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Full Length Article

## Legislative populism, ideological alignment, and human freedom

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## ABSTRACT

Populist movements portray society as divided between “the people” and “the elites” and often seek to relax institutional constraints. This paper examines how right- and left-wing populism relate to human freedom, measured by the Human Freedom Index. Our main contribution is to study populism as a legislative phenomenon and to show that its institutional associations depend on ideological alignment within legislatures. Using panel data for 76 democratic countries since 2000, we construct indices of legislative populism and use factor analysis to derive data-driven dimensions of human freedom. The central finding is conditional. Populist representation is most strongly associated with weaker institutional outcomes when populist parties are ideologically aligned with same-side legislative majorities. Right-wing populism is associated with weaker rule of law, civil liberties, and security; left-wing populism with weaker security and smaller government. Election-year interaction tests yield similar implied effects in election and non-election years, consistent with limited confounding from election-year shocks and short-run electoral updating. Executive populism matters for some outcomes but does not eliminate the relevance of legislative populism.

## 1. Introduction

Populism has received a great deal of attention in recent years, as populist parties and politicians have become increasingly successful in elections around the world. A growing empirical literature documents that populist leaders and governments can weaken rule-of-law institutions and civil liberties and can affect economic-policy institutions. This study shifts the focus to the legislature. We examine how populist representation in national legislatures is associated with multidimensional human-freedom outcomes, and we test whether these associations depend on ideological alignment within the legislature, a condition that determines whether populist parties can rely on same-side legislative support.

The legislative focus is motivated by the fact that many democratic systems are characterized by coalition and minority governance. In such settings, policy and institutional change driven by populists often depend on legislative bargaining, agenda control, and support from non-populist parties. Legislative populism therefore captures a channel of influence that is distinct from, though related to, executive populism, and it provides a way of analyzing how mainstream parties can either enable or constrain populist influence through legislative support.

While there are many notions of populism, our understanding of the term is often called minimalist or ideational. As explained by [Rovira Kaltwasser \(2018\)](#), this view consists of two main parts. First, it sees society as divided between “the pure people” and “the

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corrupt elite” and makes a moral distinction, portraying the people as honest and virtuous, and the elite as deceitful.<sup>1</sup> Second, it also holds that politics should fully reflect the will of the people, making popular sovereignty the ultimate authority. This leads to tension with liberal democracy, which relies on independent institutions and checks on power. Populists often view these institutions as protecting elite interests and seek to weaken or control them.<sup>2</sup> This conceptualization of populism characterizes it as a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde, 2004), meaning it can be combined with more comprehensive ideologies, such as nationalism, socialism, or some form of conservatism.

Following Rodrik (2018) and others, we therefore distinguish between left- and right-wing populism. In the former, populism is integrated with socialist ideals and identifies “the people” with those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. In the latter, it is combined with nationalist-conservative ideals, identifying “the people” with the dominant native population.<sup>3</sup>

Against this background, the present study is an attempt to empirically study if left- and right-wing populism is negatively related to human freedom. By “human freedom,” we refer to a comprehensive set of negative rights under the rule of law. This concept can be seen as a conceptualization of freedom close to Berlin's (1958) idea of negative liberty, implying that individuals are free to lead their lives as they wish, both in the economic and non-economic spheres, as long as they respect the equal rights of others.

Our theoretical expectations are threefold. First, we anticipate that both left- and right-wing populists will seek to undermine the rule of law, as a central characteristic of populism is its resistance to institutional constraints – particularly those that enforce checks and balances between the political and judicial branches and the separation of powers. Second, we expect primarily right-wing populists to challenge other dimensions of civil liberties, driven by a desire to limit the influence of the media, dissenting voices, and civil society. We also expect them to want to curtail relationship freedoms, which stems from their exclusionary conception of “the people”, which renders protections for minorities less desirable. Third, we posit that primarily left populists are more likely to want to restrict economic freedom, consistent with their socialist orientation that associates market liberalization with socioeconomic inequality and elite-driven exploitation. That said, right-wing populists sometimes also critique market liberalism and may aim to restrain economic freedom. In all, this points to an expectation of negative relationships between the strength of populist parties and key aspects and indicators of freedom.

To test this, we use the Human Freedom Index and its constituent parts as our dependent variables, each measured by an annual score on a 0–10 scale for up to 165 countries between 2000 and 2022. This index consists of two main parts: one measuring personal freedom and one measuring economic freedom. The first part consists of three areas with seven components: rule of law and security (with components rule of law and security and safety); civil liberties (with components the right to movement, freedom of religion, the right to association and assembly and freedom of expression) and relationship freedoms. The second part consists of five components: size of government, legal system and property rights, sound money, freedom to trade internationally and regulation. Each of these components in turn consists of subcomponents, published by recognized data sources. We employ factor analysis on these twelve components of the Human Freedom Index to uncover the underlying dimensions of human freedom empirically, thereby reducing measurement noise and addressing the risk that predefined subindices may obscure important patterns by conflating distinct but correlated aspects of freedom.<sup>4</sup>

Our main explanatory variable captures the degree of populism in national legislatures, based on data from Celico et al. (2024).<sup>5</sup> These data cover nearly all political parties represented in legislatures across 169 countries, with populism measured on a 1–10 scale. Using additional ideology data, we classify populist parties as either left- or right-wing. To calculate the average degree of left- and right-wing populism within a legislature, we weight the respective populism scores by each party's share of legislative seats. We further construct a measure of legislative ideology as a seat-share-weighted average of party ideology in the legislature. This measure is interacted with the populism variables to examine whether the relationship between left- and right-wing populism and human freedom is moderated by the overall ideological orientation of the legislature.

The final sample includes 76 countries for which full data are available in the period 2000–2020 and which exhibit recognizable, modern Western-style party systems with democratic, multi-party political institutions, although not all countries in all years have free and fair elections.

Our key findings show that right-wing populist representation is associated with weaker rule of law and regulation and weaker civil liberties, and these associations are strongest when the legislature is more right-leaning, consistent with an alignment mechanism in which same-side support relaxes effective legislative constraints. For security, the pattern is similar. The negative association of right-

<sup>1</sup> One can add that “the people” is often conceived of in an idealized homogeneous way, which means that minorities that are perceived as not fitting in are often excluded from the populist conception of “the people”.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Huber and Schimpf (2017). For broader discussions of what populism is, see, e.g., Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) and Müller (2017).

<sup>3</sup> Differentiating between left- and right-wing populism is analytically significant, as empirical evidence indicates that these two strands of populist parties exhibit distinct legislative behaviors. Moreover, the ideological orientation along the left–right spectrum often proves more consequential than their common populist attributes (Otjes and Louwerse, 2015; Huber and Schimpf, 2017; Gründler et al., 2024).

<sup>4</sup> When a result pertains to a single component of an area (e.g., rule of law only), we say so explicitly. The terminology changes somewhat in our factor analysis (as specified below).

<sup>5</sup> An alternative would be to measure populist influence by whether executive power (the prime minister or president) is held by populists. We do not pursue this for three reasons. First, populists rarely hold executive office alone, limiting empirical scope. Second, coalition governments complicate attribution of executive influence. Third, our focus is on broader legislative dynamics, where populists can shape outcomes even without a legislative majority, when aligned with the dominant ideology (left or right; cf. Celico, 2024; de Lange and Böckmann, 2025, who suggest that populists in opposition are arguably a neglected threat to liberal democracy). This legislative focus means that we probably underestimate the political consequences of populist parties, since most of the parties we study are not part of the executive.

wing populism is concentrated in more right-leaning legislatures. Left-wing populism is most robustly associated with weaker security across much of the ideology distribution. For government size, the marginal effects for left-wing populism are generally negative over much of the ideology distribution, implying smaller government. Overall, effect sizes within legislative cycles are typically moderate, consistent with incremental institutional drift rather than abrupt institutional breakdown. We nevertheless think that moderate within-cycle shifts can be policy-relevant when institutional change is persistent and slow to reverse. Additional specifications incorporating government ideology and populism show that executive populism matters for some outcomes, but the main patterns for legislative populism remain.

We also probe for reverse causality by noting that the political variables shift only in election years, implying that most endogeneity bias would derive from election-year observations. The estimates nevertheless show that the implied election-year and non-election-year effects are very similar. Still, longer-run feedback cannot be ruled out in our observational data.

A growing body of research investigates how populism affects institutions that underpin freedom and democracy.<sup>6</sup> Most closely related to our study, [Gründler et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Celico and Rode \(2023\)](#) demonstrate that populist governments, especially those with left-leaning economic views, tend to restrict economic freedom, though strong institutional constraints can moderate this effect. Other studies focus more on the legal dimension: [Kyriacou and Trivin \(2025\)](#) find that populists weaken the rule of law, particularly in countries where legal institutions are historically fragile, while [Huber and Schimpf \(2017\)](#) show that both left- and right-wing populists erode institutional checks, though right-wing populists are more likely to undermine minority rights.

