Is populism good or bad for democracy?

560183

Word count: 2492

1 Introduction

The rise of populism across democratic nations in Europe prompts a critical discussion on whether populism is good or bad for democracy? Often characterised by a moralistic conflict between 'the common people' and a corrupt 'elite', populism's relationship with democratic governance remains contentious (Freeden and Marc, 2013, p. 501). While some view its emphasis on popular sovereignty as inherently democratic, particularly through the lens of direct democracy, others highlight its frequent tension with liberal democratic principles such as the rule of law and institutional checks (Canovan, 1999, p. 7). The literature suggests this relationship is complex and context-dependent, and as such, this essay seeks to move beyond a simple dichotomy by employing Fuzzy-Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA). Focusing on 15 European countries between 2000 and 2020, I investigate the specific configurations of conditions operationalised from the V-Dem Dataset, including institutional constraints, inequality, polarisation, and judicial attacks, as to determine whether presence of significant populist actors coincides with either democratic erosion or democratic resilience.

2 Literature Review

The 'core' of populism is present in all cases in literature, regardless of ideological differences (Mansbridge and Macedo, 2019, p. 60). This core is definitive in literature; that of a *moralistic* conflict between the 'elite' or the established structure of power against 'the common people' (Canovan, 1999, p. 3; Urbinati, 2019, p. 119; Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay, 2017, p. 424). Beyond this core, the characterisation of populism becomes polysemic. Stanley characterises populism as a "thin" ideology which hybridises with "host" ideologies to form answers to questions in politics and economics (Stanley, 2008, pp. 99-100, 106; Silva, Neuner and Wratil, 2023, p. 439). However, Stanley's focus on discursive logic results in the omission of the tactical dimensions of populism. Conversely, Weyland proposes populism as "a political strategy" with "weak commitment to substantive policies" as opposed to a full ideology (Weyland, 2001, pp. 6,11). In this, by reducing populism to a strategy, one overlooks ideological continuity in populist movements. For example, Weyland would characterise the use of populist rhetoric as a strategy to explain Perón's ascension, through the cultivation of a quasi-messianic image, framing himself as the sole representative of the *descamisados* (Plotkin, 2002, p. 22). Stanley would emphasise Perón's vilifying of the *oligarquía* (landowning elites) as enemies of the people which hybridised with nationalism to form Perónism (Ostiguy, 2009, p. 21). I adopt a synthesised approach to define populism, viewing it as a thin ideology, consisting of its dialectical, moralistic core, which is *operationalised* through strategic leadership, preventing a reductionistic view proposed by the two academics.

The consensus on the relationship between populism and democracy in literature is ambivalent (Abts and Rummens, 2007, p. 411; Akkerman, 2003, p. 148), and with its impact varying significantly based on several mediating factors. These include the specific ideological orientation of the populist actor, the institutional context such as the strength of checks and balances, and the country's level of democratic consolidation (Mudde *et al.*, 2017, pp. 79, 93-95). Whilst Mudde et al's analysis is helpful for understanding variables to allow for the *success* of populism, it fails to capture variables for the *emergence* of populism within democracy. For instance, the politicisation of resentment needed to create the moralistic core of populist rhetoric requires pre-existing social dissatisfaction, as

shown empirically in Venezuela, where the "vast majority" of the electorate had major grievances with the pre-existing *puntofijista* (two-party, democratic) system (McCoy, 1999, pp. 65-66; Corrales and Penfold, 2011, p. 16; Pappas, 2019, p. 150). As evidenced, populism's impact of democracy is not due to a single factor but arises from the interaction of several factors (conjectural conjunction). For instance, a loss of perceived legitimacy in the party system from the electorate plus a charismatic leader exploiting resentment (e.g., Fujimori) leads to populism, while similar institutional fragility minus such a leader, or plus a moderate leader (e.g., González in Spain) does not (Pappas, 2019, pp. 144, 162). Therefore, any analysis of populism must address this conjunctural causation, otherwise the complexity of this relationship will fail to accurately be captured.

