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Dissecting Discontent:

How stocks and flows of county-level economic and social factors affect the vote shares of
populist candidates

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Abstract

Across the United States, recent waves of populism have disrupted existing political institutions and fueled the rise of figures like Donald Trump on the right and Bernie Sanders on the left. Myriad research has been conducted to examine the reasons behind this surge; underlying much of the literature is the story of a population who is deeply unsettled by how global changes threaten the social and economic fabric of their communities. This thesis will test many of the possible drivers of populism, including economic wellbeing, income inequality, social capital, and community breakdown. Using data from the 2016 Democratic presidential primary and the 2016 general election, we investigate the inputs of contemporary populism in the United States. Although the results were somewhat mixed, we find that close-knit counties were more likely to turn to populism, especially when those counties were economically stressed.

INTRODUCTION

“You may not like everything about your town—there may be a lot you don’t like. And yet the town is a big part of who you are. It is where you live, where you know people, and where people know you. Its values rest on your shoulders and its ways of thinking inflect your conversations. It is your way of life. You value it and you try to protect it”
(Wuthnow 2019, 6).

In communities across the United States, the seeds of discontent are in full bloom.

Decades of deterioration in once-thriving towns have left citizens angry about losing their previous way of life and apprehensive about the future (Monnat & Brown, 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). To them, traditional politicians have systematically neglected their concerns and are incapable of fixing their problems. These negative sentiments have translated into a populist backlash, fueling the rise of outsider candidates like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders and movements like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street (Aslanidis, 2016; Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Biegon, 2019; Patenaude, 2019; Hawkins & Littvay, 2019; Rudolph, 2021; Staufer, 2021).

But what exactly is the source of this populist discontent? One strand of debate is whether economic or social factors are driving populist attitudes. Some scholars argue that economic insecurity is the main driver of populism (Monnat & Brown, 2017; Walley, 2017; Rodrik 2018), while others point to discomfort with a changing sociocultural landscape (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). New research has split from this strict binary and put the factors together by exploring the ways that economic and cultural factors reinforce each other to create populism (Spruyt, et al., 2016).

Another strand of debate centers on whether the populist backlash originates at the individual or community level. Some of the literature has found that the ‘losers of globalization’ are likely to vote for populist candidates. Low-skilled, uneducated workers in the United States are increasingly subject to uncertain job prospects and stagnating wages as competition with foreign workers and automated technology have accelerated (Monnat & Brown, 2017; Rodrik,

2018). Additionally, a tectonic shift towards cultural liberalism has made these workers feel attacked for retaining their long-held social values (Spruyt, et al., 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Compounding forms of resentment render these voters uniquely receptive to candidates that validate their struggles and put blame on elite and minority groups. Other literature has emphasized community factors rather than individual attitudes. A strong sense of place is common in rural America, with residents holding close ties to their geographic location and its people. As these communities continue their decades-long economic and social decline, the entire community internalizes the pain (Monnat & Brown, 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Wuthnow, 2019). Populist voters in these places are not necessarily the most economically disadvantaged or socially marginalized. Even citizens who are doing fine individually can experience anger when they see the community around them struggling, especially if they view the government as apathetic or ineffectual.

This thesis will not make a hard stance on either argument because there is truth on both sides of these debates. The motivations behind the current populist surges are multifaceted and nuanced. As such, we will investigate a model of contemporary populism that tests the electoral effects of many potential inputs of populism. Specifically, the paper will examine whether factors like economic wellbeing, income inequality, social capital, and community breakdown affect the vote share for populist candidates.

To test these correlates, we conducted a large-sample statistical analysis of two recent American elections. Donald Trump's performance in the 2016 general election was used as a proxy for right-wing populist support; support for Senator Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary was used to represent left-wing populism. After collecting economic, social, and electoral data at the county level, we ran a series of multivariate

regressions to determine which variables were predictive of populist voting. Moreover, we included interaction terms to investigate whether certain independent variables worked in tandem to affect populist vote shares.

The main takeaway of our study is that populism on the right and left thrives areas that are socially vibrant. According to our interaction terms, these effects were even more distinct in economically stagnant areas. As the level of social capital in the county rose, decreases in income or increases in unemployment were even better for the populist candidate. The rest of our findings were fairly inconclusive. Taken as a whole, our data suggested that populist candidates, especially on the right, did better in economically struggling areas, but there was plenty of evidence refuting this takeaway. Populist vote shares and economic changes over time did not produce a coherent narrative. For instance, counties with higher real incomes in 1980 than in 2016 did not consistently support or reject populism. Income inequality was negatively correlated with populist support across all of our models. This was a curious result that perhaps should be called into question because it cuts against nearly all of the existing literature about this relationship.

Our general topic has important ramifications for the current political discourse. As discussed, decades of anger in rural America have given rise to a rebellion against the political and cultural elite. The resulting populist movements and candidates have profoundly shaped American political parties, institutions, and public opinion. Scholars have scrambled to study the causes and consequences of this powerful political force. Our study contributes to this important research by investigating how community characteristics can affect populist sentiments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is populism?

There is a contentious scholarship on populism with few points of agreement. This is one of the main themes in the literature, with many authors explicitly acknowledging the lack of consensus (Taggart, 2000; Barr, 2009; Moffitt, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017). Researchers have battled over the ontological nature of populism, with some describing populism as an entity (Mudde, 2004; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017) and others casting it as an action that is performed (Jansen, 2011; Moffitt, 2016). One universally accepted truth is that populism is a form of politics juxtaposing the villainous ‘elite’ against the heroic ‘people’ (Canovan, 1999; Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004; Jansen, 2011; Moffitt, 2016)¹, but even these two fundamental parts of populism cannot be clearly defined.

The elite are widely regarded as the antagonist in populism. In stark contrast to the virtuous and pure people, the elite are seen as evil and morally corrupt. Populists will argue that the elite wield their disproportionate power to control the people, leaving them helpless and ignored (Canovan, 1999). According to some scholars, this strict moral dichotomy precludes any compromise between elite and common interests (Mudde, 2004). Populists who condemn the elite but agree to an arrangement retaining elite control over the people are seen as hypocritical, like every other traditional politician (Barr, 2009).

While negative sentiments towards the elite are consistent across definitions of populism, the characterization of the elite varies by era, county, and ideology of the populist. Populism is usually seen as a revolt against specific groups of people, such as traditional politicians, leaders in business and finance, media moguls, lobbyists, and special interest groups. Different strains

¹ This simple definition has also been called into question. Weyland (2021) reasons that if populism were really a titanic struggle between people and the elite, then strong parties and coalitions would be formed on both sides. His actual research on populism cuts against this logic, as he finds that populism in Latin America corrodes political parties. In his view, populism centers on a charismatic leader that claims to uphold the interests of the people.

of populism may choose to demonize some groups more than others (Akkerman, et al., 2017; Rodrik, 2018). Left-wing populists tend to emphasize the corruption of corporate elites, while right-wing populists are critical of politicians who prioritize immigrants and minorities and of elite cultural institutions like entertainment and media.

Alternative characterizations of populism describe it as a rebellion against elite values, rather than specific people (Canovan, 1999). In this view, common people object to the domination of certain elite values, either progressive values like cosmopolitanism, globalism, and openness to racial and sexual minorities, or conservative values such as individualism and free-market capitalism.

The ‘people’ is an equally ambiguous concept in the populist literature. Despite the vast diversity of people in any society, populists will group the people as a singular monolith (Canovan, 1999; Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004; Moffitt 2016). This broad definition is more rhetorical tool than reality. Appealing to the entirety of the general public serves to obscure the divisions of class, race, and ethnicity (Canovan, 1999), instead providing the illusion of broad societal agreement. It also functions as a way of demonizing opponents; any opposition to populist politicians can be cast as an enemy of the people. Populists can further manipulate the definition of ‘people’ by designating the in- and out-groups. Right-wing populists will often use this strategy to target minority groups, such as immigrants, refugees, and people of color (Mudde, 2004; Moffitt, 2016).

