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# Populism and the liberal international order: An analysis of UN voting patterns

Sandra Destradi<sup>1,2</sup> · Johannes Vüllers<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract

Populism is often assumed to undermine the liberal world order, but this claim has never been tested systematically. In this study, we do so for the first time. Based on an understanding of populism as a “thin-centered ideology” entailing anti-elitism and people-centrism, we expect populist governments to have foreign policy preferences opposed to the core features of the US-led liberal international order. Our empirical analysis assesses government preferences on the liberal international order as expressed through UN General Assembly votes. Our findings support the expectation that populism has a strong and statistically significant negative impact on foreign policy preferences related to the core norms of the liberal international order. Moreover, we find that populists with a left-wing ideology and those in less democratic countries tend to be more opposed to the US-led liberal international order. However, populist governments do not reject the UNGA as such, as they are not more likely to be absent from UNGA votes than other states. Thereby, this study makes a contribution both to the burgeoning literature on the international implications of populism and to debates on the crisis of the liberal order.

**Keywords** Populism · United Nations · UNGA voting patterns · Liberal international order · International impact of populism

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## 1 Introduction

Populism is frequently mentioned as one of the main sources of the current crisis of the liberal international order (LIO). According to this narrative, the liberal order has not just been endangered by the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the emergence of other great powers that are challenging some of its core principles; it has also been weakened by the formation of populist governments and the diffusion of populist ideas (Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021; Börzel & Zürn, 2021, p. 2; Colgan & Keohane, 2017; Jahn, 2018; Lake et al., 2021). Populists are considered to have made it their main objective to target and dismantle the achievements of liberal internationalism (Jahn, 2018). If we follow this interpretation, the success of populist parties in many countries has made populism one of the most important forces in world politics, able to call into question – and even to undermine – the core values permeating the international order.

With this study, we aim to empirically test this claim. While the study of populism has long been a prerogative of Comparative Politics and Political Theory, which have focused on the domestic causes and consequences of this phenomenon (see, among many others, Gidron & Hall, 2020; Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016; Noury & Roland, 2020; Rooduijn, 2018; Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2021), the *international* consequences of the global rise of populism have long been an understudied issue. In recent years, however, a burgeoning literature has emerged, which asks how populism impacts foreign policy and international politics, but mostly focusing on single case studies or small-N comparisons of populist foreign policies (e.g., Chryssogelos, 2017; Destradi & Plagemann, 2019; Plagemann and Destradi, 2019; Verbeek & Zaslove, 2015, 2017) or by addressing populist communication and discourse in international politics (e.g., Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022; Wojczewski, 2023), or the personality traits of single leaders (e.g., Fouquet & Brummer, 2023; Thiers & Wehner, 2022). The very claim that populism undermines the liberal international order is mostly based on insights from the United States under President Trump and on the study of few other Western cases of (mostly right-wing) populism (Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Jahn, 2018). By focusing on such cases, the literature underscores that populism has undermined the liberal international order from within. Söderbaum et al. (2021) directly address populists' contestation of the liberal international order, arguing that populist governments might not necessarily reject all elements of the liberal international order, but that they tend to instill illiberal elements into multilateral cooperation, thereby promoting an alternative order in a more subtle way. Recent research on populist attitudes reveals that populist voters are much more skeptical of international organizations as compared to non-populist ones (Kiratli & Schlipphak, 2024). However, there still is a substantial gap in the literature when it comes to systematically assessing the broader impact of populism on governments' foreign policy preferences vis-à-vis the liberal international order.

This article aims to address this gap. To do so, it develops expectations about how populism translates into foreign policy preferences related to the liberal international order based on an understanding of populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that entails two constitutive dimensions: anti-elitism and people-centrism (Mudde, 2004). Based on such ideology, populist governments can be expected to develop foreign policy preferences opposed to the core features of the US-led LIO (Ikenberry, 2009). Anti-elitism will lead to a high degree of skepticism vis-à-vis elitist multilateral institutions and transnational bureaucracies, an increasingly open and globalized economy promoted by far-away economic elites, and the promotion of democracy and human rights at the hands of actors understood as detached from the “true people.” Following the people-centrism dimension of populism, the principles of the liberal order are not desirable because they impinge on popular sovereignty (Chrissogelos, 2017) and weaken the direct links between populist leaders and the “true people.”

