migration and migrants' social rights after the peak of the arrival of asylum seekers, offering to populist parties popular grievances to mobilise (Campani, 2018; Harris & Römer, 2023; Krzyżanowski, 2018). After years of austerity measures, the migration flows were perceived as a factor contributing to worsening the job prospects of the incumbent workers. The global financial crash, in combination with the so-called '*migrant crisis*', offered unprecedented opportunities for populist parties to frame the situation through their preferred lenses: a moral battle between the pure people and the corrupt elites.

In this context, Europe witnessed the perfect storm for the breakthrough of populist parties (Pappas & Kriesi, 2015; Pirro & Van Kessel, 2017), boosting the electoral performance of populist parties as well as their influence on the public agenda (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In such a semi-permanent crisis, populism emerged as a winning option. Both left-wing and right-wing populist parties, in specific ways that are presented in the next section, offered to citizens worried about the progressive loss of socio-economic status a potential solution to their problems in the form of welfare (Eick, 2024).

Indeed, when a deep economic crisis was followed by (what was presented as) an '*invasion*' of people fleeing Syria and sub-Saharan countries, populist parties gained prominence by promising to reduce inequalities, tackle poverty, and help the citizens in need. As it already happened during and after the Great Recession, it has emerged clearly that socio-economic crises help get populist parties elected because they (re)politicise welfare issues. Therefore, populists benefited by talking the welfare talk. But did they walk the walk? In other words: did they follow through on that appeal with meaningful policy action? Did they devote more attention to issues related to welfare measures compared to non-populist parties?

To understand whether it is possible to consider populist parties as a modern Robin Hood, thus answering our research question, the remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we present the concept of welfare populism and how it is articulated by different types of populist parties. Then, we develop our hypotheses and present the original dataset

we created to test them. Next, we present the results of our analyses, showing that the European populist parties did not have a *Robin Hood Effect* either before or after the Great Recession. In the conclusions, we discuss the implications and limitations of our findings, proposing new lines of research.

## Welfare populism and the Robin Hood Effect

As Elmer Eric Schattschneider famously stated, ‘the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent’ (1960, 35). Decades later, the literature confirms that political parties and governments in advanced industrialised countries do tend to cater to the interests of the rich (Giger et al., 2012) while, by and large, failing to incorporate the voice of poor citizens (Lijphart, 1997). We have reasons to believe that populist actors are particularly suitable, because of their claim to represent the *vox populi*, to champion the interests of the poor during an economic crisis triggered by national international economic elites. Therefore, we ask whether populist parties can produce a *Robin Hood Effect* by bringing new emphasis to issues related to the welfare of the poor into the political debate. If they do so, populist parties can be considered a corrective to liberal democracy in terms of political representation (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012).

We expect populists to devote more attention to welfare issues compared to mainstream parties because this emphasis allows them to reinforce their core message of directly serving ‘the people’, while simultaneously critiquing the elite as indifferent or complicit in perpetuating inequality. Established parties, on the other hand, often face the challenge of balancing competing interests, including those of affluent voters or business constituencies, which can dilute their focus on welfare redistribution (Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016). Furthermore, they are constrained by traditional policymaking frameworks and institutional norms to a greater degree than populist parties, which often challenge the existing political order (Kriesi 2014). Finally, they typically prioritise pragmatic governance over symbolic rhetoric (Sorensen, 2021), which may lead them to focus less on the polarising narratives often associated with welfare debates.

There are three main reasons why the under-representation of the poor could be balanced by populist actors. First, poor people tend to abstain from voting (Kasara & Suryanarayan, 2015): lack of material and cognitive resources, knowledge, time, and interest are factors associated with a lower turnout among the poor (Downs, 1957). This, in turn, reduces the incentives for elites to consider their points of view in policy-making (Verba, 2004). We know that populist attitudes are positively related to non-institutionalized modes of participation and even reverse income-based inequalities in political participation (Anduiza et al., 2019). Second, MPs are aligned with the rich because they share a similar background (Butler, 2014). Class influences how

the MPs behave during the pre-voting stages of the legislative process (Carnes & Lupu, 2015): the richer they are, the less the MPs support redistribution, leaving the less affluent underrepresented (Lloren et al., 2015). Regardless of their wealth, populist MPs tend to present themselves as down-to-earth and claim to speak on behalf of the common people (Müller, 2016; Rooduijn, 2014).

Here, we focus on the third reason: the poor are disadvantaged already in the agenda-setting state of representation because governments seldom address their problems (Bartels, 2008; Epp & Borghetto, 2021; Gilens, 2012). Since low-income citizens are virtually ignored in the policymaking process, political equality is compromised (Rigby & Wright, 2013). Indeed, governments and parliaments tend to adopt more laws on issues that a higher share of wealthy people find important, thus being particularly responsive to the rich (Traber et al., 2019). We aim to establish whether populist parties can increase the salience of welfare in parliamentary debates, thus offsetting the lack of attention to those most in need.

Assistance to the poor is a broad policy goal that can be achieved through a variety of welfare measures. They include (but are not limited to) poverty assistance programs for low-income families, food assistance programs, elderly assistance, pensions, housing for low-income families and homeless people, education for underprivileged students, and retraining for displaced workers. Populism offers its own (moral) interpretation of welfare because it (re)politicises the debate about who the members of the demos are, thus identifying who the 'deserving people' are (Greve, 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2021). It is therefore possible to expect populism to increase the salience of welfare, especially during and after a period of crisis. Indeed, welfare populism understands social provisions within an inherent antagonism between 'the people' and the establishment (Abts et al., 2021), opposing welfare policies that do not benefit the 'common people' (Eick & Leruth, 2024) while blaming established political elites for creating inefficient welfare states because of lengthy and complex administrative processes that make it harder for those living in poverty to access benefits and services provided by the state.

Populist parties are uniquely positioned to amplify welfare issues during economic crises. The main reason is that economic crises widen the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots', thus providing fertile ground for a populist rhetoric based on a narrative of systemic failure and elite culpability (Funke et al., 2016). This offers a perfect opportunity to populist parties, who can portray themselves as champions of those most affected by the crisis (Gozgor, 2022). Mainstream parties, by contrast, may adopt a more cautious approach because of their institutional responsibilities (e.g., fiscal stability or macroeconomic concerns) and opt for a more technocratic approach (McManus, 2022). Another factor to consider is that established parties often lack the flexibility or ideological space (consider, among other factors,

international norms, markets, and alliances) to employ the emotionally charged rhetoric that populists use to address welfare during economic downturns. Moreover, mainstream parties are typically more constrained by international norms, markets, and alliances, which can make expansive welfare commitments less feasible during crises (Fernández-I-Marín et al., 2024). Finally, populist parties emerge in the wake of troubled representative democracy and gain strength when mainstream parties neglect salient issues (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012) and given the success of populist parties after the Great Recession there are good reasons to believe that part of their success is their ability to fill the void left by established parties (Passari, 2020).