3 Methodology

3.1 Fuzzy-set QCA

To navigate the relationship between populism and democracy, this research employs QCA, a set-theoretic approach designed to systematically analyse complex causality across an intermediate number of cases (Ragin, 2014, p. 23; Schneider and Wagemann, 2012, pp. 3-4). QCA is particularly well-suited for identifying necessary and/or sufficient conditions (or combinations thereof) for specific outcomes, allowing for an assessment of whether and under which circumstances populism is associated with positive or negative democratic trajectories. The choice of QCA is motivated by its ability to handle causal complexity, specifically conjunctural causation and equifinality (Ragin, 2014, p. xx). A MSSD and MDSD analysis would fail to account for equifinality, unlike the single common factor logic of MDSD, or single differing factors as in MSSD (Anckar, 2008, pp. 393-394). The literature review has already evidenced that populism's impact on democracy is not uniform, therefore QCA allows us to identify different *configurations* of conditions that lead to either democratic enhancement or erosion in the presence of populism.

This study utilizes *fuzzy-set* QCA, which differs from crisp-set QCA, as it does not rely on a simple "dichotomous" presence of conditions. fsQCA allows for the calibration of degrees of membership in sets (Skaaning, 2011, p. 395; Schneider and Wagemann, 2012, pp. 14-16). fsQCA employs Boolean algebra and set theory, which this essay utilises via a three-step process:

- Transformation of variables into fuzzy-set membership scores (FSMS), which are numerical values between 0 and 1 that indicate the degree to which each country exhibits a variable (Lijphart, 2011, pp. 17-18).
- Construction of a truth table representing all possible combinations of conditions, which will be minimised to identify a "parsimonious" explanation for economic strength (Ragin, 2014, p. 121).
- Selection of an outcome and identification of the consistency in determining the outcome.

FSMS are key to analysing populism. The literature reiterates that populism is not a binary state: political actors and movements exhibit populist characteristics to varying degrees and hybridise populism with larger-scale ideologies (Stanley, 2008, p. 100). Similarly, democracy is not merely present or absent; democratic quality exists on a continuum, encompassing degrees of elements such as civil liberties. (Coppedge *et al.*, 2011, p. 259). fsQCA enables the operationalisation and analysis of these variables, providing a more holistic understanding compared with a cQCA analysis, as it avoids defining populism as a binary state, when literature proves that populism acts along a spectrum of varying intensities and manifestations (Skaaning, 2011, p. 403).

The primary outcome investigated is 'democratic erosion' (*EROSION*), operationalised as a negative change in the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) between 2000-2002 and 2018-2020. LDI acts as a quantification of the "bad" consequences to democracy that populism creates, as it measures the degrees of democratic checks and balances and civil liberties (Coppedge *et al.*, 2020, p. 44). To provide a balanced answer, the analysis also examines configurations leading to the *absence* of democratic erosion (*~EROSION*), which allows for understanding when populism may be considered "good" for democracy, or when populism's potential negative effects are mitigated.

Four causal conditions have been selected:

- Institutional constraints (*INST*). This assesses the institutional context's resilience and is operationalised via V-Dem's Legislative Constraints on Executive index (Coppedge *et al.*, 2020, p. 50)
- Income inequality (*GINI*). This attempts to measure potential discontent with the socio-economic context and is operationalised via average Gini coefficient. This assumes that income inequality "reduces [...] social cohesion" as justification for this condition (Jay *et al.*, 2019, p. 425).
- Societal polarisation (*POL*). This reflects societal divisions and is operationalised via V-Dem's Political Polarization index (Coppedge *et al.*, 2020, p. 224).
- Attacks on judicial independence (*JUD*). This assesses the degree to which populist leaders attempt to curb the power of independent judiciaries. This is a compound measure, consisting of an average of court independence, judicial compliance with the executive and the degree of conflict between the executive and the judiciary. (Coppedge *et al.*, 2020, pp. 164, 168-169).