Many scholars identified the ‘heartland’ as a common trope used by populists to construct the people (Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004). This concept evokes an image of the people as hardworking rural citizens who are angry that their lifestyle is being sabotaged by urban liberals, immigrants, and criminals. Folks of the ‘heartland’ are not as well-educated or

politically active, which is partly why they are looked down upon and ignored by those in power (Mudde, 2004). Yet the lack of power is not due to a lack of consensus; the populist leader has an ability to transcend the dormancy of the ‘silent majority’ and unlock the true power of the people (Mudde, 2004).

As I alluded to previously, there are countless other academic debates about the definition of populism. Scholars routinely disagree about the qualities of populist leadership, whether populism is perennial or cyclical, and several other finer details. For the purpose of my topic, these tangential debates are largely irrelevant. It is only important to have a basic understanding of populism as a political conflict between the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’.

How is populism manifesting today?

There is a long history of populism in American politics, featuring candidates and movements from across the political spectrum united by a distaste for elite control². One of the first organized protests in the United States was the Whiskey Rebellion, which was fueled by rural farmers who saw the federal tax on whiskey as elitist. Populist energy was rekindled in the early 1800s with the emergence of Andrew Jackson. The Democratic president positioned himself as a common man against the aristocratic political class, hosting thousands of supporters to a raucous, post-inauguration party in the White House and eliminating the technocratic Second Bank of the United States. Later in the 19th Century, semblances of modern populism began to appear with the development of the People’s Party (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Kazin, 2017). The party was mainly made up of rural farmers calling for the increased production of silver to pay debts. These sentiments spilled into mainstream politics, with the 1896 Democratic

² <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/populism-american-style>

presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan famously decrying the gold standard in America, saying “you shall not crucify mankind on a cross of gold.” Progressive populists accomplished policy goals throughout the early 1900s, such as improving labor rights, breaking up monopolies, and dramatically expanding the social safety net (Kazin, 2017). Populism in the late 20th Century took a rightward turn, with figures like George Wallace and Barry Goldwater pushing for social conservatism and autonomy for local governments (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Kazin, 2017).

Scholars have noticed a resurgence of populism in Western democracies over the last few decades (Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004; Moffitt, 2016; Stock 2017). Mudde has even argued that we are now in a populist zeitgeist, where populism has become a mainstream force in Western politics (2004). There are many different iterations of this new populism, occurring in different political contexts, stemming from different ends of the political spectrum, and varying in whether populist pressure is applied from inside or outside of traditional parties and institutions (Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004; Moffitt, 2016). Yet, like its predecessors, contemporary populist movements share similar anti-establishment themes (Taggart, 2000; Barr, 2009).

In America, most of the recent populist backlash has happened on the political right (Taggart, 2000). Shades of this backlash were seen with the popularity of politically-incorrect candidates like Pat Buchanan and Sarah Palin. These modest successes gave way to the Tea Party Movement, which rallied against the Obama Administration and its commitment to bigger government and social liberalism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Right-wing populism came to a crescendo in 2016 with the election of Donald Trump, whose xenophobic, anti-establishment rhetoric helped him win the presidency. This brand of populism has unique critiques of government and culture. Right-wing populists push for lower taxes and less regulation, which

they feel will check government corruption and allow the ‘people’ more control of their lives (Taggart, 2000). Also, they condemn the societal trends towards tolerance and global unity, arguing for less immigration and a return to traditional social norms (Taggart, 2000; Akkerman, et al., 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Rodrik, 2018). Some scholars have even noticed violent tendencies among right-wing populists (Stock, 2017). Such individuals take populism to its logical extreme, believing that the only way governments could forget about the upstanding people is if they were beholden to enemy groups like Jewish people, homosexuals, and minorities. This hatred has often been channeled into violence against these groups.

Yet, contemporary populism has also gained traction among progressives. Left-wing populist critiques are primarily about the inequality of economic and governmental institutions (Taggart, 2000; Akkerman, et al., 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Rodrik, 2018). Candidates emphasize class cleavages, alleging that elite individuals and corporations subvert the common people by manipulating laws and regulations to continually accrue wealth. The favored policy solutions for left-wing populists include harsher restrictions on financial institutions, stricter regulation for large corporations, and a more robust social safety net. It is no surprise that a renaissance of left-wing populism occurred in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, which was caused by financial greed but felt most acutely by those in the middle- and lower-class. Occupy Wall Street, a global grassroots movement against income inequality, was a prime example of this post-Recession populist energy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Progressive populism in the United States did not wane even as the economy improved. In the 2016 Democratic primary, little-known Senator Bernie Sanders mounted a formidable challenge against Hillary Clinton, garnering fervent support from progressives who shared his distaste for billionaires and large

companies. Although his campaign was unsuccessful, Sanders moved the Democratic platform leftward and brought ideas like Medicare-for-all and free college into the mainstream.

What is causing the populist resurgence?

Economic factors are partially responsible for fueling populist grievances, especially among the ‘losers of globalization’. International trade has steadily increased over the past several decades, as governments have placed more emphasis on economic openness³. On net, this has created jobs and generated growth, but the losses are highly concentrated among low-skilled workers in developed countries, especially in the manufacturing sector (Slaughter & Swagel, 1997; Dehesa, 2006; Hakobyan & McLaren, 2016; Autor, et al., 2016). Free trade policies have been troublesome for low-skilled workers in the United States because there is more competition with workers in other countries where labor laws are less stringent (Wood, 1995; Slaughter & Swagel, 1997; Dehesa, 2006; Autor, et al., 2016). Companies often choose to move certain low-skilled operations overseas, and even if they decide to stay, the threat of moving abroad provides leverage for firms to keep wages low (Jaumotte, et al., 2013; Furceri, et al., 2019). Populist candidates from both sides of the political spectrum have been critical of free trade policies in an effort to appeal to these low-skilled workers (Rodrik, 2018).

Another economic development since the mid-20th Century has been the explosion of inequality (Lee, 2006; Piketty & Saez, 2014). The economy has continued to grow steadily in the United States and Western Europe, but the benefits have not been shared by everyone. Wealthy people have accumulated wealth at a high rate while those in the middle- and lower-class have experienced stagnating real wages and less job security.

³ <http://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=101>

This trend has accelerated the rise of populism through a variety of mechanisms. Inequality is associated with financial instability and frequent economic crises, which causes existing political alliances to break down and allows room for populist candidates to thrive (O'Connor, 2017). Inequality is also related to political instability. As the rich have continued to expand their share of the economic pie, average citizens have begun to lose faith in the political establishment (O'Connor, 2017; Oxendine, 2019). This provides an opening for populist candidates to question the legitimacy of those in power and to argue that the common people would do better under their rule (O'Connor, 2017), whether through redistribution and corporate regulation on the left or lower taxes and deregulation on the right. Additionally, declining trust in government can generate a positive feedback loop, as low compliance hinders the performance of public institutions, further eroding faith in the government (Putnam, et al., 1993; Fieschi & Heywood, 2004; Oxendine, 2019). Finally, inequality can lead to individual status anxiety. When economic conditions are unequal, individuals tend to worry more about losing their social status (Oxendine, 2019). Tribalism and intergroup conflict blossom because the economy is seen as zero-sum, where you and your group can only succeed if others are losing (Inglehart, 2017; Oxendine, 2019). Populists seize on this zero-sum mentality by promising to target adversarial groups, like billionaires, immigrants, Wall Street moguls, or minorities. The theoretical connection between inequality and populism is empirically supported by Stankov (2020), who argues that throughout the 20th Century, inequality is correlated with extreme voting.