If populist parties truly increase the salience of welfare-related topics, it is possible to claim that they balance the bias described by Schattschneider. By producing what we call the *Robin Hood effect*, populist parties would soften 'the upper-class accent' that dominates parliaments, thus increasing responsiveness. The *Robin Hood Effect* alone—even without tangible results in terms of legislation—would produce a better representation of the interests of the poor by bringing their voices and needs into the law-making process. In this sense, populism would constitute a corrective for liberal democracy regardless of the legislation ultimately approved.<sup>3</sup>

The existence of a populist *Robin Hood Effect* would represent a key corrective for liberal democracy and deserves to be studied because of three interconnected benefits to democratic representation it would entail.

- (1) By mobilising voter groups that feel excluded from the representation process and do not participate, populist parties would make use of agenda-setting tools in parliament to address issues linked to their welfare. In turn, this might lead also established parties to increase the attention dedicated to these issues in their political agenda (Scantamburlo, 2019).
- (2) Given their anti-elitist component, populist parties could use the parliament to amplify citizens' objections to specific elite-led decisions such as austerity measures, thus increasing the responsiveness of the political system (Otjes & Louwerse, 2021).
- (3) By bringing the voice of the poor into the legislative assembly, populist parties might increase substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967), contributing to creating a responsive political decision-making process reflecting a wider range of interests and preferences within the electorate.

Overall, the presence of a *Robin Hood Effect* driven by the agenda-setting efforts of populist parties has the potential to balance, or at least partially reduce, any representational bias in favour of more affluent members of society. Next, we will see how different types of populist parties produce different approaches to welfare issues.

## Varieties of populism and welfare

Welfare populism aims to redistribute economic and other resources to reduce inequalities within the population in favour of the poorest people and those most in need. What changes substantially across different populist manifestations, however, is how ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ are defined, which varies according to the full ideology attached to the (thin) populist one. The relevant literature divides populism into inclusionary and exclusionary, roughly corresponding to Latin American left-wing populism and European right-wing populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Similarly, the populist approach to welfare can be defined as inclusionary when universal, or exclusionary when based on chauvinism.

Inclusionary populism emphasises certain characteristics of the ‘pure people’, such as ‘forgotten’ regions or the precarious situation of the youth in the job market. The ‘corrupt elite’ is generally considered a tiny minority that is very rich and has enough power to control the political system, financial elites evading taxes, or established parties going against the interests of the people (Rovira Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2021). Overall, inclusionary populism promotes generous and universal social protection for the people and claims that the elite should pay its fair share.

For example, both SYRIZA and Podemos have been part of national government cabinets with the mandate to alleviate the consequences of austerity for those most in need during and after the Great Recession (Bortun, 2023). For Podemos, the welfare state is ‘the central axis’ of the party’s patriotism: hospitals, schools, welfare policies, and the social protection provided by the State become the material expression of the *patria* (Custodi, 2023). Therefore, for Podemos real patriotism is that of workers fighting to make ends meet, while false patriotism is that of rich people with bank accounts in tax havens. Accordingly, once in power, Podemos has fought to invest in health care and to expand the minimum income.

Exclusionary populism, on the other hand, denies specific groups access to state resources such as public sector jobs or welfare provisions. Hence, this pro-welfare position is mostly declined in a chauvinistic way (Akkerman et al., 2016; Mewes & Mau, 2012; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). According to this view, immigrants are depicted as ‘lazy parasites’ living on state subsidies, and access to welfare should be restricted to the ‘deserving’ natives (Greve, 2019; Rydgren, 2008) while foreigners should have limited or even no access to domestic social security benefits (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2018; Pellegata & Visconti, 2020). Right-wing populist parties nowadays often portray themselves as the true defenders of the working class, meaning primarily white men working in traditional industries (Greilinger & Mudde, 2024). In this optic, welfare benefits and services should go only to natives (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2018) while asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees are considered

'welfare tourists', people who allegedly come to steal benefits from the natives.

For example, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) has often pledged to improve the conditions for impoverished workers. Then, when the party was part of the Kurz administration (2017-2019), the government increased the minimum pension to 1200 euros per month. The policy was promoted by vice-chancellor Strache, FPÖ's chairman at the time, and was one of FPÖ's main demands for joining the coalition with ÖVP (Chueri, 2022). This shows how right-wing populist parties are equally interested in being perceived as a modern Robin Hood on the side of the workers while excluding 'undeserving others' from welfare measures in a chauvinistic way (Rathgeb, 2021).

Finally, beyond the inclusionary/exclusionary dichotomy, we also have valence populism, characterising parties that are 'purely' populist with no full ideology attached to it, with a strong emphasis on valence issues (Zulianello & Larsen, 2021). For example, the Five Star Movement (M5S) is a valence populist party, and it has been very active on issues linked to poverty and redistribution. The *Reddito di Cittadinanza* was a minimum income scheme introduced by the first cabinet headed by Giuseppe Conte, M5S's leader, in 2019. It provided a monetary benefit targeted to poor households and it was conditional on participation in job-search activities. At that time, Conte was the head of government of a coalition with the centre-left Democratic Party, and the *Reddito di Cittadinanza* was the flagship reform of the M5S (Giuliani, 2024). This has been the M5S's way of presenting itself as a pro-social and pro-working-class party committed to an essentially leftist agenda, managing to reduce poverty.

## Hypotheses

Before formulating our hypotheses, it is important to stress the role of populism per se, beyond the full ideology attached to it. Populism is in itself a thin ideology that is supposed to represent the interests of the people (Stanley, 2008) regardless of the thick or full ideology to which it is empirically combined (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). As mentioned in the previous section, every type of populist party pushes for some sort of welfare measure. For example, valence populist parties embody the 'purely' populist spirit of fighting injustices on behalf of the common people, as explained above, illustrating the example of M5S in Italy.

The role of left-wing populism is equally straightforward: left-wing populist actors can be expected to defend the interests of the poor against rich economic and political elites, fighting socioeconomic inequality and promoting more redistributive models (Gomez et al., 2016), thus making welfare more salient in the public debate. Left-wing populist parties' social policies are generally based on defending the national welfare state (March, 2007) and their

window of opportunity has increased once social democratic governments have often supported some amount of welfare state retrenchment (March & Rommerskirchen, 2015). Moreover, we know that if voters with leftist values perceive that the welfare state is performing much more poorly than their expectations when non-populist left-wing parties are in power, they are likely to turn to left-wing populist parties (Saxonberg et al., 2024).

The idea that right-wing populist parties would also increase the salience of welfare compared to non-populist right-wing parties might seem counter-intuitive because in the 1980s and 1990s European right-wing populist parties were mainly anti-welfare (Kitschelt, 1995) to the point that they were portrayed as the primary defenders of capital as opposed to welfare spending (Huber & Stephens, 2001). In the 1990s, electorally successful right-wing populist parties were considered to be following a 'winning formula' consisting of an authoritarian and nationalistic appeal coupled with a neoliberal pro-market position on socio-economic issues (Betz, 1994; Kitschelt, 1995). Quite the opposite of a political force that one would expect to produce a Robin Hood effect.

The winning formula thesis has, however, attracted considerable criticism, and has been largely revised. Following a process of 'proletarianisation' (De Lange, 2007; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018), the working class has become the core clientele of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe (Bornschieer, 2010; Oesch, 2008). Over time, right-wing populist parties became largely pro-welfare and moved to the left on the socio-economic dimension (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2016; Rovny & Polk, 2020; Röth et al., 2018; Zaslove, 2009), placing more emphasis on welfare issues in an attempt to attract economically left-leaning voters (Arzheimer, 2012; Bale et al., 2010).