QCA's primary weakness is revealed through this, however, as QCA fails to effectively capture how these different variables may interact. For example, the interplay between *both POL* and *GINI* might produce a stronger impetus for populist movements than either factor alone (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 746; Jay *et al.*, 2019, pp. 421-423), but QCA cannot capture this synergy (Tanner, 2014, p. 293). Additionally, the variables used are static and therefore do not capture how these conditions and, by extension, causal relationships evolve over time. Temporal QCA and the use of time-lagged variables have been proposed in literature to offset this, but this is beyond the scope of this essay (Caren and Panofsky, 2005, pp. 157-158; Rihoux, 2006, p. 695). However, this essay attempts to integrate a degree of temporality, as two time periods are considered here, which prevents a static, reductionist approach to my analysis. A true TQCA analysis would typically focus on the timing, sequencing, or duration of conditions within the period of analysis as part of the causal configuration itself, whereas my methodology treats the conditions largely as static variables characterising the cases over the period rather than analysing dynamic sequences within that period (Caren and Panofsky, 2005, pp. 157-160).

3.2   Sample composition

The research design focuses on a large-N study of 15 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom) over the period 2000-2020. All 15 selected countries have experienced notable populist political actors or parties gaining significant traction, ranging from sustained opposition presence to executive power during the 2000-2020 timeframe (Algan *et al.*, 2017, pp. 1, 8; Zulianello and Larsen, 2021, p. 4). With four causal conditions, there are 16 logically possible configurations. A sample size of 15 provides a reasonable chance of observing a meaningful subset of these configurations, without being overcome by either too few cases to draw patterns or too many cases rendering in-depth interpretation impractical. The ability of a large-N QCA analysis is still subject to sensitivity to case selection; however, the inclusion of 15 cases provides more robustness against idiosyncratic results than a small-N design (Seawright and Gerring, 2008, p. 295).

4 Analysis

4.1 Data aggregation

To operationalise the conditions set out in the methodology, we must collect and aggregate the data pertaining to the conditions, as shown in Figure 1. Each condition is denoted with the '_raw' suffix to denote that the condition has not yet been calibrated.

Country	EROSION_raw	INST_raw	GINI_raw	POL_raw	JUD_raw
Austria	-0.000	0.926	0.302	-0.495	-0.485
Belgium	-0.016	0.907	0.283	-1.850	-0.558
Czechia	0.091	0.894	0.261	-1.730	-0.326
Denmark	-0.008	0.981	0.269	-3.000	-1.320
France	0.006	0.880	0.320	0.111	-0.466
Greece	0.069	0.886	0.344	-1.090	-0.009
Hungary	0.389	0.739	0.299	1.340	-0.132
Italy	-0.031	0.938	0.347	0.229	-0.236
Netherlands	-0.006	0.973	0.285	-1.310	-0.508
Poland	0.313	0.847	0.326	1.530	-0.635
Slovakia	0.010	0.854	0.260	-0.754	-0.065
Spain	0.022	0.825	0.346	-1.170	-0.671
Sweden	0.004	0.974	0.278	-2.100	-1.050
Switzerland	-0.025	0.926	0.328	-1.750	-1.140
United Kingdom	-0.005	0.954	0.343	-0.630	-0.448

Figure 1 (Maerz *et al.*, 2025; Coppedge *et al.*, 2025a; Coppedge *et al.*, 2025b; World Bank, 2025)

fsQCA requires variables to be calibrated into set memberships between 0 and 1. To calibrate, I employ three qualitative anchors: full non-membership (0.05), the crossover point (0.50), and full membership (0.95), estimating these anchors by calculating the quantiles of the raw data distribution; the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles. With these thresholds defined, we can calibrate the data to fuzzy set values, as indicated in Figure 2 (Dusa, Thiem and Dusa, 2025, p. 4)[1].

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[1] Notebook

Statistic	fEROSION	fINST	fGINI	fPOL	fJUD
Min.	0	0.00702	0.03327	0.0008939	0.002506
1st Qu.	0.1577	0.07548	0.08074	0.1037959	0.080238
Median	0.5002	0.49761	0.50048	0.4999363	0.500794
Mean	0.5477	0.489	0.49602	0.4945585	0.515952
3rd Qu.	0.9394	0.89627	0.9308	0.9486561	0.937928
Max.	0.9999	1	0.99443	0.9997999	1

Figure 2

4.2   Necessity analysis

Necessity analysis tests whether any of the individual conditions is necessary for the presence of democratic absence ('fEROSION') or its absence ('~fEROSION') (Schneider, 2019, pp. 1114-1115). I defined an inclusion threshold ('incl.cut') of 0.9 and a coverage threshold ('cov.cut') of 0.5. As such, at least 90% of the cases exhibiting democratic erosion must also exhibit the condition being tested, whilst the condition must also 'cover' at least 50% of the outcome instances it is associated with, respectively. This helps rule out conditions that are necessary but trivially so (e.g., a condition present in almost all cases, making it technically necessary for many outcomes but not very informative). For example, if a condition has a 'incl.cut' value of 0.9, but has a 'cov.cut' value of 0.3, it may be necessary, however less central, to democratic erosion. With these parameters, we can pass the data into the 'QCA::superSubset' function to derive what conditions are necessary for 'fEROSION' and '~fEROSION'.