Scholars seeking to test these hypotheses have found empirical evidence to support a link between economic factors and populism. Populist energy in the United States is partly due to economic insecurity. Donald Trump outperformed Mitt Romney's 2012 vote share in counties

with higher unemployment rates and more economic distress, which some studies attribute to the difference between an establishment Republican candidate and a populist Republican candidate (Monnat & Brown, 2017; Goetz, et al., 2018). Poor economic conditions have also fueled populism in Western Europe. Right- and left-wing populist parties flourished in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, especially in areas with greater unemployment shocks (Algan, et al., 2017; O'Connor, 2017). Similar trends were seen in the Brexit vote, as areas with higher levels of unemployment and more manufacturing jobs were more inclined to vote to leave the European Union (Alabrese, et al., 2019). Populism in Latin America can also be explained by the economy. Mendoza & Quadrini (2010) note that the emergence of left-wing populism in Latin America is partially due to waves of financial investment, which often lead to waves of financial crisis. At the individual level, survey data from Flanders suggests that less income was a reasonably good predictor of voting for populist parties, both on the right or the left (Spruyt, et al., 2016).

Economic issues are clearly important, but some would argue that social change and cultural grievances play an even larger role in the development of modern populism. This factor is especially salient on the political right because right-wing populism tends to highlight racial and gender divisions over class divisions (Rodrik, 2018). The last half of the 1900s was marked by increasing openness to new ideas: the Civil Rights Movement spurred more tolerance for racial minorities; feminist movements fundamentally changed gender roles in Western society; and movements like the sexual revolution and the gay rights movement opened the door to sexual relationships that were not strictly heterosexual, monogamous, and procreative (Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Society gradually coalesced around these ideas, but those with socially conservative views, like many low-educated, white people in small towns,

often did not accept the cultural consensus (Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). As these folks become a smaller minority, they feel more under siege. It has become difficult for social conservatives to build a positive social identity because elite culture sees their views and way of life as backwards (Spruyt, et al., 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019)⁴. Populism is a natural way for these people to band together and rebel against elites who look down on their opinions.

Changing social views have been paired with a changing social landscape. Since World War II, there has been a steady upward trajectory in annual legal immigration in the United States⁵. The share of immigrants as a percentage of the total US population has also climbed from 4.7% in 1970 to 13.7% in 2019⁶. Higher immigration levels, especially among Hispanic and Asian ethnic groups, is the main driver of racial diversification in America. The non-white share of the US population has swelled from 11.4% in the 1960 census⁷ to 42.2% in 2020⁸. A reversal in this trend is unlikely, as the Census Bureau projects America will become a majority-minority country by 2045⁹. Many see this development as further proof of a changing America where white people have lost their hegemonic cultural power (Stock, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Populist candidates who scapegoat immigrants and minorities, blaming them for issues and changes in society, serve as a refuge for threatened white folks (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Several studies have confirmed this assumption, discovering that whites disproportionately support right-wing populists at the ballot box (Goetz, et al., 2019; Alabrese, et al., 2019).

⁴ Social marginalization is even relevant to populism on the left. Gidron and Hall (2020) found that voters who felt socially marginalized were more likely to support both right- and left-wing populist parties.

⁵ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/us-immigration-trends#history>

⁶ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/us-immigration-trends#history>

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1961/dec/pc-s1-10.html>

⁸ <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/racial-and-ethnic-diversity-in-the-united-states-2010-and-2020-census.html>

⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20130503185831/http://www.census.gov/population/projections/data/national/2012/summarytables.html>

While some debate the relative importance of economic and cultural factors, it is more helpful to analyze how these factors can complement each other in the production of populism. Low-skilled workers who have been disproportionately hurt by globalization also happen to be a large portion of the socially conservative citizens who are threatened by social change, providing these individuals with two sources of grievance (Spruyt, et al., 2016; Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Sometimes both components are needed to activate populist energy. Inglehart & Norris (2017) theorize that individuals are more tolerant of social change and inclusion for minority groups during conditions of abundance. This was the case in the mid-1900s, where robust, equitable growth sustained a greater sense of openness, but it no longer remains so. Wage growth has been slow since the late 1970s, causing cultural change to be met with suspicion and xenophobia rather than tolerance. Their thesis reasons that societal progress is an ever-present phenomenon, leading to populist discontent only if paired with economic instability.

Community, Place, & Social Capital

Up to this point, I have only discussed the factors affecting populist attitudes at an individual level. Yet ignoring community and geographic identity would leave an incomplete picture of what is causing contemporary populism. The literature implies that because individuals affect and are affected by their communities, populism can be cultivated at a community level, especially in rural areas.

In the United States, ruralness is a distinct and important identity for many people. This tight-knit spirit is born from early rural traditions on the frontier (Stock, 2017). Life on the frontier was difficult and survival demanded strong communities based on the principle of

mutual reciprocity. Moreover, the frontier was remote and cut off from traditional power centers, so communities were tasked with watching over themselves rather than relying on higher levels of government. The vestiges of this frontier identity have not disappeared. Rural individuals remain deeply loyal to their town; they take pride in its customs and strive to uphold its people and way of life (Cramer, 2016; Wuthnow, 2019). Additionally, suspicion of urban life and centralized government has not ebbed (Cramer, 2016; Stock, 2017). Urban dwellers are seen as fundamentally different than rural folk, with contrasting values and lifestyles. Specifically, there is a belief in rural America that urban areas do not understand what it is like to work hard or worry about making ends meet (Cramer, 2016). Governments are seen as ignoring rural areas and unduly directing surplus resources to urban centers, despite their relative economic security (Cramer, 2016; Stock, 2017; Wuthnow, 2019). Rural distrust of urban life feeds directly into populism, which is powered by animosity towards an elite managerial class and elitist government institutions. Multiple studies confirm this intuition, finding that ruralness is a correlate of populist support, especially on the right (Cramer, 2016; Stock, 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Goetz, et al., 2019).

Community loyalty likely plays an important factor in the development of populism, especially when the community is in decline. Small towns have experienced significant economic and social deterioration over the last several decades. The negative effects of globalization and mechanization have hit rural communities hard, causing factories to close, employment to drop, and incomes to flatline (Monnat & Brown, 2017; Walley, 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Wuthnow, 2019). Economic problems have rippled across the community and brought about a host of other issues. Rural population has declined because people are moving elsewhere to seek work (Monnat & Brown, 2017; Wuthnow, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, et al., 2020).

Smaller populations are not able to support as many churches, schools, or social organizations (Wuthnow, 2019). Economic and social angst has led to more deaths of despair, like suicides and drug overdoses, which brings further sadness and anxiety for loved ones (Monnat & Brown, 2017). Because rural people feel deeply connected to their communities, persistent misery and decay are met with anger. Citizens take out the anger by voting for populists who promise big solutions to reverse decades of deterioration (Monnat & Brown, 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Meade (2019) posits that this nostalgic sense of loss is present on the left and right. Supporters of left-wing populism emphasize economic decline, placing blame on the increased power of moneyed interests and the rising cost of essential goods like housing and healthcare. Right-wingers claim cultural changes have eroded community life, such as increased secularization, the loss of traditional moral values, and a waning sense of community and national pride. Yet, Meade (2019) explains, there are elements of both critiques on the right and left. Populists on both sides of the political spectrum acknowledge the multidimensional nature of community decline. Furthermore, both sides blame establishment politicians for ruining the economically and socially vibrant communities of decades past, which opens the door for populist candidates on the right and left (Meade, 2019).

This strong sense of community loyalty is born from the high levels of social capital in small-town America. Social capital “refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, 19). Unlike physical and financial capital, social capital is a public good. Making or breaking ties produces external benefits or losses throughout the social structure; in other words, social capital affects everyone, not just the individual (Coleman, 1988). As such, the effects of social capital are far-ranging. Studies have concluded that differing levels of social capital affect educational

attainment (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000; Rupasingha, et al., 2006), economic outcomes (Putnam, 2000; Rodríguez-Pose & Stroper, 2006), crime levels (Putnam, 2000), physical and mental health (Putnam, 2000), and politics (Putnam, et al., 1993; Putnam, 2000; Fieschi & Heywood, 2004; Satyanath, et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Pose, et al., 2020; Giuliano & Wacziarg, 2020).