Several scholars have also examined the broader democratic implications of populism. [Lacey \(2019\)](#) highlights how populist discourse and agenda-setting can subtly but persistently corrode legal norms and conventions. Further research on Central and Eastern Europe, notably by [Krygier \(2019\)](#) and [Grzymala-Busse \(2019\)](#), underscores how populists in Poland and Hungary have dismantled checks on executive power and reshaped legal systems, turning early post-communist success stories into cautionary tales. Other studies, such as [Magalhães and Garoupa \(2024\)](#), focus on the judiciary, finding that attacks on judicial independence erode public trust, especially among those less aligned with the ruling populist parties.

Prior studies provide substantial evidence that populist executives and governments are associated with weaker liberal-democratic institutions. Our point of departure is that these effects plausibly depend on legislative configurations and bargaining environments, and that executive-centric designs may miss influence that arises through legislative mechanisms, coalition support, and mainstream accommodation. We therefore focus on populist representation in the legislature and study ideological alignment as the key condition under which legislative populism is associated with institutional outcomes. A secondary contribution is measurement and interpretation. By applying factor analysis to the Human Freedom Index components, we produce empirically grounded latent dimensions of freedom, thereby reducing reliance on predefined subindices and providing a novel mapping of which institutional bundles are most strongly related to populist legislative strength.

## 2. Literature and theoretical framework

### 2.1. Literature

The consequences of populism for institutional quality and freedom have become a growing focus of scholarly inquiry. A consistent finding is that populist incumbency is associated with weaker freedom-relevant institutions, with effects that vary by ideology and by the constraints imposed by political and legal institutions. For economic freedom, [Celico and Rode \(2023\)](#) show that populist governments are associated with lower economic freedom, while documenting that political constraints and ideology mediate these effects, consistent with institutional guardrails buffering but not eliminating populist encroachments. [Castro and Martins \(2021a\)](#) likewise link government ideology to economic freedom and show that mainstream left governments exhibit weak or statistically negligible associations with economic freedom, whereas populist left governments in office are associated with significantly lower economic freedom. Consistent with this, [Gründler et al. \(2024\)](#) report that lower economic freedom under left-leaning governments is primarily driven by populist parties. Moving beyond economic freedom, [Kyriacou and Trivin \(2025\)](#) show that populist episodes are associated with deteriorations in rule-of-law outcomes, with larger declines where legal traditions are weaker. [Huber and Schimpf \(2017\)](#) similarly find that populists undermine institutional constraints across ideological variants, with particularly adverse effects on minority rights under right-wing populism.

A related literature emphasizes that ideology itself is systematically connected to liberalization and freedom-relevant outcomes. [Castro and Martins \(2021\)](#) extend the analysis beyond democracies and show that ideology conditions liberalization within both democratic and authoritarian settings, reinforcing that who controls political authority and veto points can shape the direction and persistence of reform. Taken together, this work motivates treating ideology as more than a background covariate. Rather, ideology

<sup>6</sup> There is also a substantial literature on the causes of populism, which falls outside the scope of this study; for a survey, see [Guriev and Papaioannou \(2022\)](#). The two main explanatory frameworks emphasize either socioeconomic deprivation or a cultural backlash against ethnic, and in some cases other forms of, diversity. To mention some examples, [Berman \(2021\)](#) finds that while economic grievances often show only modest effects, sociocultural grievances tend to exhibit more consistent empirical associations with populist support; EU membership is associated with an increase in right-wing populist vote share ([Bergh and Kärnä, 2021](#)); weakened rule of law precipitates escalations in populist rhetoric ([Reck et al., 2025](#)); perceived crises of democratic legitimacy activate and strengthen a people-versus-elites narrative in political speeches and texts ([Hawkins et al., 2017](#)); and economic insecurity increases voter support for populist parties promising protective economic measures, such as expanded social safety nets and trade restrictions ([Margalit, 2019](#)).

structures the feasible set of policy adjustments and institutional reforms and, in interaction with populism, may produce effects that differ from those implied by ideology alone.

Lacey (2019) delves into how populist leaders pressure the rule of law through agenda-setting and norm erosion, identifying mechanisms such as policy shifts and convention trashing that weaken legal checks. Houle and Kenny (2018) show that populist regimes in Latin America reduce institutional and legal constraints on executive authority but do not improve political participation or redistribution, thereby challenging common assumptions about populism's egalitarian agenda. Adamidis (2021) adds a theoretical perspective, arguing that while populism and democracy both invoke sovereignty, populism's absolutist version strains compatibility with robust rule-of-law ideals, though in some contexts populists maintain superficial legal compliance.

Hawkins and Mitchell (2025) synthesize a growing consensus that populist incumbents erode civil liberties, media freedom, and horizontal accountability across regions. Their review underscores how both left- and right-wing populists weaken liberal democratic institutions, including judicial independence and constraints on executive authority.

Related work documents broader consequences of populist rule for economic performance, bureaucratic quality, and firm behavior, often linking these outcomes to institutional erosion and volatility (e.g., Funke et al., 2023; Magistro and Menaldo, 2025). This reinforces the relevance of identifying the institutional margins through which populist influence operates.

Krygier (2019) and Grzymala-Busse (2019) both underscore how Hungary and Poland, once seen as democratic success stories, have become emblematic cases of populist-driven institutional decay, with governments hollowing out judicial independence and other checks on power. Prendergast (2019) discusses how populist claims to embody the popular will challenge core principles of constitutional democracy, suggesting a vital role for courts in protecting democracy from erosion. Blokker (2019) introduces the notion of "populist constitutionalism," showing how populist regimes both attack and reconfigure constitutional norms to fit their agenda. Gutmann et al. (2024) report that populist supporters in Germany and Poland value the rule of law less, a finding that reinforces the sociopolitical underpinnings of institutional fragility.

Other strands of research explore consequences beyond core freedoms. Štrobl et al. (2023) and Morawski and Brzezinski (2024) assess redistributive outcomes, with Štrobl et al. finding that Latin American populists' claims of redistribution are largely rhetorical, while Morawski and Brzezinski identify no poverty reductions in Poland driven by populist welfare policies. Bellodi et al. (2024) and Sasso and Morelli (2021) show how populist leaders' disregard for expert advice degrades bureaucratic quality. Xiong et al. (2025) find that populism impairs firm innovation by fostering institutional volatility, and Schütz and Pape (2024) identify a populism risk premium in financial markets. Corina et al. (2025) reveal that strong political institutions can partially shield firms from populist damage, though populist leaders typically seek to weaken these constraints.

Finally, Celico (2024), de Lange and Böckmann (2025), and Ruth-Lovell and Wiesehomeier (2025) note that even populist parties in opposition influence political dynamics, while Lewkowicz et al. (2024) document how entrenched anti-pluralist populism correlates with declining constitutional compliance. Bílková (2019) and Alston (2017) address how populists distort human rights discourses, and Cachanosky et al. (2025) show that left-wing populists in Latin America impose lasting institutional damage. Berggren and Bjørnskov (2022) and Tähtinen (2025) contribute insights on the role of ideology, with Berggren and Bjørnskov linking right-leaning legislatures to academic freedom, and Tähtinen showing that populist success in local councils narrows ideological diversity.

Put together, this literature substantiates the concern that populism, across ideological lines, can threaten institutional safeguards of human freedom. At the same time, most existing evidence is derived from executive-centered designs that study populist incumbency or populist governments. This includes work linking ideology to economic freedom and showing that populism can condition ideological effects, for example the distinction between mainstream and populist left incumbents in Castro and Martins (2021b) and related evidence in Gründler et al. (2024), as well as broader regime-scope evidence on ideology and liberalization in Castro and Martins (2021). Less well understood, however, is how populist representation in the legislature relates to institutional outcomes, and under what political configurations legislative populism is most consequential. This gap matters because coalition and minority governance is common, and because legislative bargaining and pivotal support can condition executive initiatives and policy outcomes more generally.

The present study addresses this gap by treating populism as a legislative phenomenon and by testing whether ideological alignment within the legislature conditions the populism–freedom relationship. Relative to Castro and Martins (2021,b), who analyze government ideology, executive incumbency, and economic freedom and show that populism can amplify ideological regularities, we examine whether analogous conditioning arises through legislative representation and whether it extends to a broader concept of human freedom. This contribution complements studies such as Celico and Rode (2023), Gründler et al. (2024), Kyriacou and Trivin (2025), and Castro and Martins (2021,b) by highlighting a legislative channel and by showing that the association between populism and institutional outcomes is concentrated in ideologically aligned legislatures.

## 2.2. Theoretical framework

Populism, whether left- or right-wing, is fundamentally premised on a dichotomy between a virtuous, unified "people" and a corrupt or self-serving "elite" (Mudde, 2004; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). This binary framing casts politics as a moral struggle to reclaim sovereignty for the people, often at the expense of liberal-democratic safeguards (Eichengreen, 2018; Lacey, 2019). By depicting elites as obstacles to genuine democracy, populists frequently justify bypassing or dismantling institutional checks and balances, which could erode the rule of law, civil liberties, and economic freedom (Huber and Schimpf, 2017; Hawkins and Mitchell, 2025).