No.	Model	inclN	RoN	covN
1	~fINST + ~fPOL	0.910	0.411	0.628
2	~fINST + fPOL	0.926	0.670	0.757
3	~fINST + fJUD	0.910	0.626	0.726
4	~fGINI + fPOL	0.918	0.366	0.615
5	~fPOL + fJUD	0.914	0.376	0.616
6	~fINST + ~fGINI + ~fJUD	0.922	0.195	0.559
7	~fINST + fGINI + ~fJUD	0.929	0.397	0.632
8	fGINI + fPOL + ~fJUD	0.919	0.385	0.622

Figure 3 – EROSION configurations

No.	Model	inclN	RoN	covN
1	fINST + fGINI	0.959	0.451	0.582
2	fINST + fPOL	0.955	0.392	0.556
3	fINST + ~fJUD	0.903	0.576	0.619
4	fINST + fJUD	0.924	0.392	0.541
5	~fGINI + ~fPOL + ~fJUD	0.913	0.438	0.556
6	fGINI + ~fPOL + ~fJUD	0.955	0.259	0.506

Figure 5 - ~EROSION configurations

The output shows several combinations of conditions meet the necessity thresholds. Importantly, no single condition (such as 'fPOL' or '~fINST' alone) passed the 0.9 consistency threshold, suggesting that while factors like weak institutions ('~fINST') appear frequently, no single factor identified here is, by itself, an absolute requirement for democratic erosion to occur in this set of countries. Instead, erosion seems to necessitate certain combinations involving weak institutions alongside specific levels of polarisation or judicial attacks. For '~fEROSION', the results indicate several combinations are necessary for the absence of erosion. Notably, 'fINST' features prominently in many combinations meeting the thresholds, namely, models numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4. Therefore, in a European context, strong legislative constraints on the executive are a near-essential factor in preventing democratic erosion in the presence of a populist movement.

4.3 Sufficiency analysis

Sufficiency analysis allows us to identify combinations of conditions that are *sufficient* for the outcome, or its absence (Dușa, 2022, p. 551). The inclusion threshold remains unchanged; however, I incorporate a 'n.cut' value of 1 to ensure there is at least 1 case per configuration which avoids the presence of theoretical configurations that do not occur in the actual data. With the variables set, we can identify all unique configurations of the conditions by generating a truth table, as illustrated in Figures 6a, 6b and 7a, 7b for the EROSION and ~EROSION outcomes respectively (Dușa, 2018, p. 45).

Cases	fINST	fGINI	fPOL	fJUDA	OUT
Switzerland	0	0	1	1	1
Austria	0	1	0	1	1
Italy, United Kingdom	0	0	0	0	1
Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden	0	1	1	1	1
Spain	1	0	1	1	0
Czechia	1	1	1	0	0
Poland	1	0	0	1	0
Hungary, Slovakia	1	1	0	0	0
France, Greece	1	0	0	0	0

Figure 6a

Cases	n	incl	PRI
Switzerland	1	0.999	0.999
Austria	1	0.943	0.889
Italy, United Kingdom	2	0.917	0.888
Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden	4	0.834	0.778
Spain	1	0.749	0.521
Czechia	1	0.566	0.271
Poland	1	0.530	0.105
Hungary, Slovakia	2	0.502	0.055
France, Greece	2	0.482	0.116

Figure 6b

Cases	fINST	fGINI	fPOL	fJUD	OUT
Poland	1	0	0	1	1
France, Greece	1	0	0	0	1
Hungary, Slovakia	1	1	0	0	1
Czechia	1	1	1	0	1
Spain	1	0	1	1	0
Austria	0	1	0	1	0
Italy, United Kingdom	0	0	0	0	0
Switzerland	0	0	1	1	0
Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden	0	1	1	1	0