The existing literature on the connection between social capital and right-wing populism is neither large nor conclusive. Some research suggests that higher levels of social capital can make governments more efficient and effective, thus inhibiting the rise of populism (Putnam, et al., 1993; Fieschi & Heywood, 2004). A working paper from Giuliano & Wacziarg (2020) provides empirical backing to this position, finding a negative correlation between counties with high levels of social capital and vote shares for Trump in the 2016 general election. Other research argues that social capital helps populism proliferate, the exact opposite conclusion. Dense networks of social ties in Italy and Germany during the interwar period aided the spread of Nazi (Berman, 1997; Satyanath, et al., 2017) and Fascist (Riley, 2005) ideology¹⁰. Another working paper finds that deteriorating areas with high levels of social capital saw large swings from Romney in 2012 to Trump in 2016 (Rodríguez-Pose, et al., 2020). The logic behind this outcome tracks with other literature on the relationship between populism and economic factors; populist energy is kindled by economic malaise, but especially in the presence of dense social connection because decay is felt by the whole community (Rodríguez-Pose, et al., 2020). This working paper is the basis for our thesis, as we tested its hypothesis and conclusions on a larger scale.

¹⁰ Although fascism and right-wing populism are not perfectly analogous, there are many commonalities between the two political philosophies, such as intense nationalism, charismatic leadership, the tendency to scapegoat minority groups, and detest for global connectedness.

The scholarship about social capital and left-wing populism is virtually non-existent, which is one reason why our inquiry holds weight. Like populism on the right, the connection between social capital and left-wing populism could reasonably be positive or negative. It is plausible to imagine that left-wing populism thrives in low social capital areas, where isolated voters are willing to turn to anti-establishment figures. Yet, it is also logical to assume that social capital would assist left-wing populists. Citizens in struggling communities would be eager to challenge the status quo regardless of their political orientations, especially in tight-knit areas where people are more inclined to feel each other's pain and frustration. Our study is important because it begins to explore the relationship between social capital and progressive populism.

Hypotheses

We studied the effect of several independent variables on the electoral success of populist candidates. Based on the above literature, it is reasonable to assume that numerous factors are propelling the current populist backlash. We expected county-level per capita income to be negatively correlated with populist success, driven by disillusioned low-skilled workers who are inclined to reject the status quo. Using similar logic, it was reasonable to assume a positive relationship between unemployment and populist vote shares. Another expectation was that higher levels of income inequality are connected to populist attitudes because people respond to policy failures by losing faith in the traditional ruling class. Community decline was also expected to affect populist vote shares. Counties that have seen larger declines in employment and income will be more likely to turn to populism, as citizens look for outside-the-box solutions to save the communities they love. We expected this effect to be compounded by high levels of

social capital. With dense social ties, suffering felt by one becomes suffering felt by many, fueling populist discontent among the entire community. Finally, we expected a connection between populism and county-level factors like educational attainment, population density, and racial demography.

Although the political opinions are starkly different, we expected similar correlates of right- and left-wing populism in our results. The key break between the populist right and the populist left is on social issues like immigration and racial equality, which are not being tested in this thesis. Most of the variables we focused on were economic, which the literature suggests is salient to populism on both sides of the political spectrum. The connection between social capital and left-wing populism is a bit of an unknown, but for the reasons I explain above, we expected relatively similar outcomes.

DATA & METHODS

This section of the thesis explains how we answered the research question. First, I will provide detail about the exact independent and dependent variables of interest in the study. Then, I will incorporate the variables into a model for the inputs of modern populism in America. Finally, I will describe the exact research methods used to study the model and address the research question.

Dependent Variables

Two different dependent variables were used to proxy populist support. One is support for Donald Trump in the 2016 general election; the second is support for candidate Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary.

These dependent variables are adequate representations of modern American populism. Academics and pundits broadly agree that Trump has used populist rhetoric and policy proposals throughout his two campaigns and his presidency (Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Biegon, 2019; Rudolph, 2021). Similarly, scholars have concluded that populist sentiments played a central role in the rise of Bernie Sanders (Hawkins & Littvay, 2019; Stauffer, 2021). Both examples are from the 2016 election cycle, which is an illuminating case for two reasons: the broadness of presidential elections make the findings generalizable to the entire US and perhaps even beyond, and the recency of the elections would suggest that the results still hold.

Both of these cases are important in painting a comprehensive picture of populism in America. Testing multiple forms of the dependent variable, especially when the results are similar for both cases, shows that the results hold across different types of elections and on both sides of the political spectrum, giving our conclusions a degree of universality.

County vote share was used to measure support for populist candidates. For the 2016 Democratic primary, we subtracted the vote share for Bernie Sanders from the vote share for Hillary Clinton for every county in the US, excluding Washington DC and counties from Alaska, Kansas, Minnesota, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. For the other case, we used a metric called the ‘Trump margin’. This tactic is in accordance with the methods used by Rodríguez-Pose, et al., (2020), which sought to distinguish populist support from general support for Republican candidates. For the 2016 election, we calculated the difference in county vote share from Romney’s performance in 2012 to Trump’s performance in 2016, excluding Washington DC and counties from Alaska.

Independent Variables

The first three inputs into the model are economic measures. Per capita income is the first independent variable. This metric reflects the average personal income in a given jurisdiction. We collected the per capita income for each county in the US for the year 2016, excluding the aforementioned omissions. The second independent variable is income inequality. There are a few different ways to measure income inequality, but we chose to use the GINI index. This metric reflects the statistical dispersion of income in a given population, where lower coefficients signify more equal distributions of income and higher coefficients signify concentration of income at the extremes. We collected the GINI coefficient for each county in the US for the year 2016, excluding the aforementioned omissions. The final variable is the unemployment rate, which is the percentage of people looking for a job who are unable to acquire one. We collected the unemployment rate for each US county for the year 2016, excluding the aforementioned omissions. These data came from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The data for income and inequality were gathered from the 2012-2016 5-year American Community Survey.

The fourth input into the model is social capital. To model this variable, we used a social capital index coming from Rupasingha, et al., originally a 2006 paper that has since been updated to include data from 1990, 1997, 2009, and 2014. The article integrates four key social capital outcomes – density of social establishments (like bars, bowling alleys, churches, etc.), density of non-profit organizations, census response rate, and voter turnout in the last presidential election – into one numerical score for each county in the United States. The 2014 data set was used to analyze the 2016 Democratic primary and general elections.

The fifth input into the model is long-term economic change, which tracks how communities have grown or deteriorated over time. Specifically, the unemployment rate and per

capita income were our key indicators of economic change. We calculated the difference in per capita income from 1980 to 2016 for each county in the US, excluding the aforementioned omissions. These data were acquired from the 1980 census and the 2012-2016 5-year American Community Survey. Additionally, we calculated the difference in the unemployment rate from 1990 to 2016 for each county in the US, excluding the aforementioned omissions. These data came from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The sixth input into the model is a set of several social capital interaction terms, which include: social capital*per capita income, social capital*unemployment, social capital*income inequality, social capital*income change, and social capital*unemployment change. These terms were calculated by taking the values for two individual variables and multiplying them together for every county in the US, excluding the aforementioned omissions.

The final input into the model is a number of other independent variables that may affect populist sentiments, such as population density, education levels, and racial makeup. Population density is the number of people in a given county divided by the land area. We collected the population density for each county in the US for the year 2016, excluding the aforementioned omissions. These data come from the 2012-2016 5-year American Community Survey. Education level can be quantified in several ways, but we chose to focus on the percentage of people in the county with at least a bachelor's degree. Racial makeup is similarly ambiguous, but we collected the share of the county population that is white. Both the racial and educational makeup of a county were found in the 2012-2016 5-year American Community Survey.