As a result, right-wing populist parties have become strong competitors for working-class votes in many European countries (Arzheimer, 2012; Oesch, 2008). Embracing a pro-welfare stance, even though in chauvinistic terms, constitutes a winning approach for right-wing populist parties today: it allows them to mobilise a coalition of interests between voters with cultural grievances over immigration and voters with economic grievances over immigration (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020). This shift has been accompanied by an increase in the salience of the distributive issue in their platforms (Afonso & Rennwald, 2018), challenging the notion that they emphasise cultural issues while obscuring their distributive preferences (Rovny, 2013). Therefore, considering that every type of populist party is supposed to increase the salience of welfare, we hypothesise that:

**H1:** Populist parties devote a greater proportion of their attention to poverty assistance than non-populist parties.

It may also be the case that populist parties decide to focus on issues related to welfare in the aftermath of crises (as discussed above). Indeed, since the Great Recession and the following 'migrant crisis', debates around migration

and the national welfare state have been increasingly politicised, and the welfare state itself has started to become a new political cleavage as a result (Eick, 2024). In other words, we might expect the Great Recession (2007) to be a watershed moment, after which populist parties produce an even stronger *Robin Hood Effect* than before. Notably, many see the established parties as having done little to address citizen concerns about welfare measures and devoting too little attention to the topic (Bartels, 2008; e.g., Gilens, 2012; Lupu & Warner, 2022), so there seems to be an opening for populist parties. If in 'normal' times, populist parties can be expected to devote more attention to welfare issues than non-populist parties, the *Robin Hood Effect* should be much stronger during and after periods of crisis.<sup>4</sup> We therefore hypothesise that:

**H2:** Situations of economic crisis amplify the attention populist parties pay to social welfare.

One final important factor to analyse is whether populist parties enter government positions. Existing research reveals that, when in office, they tend to tone down their populism (Rooduijn et al., 2014) and strategically 'mainstream' some of their positions (Paxton & Peace, 2021). This originates, in part, from having to govern in coalitions. For instance, when they are in coalitions with centre-right parties, they often encounter constraints on expanding welfare policies due to differing priorities, which can lead to potential conflicts over welfare expansion versus retrenchment (Fischer & Giuliani, 2023). While empirical evidence on the effects of being in power on left-wing populist parties' issue salience is scarce, existing research indicates that right-wing populists often allow their partners to manage socio-economic matters, focusing instead on issues that they deem more important, such as immigration control or law and order (Afonso, 2015). This is not surprising, considering that only Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece have joined governments thus far, and that most of the literature centres on right-wing populism. However, we argue that, once constrained by traditional policymaking frameworks and institutional norms, left-wing parties may also reduce their attention towards their electoral promises regarding welfare measures. Overall, we advance the hypothesis that:

**H3:** Membership in the governing coalition will make populist parties less likely to ask about social welfare.

## Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we use a combination of different data sources measuring the parliamentary activities of political parties and socioeconomic conditions across Europe. Our dependent variable measures the share of total questions asked by a party during a cabinet on the topic of social welfare. We

focus specifically on oral parliamentary questions addressed to high-level ministers or the prime minister, which further strengthens their use as a proxy for party issue attention. These questions, often posed during high-profile sessions, are not only directed at key decision-makers but are also frequently televised, increasing their visibility to a wider audience (Salmond, 2014). Their public nature makes them a strategic tool for parties to signal their policy priorities and shape the political agenda (e.g., Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). Additionally, opposition parties often use oral questions to scrutinise the executive's performance or influence government policy (e.g., Seeberg, 2023). This centrality persists in the social media era: recent research shows that parties often introduce issues in parliamentary debates and subsequently reinforce them on social media (Poljak, 2025). Finally, we are confident in using this type of parliamentary tool because it has been shown that populist parties do not behave differently from other parties in their use of parliamentary questions (Cavaliere & Froio, 2022; Otjes & Louwse, 2021).

Our dataset is built using data collected and coded within the framework of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), an established research initiative aimed at tracking and comparing policy activity across different countries (Baumgartner et al., 2019). Trained human coders from various national teams classified each parliamentary question using the CAP coding system, which relies on a comprehensive codebook to categorise policy issues into 21 mutually exclusive categories, further divided into 213 subtopics. For this study, we focused on the 'Social Welfare' category, which includes topics such as low-income assistance (e.g., poverty alleviation programs, food assistance, and tax credits for low-income families), elderly assistance (e.g., pensions), disabled assistance (e.g., aid for people with physical or mental disabilities), volunteer associations (e.g., charities and youth organisations), and childcare (e.g., parental leave). This granular coding allows us to capture the detailed nature of party issue attention to social welfare policies during parliamentary debates.

The dataset on parliamentary questions spans nine European countries—Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, and Spain—covering a period from the mid-1990s to the early 2020s. This comprehensive dataset includes almost 90,000 coded parliamentary questions asked by 136 parties across 52 elections and 85 cabinets. It is one of the most complete datasets of its kind, offering a unique opportunity to test our hypotheses across diverse national contexts. By covering countries from Northern Europe (France, Germany, Belgium), Southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal), and Eastern and Central Europe (Hungary, Croatia), we can analyse variations in party behaviour and issue attention while controlling for different regional contexts, the (perceived) intensity of different crises, and manifestations of populism. [Table 1](#) summarises this data.

It is important to note two things about our data. First, it does not tell us about the nature of the attention given to welfare by any question (that is, whether a party wants to cut or increase assistance). So, a question urging the elimination of food stamps counts the same as one that supports more generous housing benefits. Of course, this is a limitation of CAP data, which considers only issue salience and not its ‘direction’. Coding for policy intent is difficult, as one must know how a given policy mechanism is meant to work and is therefore not feasible for thousands of parliamentary questions asked across time and space. However, as our goal is to capture rhetorical attention to poverty-focused issues, rather than concrete policy interventions (which could be more aptly measured by analysing legislation or budget allocations), the CAP data is a good fit. We also note that existing scholarship finds that the best strategy to oppose policies in favour of the poor is to not talk about them during question time or when a prime minister presents their executive agenda, thus trying to keep the issue off the political agenda (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Schattschneider, 1960). Indifference to an issue is one of the main ingredients for policy inaction.

Second, since our dependent variable is party attention devoted to social welfare issues during a cabinet mandate, we exclude questions from two types of parliamentary groups. First, we filter out parties that only marginally engaged in oral parliamentary questions, defined here as asking fewer than 10 questions during a cabinet mandate. Our dependent variable is a proportion, so including parties that ask only a small number of total questions can generate huge percentage values based on only 1 or 2 questions about welfare. This cutoff resulted in the exclusion of prominent parties like the French *Rassemblement National* which, despite being represented in at least four cabinets in our dataset, did not meet the engagement threshold in any of them.<sup>5</sup> Second, we excluded questions coming from MPs who are not affiliated with any specific party and typically sit in mixed groups.