Left-wing populists typically construe the elite in economic terms, associating it with capitalist interests, large corporations, and "neoliberal" institutions. Their vision of justice emphasizes redistributive policies and state-led economic intervention, often involving the weakening of institutional constraints that defend private property, free markets, and judicial autonomy. This reflects a broader

skepticism toward institutions viewed as upholding elite privilege, including elements of the security apparatus, such as the police, which are often seen as guardians of entrenched economic power. Consequently, left-wing populists can be expected to challenge both economic freedom and aspects of legal order related to security.

Right-wing populists, by contrast, frame the elite more in cultural and cosmopolitan terms, targeting intellectuals, bureaucrats, and “globalist” actors perceived as prioritizing minority rights and international norms over national identity. Their strategies often aim to reinforce a homogeneous national identity, involving restrictions on freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, particularly where these enable dissent or empower marginalized groups. While pursuing greater executive discretion, right-wing populists also share with their left-wing counterparts a suspicion of market liberalism, though typically framed through a conservative lens that emphasizes protecting traditional social and economic orders rather than pursuing egalitarian redistribution. Both ideological variants thus exhibit skepticism toward liberal-democratic institutions, portraying constitutional checks, judicial review, and independent agencies as elitist mechanisms that thwart the popular will (Mudde, 2019). Weakening these institutions allows greater discretion in governance but simultaneously undermines legal predictability, personal security, and public trust (Keefer et al., 2021).

The key conceptual extension in this paper concerns why, and how, populist representation *in the legislature* should matter over and above the identity or ideology of the executive. The legislature is the central arena for institutional change in democratic systems. Populist parties operate within it, and durable changes to formal rules, budgets, oversight arrangements, appointments, and the legal environment typically require legislative approval. In addition, coalition and minority governance, common in many countries, means that executive initiatives are frequently negotiated in the legislature and depend on legislative support. Accordingly, legislatures are not merely arenas for “rubber-stamping” executive initiatives. In parliamentary and semi-parliamentary systems, legislatures are central to forming and sustaining governments, passing and amending legislation that structures rights, enforcement, and regulation, allocating resources through budgets, and shaping oversight and accountability through committees and investigative powers. Even where executives have considerable decree or administrative authority, many institutional changes relevant to human freedom are most effectively implemented, insulated, and made persistent when they are embedded in legislation, personnel rules, or budgetary commitments that pass through the legislature. Similarly, in presidential systems, divided government frequently occurs. When the presidency and the legislature are controlled by different parties or blocs, legislative bargaining and veto power become more consequential, increasing constraints on executive initiatives and making institutional change more dependent on legislative agreement.

These channels imply three distinct but complementary ways in which “legislative populism” can affect outcomes. First, a government or executive channel. When populists are in government, legislative support determines how far executive initiatives can be translated into durable legal and institutional changes. Second, a legislative bargaining and agenda-setting channel operating even when populists are not in government. Populist parties may be pivotal coalition partners, support parties of minority governments, or be influential committee actors. In these roles, they can extract policy concessions, shape the agenda by making certain issues salient or politically costly to ignore, and participate in logrolling that trades support across policy domains (Tullock, 1981; McGann, 2019). In practice, focusing only on the executive may understate the institutional consequences of populism when executive action depends on legislative support, whether because cabinets are minority or coalition (common in parliamentary and semi-parliamentary systems), because partisan control of the executive and legislature is divided (possible in presidential systems), or because populists exert influence through legislative pivotality rather than direct cabinet control. A third, complementary channel is strategic accommodation. Populist electoral advances, reflected in greater legislative representation, can alter the incentives of non-populist parties by increasing the salience of certain issues and by raising the expected electoral costs of maintaining prior platforms. Mainstream parties may then partially adjust their legislative agendas, voting behavior, coalition red lines, or subsequent programs in the populist direction, even while continuing to distance themselves rhetorically. Evidence consistent with such accommodation has been documented in recent work on France, where mainstream candidates reposition in response to far-right competition (Edo et al., 2025; cf. Celico, 2024). This mechanism does not require populists to be in government or even be pivotal in the legislature. It operates through competition for voters and can be more likely when accommodation is relatively low-cost within an ideologically congruent bloc.

An important implication is that populist influence should be conditional on the broader ideological configuration of the legislature. Populist parties rarely command majorities alone, but their ability to translate preferences into institutional and policy change can be magnified when they are supported by a same-side legislative majority. We interpret this as an alignment mechanism. When the populist party can rely on majority support from parties on the same side of the left–right spectrum, fewer effective legislative constraints impede implementation in the policy area at issue. In such settings, two mechanisms are at work. One is *transactional*: Agreement is easier on first-order distributive or cultural goals, which lowers the bargaining costs of granting the populist party influence over rule changes, enforcement discretion, or institutional appointments in exchange for support on other items. The other is *strategic*: Mainstream parties may partially accommodate some populist positions to reduce electoral pressure, thereby shifting the feasible policy set in the populist direction even without any assumption of ideational “contamination”.

At the same time, ideological congruence within a bloc does not imply automatic diffusion of populist ideas. Non-populist parties frequently attempt to contain populists through exclusion strategies, explicit distancing, or cross-party agreements to keep populists out of coalitions and key posts. Such resistance is more likely when reputational costs of cooperation are high, when coalition alternatives exist, when internal party discipline is strong, and when constitutional, judicial, or legislative procedures raise the costs of changing core institutional constraints. Under these conditions, populist parties may remain isolated and their influence on freedoms may be limited even if they share a coarse left–right orientation with the median legislator. In contrast, when mainstream bloc cohesion is organized primarily around left–right programmatic agreement, when governments are minorities or rely on *ad hoc* legislative majorities, or when committee and agenda powers are allocated proportionally, populist parties can become “useful” coalition or bargaining partners and thereby gain influence over institutional margins that matter for human freedom. The empirical content of

our alignment interaction is therefore not that populism necessarily “spreads” ideationally within blocs, but that ideologically aligned configurations are more likely to relax effective vetoes and facilitate either accommodation or transactional bargaining that grants populists greater policy or institutional influence.

This framework yields the following expectations. First, both left- and right-wing populists should be associated with weaker institutional components of human freedom, but with different emphases. Left-wing populists primarily focus on economic intervention and security governance, while right-wing populists primarily strive to affect civil liberties, legal constraints, and institutional independence. Second, these associations should be strongest when populists operate in legislative settings that reduce effective intra-legislative constraints on the relevant margin, which we operationalize by the legislature’s overall ideological orientation. Third, because the mechanisms include bargaining, agenda-setting, and mainstream accommodation, legislative populism can matter both through the executive and independently of it, particularly under coalition and minority governance.

### 3. Data and empirical strategy

To test our hypotheses, we use data from multiple sources. Our dependent variable is human freedom, measured by the Human Freedom Index (HFI) (Vásquez et al., 2024). The HFI is constructed as the average of two subindices: a personal freedom subindex and an economic freedom subindex. The economic freedom subindex corresponds to the well-known Economic Freedom of the World (EFW) index (Gwartney et al., 2024), while the personal freedom subindex is constructed within the HFI framework from a set of underlying indicators.

The personal freedom subindex consists of seven components: (1) rule of law, (2) security and safety, (3) the right to movement, (4) freedom of religion, (5) the right to association and assembly, (6) freedom of expression, and (7) the right to identity and relationships. We refer to (1) and (2) as rule of law and security, to (3)–(6) as civil liberties, and to (7) as relationship freedoms. The economic freedom subindex (EFW) consists of five components: (1) size of government, (2) legal system and property rights, (3) sound money, (4) freedom to trade internationally, and (5) regulation. All components, the two subindices, and the HFI overall are measured on a 0–10 scale and are based on published data from other sources. Additional details are provided in Table A1 in the Appendix.

The HFI is available for up to 165 countries for 2000–2022, although the availability of other covariates restricts our analysis sample. It is presently the only comprehensive measure of the concept that captures both main components (personal and economic freedom) and covers many countries and years.<sup>7</sup>

The EFW index has been published since 1996 and has been widely used in the academic literature (cf. Lawson, 2022; Berggren, 2024). By contrast, the HFI is a more recent development and is available from 2000 onward. Conceptually, the HFI follows a similar aggregation approach as EFW, scoring 86 indicators that are aggregated into 12 components (seven personal and five economic) and then into the two subindices and the overall index.