Figure 7a

Cases	n	incl	PRI
Poland	1	0.945	0.895
France, Greece	2	0.919	0.861
Hungary, Slovakia	2	0.910	0.828
Czechia	1	0.839	0.729
Spain	1	0.727	0.479
Austria	1	0.546	0.111
Italy, United Kingdom	2	0.341	0.112
Switzerland	1	0.314	0.001
Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden	4	0.284	0.041

Figure 7b

With the truth table constructed, I derive both a conservative solution (CS) and a parsimonious solution (PS) from the truth table. These solutions present different ends of a spectrum regarding how logical remainders are handled during the minimisation of the truth table. Logical remainders represent the theoretically possible combinations of the configurations for which no European country case was actually observed in the dataset, but whose assumed outcomes can be used by the PS, as opposed to the CS, to simplify the final causal pathways (Schneider and Wagemann, 2013, p. 211).

Comparing the CS and PS helps assess how much the findings depend on assumptions about unobserved cases; if the conditions highlighted in the PS also appear in the CS, it increases confidence in their importance, with the final solutions shown in Figure 8 and 9.

Solution Type	Solution Formula	Overall Consistency	Overall Coverage
Conservative (CS)	~fINST*fGINI*fJUD + ~fINST*fPOL*fJUD + ~fINST*~fGINI*~fPOL*~fJUD	0.868	0.677
Parsimonious (PS)	~fINST	0.841	0.785

Figure 8 - EROSION

Solution Type	Solution Formula	Overall Consistency	Overall Coverage
Conservative (CS)	fINST*~fGINI*~fPOL + fINST*fGINI*~fJUD	0.814	0.659
Parsimonious (PS)	fINST*~fPOL + fINST*~fJUD	0.833	0.774

Figure 9 - ~EROSION

4.4   Interpretation

The necessity analysis shows that only on the observed countries, there are three distinct paths sufficient for democratic erosion, with a consistency of cases fitting these configurations is 0.868 and a coverage of 0.677:

- Weak institutions AND high inequality AND high attacks on the judiciary
- Weak institutions AND high political polarisation AND high level of attacks on the judiciary
- Weak institutions AND low inequality AND low polarisation AND low level of attacks on the judiciary

Regarding the absence of democratic erosion, there are two paths sufficient for democratic resilience, with a consistency of 0.814 and a coverage of 0.659:

- Strong institutions AND low inequality AND low polarisation
- Strong institutions AND high inequality AND low level of attacks on the judiciary

When simplified, two core paths emerge for democratic resilience, with a consistency of 0.833 and a coverage of 0.774:

- Strong institutions AND low polarisation
- Strong institutions AND low level of attacks on the judiciary

As such, this essay suggests that the *strength of institutional constraints* is the pivotal factor in determining whether populism coincides with democratic erosion or resilience in this European context. Whilst other factors nay combine with institutional strength, weak institutions open the door to erosion, especially when combined with high polarisation or judicial attacks. Conversely, strong institutions act as a bulwark against erosion, particularly when societal polarisation is low, or the judiciary remains divorced from the executive.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay investigated whether populism is good or bad for democracy, utilizing fsQCA to analyse causal pathways across 15 European nations. The findings reveal that populism's impact is not uniform, but highly contingent upon the institutional context. The analysis demonstrates that no single factor guarantees democratic erosion or resilience in the face of populism; rather, specific combinations of conditions are crucial. Democratic erosion was consistently associated with pathways involving weak institutional constraints, particularly when combined with high societal polarisation or significant attacks on judicial independence. Conversely, democratic resilience was primarily linked to the presence of strong institutional constraints, which appeared capable of mitigating potential negative effects, especially in environments with lower polarisation or where the judiciary remained independent from executive pressure. Therefore, the answer to whether populism is 'good' or 'bad' is conditional. While populism itself may challenge established norms, its potential to damage liberal democracy significantly increases in contexts with pre-existing institutional weaknesses. The focus, therefore, should be less on populism's inherent nature relative to democracy, but more on the institutional resilience of the democracies it encounters.

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