**Table 1.** Available data.

Country	Elections	Cabinets	Parties	Questions	Start	End
Belgium	5	10	17	11085	1999	2019
Croatia	7	13	35	3928	2000	2022
Denmark	6	9	12	3617	1998	2017
France	5	11	12	15137	1997	2022
Germany	6	6	6	24686	1998	2021
Hungary	6	9	11	10268	1998	2022
Italy	6	15	25	5746	1996	2022
Portugal	4	4	7	2413	2005	2019
Spain	7	8	11	10663	1996	2022
Total	52	85	136	87543	1996	2022

Note: For citations of the various contributions that enabled the collection of this data and for more information on procedures used to ask parliamentary questions across different countries, please refer to [Table A1](#) in the appendix.

Our key independent variable is whether a party is populist. This classification is based on the list compiled by the PopuList project (Rooduijn et al. 2024). We made only one amendment to the list, as – based on previous literature – we consider two Portuguese parties, the Left Bloc and the Portuguese Communist Party as far-left populist parties (Carreira da Silva et al., 2022; Custodi, 2023; Lisi & Borghetto, 2018). If populist parties are present in all nine countries where we have data on parliamentary questions, their number of mandates and electoral weight vary extensively. For instance, while the Northern League has been consistently in Parliament since the mid-1990s, the Five Star Movement made its first electoral breakthrough only in 2013. Furthermore, always based on the PopuList classification, we distinguished populist parties that are positioned on the political left versus the right. Table A2 in the appendix reports all populist parties included in the dataset and their position on the ideological spectrum.

Finally, we include a measure of whether a party is in opposition or not, which is a binary variable taking the value of 1 if the party asking the question is a member of the governing cabinet. This and other control variables for seat share and duration of the cabinet – that reflect, respectively, the size of the party delegation in parliament and the duration of the cabinet (in days) – were drawn from the ParlGov database (Döring & Manow, 2024). Other contextual variables include country-level unemployment rates, GDP growth, and levels of economic inequality, each of which takes the annual average per cabinet for these measures (i.e., averaging across all the years a cabinet existed, or using data for just a single year if a cabinet dissolved rapidly). We see these as the most straightforward way to test the impact of negative external events (e.g., an economic crisis) on the attention paid to welfare by political parties.

Subsequent empirical analyses use a variety of regression specifications to predict the proportion of total questions asked by a party on the topic of social welfare. We use the proportion of total questions, rather than the number of questions, because we are interested in the relative priority given to welfare by different types of political party. Also, because the total number of questions a party can ask during question time is sometimes capped based on the number of seats they control in parliament. Our dataset – after compiling variables from all the sources discussed previously – is organised at the party-cabinet level, so that all the parties active during a given cabinet are represented as a row in the data frame. The proportion that we calculate as the dependent variable is based on all the questions a given party asked during a given cabinet. Altogether, we have 513 observations.

## Results

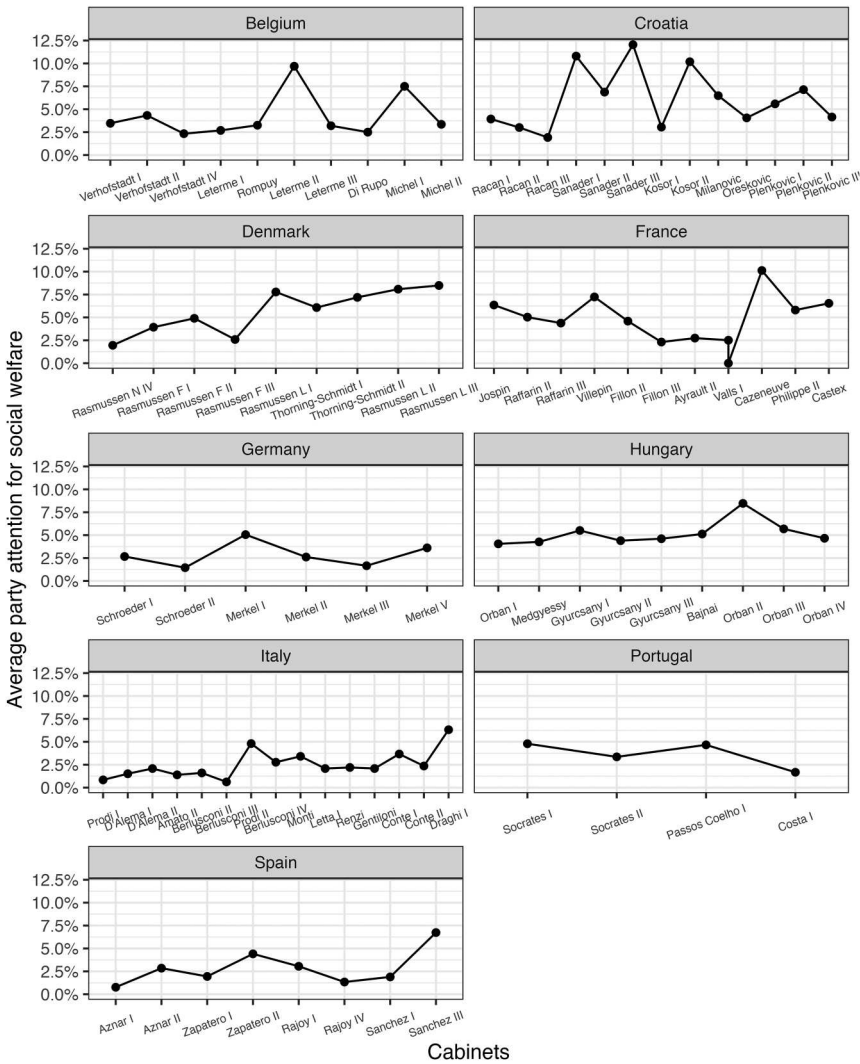
Before discussing our models, it is useful to visualise the time series of our dependent variable across the nine countries (see Figure 1). On average,

parties dedicate approximately 3% of their questions to social welfare. However, this attention varies significantly, with some parties neglecting it entirely while others allocate nearly a third of their time to it. Over time, attention to social welfare has increased in Denmark and, more marginally, in Italy while it has remained relatively stable in the remaining countries.

Table 2 shows the estimates of nine regression models testing Hypothesis 1. The first section of the table shows results from regressions that include all parties (i.e., the full dataset), the second section shows results from the same regression specifications after subsetting the data to include only left-wing parties, and the bottom section does the same thing for right-wing parties.<sup>6</sup> This allows us to see if populist parties behave differently than non-populist parties on average, and when making comparisons specific to the left and right.

Model 1 includes only one predictor: the variable for whether a party is classified as populist. This reveals that on average populist parties are 1.3 percentage points less likely to ask about welfare than non-populist parties, an effect size that is 27 percentage points of the standard deviation of the dependent variable.<sup>7</sup> Model 2 adds fixed effects for every cabinet, which should soak up any baseline differences between cabinets or countries (because cabinets are unique to countries) that might affect how often parties ask about welfare, including time-invariant particularities of the socio-economic conditions within countries. These fixed effects should also control for institutional differences in how question times are structured across countries. Notice that the adjusted  $R^2$  for this model is much larger than in Model 1. However, the coefficient for populist parties is largely unchanged and continues to indicate that populist parties dedicate proportionally less of their question time to welfare. Finally, we consider a kitchen sink approach that, rather than using cabinet fixed effects, includes controls for various cabinet and country-level economic conditions. These results are shown in Model 3 and make clear that our findings regarding populist parties are robust: they appear less likely to ask about welfare than their non-populist counterparts regardless of how we specify the model. Note that in this specification, we find that being a member of the governing coalition makes parties less likely to ask about social welfare, which is consistent with existing scholarship on the subject.