Model

$$DV = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Income pc} + \beta_2 \text{Inequality} + \beta_3 \text{Unemployment} + \beta_4 \text{Social Capital} \\ + \beta_5 \text{Longterm Econ Changes} + \beta_6 \text{Social Capital Interactions} + \bar{X} + \varepsilon$$

where,

DV denotes one of two dependent variables of interest

β_1 *Income pc* denotes per capita income for each US county in 2016

β_2 *Inequality* denotes the level of income inequality for each US county in 2016

β_3 *Unemployment* denotes the rate of unemployment for each US county in 2016

β_4 *Social Capital* denotes the level of social capital for each US county in 2016

β_5 *Longterm Econ Changes* denotes the change in various factors (unemployment rate and income per capita) for each US county between either 1990 and 2016 (in the case of unemployment) or 1980 and 2016 (in the case of income)

β_6 *Social Capital Interactions* denotes various interaction terms, where social capital is interacted with each of the previous five variables

\bar{X} denotes other county-level control factors that may contribute to populism, such as population density, education level, and racial makeup

ε is an error term

This model is mostly borrowed from a working paper by Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020).

We retested its conclusions about the inputs of contemporary populism and compared these takeaways to an example of left-wing populism in America.

Research Methods

Large-sample statistical analysis of the above datasets is the primary means to answer our research question. We ran a series of multivariate regressions (all of which are derived from the

model above) to establish which inputs are predictive of populist backlash at the polls and how different independent variables interact to affect the dependent variables.

The first set of regression models sought to determine which factors affect the Trump margin. Eight models were tested, each with a different combination of the core variables, which include income inequality, unemployment, income per capita, unemployment, change, income change, unemployment change, and social capital. The eighth model includes all of these variables, as well as the control variables.

The second set of regression models incorporated the various social capital interaction terms from above to explore how differing levels of social capital affected other variables. Models 1-5 included all of the variables from the basic model and one of the five interaction variables. Models 6-8 included all of the variables from the basic model, excluding the long-term change variables, and one of the three static (not long-term change) interaction variables.

The third and fourth sets of regression models matched the first two, except the dependent variable was the difference between Bernie and Clinton vote shares.

RESULTS

In recreating the Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020) study, our results generally agreed with their conclusions about the correlates of populism in the 2016 general election, save for a few key differences (see Table 1.1 in appendix).

The economic results of our multivariate regression were similar to the findings from the Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020) paper. Across all eight models, income inequality yielded robust, negative correlations. In other words, as counties became more unequal, the difference in the margin between Trump and Romney decreased, so populist Trump did relatively worse than

Romney. This result tracked closely with the results from Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020). Income per capita also generated negative coefficients across the board, meaning higher-income counties were less likely to swing towards Trump in 2016. Again, the models from Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020) produced similar results. Our final economic indicator, unemployment, was positively related to the Trump margin in all of our models. Put plainly, Trump did comparatively better in counties with more unemployment. This revelation breaks with the Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020) analysis, which found no significant connection between the unemployment rate and the Trump margin.

Our long-term change variables produced surprising outcomes. The change in the county unemployment rate from 1990 to 2016 correlated negatively with the Trump margin for each model that included the variable. In other words, counties with higher unemployment in 2016 than in 1990 were less favorable for Trump. Similarly, the income per capita change from 1980 to 2016 yielded positive coefficients, implying counties that were richer (controlling for the effect of inflation) in 2016 than in 1980 were more likely to turn to populist Trump. These calculations are counter to the conclusions from Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020), which generally found that Trump did relatively better in economically deteriorating counties. Our data also cuts against the theoretical reasoning that once-thriving counties would be more willing to reject the status quo and vote for populist candidates.

Social capital, a key variable of interest in the model, largely turned out as expected. There was a strong, positive connection between social capital and the Trump margin; as the density of social connection in a county increases, so too does the relative support for Trump. This outcome matches the findings from Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020) and is in accordance with our theoretical assumptions.

The control variables in our regression analysis were closely aligned with the controls in the Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020) paper. In both studies, counties with a higher share of African Americans were shown to swing away from Trump. Education was also related to the Trump margin in both analyses, as more educated counties were less likely to vote for Trump in 2016. The one difference in our results was that population density had no significant effect on the difference between Trump and Romney. Based on existing scholarship, we had expected to find a negative correlation between population density and the Trump margin.

Table 1.2 (see appendix) introduced a number of social capital interaction terms into our regression analysis. In general, adding in these new variables did not change the findings of the basic model. The sign and significance of the coefficients remained consistent for all variables except income per capita, which became positive across the board when including the various interaction terms. So hypothetically, if social capital equals 0, an increase in county income would actually help Trump.

The coefficients of the interaction terms suggest that differing levels of social capital changed the strength of the relationship between other independent variables and the Trump margin. We found a negative correlation for social capital*income, so as social capital increases, the coefficient for per capita income becomes more negative. In other words, as social capital rises, an increase in county income is even worse for Trump. There was also a negative coefficient for the interaction between social capital and income inequality, which means that increasing economic inequality has more of a negative effect on the Trump margin in well-connected areas than it does in weakly-connected areas. The interaction terms involving our long-term change variables also had negative coefficients. As the density of social connection increases, increases in unemployment from 1990 to 2016 are even more damaging to the Trump

margin. Likewise, as social capital rises, the coefficient for income change from 1980 to 2016 becomes more negative. The social capital*unemployment term did not have a significant correlation, indicating there was no relationship between social capital and the effect of unemployment on the dependent variable.

The second prong of our study analyzed the drivers of populism on the left, specifically in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary. Some of the findings were analogous to the previous set of regressions, but the motivations to support Sanders were noticeably different than the motivations to support Trump (see Table 2.1 in appendix).

Counties that backed Sanders were not economically parallel to Trump counties. Across all eight models, income per capita had a positive relationship with the dependent variable, indicating that richer counties were more likely to favor Sanders. This outcome does not match our general election result, which found that populist Trump did better in poorer counties. Unemployment was another area of difference between the two sets of regressions. The vote share for Sanders was lower in counties with more unemployment, as evidenced by the robust, negative correlations in every model. One economic factor shared by Sanders and Trump counties was income inequality. As income inequality increased, the difference in vote share between Sanders and Clinton decreased. In other words, more unequal counties tended to swing away from Sanders.

There were also mixed results for the long-term change variables. The change in the county unemployment rate between 1990 and 2016 was negatively related to support for Sanders. Put simply, counties that saw an increasing unemployment rate over time were less likely to vote for Sanders. Likewise, Trump did worse in areas with an increasing unemployment rate over time. Changes in per capita income, however, did not align with the

outcome of our Trump regressions. This variable was negatively correlated with the difference between Clinton and Sanders, suggesting that areas with a higher income in 2016 than in 1980 were more likely to favor Clinton over Sanders.

Social capital again matched our initial expectations. Across the board, social capital and support for Sanders were positively connected; counties with more dense social ties were more inclined to break for Sanders. These findings matched the general election regressions.

Among the control variables, there was disagreement between the Trump and Sanders models. In both sets of regressions, the populist candidate did worse as the percentage of African Americans in the county grew. Yet, the education variable did not produce a similar result for Trump and Sanders. Unlike Trump, the Sanders models yielded a positive correlation between education and vote share, so counties with more college graduates tended to swing towards Sanders. Population density was not significantly related to support for Sanders. Although this result matched the 2016 general election results, it was still unexpected based on prior populism literature.