To test these propositions, we focus on voting in the UN General Assembly (UNGA), which has long been used as the best source to create measures of state preferences. We rely on a data set by Bailey et al. (2017), which estimates state ideal points on a dimension that reflects countries’ positions towards the US-led LIO. To test the general willingness of populists to undermine multilateral organizations, we also examine whether populist governments are more likely to be absent from UNGA votes and thus refuse to participate in the UNGA. We combine the UNGA voting data with a new measure for populist governments, based on an expert survey of the level of populism of governing parties by the V-Dem project (Lührmann et al., 2020). This data allows us to investigate to what extent more populist governments were more likely to vote against the US-led LIO in the UNGA for most countries in the world from 1975 to 2015.

The result of our analysis is straightforward: the negative impact of populism on foreign policy preferences related to the US-led liberal international order is strong and statistically significant. This effect is robust to the inclusion of an exhaustive list of confounding variables and alternative measures. Looking at different features of populist governments, we found in line with our expectations (i) that left-wing populists are more likely to reject the US-led LIO, and (ii) that populists in less democratic countries are more likely to reject the US-led LIO than populists in more democratic ones. Finally, we found no evidence that populist governments reject the UNGA as an international organ as such, as they are not more likely to be absent from UNGA votes than other states. Thus, while populists are opposed to the tenets of liberalism and to US influence, they continue to participate in and to support UN processes.

Our findings have several important implications for the existing literature. For one, we find empirical support for the widespread assumption that populism leads to a rejection of the core principles of the US-led liberal international order. By extension, we are also able to show systematically that populism does indeed have an impact on foreign policy preferences. Thereby, our analysis makes a contribution both to the literature on the crisis of the liberal international order and to the literature on the international consequences of populism. It also opens up avenues for further research on the impact of populism on multilateral cooperation and

international regimes, on global public goods provision, or on normative change in world politics.

This article proceeds as follows: first of all, we discuss the state of the art on the international implications of populism. We then outline our understanding of populism as well as the core components of the US-led liberal international order. On that basis, we explain the theoretical link between populism and a rejection of such order. In the following section, we outline our empirical strategy. Finally, we present our empirical results and conclude by drafting a research agenda on the international consequences of populism.

## 2 The international implications of populism

The literature on populism has long acknowledged that populism is not a purely domestic phenomenon detached from world politics. Indeed, studies on the causes of populism have highlighted that deep-seated fears about the negative implications of globalization have been among the drivers of the success of populist parties (Algan et al., 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Nevertheless, the study of populism has long been a domain of Comparative Politics and Political Theory. Only over the past few years has a small but rapidly growing community of scholars in the fields of International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis started asking how populism influences international politics (Wajner & Giurlando, 2024). Some studies have made first efforts at theorizing the impact of populism on conflict behavior, on the readiness to contribute to global governance, or on the processes of foreign policy decision making (Chryssogelos, 2017; Destradi & Plegemann, 2019; Plegemann and Destradi, 2019; Wajner, 2021; see also Wajner et al., 2024; and the recent edited volume by Giurlando & Wajner, 2023). Others have addressed issues like specific populist leaders' foreign policy role conceptions (Wehner & Thies, 2020) or their rhetoric and discourse on international matters (Lacatus et al., 2023; on US President Trump, see Boucher & Thies, 2019; Lacatus, 2021; on Iranian leaders, see Holliday, 2019; on Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, see Sagarzazu & Thies, 2019; on Poland's Law and Justice government, see Cadier & Szulecki, 2020). Moreover, some studies have delved deeper into populists' attitudes towards specific actors or issues in international politics, including their skepticism of international courts and multilateralism (Voeten, 2020, 2021; Copelovitch & Pevehouse, 2019) or their approach to international cooperation in the COVID-19 pandemic (Pevehouse, 2020).