Subsequent sections of Table 2 report the results of Models 4 through 9, which re-estimate the first three models after subsetting the data to include only left – or right-wing parties. The variable for populist parties is always negative and only statistically meaningful in Model 8 that looks at right-wing parties while using cabinet-level fixed effects. This suggests that the differences between populist and non-populist parties are slight when it comes to asking about welfare, but, if anything, populist parties may do it relatively less. Overall, the results lend no support to Hypothesis 1.



**Figure 1.** Longitudinal variation of attention for social welfare across countries. Note: Figure 1 shows the average % of total questions asked about social welfare across parties by cabinet.

Next, we turn to test Hypothesis 2: that populist parties become activated on the issue of welfare by challenging economic conditions. As we have discussed, this possibility forms part of the conventional wisdom that explains the appeal of populist parties. To find out, we estimate a regression similar to Model 2 from Table 2 (in that it includes cabinet-level fixed effects) but interacting the variable for populist parties with the variable for economic inequality. If Hypothesis 2 is correct, then as inequality becomes more

**Table 2.** Regression coefficients characterising the effect of being a populist party on the likelihood of asking questions about social welfare in parliament.

	All Parties		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Populist	-1.33** (0.50)	-1.38** (0.51)	-1.30* (0.54)
Cabinet party	-	-	-1.20* (0.61)
Seat share	-	-	0.02 (0.01)
Cabinet duration	-	-	0.00 (0.00)
Unemployment	-	-	0.06 (0.11)
Gini index	-	-	0.36 (0.19)
GDP growth	-	-	0.06 (0.09)
Cabinet FEs	✗	✓	✗
Country FEs	✗	-	✓
N	513	513	502
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.011	0.135	0.073
<b>Left-wing Parties</b>			
	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Populist	-1.29 (0.87)	-0.28 (1.11)	-1.28 (0.98)
Cabinet party	-	-	-0.90 (0.92)
Seat share	-	-	0.02 (0.02)
Cabinet duration	-	-	0.00 (0.00)
Unemployment	-	-	-0.06 (0.14)
Gini index	-	-	0.59* (0.26)
GDP growth	-	-	0.03 (0.14)
Cabinet FEs	✗	✓	✗
Country FEs	✗	-	✓
N	295	295	288
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.004	0.096	0.062
<b>Right-wing Parties</b>			
	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Populist	-0.45 (0.54)	-1.41* (0.69)	-0.45 (0.59)
Cabinet party	-	-	-0.69 (0.79)
Seat share	-	-	0.03 (0.02)
Cabinet duration	-	-	-0.001* (0.000)
Unemployment	-	-	0.14 (0.15)
Gini index	-	-	0.47 (0.24)
GDP growth	-	-	0.19 (0.11)
Cabinet FEs	✗	✓	✗
Country FEs	✗	-	✓
N	147	147	144
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.000	0.149	0.175

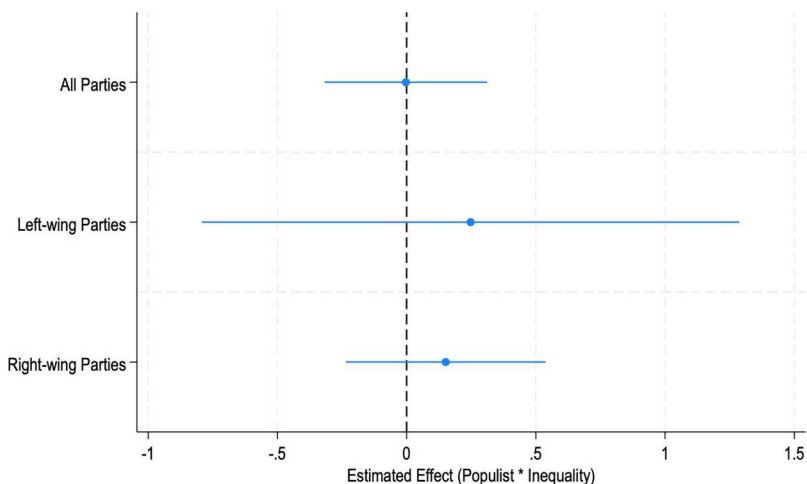
\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$  \*\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.001$ .

acute, populist parties should dedicate proportionally more attention to welfare relative to non-populist parties. As we did in [Table 2](#), we first estimate this model including all parties together, and then after subsetting the data

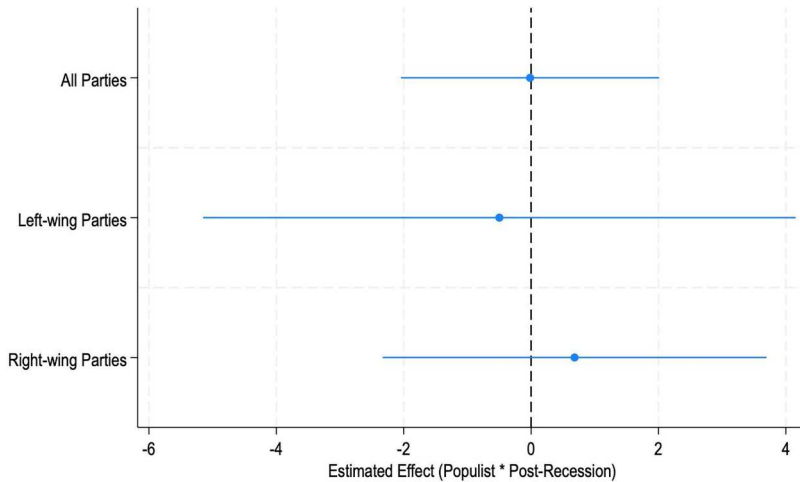
into left- and right-wing parties. **Figure 2** plots the coefficient estimates for the interaction term from all three models. For the first time, we find positive coefficients associated with the populist party variable, indicating that as inequality increases, populist parties dedicate more of their question time to welfare. But none of the coefficients approach statistical significance, so we have no confidence that the estimated effects are different from zero.

We take another approach to the same question, this time re-estimating the regressions when interacting populist parties with a step variable that is coded 1 in years after 2007 (and 0 otherwise). The idea is to capture a post-Great Recession period, which marked a major turning point in the economic fortunes of Western Europe and which many observers see as the start of the modern populist resurgence. Coefficients for the interaction terms are plotted in **Figure 3**, revealing, once again, that populist parties are not statistically different than non-populist parties even in the aftermath of economic crises.

Finally, we turn our attention to hypothesis 3, which posits that populist parties in government are less likely to talk about welfare than their counterparts in opposition. To test this hypothesis, we use an interaction between the variable capturing governing coalition membership and that of being a populist party within the same model specification. **Figure 4** presents coefficient plots for these regressions, revealing no statistical support for the



**Figure 2.** Regressions coefficients characterising the effect of the interaction between populist parties and economic inequality on the likelihood of asking questions about social welfare in parliament.. Note: Figure plots regression coefficients for the interaction between populist parties and economic inequality from three separate models predicting the proportion of total parliamentary questions about social welfare during a given cabinet.