Table 2.2 (see appendix) displays the effects of our social capital interaction variables. There were some noticeable differences between the basic regression model and this set of regressions. For income per capita and unemployment, the inclusion of interaction terms switched the coefficient signs across all eight models. Also, social capital becomes insignificant in models 3 and 6 with the inclusion of the social capital*unemployment variable. There was little change among the rest of the variables when moving from the basic to the advanced models.

The interaction coefficients themselves illuminated how social capital works in tandem with other variables to affect support for Sanders. Social capital*unemployment had positive

coefficients in models 3 and 6. In other words, as social capital rises, increases in the unemployment rate are more helpful for Sanders. The social capital*income inequality interaction term was also positive, so an increase in social capital makes the relationship between inequality and Sanders' vote share more positive. There was a negative coefficient for the interaction between social capital and unemployment change, which means that rising unemployment from 1990 to 2016 had more of a negative effect on Sanders in well-connected areas than it did in weakly-connected areas. Neither social capital*income nor social capital*income change had a significant result, implying that there is no relationship between social capital and the effect of either income variable on the dependent variable.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The most straightforward narrative to emerge from our findings is that populism flourishes in well-connected areas. Social capital had a significant, positive relationship with the dependent variable in nearly every model. These findings make sense for a few reasons. As discussed above, with higher levels of social capital, individual pain is internalized by more members of the community, leading to widespread dissatisfaction. Another reason for the connection is that social capital facilitates the spread of information. Granovetter (1973) expounds on the 'strength of weak ties', arguing that minor friendships are useful in speeding the transfer of information and ensuring that people do not live in an ideological echo chamber. According to this logic, it seems reasonable that the two populist candidates would perform better in well-connected counties. Senator Sanders began the 2016 primary season with little name recognition, especially compared to Hillary Clinton, and a set of policies outside of the political mainstream. He likely benefitted from people talking about him and his policies

because both were unfamiliar before the election. Trump had been well-known for decades but garnered a reputation for controversy in the run-up to the 2016 election cycle. Rather than increasing name recognition, local discussions about Trump probably signaled to individuals that they were not alone in resonating with his sentiments. In short, social capital reassured people that it was okay to support Trump.

Despite the seemingly resounding results, the social capital coefficients should be taken with a grain of salt. For our study, we used an index with four inputs of social capital, but researchers have used countless proxies to study the concept (Gannon & Roberts, 2020). For a given community, the level of volunteering, club participation, voting rate, participation in political organizations and other parts of the political process, level of helping family members, level of helping friends, level of helping strangers, level of gift-giving to friends and family, level of charitable giving, census response rate, level of trust, and number of social establishments are a few of the myriad ways to measure social capital (Putnam, 2000; Gannon & Roberts, 2020). Gannon & Roberts (2020) inspected the relationship between health outcomes and many of these proxies for social capital, finding vastly different results depending on the variable that was used. They concluded that using only a few proxies was not sufficient to reliably measure social capital; instead, to better account for its multidimensionality, researchers should use multiple indices or one large index that combines the qualitative and quantitative components of social capital.

One such index that we could have used comes from a 2018 report compiled by the office of Utah Senator Mike Lee. This index is more complicated than the Rupasingha, et al. (2006), data, synthesizing over 25 indicators split over 7 broad categories: family unity (share of women married, share of children in single-family homes, etc.); family interaction (share who read to

their children, share of children who frequently watch TV, etc.); social support (number of close friends, share who trust their neighbors, etc.); community health (share who attended a political meeting, density of membership organizations, etc.); institutional health (census response rates, trust in public schools, etc.); collective efficacy (violent crime rate); and philanthropic health. Running the regression with this index or even some combination of the two indices may have generated more reliable results.

The connection between populism and economic conditions was not clear-cut, but the findings generally point to populist success in economically struggling areas, especially when accounting for the effects of social connection. This outcome is fairly similar to one of the central hypotheses of the paper. Originally, it was expected that counties which were struggling in the long run would be receptive to populist messaging, particularly when these counties were tightly-knit. Yet, it was actually counties with near-term economic issues that followed this reasoning.

There is evidence to suggest that both Sanders and Trump were buoyed by economic malaise¹¹. For Trump, the proof is strong; his improvement over Romney was most pronounced in areas with high unemployment and low per capita income. This result did not show up in the basic model for Sanders, but when including interaction terms, the populist candidate was helped by low income and high joblessness.

These findings were amplified by social capital. Low-income, high-connection counties were a powerhouse for Trump. The populist candidate generally did well in lower income communities, but this was especially true in communities with higher levels of social capital. A similar story could be told for Sanders and unemployment. The democratic socialist performed

¹¹ As I will discuss, there is also evidence to the contrary.

better in high unemployment counties with dense social ties than in high unemployment counties with sparse social ties.

Although this was not our original guess, the retrospective logic supporting these results is sound. Low wages and high unemployment are always politically unpopular, regardless of the prior conditions in the area. As incomes decrease and unemployment increases, more people are feeling the acute effects of these economic issues; as such, many more people are receptive to populist rhetoric. Social connection opens the door to even more populist converts. In counties with higher levels of social capital, there are more people who know people with economic struggles. Even if an individual is not personally afflicted, it is not enjoyable to have a friend who lost their job or cannot afford to pay their electric bill. Simply knowing someone with an issue and feeling empathetic towards their plight can be the impetus for supporting an outside-the-box candidate.

It is notable that Trump and Sanders have different interaction terms of significance. For Trump, social capital is correlated with the coefficient for income, whereas for Sanders, social capital affected the coefficient for unemployment. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is an idea known as the partisan Phillips curve. The partisan Phillips curve builds on the tenets of the Phillips curve, which posits an inverse relationship between inflation and unemployment (Phillips, 1958). According to the partisan Phillips Curve, right-wing voters and parties tend to care more about inflation, while left-wing voters and parties tend to worry more about unemployment (Tuft, 1978; Hibbs, 1982). Left-wing voters are traditionally in the working-class, so they are more likely to be negatively affected during periods of high unemployment. Professional-class voters on the right are removed from the effects of unemployment, but are upset when inflation cuts into their real income. This is in accordance with our results, which

show that Sanders counties care more about unemployment and Trump counties care more about real income.

The results for income inequality did not correspond with the results for other economic indicators. Across all of the models, income inequality was negatively correlated with populist support. This finding was opposed to the consensus reached by populist scholars, who theorize that income inequality energizes populist grievance. We thought that this assumption would hold, and be even starker at the micro-level (county) than at the macro-level (country).

Countries are relatively large and citizens may be ignorant to the wide diversity of living conditions within. Counties, on the other hand, are relatively small and citizens usually have a general idea of conditions throughout the jurisdiction. We expected that the visibility of inequality would cause status envy and status anxiety to be more present in the minds of residents, leading to populist grievance.

This peculiar finding could be explained by the racialized nature of inequality in the United States. Residential segregation is still common, driving much of the local inequality in America. Many of the most unequal counties are comprised of rich, white suburbs bordering impoverished, diverse cities. It is not surprising that Trump and Sanders would do poorly in these counties. Trump struggled in richer counties, as well as counties with more African Americans, so putting the two factors together was not a recipe for success. Sanders did slightly better in rich counties, but was largely unable to win the black vote, so it is plausible that he would flounder in diverse, inequitable counties.

The unevenness of our long-term change variables was surprising. Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020) painted a clear picture of community decline giving way to populist attitudes, which seems intuitive considering the previous scholarship. Our regression analysis muddied this clear

relationship. Long-term increases in unemployment were shown to hurt Trump, which is the opposite of what Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020) concluded. Additionally, there were instances of contradiction in the results for these variables. For example, Sanders did worse in counties with higher unemployment in 1990 than in 2016 but also in counties with rising real incomes over time; taken together, these outcomes do not suggest a clear connection between economic deterioration and populism.