We combine these data with populism data from the newly developed database in Celico et al. (2024). Their machine-learning index provides continuous (0–10) time-varying scores at the party level for 169 countries, 1970–2019. The data capture a “supply side” of populism by measuring the degree of populism of parties that voters can actually vote for. To construct the indicator, the authors began with the Populism and Party Experts Survey (Meijers and Zaslove, 2021) and the Global Party Survey (Norris, 2020), which capture ideational and rhetorical populism, respectively (see the Introduction). The surveys nevertheless provide populism scores for a relatively limited set of political parties and only the years in which they were administered. To broaden the scope, Celico et al. used a Random Forest Regression algorithm, a type of supervised machine learning, to model the relationship between party characteristics and their populism scores as measured by these expert surveys. By training the model on existing data from the Populism and Party Experts and Global Party surveys, it learned to predict how populist a party is based on features such as anti-elitism, people-centrism, anti-pluralism, and personalization of leadership, among others. Once the model was trained, it could estimate populism scores for many more parties across a wide range of countries and year.<sup>8</sup>

Matched to party-level ideology data for 78 countries, based on Berggren and Bjørnskov (2017) and updated by us to extend party and year coverage to our sample, the populism data allow us to calculate the average degree of populism among parties represented in the legislature, separated into left- and right-wing parties and weighted by their share of seats. The ideology data are coded explicitly on party placement on economic policies and institutions. Berggren and Bjørnskov (2017) sort parties into five categories: communist and unreformed socialist parties (with a value  $-1$ ), reformed socialist parties ( $-0.5$ ), modern social democratic parties (0), conservative parties ( $+0.5$ ), and parties with a foundation in some form of classical liberalism ( $+1$ ). We use these exact distinctions to classify parties as left-wing (the first three categories) or right-wing (the latter two categories). To capture the legislature’s overall ideological

<sup>7</sup> While the *Varieties of Democracy* project includes a number of similar indicators as the HFI, the personal freedom index of the latter actually includes 18 variables from the former as the basis of its 46 subcomponents (Coppedge et al., 2025). *De facto*, the two are therefore similar by construction. As a robustness and validation test of the HFI, we use an average of four indicators of civil liberties from the annual reports of Freedom House (2025), covering Freedom of expression and belief, Association and organizational rights, Rule of law, and Personal autonomy and individual rights.

<sup>8</sup> A third source of populism scores is Funke et al. (2023) who code a dummy for periods in which the head of government or head of state was clearly populist. While this source only captures executive populism and only overlaps with about two thirds of our data, we note that when Funke et al. code the executive as populist, our measure of government populism increases approximately one point, and our measure of legislative populism increases about half a point. Broadly, the two very different approaches thus yield comparable patterns, thereby providing some validation of our data.

orientation, our baseline measure of legislative ideology is the seat-share-weighted average of party ideology scores, that is, the sum of each party's ideology score weighted by its share of seats in the legislature.<sup>9</sup> In countries with bicameral legislatures, we exclusively code the lower house. Conceptually, this measure summarizes the legislature's overall position on the economic-policy and institutional dimension emphasized in the coding and is scaled so that higher values indicate a more right-leaning legislature. For an extended analysis, we construct an analogous measure of government ideology by applying the same seat-share-weighted averaging procedure to the parties comprising the government, using their legislative seat shares as weights.

We add a small set of control variables to form a parsimonious specification and thus avoid bad controls. From the Penn World Tables, mark 10, we add the logarithm of real purchasing-power-adjusted GDP per capita, as well as the logarithm of population size and trade volumes as a percent of GDP (Feenstra et al., 2015). The economic data are all lagged by one year to avoid simultaneity bias. From Bjørnskov and Rode's (2020) database of regime types and regime transitions, we next form two dummies capturing whether a country in a given year was either a multi-party autocracy or a full electoral democracy; the comparison category is therefore single-party regimes and regimes without elections. These data also enable us to create a dummy variable for election years. Using this specification, we estimate all models by ordinary least squares with country and year fixed effects. This last choice ensures that we do not simply capture joint global changes or stable national features such as culture, geography or stable policy traditions.

It bears noting that our design thereby evaluates changes over a single electoral cycle, so the coefficients should be read as medium-run effects of populist representation and its ideological alignment. Several components of human freedom, especially legal-constitutional ones, tend to adjust according to specified procedures which take time, which can push effects beyond one term. Thus, if reforms are gradual or back-loaded, our estimates likely understate the full longer-run impacts.

The availability of data gives us a sample of up to 1590 observations from 78 countries observed between 2000 and 2020 out of which 1158 observations from 76 countries also have full populism data. It is thus mainly the combination of availability of populism data and ideology, which is only available for countries with a formally democratic political system and a recognizably developed Western party system, that delimits our sample. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

Turning to the empirical strategy, we estimate the following panel-regression equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Freedom}_{it} = & \alpha_i + \lambda_t + \beta_1 \cdot \text{LeftPop}_{it} + \beta_2 \cdot \text{RightPop}_{it} + \beta_3 \cdot \text{Ideology}_{it} \\ & + \beta_4 \cdot (\text{LeftPop}_{it} \times \text{Ideology}_{it}) + \beta_5 \cdot (\text{RightPop}_{it} \times \text{Ideology}_{it}) \\ & + \gamma' X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}, \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where  $\text{Freedom}_{it}$  is the Human Freedom Index (or a factor based on it) in country  $i$  in year  $t$ ,  $\text{LeftPop}_{it}$  and  $\text{RightPop}_{it}$  are the seat-share-weighted populism measures within left and right parties, respectively,  $\text{Ideology}_{it}$  is the seat-share-weighted average of party ideology scores in the legislature (higher values indicate a more right-leaning legislature),  $X_{it}$  is a vector of control variables that includes (at minimum) log GDP per capita, log population, trade volume, and regime-type indicators such as multi-party autocracy and electoral democracy,  $\alpha_i$  are country fixed effects and  $\lambda_t$  are year fixed effects.

In our empirical analysis, we use the ideological composition of the legislature to condition the effect of populism. This is motivated by evidence that freedom outcomes vary with ideology, and that these ideological patterns can differ in the presence of populism. Castro and Martins (2021b), for example, document systematic links between government ideology and economic freedom and show that these associations differ between mainstream and populist incumbents (cf. Gründler et al., 2024). Our interaction terms therefore test whether the marginal association between populist legislative strength and human freedom varies with the legislature's overall ideological orientation. We use a linear interaction for three reasons. First, both variables are functions of seat shares, and the seat-share-weighted ideology measure changes linearly with marginal seat-share shifts by construction, making a linear interaction a natural first-order specification. Second, the theoretical mechanism suggests smooth, directionally consistent heterogeneity over the empirically relevant range, which favors a parsimonious specification. Third, higher-order terms are difficult to estimate precisely in a fixed effects setting like ours. For interpretation, we report marginal effects of populism at selected values of the ideology variable.

Finally, although our estimates are identified by within-country, year-to-year changes in freedom and covariates, reverse causality remains an issue if freedom affects subsequent electoral outcomes. We argue that the structure of our data provides a diagnostic. Because our political variables change discretely at elections and are otherwise fixed within legislative terms, we can test whether the estimated associations differ in election years versus non-election years by interacting the key political regressors with an election-year indicator. Similar implied effects across election and non-election years would be consistent with limited confounding from election-year shocks and short-run electoral reverse causality, while not ruling out slower-moving feedback from institutions to politics or omitted time-varying factors. The validity of this type of test rests on election timing being exogenous, which it evidently is in fixed-schedule election systems such as the United States. We therefore provide evidence in the appendix, Table A5, that prior human

<sup>9</sup> To be precise,  $\text{Legislative ideology}_{it} = \sum_p (\text{Seats share}_{pit} \times \text{Ideology score}_{pit})$ , where  $\text{Seats share}_{pit}$  is party  $p$ 's share of seats in the legislature of country  $i$  in year  $t$ , and  $\text{Ideology score}_{pit} \in \{-1, -.5, 0, .5, 1\}$  is the party's ideology category.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Observations
Human freedom	7.068	1.282	3280
Economic freedom	6.711	1.079	3280
Personal freedom	7.323	1.591	3280
Government size <i>component one of economic freedom</i>	6.625	1.321	3547
Legal system and property rights <i>component two of economic freedom</i>	5.469	1.700	3630
Policy quality <i>average of components three to five of economic freedom</i>	7.232	1.215	3245
Rule of law and security and safety <i>average of components one and two of personal freedom</i>	6.656	1.471	3630
Civil liberties <i>average of components three to seven of personal freedom</i>	7.369	1.948	3620
Rule of law	5.312	1.614	3630
Security and safety	7.99	1.674	3630
Movement	8.028	1.761	3630
Religion	7.997	2.055	3630
Association and assembly	7.139	2.395	3630
Expression	5.541	2.838	3596
Identity and relationships	7.141	2.911	3620
Civil liberties (Freedom House)	3.175	.749	1252
Log GDP per capita	9.205	1.215	3381
Log population size	2.234	1.689	3381
Trade volume	.612	.529	3381
Multiparty autocracy	.377	.485	3629
Electoral democracy	.603	.489	3629
Ideology, legislature	.112	.285	1659
Ideology, government	.142	.468	1659
Left populism	3.436	1.209	1596
Right populism	4.065	1.539	1596
Election year	.226	.419	3628

freedom does not seem to affect election outcomes overall.<sup>10</sup>

## 4. Empirical results

### 4.1. First results, simple aggregation

We present the first set of results in [Table 2](#).<sup>11</sup> We use the full Human Freedom Index and its two pre-defined parts, economic freedom and personal freedom. We consider this a useful exercise to connect to previous studies using these or similar indices, although our main analysis uses factor analysis and is presented in the following section.

