

Do populist parties increase electoral participation?



While many observers view the rise of populism as a negative development for democracy, other authors have suggested populist parties might boost political participation by attracting disaffected citizens who do not normally vote. Drawing on a new study, [Arndt Leininger](#) and [Maurits J. Meijers](#) find evidence that in Central and Eastern Europe the presence of populist parties is associated with a rise in turnout. However, in Western Europe, there is no such effect, indicating that context matters for the impact populism has on democracy.

Since the late 1990s onward, both right-wing and left-wing populist parties have become important players in European democracies. As populist parties across Europe have gained electoral success and in some cases have been able to form government coalitions, political scientists have turned to the question of what the rise of populism means for the quality of liberal democracy.

Populist parties are often considered to be a threat to the stability of liberal democracies. As [Cas Mudde](#) famously noted, populists regard 'the people' as a pure and homogeneous entity who share one 'general will' that needs to be translated into policy. As such, populism is considered to be antithetical to democratic pluralism and the rule of law, leading authors like [Jan-Werner Müller](#) to conclude that populism poses a danger to democracy. And indeed, the rich literature on populism has shown that populist parties and populist leaders negatively affect the [separation of powers](#), the [rule of law](#), [media freedom](#) and [minority rights](#).

Yet, scholars have also stressed the potential positive effects of populism. In their book [Populism: A Very Short Introduction](#), Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser argue that populist parties can also be a 'corrective for democracy' by increasing political participation among politically disaffected citizens. In this line of argument, populist movements and parties voice the concerns of citizens who have been previously underrepresented by the political establishment. Yet, to that there was no conclusive evidence on the effects of populist parties on voter turnout.



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The vast academic literature on voter turnout also provides evidence that political parties can boost turnout. [Higher campaign expenditures](#) by political parties are positively related to higher voter turnout. While [some scholars](#) have argued that a higher diversity of political parties participating in elections depresses turnout as they make election campaigns harder to follow, [others](#) find that political fragmentation is good for political participation. The idea is that voters are more likely to be drawn to the voting booth when party competition makes elections meaningful. In other words, voters are likely to go out and vote when the stakes are higher.

If anything, populist parties arguably increase the urgency of elections – both for potential populist voters and for their political opponents. Populist parties can increase the clarity of choice in an election as they emphasise previously ignored political issues – such as immigration or European integration – and adopt a clear position on those issues. Populist parties' candidates also do not shy away from using [unconventional communication strategies](#). Moreover, populist parties are found to [use less complex language](#) which makes it easier for voters to understand what they advocate. By communicating simple messages in colloquial language, populist parties can make politics more accessible. And if politics is less of a distant affair, citizens may be more prone to participate.

Do populist party have different effects in newer and older democracies?

In a [recent study](#), we examine the effects of populist parties on voter turnout at the aggregate level in 31 European countries from 1970 until 2018. For Central and Eastern Europe, we find robust evidence that when at least one populist party is represented in parliament prior to the election, voter turnout is higher. In the first elections after the fall of the Iron Curtain, turnout was [high](#) in post-communist countries. In years that followed, however, turnout in post-communist democracies dropped significantly – also in [comparison](#) to other newly democratised regions such as Latin America. It has been frequently suggested that citizens were quickly disillusioned as they saw that the transition to democracy and political pluralism did not absolve societies of all their problems. Our results could indicate that disillusion with democracy arguably enhances the mobilisation potential of populist parties.

By contrast, in West European countries no effect of populist parties on electoral participation could be established. This suggests that populist parties in established parties do not encourage masses of previously underrepresented citizens to go out and vote. Rather, populist parties attract dissatisfied voters who previously voted for mainstream parties, as recent [research](#) shows.

Does it matter whether populist parties are right-wing or left-wing?

Populism comes in [many different guises](#). [Populist radical right parties](#) combine populism with nativism and authoritarianism. The populist radical right usually defines 'the pure people' in ethnic or cultural terms and considers the 'liberal political establishment' as the 'corrupt elites'. By contrast, the [populist radical left](#) combines populism with a fundamental critique of market-liberalism and new public management. For the populist radical left, 'the people' are an amalgam of ordinary citizens threatened by corporations and neoliberal elites.

The difference between right-wing and left-wing populism can be important as these parties may exert different effects on the quality of democracy. The presence of right-wing populist parties is associated with a [decline in minority rights](#), while a left-wing populist presence is associated with higher levels of minority rights. Yet, the presence of both left-wing and right-wing populist parties has a negative effect on [mutual constraints in the balance of power](#).

Our results show that both left-wing and right-wing populist parties can increase voter turnout in Central and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, however, neither spur citizens' participation in national elections.

Turnout at the cost of democracy?

Our findings, once again, highlight the importance of context for understanding political events. For Central and Eastern Europe, we find robust evidence that parliamentary representation of populist parties does affect voter turnout. This may sound like good news for democracy in Europe's newer democracies as high levels of popular participation are often deemed necessary for a well-functioning representative democracy. Yet, increased turnout going hand in hand with support for populism is hardly a sign of a healthy democracy. For Western Europe, our findings are sobering to those who claim populist parties have a participatory effect on West European democracies by appealing to the disaffected 'silent majority'. Given our findings, politicians would be well advised to reject such claims made by populist actors.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in [Political Studies](#)

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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