These findings call into question the methods used in this thesis, and by extension, those used by Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020). Due to the volatility of the business cycle, choosing an arbitrary starting point may not be an accurate way to measure long-run economic performance. The change variables used in this study are a snapshot of the business cycle at two distinct moments rather than a true representation of long-term trends. In a given county, a 2016 boom¹² could have yielded lower unemployment levels than a 1990 bust¹³, even if the overall 25-year trend was towards economic degradation. Selecting two different starting years from the same county could produce radically different outcomes, and researchers could theoretically manipulate this reality to achieve their desired results. Therefore, any inferences drawn from this method are probably invalid.

Future studies would need to craft a better way to operationalize these variables. One possible way to accomplish this would be to take an average of the yearly percentage change for either unemployment or income. For example, if incomes increased by 1.1% from year 1 to year 2 and decreased by 0.5% from year 2 to year 3, the average over time would be an increase of 0.3%. This method would more effectively smooth fluctuations in the business cycle.

¹² 2016 was near the end of one of the longest economic expansions in US history (from 2009-2020), according to the St. Louis Fed (<https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/UNRATE>)

¹³ Throughout much of 1990, the US was in the midst of an abrupt recession where the unemployment rate jumped to around 8%, according to the St. Louis Fed (<https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/UNRATE>)

Complexity is the overarching theme of our results. The Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020) paper claims to have developed an unambiguous model of populism in the US, but our findings problematize this simplicity. We found significant discrepancies between our results and the Rodríguez-Pose, et al. (2020) study, between our results and theoretical reasoning, and between our results on the right and the left. Moreover, no variable had the same sign and significance across all 32 of our models, implying that no independent variable was a predictable correlate of populism in every context. The same variable can act differently depending on the configuration of other variables in the model.

Even the clearest themes in my data are not so clear. Several times I have mentioned that economic plight aids right- and left-wing populists, particularly when paired with high levels of social capital, but according our data, this is not always true. Sanders only did better in economically struggling areas when including interaction terms into the model. Comparably, the relationship between income and the Trump margin went from negative to positive when including interaction variables. The coefficient for social capital was also unstable, becoming insignificant with the inclusion of the social capital*unemployment term. There appears to be some connection between populism, social connection, and economic factors, but it does not hold in every situation.

Considering the earlier discussion of populism, complexity should not be a shock. The extensive literature has just one point of agreement: there are no points of agreement. Populism has no clear definition, manifesting differently depending on the country, era, populist leader, populist audience, and underlying ideology. When dealing with such an intricate political philosophy, universal trends or relationships are rare.

To fully understand the determinants of populism, more work needs to be done. Examining a broader array of populist cases can reveal how the correlates of populism change across different circumstances. More research should be done on populism across the political spectrum, but especially on left-wing populism. Right-wing populism is currently experiencing a renaissance in the West, making it an attractive topic of exploration, but the literature on progressive populism (particularly left-wing populism outside of Latin America) is underdeveloped. More research should be done across history, to comprehend how the demographics of populist support have changed over time. More research should be done across cultural contexts, to grasp how different factors drive populism in different countries. Future scholars could use our methods or similar methods to investigate the 2020 American election, the Brexit vote, the 2010 US midterm elections, various elections in Latin America, support for populist parties in any multiparty European system, support for the People's Party or Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan in 1800s America, or numerous other examples of populism.

One specific element that I regret excluding from the model, and that I hope future researchers pursue, is the change in social capital over time. This would be a tricky variable to obtain; the social capital inputs needed to create an index are not collected as regularly or as systematically as economic indicators. Consequently, it would be complicated to track the changes in social connection over a long time period. Even if there was one well-documented proxy, it would not be sufficient to comprehensively measure the nuances of social capital.

If it could be reliably measured, the long-term change in social capital would be valuable to study. Journalist Tim Carney alludes to the importance of this in his book, *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse*. In one of the first interviews he conducted for the book, he asks a man in a Trump hat about his impressions of modern America and why it is

no longer ‘great’. The man replies, “Well, when I was a kid, we had Memorial Day parades and all the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and all the Little Leagues would walk down and put American flags in the cemetery in town.”¹⁴ These wistful sentiments are derived from social loss rather than economic decline. Related themes are present throughout the populist literature, with stories of people who feel isolated and alone, who groan about the loss of pride in community and country, and who lament the societal changes that have left them behind. Some of this nostalgia is rooted in prejudice, as straight, white folks miss their hegemonic standing in nearly-homogenous communities. But some of the nostalgia is grounded in objective truths about social decay. Putnam uncovered a decades-long weakening of social capital in America (2000), noting steep drops in volunteerism, political engagement, religious participation, union membership, formal and informal friendships, and social trust. The thesis is sobering: we are not as connected to each other or to our communities as we used to be. Populism may be an outlet for this sense of loss. When the community around them is deteriorating, it is natural for people exercise their frustration at the ballot box.

Continuing to discover the motivations behind populism is not just an academic task; this research elucidates the issues that everyday people face. For various reasons, many of which are discussed above, there is significant pain across the country. Without it, there would be no desire to challenge the status quo. We may think that the reasons are silly or that populism is a foolhardy response, but this does not discount the pain nor make it disappear. It is important to meet people where they are and try to understand peoples’ struggles from their perspective. Not only will this give us a better grasp on populist resentment, it lays the foundation for building a society where we can all find prosperity and joy.

¹⁴ <https://www.vox.com/platform/amp/podcasts/2020/2/24/21147042/tim-carney-donald-trump-white-america-the-ezra-klein-show>

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APPENDIX

Table 1.1: Presidential 2016 General Election								
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	0.285*	0.286*	0.334*	0.278*	0.279*	0.323*	0.320*	0.110*
	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Income Inequality	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.024)

	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Income per Capita	0.258* **	0.235* **	0.518* **	0.288* **	0.260* **	0.518* **	0.480* **	0.070* *
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.028)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.030)
Unemployment Rate	0.264* **	0.274* **	0.303* **	0.457* **	0.485* **	0.475* **	0.498* **	0.166* **
	(0.061)	(0.060)	(0.059)	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.060)	(0.060)	(0.052)
Unemployment Rate Change (2016-1990)		- 0.249* **			- 0.329* **		- 0.277* **	- 0.244* **
		(0.046)			(0.045)		(0.045)	(0.038)
Income per Capita Change (2016-1980)			0.458* **			0.411* **	0.383* **	0.248* **
			(0.039)			(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.032)
Social Capital				0.994* **	1.069* **	0.905* **	0.974* **	0.907* **
				(0.078)	(0.078)	(0.077)	(0.078)	(0.065)
Population Density								-0.003 (0.044)
Education								- 0.760* **
								(0.023)
African American								- 0.063* **
								(0.006)
Constant	21.578 ***	20.776 ***	26.411 ***	21.027 ***	19.926 ***	25.412 ***	24.192 ***	14.799 ***
	(1.308)	(1.310)	(1.342)	(1.276)	(1.274)	(1.316)	(1.323)	(1.173)
Observations	3,109	3,109	3,109	3,109	3,109	3,109	3,109	3,109
R-squared	0.120	0.128	0.158	0.164	0.178	0.194	0.204	0.443

Dependent Variable: Difference between
Trump's and Romney's vote shares.
Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05