Beginning with the control variables, log GDP per capita is strongly and positively associated with economic freedom, while its association with overall human freedom and personal freedom is weaker and statistically indistinguishable from zero. Population size is negatively associated with human freedom and economic freedom, and it is also negatively associated with personal freedom in some specifications. Trade volume is not related to any of the freedom measures. Regarding political institutions, multi-party autocracies display substantially higher freedom than single-party/no-election autocracies but markedly less than electoral democracies.

Turning to our central variables, we test the association between legislative ideology and freedom in odd-numbered columns and add interactions between ideology and populism in even-numbered columns. We find a positive association between legislative ideology and both overall human freedom and, in particular, personal freedom, with more right-leaning legislatures associated with higher scores. This is visible both in the main ideology coefficients and in the “effects of ideology” evaluated at low levels of populism in the lower panel.

The interaction results indicate substantial conditionality in the association between populism and freedom. Right-wing populism is associated with lower human freedom and lower personal freedom when legislatures are more right-leaning, with the marginal effects becoming increasingly negative as the legislature shifts to the right. In contrast, left-wing populism is primarily associated with lower personal freedom in more left-leaning legislatures, while its marginal effects attenuate and become statistically insignificant as legislatures become more right-leaning. For economic freedom, the evidence of populism effects is weaker overall, although the

<sup>10</sup> The exception in [Table A5](#) is government ideology, which is to some extent affected by security and government size in countries in which early elections can be called. However, while this has implications for our interpretation of those specific results, it is hardly surprising that decreased public safety and increasing government size tends to increase the probability of having a right-wing government in the next election. We also note that one could in principle consider pushing for an early election as a mechanism through which populists may gain political influence. In [Table A3](#), where we re-estimate our main findings for countries in which early elections cannot be called, we must also warn that adding yet another distinction between regime types on top of two-way fixed effects and interacted effects for dependent variables with strong persistence may leave very little relevant variation in subsamples.

<sup>11</sup> For some descriptive material, see [Fig. A1 and A2](#) in the Appendix, where we relate the annual change in personal freedom and economic freedom to three groups of countries, divided into terciles based on their level of populism.

**Table 2**  
Main results.

	Human freedom		Economic freedom		Personal freedom	
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Log GDP per capita	.196 (.123)	.175 (.123)	.515*** (.192)	.525*** (.205)	-.033 (.144)	-.076 (.138)
Log population size	-.624** (.273)	-.684*** (.243)	-.912** (.467)	-.857* (.459)	-.429 (.331)	-.571* (.308)
Trade volume	.042 (.062)	.063 (.057)	.104 (.098)	.117 (.091)	-.004 (.063)	.024 (.061)
Multiparty autocracy	.647*** (.145)	.542*** (.141)	1.050*** (.142)	.883*** (.116)	.352* (.209)	.292 (.204)
Electoral democracy	1.143*** (.064)	1.023*** (.079)	1.117*** (.091)	.957*** (.122)	1.158*** (.083)	1.065*** (.099)
Ideology, legislature	.270* (.144)	.865*** (.270)	.089 (.168)	.747* (.394)	.399** (.176)	.956*** (.308)
Left populism		-.012 (.026)		.037 (.053)		-.048** (.018)
Right populism		-.020* (.019)		-.004 (.035)		-.032 (.020)
Ideology * left populism		.027 (.070)		-.051 (.142)		.081 (.067)
Ideology * right populism		-.175*** (.060)		-.124 (.118)		-.212*** (.052)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Annual FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1558	1558	1558	1558	1558	1558
Countries	76	76	76	76	76	76
Within R sq.	.357	.402	.242	.263	.385	.426
F statistic						
<i>Effects of left populism at</i>						
90% left		-.018 (.038)		.049 (.079)		-.067*** (.026)
75% left		-.012 (.026)		.038 (.054)		-.049*** (.019)
Median		-.008 (.019)		.029 (.039)		-.035* (.019)
75% right		-.005 (.019)		.023 (.036)		-.025 (.024)
90% right		-.001 (.022)		.017 (.040)		-.015 (.029)
<i>Effects of right populism at</i>						
90% left		.019 (.028)		.023 (.058)		.015 (.021)
75% left		-.019 (.019)		-.003 (.035)		-.031 (.020)
Median		-.049*** (.017)		-.024 (.024)		-.067*** (.023)
75% right		-.069*** (.019)		-.039 (.024)		-.092*** (.027)
90% right		-.091*** (.023)		-.054* (.031)		-.118** (.032)
<i>Effects of legislative ideology</i>						
Little populism		.495*** (.159)		.309 (.202)		.629*** (.188)

Notes: \*\*\* (\*\*) [\*] denote significance at  $p < 0.01$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) [ $p < 0.10$ ]. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors clustered at the country level. F statistics are calculated with clustered standard errors.

marginal effects of right-wing populism become negative in sufficiently right-leaning legislatures.

Overall, [Table 2](#) therefore indicates two patterns. First, legislative ideology is positively associated with personal freedom when populism is low. Second, populism is most strongly associated with reductions in personal freedom under ideological alignment, that is, right-wing populism in more right-leaning legislatures and left-wing populism in more left-leaning legislatures.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.2. Factor analysis and main results

Human freedom is nevertheless a multi-dimensional concept encompassing legal, economic, personal, and political aspects. As noted, there is a substantial literature on how to aggregate or disaggregate economic freedom, but very little corresponding work on human freedom (with the exception of [Murphy, 2025](#)). While following the small literature on human freedom in using pre-defined indices in [Table 2](#), such approaches risk oversimplifying the complexity of freedom as it is manifested across societies. To address this problem, we undertake exploratory factor analysis aimed at identifying underlying latent constructs that capture shared variance across multiple indicators of human freedom. This exercise allows us to gain deeper insights into how populism affects not just overall freedom but its various distinct dimensions.<sup>13</sup>

Our approach is to apply factor analysis to the twelve primary subcomponents of the Human Freedom Index, after which we rotate the solution. A key technical decision in this analysis concerns the choice of rotation method. Although Varimax rotation is a common choice because it produces orthogonal (uncorrelated) factors that may be easier to interpret, it relies on the assumption that

<sup>12</sup> As a robustness check, we have used a different “left–right balance” indicator of legislative ideology, defined as the seat share of left-wing parties minus the seat share of right-wing parties. This alternative emphasizes the direction and strength of ideological dominance in the legislature and is closely related to the alignment mechanism discussed above. The key findings are similar throughout; results are available on request.

<sup>13</sup> [Murphy \(2025\)](#) pioneered the application of factor analysis to the Human Freedom Index. His study identifies three latent dimensions, labeled “trappings of capitalism”, “social repression”, and “state economic modernity”, and highlights the second factor as a novel measure of social repression, capturing the suppression of civil liberties within otherwise market-oriented regimes. Our approach builds on this foundation by using oblique rotation to further disentangle the multidimensional effects of populism on human freedom. While Murphy’s focus is primarily descriptive and centers on mapping the structure of the index, our analysis extends this by integrating political variables to assess how populism, both left- and right-wing, systematically alters distinct dimensions of freedom over time.

dimensions of freedom are fully independent and separable. In our view, such an assumption is implausible in the present context, as various aspects of freedom, such as civil liberties, the rule of law and economic openness, are inherently interconnected at both a theoretical-normative as well as an empirical level. To reflect this more accurately, we use oblique rotation (more specifically, Oblimin), which allows the extracted factors to be correlated. This choice is consistent with theoretical expectations from the literature in political economy and institutional economics, where improvements in one domain of freedom often coincide with gains in others. Contrary to other approaches using factor analysis or principal components analysis, this allows us to obtain a solution in which the factors can have non-zero correlations. In the solution, which we document in Table 3, the inter-factor correlations vary between .26 (3 and 5) and .92 (factors 1 and 3). While this may indicate that factors are not sufficiently separable, it bears noting that although the average correlation between levels of the factors is .58, the average correlation between *changes* of the factors is only .14. In a fixed-effects framework as we apply here, the factor-derived components are therefore practically separable.

As the table shows, the oblique solution yields five clearly interpretable factors, which we refer to as the rule of law and regulation (factor 1), civil liberties (2), policy freedom (3), security (4), and government size (5). The scaling of the factors thus refers to stronger rule of law (1), more civil liberties, policy freedom and security (2–4), and larger government spending and higher taxes (5). We choose five factors because a sixth factor includes no loadings above .2 and provides almost no additional identification. The factor loadings show a coherent and well-structured pattern, reinforcing the validity of these extracted dimensions. Specifically, factor 1 (“rule of law and regulation”) is primarily defined by regulation, rule of law, and legal system and property rights, each of which loads strongly on this factor. Factor 2 (“civil liberties”) is driven by the classic civil-liberties components, with particularly strong loadings on freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and association and assembly, and a substantial loading on the right to movement. Factor 3 (“policy freedom”) is anchored in economic-policy institutions that facilitate market exchange, loading strongly on sound money and freedom to trade internationally. Factor 4 (“security”) is mainly captured by the security and safety component. Factor 5 (“government size”) is chiefly defined by the government-size component, and its sign is normalized so that higher values correspond to a larger fiscal state. We note only one exception: the identity and relationships component, which has a comparatively high uniqueness score and loads moderately on multiple factors, suggesting that this dimension is less well summarized by the common latent structure than the other components.