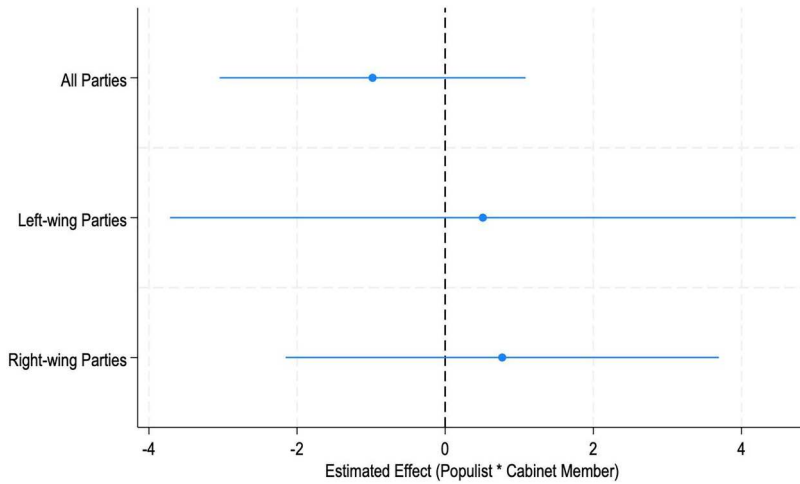
**Figure 3.** Regressions coefficients characterising the effect of the interaction between populist parties and post-Great Recession on the likelihood of asking questions about social welfare in parliament. Note: Figure plots regression coefficients for the interaction between populist parties and a step variable for post-Great Recession from three separate models predicting the proportion of total parliamentary questions about social welfare during a given cabinet.

hypothesis. Populist parties do not become less likely to talk about welfare when they enter a governing coalition.

In summary, we find no support for our hypotheses. Populist parties do not dedicate more of their question time to welfare than non-populist parties and this result is robust across a range of plausible model specifications, and when considering possible sources of heterogeneity such as economic crises or membership in governing coalitions. When it comes to social support for the poor, the populist parties of Western Europe may talk the talk but their follow through – when elected to government – is unremarkable relative to their non-populist counterparts.

## Robustness

We implement a variety of tests to probe the robustness of our null results. First, we look at the high number of 0% values in our dependent variable. Many parties do not ask a single question about welfare during a given cabinet. We therefore estimate two separate regressions that treat 0% as a threshold, first predicting the likelihood that populist parties ask 0% of their questions about welfare, and then sub-setting the data to include only values above 0% and re-estimating the model. These results can be found in [Table A3](#). Overall, populist parties are more likely than their non-populist counterparts to ask 0% of their questions about welfare. And the



**Figure 4.** Regressions coefficients characterising the effect of the interaction between populist parties and being a member of the governing coalition on the likelihood of asking questions about social welfare in parliament. Note: Figure plots regression coefficients for the interaction between populist parties and an indicator variable for membership in the governing coalition from three separate models predicting the proportion of total parliamentary questions about social welfare during a given cabinet.

model that includes only values above 0% in the dependent variable is substantively the same as the preceding results.

Next, we re-estimate the regression from Model 2 in Table 2 after iteratively excluding each country in our dataset to make sure that the null results are not being driven by data from any one country. Coefficients for the variable associated with populist parties can be found in Figure A1 in the appendix. For eight out of nine regressions, populist parties are still associated with a negative and statistically meaningful coefficient, but when Italy is excluded, the coefficient is no longer distinguishable from zero. However, even excluding Italy, there is no evidence to support the idea that populist parties are asking more questions about social welfare (hypothesis 1). We also estimate a model that excludes both Hungary and Croatia, so that our focus is exclusive to Western Europe. These results can be found in Table A4 and support our conclusions.

Next, we estimate models that use the total number of questions asked about welfare as the dependent variable rather than the percentage of total questions (see Table A5). These reveal that left-wing populist parties ask more questions on welfare than their non-populist counterparts on the left. On average, parties in our sample ask 160 questions during any given parliament, but left-wing populist parties ask an average of 322. So, they are much more interrogative in general, even though they do not spend proportionally any more time on welfare than non-populist parties. We re-

estimate the results of Model 3 from [Table 2](#) using an interaction term for left-right parties and populist parties rather than sub-setting the data by ideological direction. Results (see [Table A6](#)) are not substantively different from those presented above. Finally, we re-estimate our models after relaxing the 10-question threshold for inclusion in the data sample. Instead of dropping parties that asked fewer than 10 questions, we drop only parties that asked two questions (or less) during a given cabinet. Coefficient estimates are substantively the same (see [Table A7](#)).

## Conclusions

Europe has been in a semi-permanent crisis since 2007: the Great Recession evolved into a debt crisis, which was subsequently followed by the so-called ‘migrant crisis’, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, along with the ensuing inflation. Not to mention the elephant in the room: the long shadow of the climate crisis. If liberal democracy already speaks with an upper-class accent, this continued string of crises has done nothing but increase the already alarming levels of inequality (Milanovic, 2024). In this scenario, many voters believe that populist parties, with their common-sense and anti-establishment message that positions them on the side of the man in the street, can truly represent the *vox populi* and all those vulnerable people that a series of material and symbolic crises have made even poorer and angrier.

We sought to empirically test whether European populist parties in parliament can constitute a corrective to this situation thanks to what we have defined as *Robin Hood Effect*. The answer is no. Our analysis suggests that we cannot expect populist parties to increase the responsiveness of the political system by putting the issue of poverty assistance at the centre of the political debate: in this sense, populism does not seem to constitute a corrective for the purported flaws of liberal democracy. Contrary to our expectations, their level of attention to issues linked to welfare and poverty in parliamentary debates does not differ from that of other parties.

The growing success of populist parties in elections across Europe does not seem to be linked to a *Robin Hood Effect*. If populist actors talk the talk, promising generous welfare packages and reforms during the electoral campaign, they may forget about these pledges as soon as they enter the parliament where they have been elected. In other words, they do not walk the walk, and we know that the same happens in several fields, from corruption (Kostadinova, 2024) to referenda (Gherghina et al., 2024) and transitional justice (Dias et al., 2024). Once populists gain access to the halls of power, their inflammatory rhetoric in support of the vulnerable becomes more difficult to maintain.

Our study contributes to shed light on the representational role of populist parties in democratic systems as well as their agenda-setting role. Specifically, we offer two key political and theoretical contributions. First, our findings challenge the widespread assumption that populist parties act as a corrective to liberal democracy's biases and as force that represents the most marginalised groups. Second, we highlight the gap between the electoral promises of populist parties and their role within institutions, showing the limited impact populist parties have on redistributive issue. The political implication is clear: although reactivating welfare solidarity might be Europe's best chance to reconcile social cohesion and economic resilience (Greve, 2023), this is unlikely to be brought about by populist parties. Our findings support previous studies indicating that the economic agenda of right-wing populist parties is blurry (Rovny & Polk, 2020) or inconsistent (Otjes et al., 2018), while suggesting that this is the case also for left-wing populist parties. This suggests that if the most vulnerable citizens wish to vote for parties dedicated to safeguarding their interests, it may be wise to reconsider support for populist parties. Despite their anti-establishment rhetoric and their ability to exploit popular discontent to further exacerbate the crisis of representation, populist parties do not increase the saliency of welfare during the agenda-setting phase.