**Table 1.2: Presidential 2016 General
Election**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Income Inequality	0.102* ** (0.024)	0.101* ** (0.024)	0.108* ** (0.024)	0.099* ** (0.024)	0.107* ** (0.024)	0.074* ** (0.025)	0.070* ** (0.025)	0.072* ** (0.024)
Population Density	0.003 (0.044)	-0.002 (0.044)	-0.002 (0.044)	0.001 (0.044)	-0.009 (0.044)	-0.005 (0.045)	-0.004 (0.045)	-0.011 (0.045)
Education	0.758* ** (0.023)	0.769* ** (0.023)	0.758* ** (0.023)	0.765* ** (0.023)	0.765* ** (0.023)	0.782* ** (0.023)	0.785* ** (0.023)	0.788* ** (0.023)
African American	0.065* ** (0.006)	0.064* ** (0.006)	0.064* ** (0.006)	0.065* ** (0.006)	0.062* ** (0.006)	0.067* ** (0.006)	0.067* ** (0.006)	0.066* ** (0.006)
Income per Capita	0.056* (0.030)	0.073* * (0.030)	0.064* * (0.031)	0.060* * (0.030)	0.080* ** (0.030)	0.202* ** (0.022)	0.204* ** (0.022)	0.212* ** (0.022)
Income per Capita Change (2016-1980)	0.259* ** (0.032)	0.256* ** (0.032)	0.255* ** (0.033)	0.271* ** (0.033)	0.247* ** (0.032)			
Unemployment Rate	0.166* ** (0.052)	0.172* ** (0.052)	0.186* ** (0.054)	0.187* ** (0.052)	0.151* ** (0.052)	0.131* * (0.055)	0.133* * (0.053)	0.112* * (0.053)
Unemployment Rate Change (2016-1990)	0.305* **	0.246* **	0.241* **	0.251* **	0.243* **			

	(0.039)	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.038)			
Social Capital	0.860* **	1.234* **	0.730* **	1.886* **	3.084* **	0.864* **	1.239* **	3.188* **
	(0.065)	(0.141)	(0.154)	(0.290)	(0.748)	(0.153)	(0.290)	(0.761)
Interaction: Social Capital and Unemployment Change	- 0.145* **							
	(0.025)							
Interaction: Social Capital and Income Change		- 0.035* **						
		(0.014)						
Interaction: Social Capital and Unemployment			0.039 (0.031)			0.009 (0.031)		
Interaction: Social Capital and Income				- 0.038* **			-0.013 (0.011)	
				(0.011)				
Interaction: Social Capital and Income Inequality					- 0.050* **			- 0.052* **
					(0.017)			(0.017)
Constant	14.738 ***	14.418 ***	14.751 ***	14.436 ***	14.572 ***	12.610 ***	12.433 ***	12.414 ***
	(1.167)	(1.181)	(1.173)	(1.175)	(1.174)	(1.131)	(1.139)	(1.127)
Observations	3,109	3,109	3,109	3,109	3,109	3,109	3,109	3,109
R-squared	0.449	0.444	0.443	0.445	0.445	0.422	0.423	0.424
Dependent Variable: Difference between Trump's and Romney's vote shares. Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05								

Table 2.1: Presidential 2016 Democratic Primary Elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Income Inequality	2.504 ***	2.496* **	2.412* **	2.502* **	2.492* **	2.403* **	2.376* **	0.764* **
	(0.162)	(0.160)	(0.163)	(0.161)	(0.160)	(0.162)	(0.160)	(0.126)
Income per Capita	0.796 ***	0.965* **	1.307* **	0.758* **	0.931* **	1.299* **	1.576* **	0.585* **
	(0.103)	(0.105)	(0.161)	(0.103)	(0.105)	(0.161)	(0.163)	(0.154)
Unemployment Rate	1.823 ***	1.713* **	1.907* **	1.471* **	1.277* **	1.535* **	1.340* **	0.963* **
	(0.343)	(0.340)	(0.342)	(0.353)	(0.351)	(0.353)	(0.350)	(0.264)
Unemployment Rate Change (2016-1990)		- 1.795* **			- 1.929* **		- 2.055* **	- 0.628* **
		(0.257)			(0.258)		(0.258)	(0.191)
Income per Capita Change (2016-1980)			- 0.937* **			- 0.998* **	- 1.170* **	- 0.463* **
			(0.228)			(0.228)	(0.226)	(0.167)
Social Capital				1.946* **	2.354* **	2.085* **	2.544* **	2.000* **
				(0.499)	(0.497)	(0.498)	(0.496)	(0.364)
Population Density								0.247 (0.216)
Education								1.620* ** (0.119)
African American								- 1.421* **

								(0.029)
)
Constant	90.70 2*** (7.544)	83.829 *** (7.545)	81.627 *** (7.840)	89.919 *** (7.527)	82.368 *** (7.523)	80.199 *** (7.824)	70.479 *** (7.834)	27.921 *** (6.094)
Observations	2,811	2,811	2,811	2,811	2,811	2,811	2,811	2,811
R-squared	0.159	0.173	0.164	0.164	0.180	0.169	0.188	0.568
Dependent Variable: Difference between Sander's and Clinton's vote shares.								
Standard errors in parentheses								
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05								

Table 2.2: Presidential 2016 Democratic Primary Elections								
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Income Inequality	0.725* ** (0.125)	0.762* ** (0.127)	0.746* ** (0.126)	0.740* ** (0.127)	0.744* ** (0.126)	0.768* ** (0.125)	0.766* ** (0.126)	0.777* ** (0.125)
Population Density	0.272 (0.214)	0.248 (0.216)	0.268 (0.215)	0.257 (0.216)	0.278 (0.216)	0.325 (0.215)	0.320 (0.216)	0.342 (0.216)
Education	1.629* ** (0.118)	1.619* ** (0.120)	1.659* ** (0.119)	1.613* ** (0.119)	1.646* ** (0.119)	1.697* ** (0.118)	1.653* ** (0.118)	1.691* ** (0.118)
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
African American	1.435* ** (0.029)	1.422* ** (0.029)	1.446* ** (0.030)	1.428* ** (0.029)	1.427* ** (0.029)	1.465* ** (0.029)	1.447* ** (0.029)	1.445* ** (0.029)
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Income per Capita	0.661* ** (0.153)	0.584* ** (0.154)	0.690* ** (0.156)	0.617* ** (0.155)	0.641* ** (0.155)	0.971* ** (0.113)	0.940* ** (0.113)	0.983* ** (0.113)
	-	-	-	-	-			
Income per Capita Change (2016-1980)	0.375* * (0.166)	0.463* ** (0.167)	0.347* * (0.169)	0.414* * (0.170)	0.445* ** (0.167)			
Unemployment Rate	1.008* **	0.964* **	1.365* **	1.010* **	1.034* **	1.399* **	1.016* **	1.040* **

	(0.262)	(0.264)	(0.281)	(0.265)	(0.264)	(0.280)	(0.265)	(0.264)
Unemployment Rate Change (2016-1990)	- 1.121* **	- 0.629* **	- 0.603* **	- 0.647* **	- 0.633* **			
	(0.203)	(0.191)	(0.190)	(0.191)	(0.190)			
Social Capital	1.590* **	2.076* **	-1.101	4.471* **	11.241 ***	-1.573* **	4.568* **	11.668 ***
	(0.366)	(0.784)	(0.852)	(1.579)	(4.271)	(0.837)	(1.555)	(4.279)
Interaction: Social Capital and Unemployment Change	- 0.909* **							
	(0.135)							
Interaction: Social Capital and Income Change		-0.009 (0.080)						
Interaction: Social Capital and Unemployment			0.664* **			0.729* **		
			(0.165)			(0.163)		
Interaction: Social Capital and Income				-0.098 (0.061)			-0.110 (0.060)	
Interaction: Social Capital and Income Inequality					0.300* **			0.305* **
					(0.096)			(0.096)
Constant	27.022 ***	27.848 ***	26.985 ***	27.291 ***	27.718 ***	32.311 ***	33.544 ***	34.359 ***
	(6.047)	(6.131)	(6.082)	(6.104)	(6.085)	(5.815)	(5.843)	(5.801)
Observations	2,811	2,811	2,811	2,811	2,811	2,811	2,811	2,811
R-squared	0.574	0.568	0.570	0.568	0.569	0.568	0.565	0.567
Dependent Variable: Difference between Sander's and Clinton's vote shares.								
Standard errors in parentheses								
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05								