We report the results of estimating the effects of populism on the five factor-derived components in Table 4 below. Beginning with the controls, GDP per capita is positively associated with the rule-of-law/regulation factor and, more strongly, with policy freedom, while it is negatively associated with the government-size factor.<sup>14</sup> Population is negatively associated with four of the five dimensions, namely rule of law/regulation, civil liberties, policy freedom, and security. We find no clear associations with trade volume. Regarding regime types, multi-party autocracies exhibit higher values of rule of law/regulation and policy freedom than the single-party/no-election reference category, and lower values of the government-size factor. Electoral democracies score higher on factors 1–4 and lower on the government-size factor (implying larger government).

Turning to our main variables, the central result is that the associations between populism and freedom are highly conditional on the legislature's ideological orientation. Right-wing populism is significantly and negatively associated with rule of law and regulation (factor 1) and civil liberties (factor 2) when legislatures are more right-leaning, whereas the corresponding marginal effects are small and statistically indistinguishable from zero in more left-leaning legislatures. A similar pattern holds for security (factor 4), where the marginal effect of right-wing populism becomes increasingly negative as legislatures become more right-leaning. By contrast, we find no robust association between right-wing populism and policy freedom (factor 3) or the government-size factor (factor 5) in this specification. Left-wing populism, in turn, is most consistently associated with weaker security, with the negative marginal effect largest in more left-leaning legislatures and attenuating as legislatures become more right-leaning. Left-wing populism is also negatively related to the government-size factor (meaning larger government), again with the strongest association in more left-leaning legislatures. Finally, evaluated at low levels of populism, a more right-leaning legislature (higher values of the seat-share-weighted ideology index) is positively and statistically significantly associated with the rule-of-law/regulation factor and the civil-liberties factor, while the corresponding estimates for the other factors are small and statistically insignificant (cf. Gründler et al., 2024).

Some of these patterns depart from our *a priori* expectations, and we offer a few tentative interpretations. A common feature across both left- and right-wing populism is conditionality, meaning that the estimated associations are strongest when populists operate in a legislature whose overall ideology is aligned with their orientation. This is consistent with an alignment mechanism, whereby ideologically congenial legislatures reduce intra-legislative constraints and facilitate the translation of populist agendas into institutional and policy change. In this sense, legislative ideology shapes the feasibility set within which populist actors can act.

Within this broader alignment logic, one result that merits interpretation is the negative association between left-wing populism and security. One possibility is that some left-populist parties view coercive state institutions, particularly the police and the criminal justice system, as instruments of elite domination and structural injustice. In such contexts, reforms framed as democratizing, for example reducing police autonomy or relaxing enforcement, as in American campaigns to “defund the police”, may in practice weaken deterrence and reduce the effectiveness or impartiality of law enforcement. For right-wing populism, the strongest conditional associations appear for legal-institutional quality and civil liberties, consistent with the idea that, under ideological alignment, right-populist agendas more readily translate into changes affecting the rule-of-law/regulatory environment and civil-liberties constraints.

By disaggregating human freedom into multiple, separable dimensions, we thus uncover that the associations of populism with

<sup>14</sup> We prefer to remain agnostic about how to interpret the association between government size and GDP per capita. Several components entering this factor are scaled by GDP, which all other things being equal mechanically makes them negatively associated (see, e.g., Bergh and Henrekson, 2011).

**Table 3**  
Factor analysis solution.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	Uniqueness
Government size	.017	.184	.097	−.127	−.468	.698
Legal system and protection of property	<b>.691</b>	.012	.101	.118	.144	.104
Sound money	.039	−.008	<b>.742</b>	.029	−.028	.394
Freedom to trade	.098	.054	<b>.725</b>	.064	.022	.217
Regulation	<b>.808</b>	−.029	.147	−.029	−.125	.253
Rule of law	<b>.674</b>	.181	−.096	.149	.189	.137
Security and safety	.138	.003	.158	<b>.413</b>	.091	.537
Movement	.004	<b>.618</b>	.159	.121	.001	.276
Religion	.027	<b>.872</b>	−.082	−.028	−.048	.175
Association and assembly	.001	<b>.980</b>	.022	−.033	−.047	.093
Expression	.048	<b>.868</b>	.052	.067	.105	.100
Identity and relationships	.099	.269	.287	−.162	.238	.578
Observations	3245					
Countries						
Variance	5.252	4.702	4.417	2.627	1.500	
Proportion explained	.660	.591	.555	.329	.189	

Notes: Factor loadings in bold indicate the primary association of each variable with the corresponding factor (defined as loadings above .4); these represent the strongest relationships used to interpret the factor structure.

**Table 4**  
Main results from factor analysis.

	Oblique factor 1 (“rule of law and regulation”)	Oblique factor 2 (“civil liberties”)	Oblique factor 3 (“policy freedom”)	Oblique factor 4 (“security”)	Oblique factor 5 (“government size”)
Log GDP per capita	.160* (.091)	−.079 (.092)	.541*** (.197)	−.144 (.091)	−.499*** (.164)
Log population size	−.699*** (.207)	−.512** (.209)	−.736* (.398)	−.349* (.203)	.024 (.382)
Trade volume	.030 (.049)	−.061 (.041)	.195 (.083)	−.016 (.044)	−.102 (.080)
Multiparty autocracy	.458*** (.068)	.040 (.165)	.751*** (.110)	.049 (.070)	−.488*** (.139)
Electoral democracy	.652*** (.057)	.584*** (.065)	.784*** (.107)	.256*** (.056)	−.336*** (.091)
Ideology, legislature	.508*** (.157)	.876*** (.236)	.614* (.326)	.010 (.139)	−.159 (.222)
Left populism	−.009 (.017)	−.009 (.017)	.052 (.043)	−.060*** (.021)	−.096** (.042)
Right populism	−.009 (.015)	−.019 (.015)	−.001 (.033)	−.015 (.015)	−.021 (.031)
Ideology * left populism	.010 (.050)	−.013 (.046)	−.061 (.118)	.119* (.061)	.132 (.105)
Ideology * right populism	−.116** (.050)	−.130*** (.039)	−.092 (.112)	.098*** (.044)	−.071 (.097)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Annual FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1551	1551	1551	1551	1551
Countries	76	76	76	76	76
Within R sq.	.349	.429	.278	.212	.268
<i>Effects of left populism at</i>					
90% left	−.012 (.025)	−.006 (.023)	.065 (.064)	−.087*** (.031)	−.126** (.059)
75% left	−.009 (.017)	−.009 (.017)	.052 (.043)	−.061*** (.021)	−.097** (.042)
Median	−.008 (.014)	−.012 (.015)	.041 (.033)	−.040** (.016)	−.074** (.034)
75% right	−.007 (.015)	−.013 (.017)	.034 (.032)	−.027* (.016)	−.059* (.033)
90% right	−.005 (.019)	−.015 (.019)	.027 (.037)	−.012 (.019)	−.042 (.037)
<i>Effects of right populism at</i>					
90% left	.017 (.024)	.009 (.014)	.019 (.055)	.007 (.022)	−.005 (.048)
75% left	−.008 (.015)	−.019 (.015)	−.001 (.033)	−.014 (.015)	−.021 (.031)
Median	−.028** (.012)	−.041** (.018)	−.017 (.022)	−.031** (.013)	−.033 (.024)
75% right	−.042*** (.013)	−.056*** (.022)	−.027 (.021)	−.042*** (.014)	−.041* (.025)
90% right	−.056*** (.016)	−.072*** (.026)	−.038 (.028)	−.054*** (.017)	−.049 (.031)
<i>Effects of ideology</i>					
Little populism	.243*** (.089)	.518*** (.144)	.232 (.181)	.064 (.072)	−.005 (.129)

Notes: \*\*\* (\*\*) [\*] denote significance at  $p < 0.01$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) [ $p < 0.10$ ]. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors clustered at the country level. F statistics are calculated with clustered standard errors.

freedom are not uniform but vary systematically across aspects of freedom and with legislative ideology. Right-wing populism emerges as a broad threat to legal-institutional quality, civil liberties, and security in more right-leaning legislatures, whereas left-wing populism is less far-reaching in scope but is associated with sizeable deterioration in security, and with shifts in the government-

size factor, in more left-leaning legislatures. The role of political context is therefore central: populist actors appear most consequential for freedom-related outcomes when backed by ideologically aligned legislative majorities, which magnify and channel populist agendas across both economic and personal domains of freedom.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4.3. Probing legislative-term reverse causality and effect sizes

A potential concern with our empirical strategy is reverse causality, whereby changes in human freedom, whether through shifts in legal protections, civil liberties, or the market-liberal order, may influence electoral outcomes and the rise of populist parties. Theoretical perspectives, particularly grievance-based models, suggest that deteriorating human freedom can erode public trust and amplify dissatisfaction with established political actors, thereby increasing the appeal of populist movements that promise to reclaim control and restore key institutions in society (cf. Eichengreen, 2018; Bergh and Kärnä, 2024). Conversely, when human freedom remains stable and well-protected, citizens may feel less impetus to seek political alternatives outside the mainstream. If such mechanisms are at play, part of the association we document between populism and human freedom could reflect feedback from prior institutional developments to subsequent political outcomes, rather than the reverse.