Of course, our study has several limitations. First, the data we use only shows the salience devoted to welfare, and not what *type of attention* is devoted to it. We know when parties talk about welfare, but not if they propose to increase the financial aid to the poor or rather restrict it, and how. Second, we do not know to what extent these parliamentary questions really impact policy implementation and if populist parties approve more welfare measures for the protection of the poor compared to non-populist parties. Third, we have not explored whether mainstream parties have reacted to the electoral growth of populist parties and become more attentive to the needs of the have-nots: it could be that the *Robin Hood Effect* is there but in a less direct fashion. Finally, given our classification of parties as either populist or non-populist, we did not capture the effect of different degrees of populism on the attention devoted to poverty assistance.

Future research could tackle the limitations just described while trying to move beyond the European case. Moreover, with an increasing number of populist parties in power and a shifting dynamic of competition and strategic adaptation with established (non-populist) parties, the levels of salience of welfare issues might change over time and in response to different types of crises in ways that are not captured by our analysis. More generally, our findings speak to present and future studies addressing the effects of crises on both the supply (e.g., party programs and discourse) and demand side (e.g., mobilisation of grievances and voting behaviour). Finally, we point to a cognitive dissonance between populist party rhetoric and their (lack of)

follow-through, which should be investigated when trying to make sense of the continued electoral success of populist parties.

## Notes

1. We rely on an ideational definition of populism, understood as a “thin” ideology dividing society into two moral opposites: “the good people”, who are exploited, betrayed, neglected, or corrupted by “an evil elite” that acts in opposition to the people’s interests (Hawkins, 2010; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 1995).
2. We do not consider the political and economic crisis originated by the Covid-19 pandemic or by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. First because our analysis takes place almost exclusively before their effects could be felt. Second, because geopolitical and health crises might push populist parties to shift their focus toward issues of public security, personal freedom, and national sovereignty rather than welfare.
3. Whether attention translates into legislation and depends on many factors such as budgetary constraints, inter-coalition and intra-coalition policy negotiations, bargain power of coalition members and salience of the issue in the parties’ platforms (Abts et al., 2021; Bäck et al., 2011; Green & Hobolt, 2008). What a party can do is to pay attention to poverty and bring the topic into the debate, thus increasing its saliency, which is precisely what we are going to measure.
4. Clearly, welfare policy positions are often more fluid and strategic than a strict populist vs. non-populist framework suggests. While the far right tends to advocate exclusionary welfare policies rooted in welfare chauvinism, the conventional right favours insurance-based models, and the left promotes universalist, egalitarian principles (Manow et al., 2018). All parties, not just populist ones, adjust their policy emphasis in response to shifting political and economic contexts, particularly in times of crisis when public demand for welfare intensifies. Rather than being driven solely by ideological commitments, parties strategically compete to shape the political agenda around issues they believe will maximize their electoral prospects (Christoffer Green-Pedersen & Jensen, 2019). This includes responding to salient concerns such as rising unemployment (Davidsson & Marx, 2013) and recalibrating their social policy positions in reaction to the presence of far-right challengers (Abou-Chadi & Immergut, 2019; Afonso & Rennwald, 2018). Recognizing this dynamic interplay is crucial to understanding welfare politics beyond simplistic categorizations. At the same time, to the best of our knowledge the difference between populist and non-populist parties remains untested. Hence, we formulate H2 and expect the effect of crises to make populists even more prone than non-populist to increase their attention to welfare issues.
5. In the appendix, we re-estimate our regression models after dropping only those parties that asked two or fewer questions during a cabinet, rather than using a 10-question threshold. See Table A7. The overall variance explained by these models is very low, which is not surprising given the extreme volatility of the dependent variable when it is calculated using so few total questions.
6. The variable identifying parties as politically left or right comes from the Manifesto Project Dataset (Lehmann et.al. 2024)
7. In theory, the scale could vary from 0 to 100% but in practice we observe variation between only 0 and 13%

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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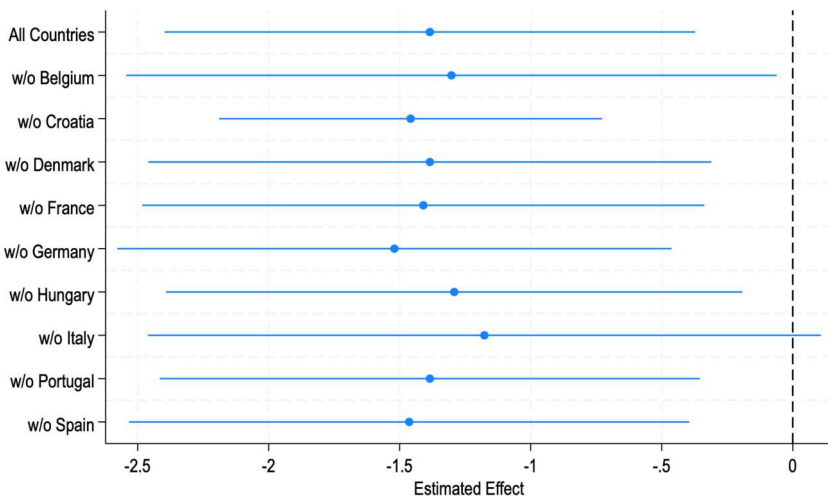
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## Appendix



**Figure A1.** Regressions coefficients characterizing the effect of being a populist party on the likelihood of asking questions about social welfare in parliament, iteratively excluding countries. Note: The figure shows the coefficient for the populist variable for 10 separate regressions. The 'All Countries' model includes data from all nine countries and is the same model as Model 2 in the top panel of [Table 2](#). Each subsequent regression excludes data from one country.