To probe this concern, we exploit a structural feature of the data: our measures of populism and political ideology change discretely in election years, whereas the freedom outcomes vary annually. This allows a diagnostic for whether the estimated associations are confined to election years, where political variables are updated and where election-year shocks may coincide with both electoral outcomes and institutional indicators. We therefore interact the key political variables with an election-year indicator (Table 5), which yields implied marginal effects for election years and non-election years. Similar implied effects across the two periods would be consistent with the view that election-year confounding and short-run electoral updating are not the primary drivers of the baseline interaction patterns, while not ruling out slower-moving feedback from institutions to politics or omitted time-varying factors.

The results show substantial consistency between election and non-election years for the patterns that are central in Table 4. For rule of law and regulation (columns 1–2), the marginal effects of left-wing populism are small and statistically insignificant throughout the ideology distribution in both election and non-election years. Right-wing populism, by contrast, is negatively and statistically significantly associated with this factor from the median legislature and upward, and the implied marginal effects are very similar in election and non-election years. For civil liberties (columns 3–4), the same pattern emerges: right-wing populism is significantly negative from the median and becomes increasingly negative as legislatures become more right-leaning, with comparable magnitudes in election and non-election years, whereas left-wing populism remains statistically insignificant. For security (columns 7–8), left-wing populism is significantly negative in more left-leaning legislatures, and right-wing populism is significantly negative from the median and upward, again with closely similar estimates across election and non-election years. For policy freedom and government size, the corresponding patterns are weaker and less precisely estimated, so we focus the discussion on the dimensions that drive the baseline factor results.

Overall, the absence of systematic differences between the implied election-year and non-election-year effects suggests that the baseline interaction patterns are not confined to election years and are not obviously driven by election-year shocks or short-run electoral updating. At the same time, no observational design can fully rule out endogeneity concerns in this context, and the results should be interpreted as associations that are consistent with, but do not by themselves establish, the proposed causal mechanisms.

A distinct timing-related concern may nevertheless arise in political systems where elections can be called early. In such discretionary-election settings, changes in human freedom could in principle affect not only subsequent electoral outcomes but also the timing of elections, which would determine when our election-linked political measures, legislative populism (left and right) and the legislature's ideological composition, are updated. To address this concern, we re-estimate the baseline specification separately for (i) country-years in which early elections are constitutionally feasible without requiring potential impeachment of cabinet members and (ii) country-years in which election timing is effectively fixed (Table A3 in the Appendix). For rule of law and regulation and for civil liberties, the fixed-election subsample closely reproduces the baseline interaction pattern, and the right-wing populism effects are, if anything, more pronounced and more precisely estimated there, whereas the discretionary-election estimates are weaker and less precise. For security, the split-sample results are more mixed, with clearer right-wing populism effects in the discretionary subsample. Overall, the fact that the core interaction patterns for the baseline-driving dimensions persist when election timing is mechanically constrained provides limited support for endogenous election timing as the primary explanation, while we consider it important to acknowledge the loss of precision from splitting the sample.

In addition, as an auxiliary check, we estimate specifications for the political variables that include a lagged dependent variable, the contemporaneous freedom factors, an early-election indicator, and interactions between early-election discretion and the freedom factors, to assess whether political updating is differentially related to freedom in discretionary-election systems in election years (Table A4 in the Appendix). We find little systematic evidence of such differences for the political variables central to our baseline.

<sup>15</sup> We also estimate regressions using subindices based directly on the Human Freedom Index, splitting economic freedom into three components and personal freedom into two; see columns 1–5 in Table A2 in the Appendix. Results broadly align with those from the factor model, but the standard subindices show a strong negative association between left-wing populism and the rule of law (which includes both rule of law and safety), and a negative association between right-wing populism and two aspects of economic freedom. We view the two approaches as complementary but prefer the factor analysis. In column 6 of Table A2, we also show that the results for civil liberties, using HFI indicators, are qualitatively similar to the results when using Freedom House indicators of civil liberties, implying robustness.

**Table 5**  
Election-year test.

	Rule of law and regulation		Civil liberties		Policy freedom		Security		Government size	
	No election	Election year	No election	Election year	No election	Election year	No election	Election year	No election	Election year
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Effects of left populism at</i>										
90% left	-.011 (.024)	-.011 (.027)	-.003 (.023)	-.016 (.023)	.064 (.062)	.073 (.071)	-.087*** (.032)	-.089*** (.030)	-.122** (.058)	-.140** (.064)
75% left	-.009 (.016)	-.009 (.019)	-.008 (.017)	-.014 (.017)	.051 (.041)	.055 (.048)	-.059*** (.021)	-.064*** (.021)	-.093*** (.041)	-.106*** (.045)
Median	-.008 (.015)	-.009 (.016)	-.011 (.016)	-.012 (.015)	.041 (.032)	.042 (.036)	-.039** (.016)	-.044*** (.016)	-.071** (.033)	-.080** (.036)
75% right	-.007 (.015)	-.008 (.016)	-.014 (.017)	-.011 (.016)	.034 (.032)	.032 (.033)	-.025 (.016)	-.031* (.016)	-.056* (.033)	-.063* (.034)
90% right	-.006 (.019)	-.007 (.019)	-.016 (.019)	-.010 (.018)	.027 (.038)	.023 (.036)	-.010 (.019)	-.016 (.019)	-.041 (.038)	-.044 (.036)
<i>Effects of right populism at</i>										
90% left	.019 (.024)	.008 (.026)	.009 (.014)	.013 (.017)	.025 (.053)	-.005 (.063)	.007 (.021)	.011 (.023)	-.011 (.047)	.021 (.055)
75% left	-.007 (.015)	-.013 (.016)	-.019 (.015)	-.019 (.017)	.002 (.033)	-.011 (.037)	-.014 (.015)	-.015 (.017)	-.024 (.031)	-.009 (.035)
Median	-.028** (.012)	-.029** (.013)	-.040** (.018)	-.045** (.021)	-.016 (.022)	-.016 (.023)	-.029** (.013)	-.034** (.015)	-.033 (.024)	-.033 (.026)
75% right	-.042*** (.013)	-.041*** (.014)	-.055*** (.021)	-.062** (.024)	-.029 (.021)	-.019 (.023)	-.041*** (.014)	-.048*** (.016)	-.040 (.025)	-.049* (.027)
90% right	-.057*** (.016)	-.052*** (.016)	-.069*** (.025)	-.079*** (.029)	-.041 (.027)	-.023 (.032)	-.052*** (.016)	-.062*** (.018)	-.047 (.029)	-.066** (.034)
<i>Effects of ideology, legislature</i>										
Little populism	.244*** (.087)	.221** (.098)	.516*** (.147)	.523*** (.141)	.243 (.173)	.149 (.219)	.057 (.075)	.101 (.069)	-.024 (.125)	.109 (.155)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Annual FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1551		1551		1551		1551		1551	
Countries	76		76		76		76		76	
Within R sq.	.351		.429		.281		.214		.273	

Notes: The full model specifications were included in the regressions. \*\*\* (\*\*) [\*] denote significance at  $p < 0.01$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) [ $p < 0.10$ ]. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors clustered at the country level.

These results provide only limited support for an endogenous election-timing channel as an explanation for the main patterns, while leaving open the broader possibility of longer-run feedback and other endogeneity concerns.

However, although a set of estimates are statistically significant, it is well-known that establishing significance and a likely case for causality does not imply that they are politically or societally relevant (McCloskey and Ziliak, 1996). The practical relevance of findings is often assessed by standardizing estimates, for example, by evaluating how large a shift in the dependent variable is associated with a one-standard-deviation change in an independent variable. In our case, where we apply fixed effects estimators, a further complication arises because factors can vary substantially across countries while being much more stable within countries. We therefore provide standardized estimates using both the full within-sample standard deviations of left- and right-wing populism and the factor scores, as well as the within-country standard deviations. The latter choice may arguably provide more correct assessments, as fixed effects estimators entirely identify effects using the within-country variation.

Starting with the rule of law and regulation component, a one standard deviation increase of right-wing populism results in a deterioration of about nine percent of a standard deviation, evaluated at the 90th percentile of legislature ideology. A *within-country* one standard deviation increase of right-wing populism results in a deterioration of about 26 percent of a within-country standard deviation. Using the full standard deviation, a standardized change of right-wing populism is associated with a deterioration of civil liberties of about 11 percent of a standard deviation. However, applying the within-country standard deviation, the effect size is 19 percent. Likewise, standardized changes in left-wing populism result in deteriorations of security and movement of eight and 17 percent, respectively, while a similar change in right-wing populism results in deteriorations of 10 and 27 percent. Finally, a standardized change in leftwing populism results in a 19 percent increase in government size using the full standard deviations and a 22 percent increase when evaluated using the within-country variation, while the same effect sizes for right-wing populism are 16 and 41 percent. While some effect sizes may therefore appear quite moderate, others are politically relevant.

We would like to stress two points about these magnitudes. First, the results suggest incremental, not dramatic, within-cycle changes in institutional outcomes. This is consistent with political constraints that make large formal reforms difficult within a single term, and with mechanisms that operate through executive and legislative control of appointments, agenda-setting, budgetary priorities, and the intensity of enforcement. Second, moderate within-cycle effects do not preclude larger cumulative consequences under persistence. If populist representation remains elevated across consecutive legislative terms, repeated within-cycle shifts can cumulate mechanically, and some institutional changes may be partially sticky. We do not estimate long-run effects directly, but the medium-run estimates imply that sustained populist influence could generate materially larger changes over multiple terms than any single-cycle coefficient suggests.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4.4. Analyzing government ideology

So far, our empirical analysis has focused on populism in the legislature. A concern might be that such populist representation can proxy for populist control of the executive, so that estimated “legislative populism” effects partly reflect omitted executive populism. This concern is particularly relevant because populist legislative strength and populist participation in government are arguably positively correlated in many systems. At the same time, our theoretical framework implies that the legislature can matter through channels that are not reducible to executive-leader effects, especially under coalition and minority governance, and under divided government. Legislative support conditions how far executive initiatives can be translated into durable legal and institutional change, and legislative bargaining, agenda-setting, and logrolling can affect policy even when populists are not in government.

We therefore extend the empirical analysis in three steps. First, we re-estimate our baseline specification using government ideology rather than legislative ideology as the conditioning variable (Table A5 in the Appendix). The core interaction patterns remain. In particular, right-wing populism becomes increasingly negatively associated with rule of law and regulation, civil liberties, and security as governments become more right-leaning, with statistically significant marginal effects in the right tail of the government-ideology distribution. This indicates that the conditional pattern is not an artifact of measuring ideological context at the legislature level and is consistent with the idea that alignment relaxes political constraints on institutional change.

Second, we construct measures of government populism, using the same party classifications as before, and re-estimate the model with government populism interacted with ideological context (Table A6 in the Appendix). Executive populism is itself associated with several dimensions of human freedom. The clearest patterns are for security and government size, where both left- and right-populist participation in government is associated with lower values of the corresponding latent factors, and where the magnitude and statistical significance of these associations vary systematically with ideological context. More generally, the interaction terms indicate that executive populism is not a uniform “level effect” but is conditional on alignment, which accords with our theoretical emphasis on constraints and bargaining. Thus, even when populists hold executive office, institutional outcomes depend on whether they operate in an environment that facilitates the translation of preferences into durable policy and institutional change.

<sup>16</sup> As robustness checks, we (i) drop the 10 percent of observations with the highest populism scores, which largely removes 1980s data while preserving country coverage, and (ii) restrict the sample to countries without strong presidential systems. In both cases, the pattern of results closely mirrors the baseline: coefficients on left- and right-wing populism and their interactions with legislative ideology retain their signs and broadly their magnitudes, with both types of populism still associated with weaker security and larger government when their respective side of the legislature is strong, while effects on the rule of law, regulation, and civil liberties remain of the same sign but are less precisely estimated. If anything, the adverse associations between populism and freedom components strengthen in the parliamentary-only sample, whereas policy freedom continues to display no systematic relationship with populism. Full regression results for these sample variations are available on request.

Third, we estimate “horse race” specifications that include both legislative populism and government populism simultaneously (Table A7 in the Appendix), which address the omitted-variable concern. The results indicate that the legislature and the executive both matter. For several outcomes, the coefficients for legislative populism remain statistically significant when government populism is included, while measures of government populism are also informative in the same regression. The substantive interpretation is therefore not that “legislative populism is merely executive populism in disguise”, but that populist influence can operate through multiple institutional loci. This is precisely what the theory section motivates: Executive authority matters, but legislative bargaining and constraint-relaxation can matter in addition, particularly in coalition and minority settings where legislative support is pivotal.

In all, these additional analyses mitigate the concern that our main findings are driven solely by populist leaders in power. They also make the paper's contribution more precise by showing that a focus on the legislature adds information beyond executive populism, while acknowledging that executive populism is an empirically relevant part of the broader institutional story, in line with findings in previous studies.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

This study examines how populism, in its left- and right-wing variants, is associated with human freedom, conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing institutional safeguards of personal and economic freedom. The paper's main contribution is to study populism as a *legislative* phenomenon. Rather than focusing exclusively on populist leaders or governments, we analyze how populist representation in national legislatures relates to institutional outcomes and how these associations depend on ideological alignment within the legislature, a political configuration that shapes the availability of same-side legislative support and the strength of effective legislative constraints.

Drawing on data from 76 countries with formally democratic, multi-party political systems since 2000, we combine seat-share-weighted measures of left- and right-wing populism in the legislature with a seat-share-weighted measure of legislative ideology. We use factor analysis of the Human Freedom Index components to recover empirically grounded latent dimensions of human freedom and relate these to populist legislative strength. The central finding is that the associations between populist representation and weaker institutional outcomes are concentrated in ideologically aligned legislatures. For right-wing populism, the negative associations with rule of law and regulation and with civil liberties are strongest when the legislature is more right-leaning; for security, the negative association is likewise concentrated in more right-leaning legislatures. For left-wing populism, the most robust pattern is a negative association with security across much of the ideology distribution, with larger marginal effects when legislatures are more left-leaning. For government size, the marginal effects for left-wing populism are generally negative over much of the ideology distribution, implying smaller government size. The results suggest that populist influence is not mechanical but amplified when populists are ideologically aligned with, and can rely on support from, a same-side legislative environment.

At the same time, the estimated effect sizes are generally moderate within legislative cycles. This suggests that the typical pattern is incremental institutional drift rather than abrupt or transformative breakdown of liberal democracy, at least in the countries and period under study. However, moderate within-cycle effects can still be substantively important. Several institutional outcomes considered here have persistent components and may adjust through channels such as appointments, enforcement intensity, and regulatory frameworks, which can be slow to reverse. If populist influence is sustained across consecutive legislative terms, repeated within-cycle changes may therefore cumulate into larger medium-to-long-run shifts even when the per-cycle effects are moderate. We emphasize that we do not estimate long-run effects directly, but this implication follows from persistence in political representation and partial stickiness in institutional change.

By disentangling both the latent structure of human freedom and its responsiveness to populist influence, this study extends earlier work (e.g., Huber and Schimpf, 2017; Celico and Rode, 2023; Gründler et al., 2024; Kyriacou and Trivin, 2025) in four ways. First, it shifts the empirical focus from executive populism to legislative populism and shows that legislative representation carries information beyond executive populism, as confirmed by specifications incorporating government ideology and government populism. Second, it integrates economic and personal freedom into one analytical and empirical framework. Third, it advances the study of institutional outcomes by using factor analysis to identify empirically grounded dimensions of human freedom. Fourth, it provides diagnostics bearing on endogeneity concerns by exploiting that populism and ideology shift discretely at elections. Interacting the key regressors with an election-year indicator yields very similar implied effects in election and non-election years.

The results suggest implications for institutional design that follow directly from the conditionality we document. When populist parties are ideologically aligned with, and supported by, a same-side legislative majority, checks that rely on intra-legislative opposition become less likely to bind, and safeguards that remain effective even when the executive and the legislative agenda are controlled by the same majority become correspondingly more important. This points to institutional arrangements that protect the independence of courts and the justice system (for example, appointment rules that dilute single-majority control, tenure safeguards, and budget autonomy), that strengthen legislative oversight and minority rights (committee investigatory powers, information access, auditing institutions, and transparency requirements), and that limit discretionary executive influence over implementation and enforcement (constraints on emergency powers, rulemaking procedures, and insulation of key administrative functions). More generally, constitutional and legislative rules that increase the effective number of veto players for changes affecting civil liberties, rule-of-law institutions, and security governance can reduce the scope for incremental but persistent deterioration when populist-aligned majorities are in place. Such guardrails are particularly relevant in the setting studied here, where the estimated within-cycle effects are typically moderate yet plausibly cumulative when political alignment persists across terms.

Future research could deepen these insights by analyzing more specific mechanisms through which populist actors affect dimensions of human freedom, by expanding the analysis to additional regime types and institutional settings, and by incorporating

dynamic or long-term designs as well as experimental or quasi-experimental evidence. Ongoing political developments will also provide new opportunities to study how different types of populism influence the institutions that protect human freedom.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Christian Bjørnskov:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Niclas Berggren:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

We hereby declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2026.102846>.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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