**Table A1.** List of contributing projects and data sources used in the study\*.

Countries	Source
Belgium	The Belgian data for the period of 1988–2011 were collected by Stefaan Walgrave and his collaborators (Jeroen Joly, Anne Hardy, Brandon Zicha, Julie Sevenans, and Tobias Van Assche). Funding came from the European Science Foundation (grant number: 07-ECRP-008), from the Flemish National Science Foundation (grant number: G.0117.11N) and from the Belgian Federal Science Policy (grant number: IUAP P7/46). The Belgian data for the period of 2011–2019 were collected by Stefaan Walgrave and Yannick Léonard. The Funding was provided by the TOP BOF University of Antwerp Grant (grant number FFB210426).Walgrave S, Joly J and Sevenans J (n.d.) The Belgian Agendas Project. In: Baumgartner F, Breunig C, and Grossman E (eds) <i>Comparative Policy Agendas</i> . Oxford University Press, pp.57-66
Croatia	Širinić, D., & Čakar, D. N. (2019). <i>Croatian Political Agendas</i> . In: Baumgartner FR, Breunig C, and Grossman E (eds) <i>Comparative Policy Agendas: Theory, Tools, Data</i> . Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, pp.74-81
Denmark	The data in the Danish Policy Agenda Project have been collected by Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Peter B. Mortensen with support from the Danish Social Science Research Council and the Research Foundation at Aarhus University. Green-Pedersen C and Mortensen PB (2019) <i>The Danish Agendas Project</i> . In: Baumgartner FR, Breunig C, and Grossman E (eds) <i>Comparative Policy Agendas: Theory, Tools, Data</i> . Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 82–89.
France	Grossman E (2019) <i>The French Agendas Project</i> . In: Baumgartner FR, Breunig C, and Grossman E (eds) <i>Comparative Policy Agendas: Theory, Tools, Data</i> . Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 90-96.
Germany	Breunig, C. & Schnatterer, T. (2020). <i>Die politische Agenda Deutschlands</i> . <i>Politische Vierteljahresschrift</i> , 61(1), pp.131-14
Hungary	The presented data are originally from the research 'Hungarian Comparative Agendas Project, 2014-2017' funded by OTKA (ÁJP K 109303), the data are published by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre for Social Sciences.Sebők, Miklós – Boda, Zsolt (eds) (2021) <i>Policy Agendas in Autocracy, and Hybrid Regimes. The Case of Hungary</i> . Cham: Palgrave MacMillan
Italy	Russo F and Cavalieri A (2016) <i>The Policy Content of the Italian Question Time. A New Dataset to Study Party Competition</i> . <i>Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche</i> 11(2): 197–222.Borghetto E, Carammia M and Russo F (2019) <i>The Italian Agendas Project</i> . In: Baumgartner F, Breunig C, and Grossman E (eds) <i>Comparative Policy Agendas: Theory, Tools, Data</i> . Oxford University Press, pp. 120–128.
Portugal	The data was originally coded by the research projects 'Public Preferences and Policy Decision-Making. A Longitudinal and Comparative Analysis' – PTDC/IVC-CPO/3921/2012 (2013–2015) Coordinated by Ana Maria Belchior Associated institutions: ISCTE-IUL, CIES-IUL, FCT. And 'Portuguese Parliament: Agenda-setting and Law-making' – IF/00382/2014 (2016–2020) Coordinated by Enrico Borghetto Associated institutions: FCSH-NOVA, CICS.NOVA, FCT.Belchior AM and Borghetto E (2019) <i>The Portuguese Policy Agendas Project</i> . In: Baumgartner FR, Breunig C, and Grossman E (eds) <i>Comparative Policy Agendas: Theory, Tools, Data</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 145–151.
Spain	The data was originally collected by Laura Chaqués-Bonafont, Anna M. Palau and Luz M. Muñoz, with the collaboration of graduate students and the financial support of the Spanish Ministry of Innovation and Science and the Agència de Gestió d'Ajuts Universitaris i de Recerca (AGAUR).Chaques-Bonafont L, Palau AM and Munoz L (2019) <i>Agenda Dynamics in Spain</i> . In: Baumgartner FR, Breunig C, and Grossman E (eds) <i>Comparative Policy Agendas: Theory, Tools, Data</i> . Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 152–159.

\*The original collectors of the data do not bear any responsibility for the analysis reported here.

**Table A2.** Populist parties included in the data set.

Country	English name (parlgov)	Original name (parlgov)	Type of populism	N. of observations
Belgium	Flemish Block / Interest	Vlaams Blok / Belang	Far right populist	10
	List Dedecker / Libertarian, Direct, Democratic	Lijst Dedecker / Libertair, Direct, Democratisch	Other populist	5
	National Front	Front National	Far right populist	2
	New Flemish Alliance	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie	Far right populist	8
	People's Party	Parti populaire	Far right populist	1
Croatia	Bridge of Independent Lists	Most nezavisnih lista	Far right populist	2
	Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja	Hrvatski demokratski savez Slavonije i Baranje	Far right populist	1
	Croatian Democratic Union	Hrvatska demokratska zajednica	Far right populist	13
	Homeland Movement	Domovinski pokret	Far right populist	1
	Milan Bandić 365 — The Party of Labour and Solidarity	Bandić Milan 365 — Stranka rada i solidarnosti	Other populist	1
	We Can! – Political Platform	Možemo! – politička platforma	Far left populist	1
Denmark	Danish Peoples Party	Dansk Folkeparti	Far right populist	9
France	Unbowed France	La France Insoumise	Far left populist	2
Germany	Alternative for Germany	Alternative für Deutschland	Far right populist	1
	The Left	Die Linke	Far left populist	6
Hungary	Fidesz — Hungarian Civic Alliance	Fidesz — Magyar Polgári Szövetség	Far right populist	9
	Hungarian Justice and Life Party	Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja	Far right populist	1
	Independent Smallholders Party (1988)	Független Kisgazdapárt	Far right populist	1
	Movement for a Better Hungary	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	Far right populist	3
Italy	Brothers of Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	Far right populist	6
	Five Star Movement	Movimento 5 Stelle	Other populist	6
	Go Italy	Forza Italia	Other populist	15
	List Di Pietro — Italy of Values	Lista di Pietro — Italia del Valori	Other populist	3
	North League	Lega Nord	Far right populist	15
Portugal	Left Bloc	Bloco de Esquerda	Far left populist	4
	Portuguese Communist Party	Partido Comunista Português	Far left populist	4
Spain	Voice	Vox	Far right populist	1
	We Can	Podemos	Far left populist	2

**Table A3.** Regression coefficients characterizing the effect of being a populist party on the likelihood of asking questions about social welfare in parliament.

	Model 1: Any Questions	Model 2: % of Questions
Populist	0.08* (0.04)	-1.46* (0.61)
Cabinet FEs	✓	✓
N	513	510
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.200	0.145

\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$  \*\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.001$ .

Note: The dependent variable in Model 1 is dichotomous and coded '1' if a political party asks any questions about social welfare during a given cabinet (and '0' otherwise). Model 2 uses the percentage of total questions asked about social welfare as the dependent variable, excluding 0% observations.

**Table A4.** Regression coefficients characterizing the effect of being a populist party on the likelihood of asking questions about social welfare in parliament, excluding Hungary and Croatia.

	Model 1: Any Questions
Populist	-1.35** (0.39)
Cabinet Fes	✓
N	405
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.317

\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$  \*\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.001$ .

**Table A5.** Regression coefficients characterizing the effect of being a populist party on the likelihood of asking questions about social welfare in parliament, number of questions.

	Model 1: Any Parties	Model 2: Left-wing	Model 3: Right-wing
Populist	0.96 (1.65)	8.82* (4.21)	-0.18 (1.13)
Cabinet FEs	✓	✓	✓
N	513	295	147
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.539	0.414	0.951

\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$  \*\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.001$ .

Note: The dependent variable in these models is the total number of questions asked about welfare by a political party during a given cabinet.

**Table A6.** Regression coefficients characterizing the effect of being a populist party on the likelihood of asking questions about social welfare in parliament, interacting with left-right ideology.

	Coefficients (SEs)
Populist	-0.96 (0.77)
Left-wing party	0.70 (0.63)
Populist X Left-wing party	0.58 (1.18)
Cabinet Fes	✓
N	442
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.158

\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$  \*\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.001$ .

**Table A7.** Regression coefficients characterizing the effect of being a populist party on the likelihood of asking questions about social welfare in parliament, 2 question cutoff.

	Model 1: Any Parties	Model 2: Left-wing	Model 3: Right-wing
Populist	-1.81* (0.77)	0.50 (1.29)	-0.99 (0.72)
Cabinet FEs	✓	✓	✓
N	585	319	170
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	-0.017	-0.012	-0.019

\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$  \*\*  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.001$ .