This literature has led to a range of interesting insights, but disagreements persist over whether populism can be expected to have an impact on foreign policy and on whether there is anything like a genuinely "populist foreign policy." According to Moravcsik (2018, 1663), in Europe "populists have had surprisingly little effects on EU policies," except for the issue of migration. Other scholars have highlighted that populist parties' preferences about foreign policy issues depend primarily on their "thick ideology" (Mudde, 2004, see below) and not so much on populism. According to this argument, left-wing populists will have very different preferences on matters like trade or regional integration as opposed to radical right or "regionalist"

populists (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). By contrast, other authors have argued that there is, indeed, something like a “populist foreign policy,” but that the impact of populism on foreign policy is mediated by more procedural aspects of foreign-policy making (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019, 2024).

Yet, overall, we still lack any systematic conclusions about the broader impact of populism on world politics and the current international order. This lack of systematic analyses might have been due, among other things, to an absence of datasets measuring populism worldwide over longer time periods.<sup>1</sup> With our analysis, we address this gap and we show that populism has a strong and statistically significant impact on foreign policy preferences vis-à-vis the predominant norms of international politics, that is, vis-à-vis the US-led liberal international order.

### 3 Populism and the liberal international order

A large part of the literature in International Relations concurs in characterizing the current world order as “liberal” and in highlighting the centrality of the United States, or the “West” more broadly, in such order (Ikenberry, 2018). In the following, we will refer to the US-led liberal international order<sup>2</sup> to characterize the international order of the past decades, with the end of the Cold War and the expansion of the liberal order to a truly global scale being the main turning point (Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Ikenberry, 2009). Among the core principles of such order are a preference for multilateralism, for the global spreading of liberal values and institutions, especially representative democracy and human rights, and for economic openness (Ikenberry, 2018; Stephen & Skidmore, 2019). These elements are deeply intertwined and thereby make the liberal international order, as Ikenberry (2009, 71) puts it, “an evolving order marked by increasingly far-reaching and complex forms of international cooperation that erode state sovereignty and reallocate on a global scale the sites and sources of political authority.”

How does populism relate to this US-led liberal international order? In this contribution, we follow the currently most widespread definition of populism, which considers populism a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde, 2004), that is, a rather limited set of ideas usually coexisting with a full-fledged “thick-ideology” like socialism or Hindu-nationalism. Populism “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and [...] argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004: 543, emphasis removed). Anti-elitism and the centrality of the people can therefore be considered the two constitutive components of populism. The opposition between them is usually depicted in highly moralistic terms, as a clear-cut dichotomy between good and evil (Hawkins, 2009,

<sup>1</sup> For data on populist discourse by selected leaders, see Hawkins et al. (2019). On European parties, see Huber and Ruth (2017), Rooduijn et al. (2023a, 2023b); on populist presidents in Latin America, see Ruth (2018).

<sup>2</sup> See below a discussion of how focusing on support for a US-led order differs from focusing on an alignment with the US.

1043–44; Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Other authors also highlight that populist leaders claim that they embody the popular will, that “they, and they alone, represent the people” (Müller, 2017, p. 3). This has a number of consequences at the domestic level, including a weakening of intermediary democratic institutions, which are perceived as hampering the direct connection between populist leaders and the “true people” (Müller, 2017, p. 31). As Urbinati (2019, 113) argues, populists in power will “disfigure” democracy, “by making the principles of democratic legitimacy (the people and the majority) the possession of a part of the people, which a strong leader embodies and mobilizes against other parts (minorities and the political opposition).”

Being a thin-centered ideology, populism does not entail any specific ideas about foreign policy, nor any explicitly articulated preferences concerning the liberal international order. However, we argue that it is possible to derive some expectations about populist governments’ foreign policy preferences based on the “thin” dimensions of anti-elitism and people-centrism.<sup>3</sup> In the following, we will elaborate on how populists can be expected to relate the two constitutive dimensions of their thin-centered ideology to the various components of the US-led liberal international order. As we will see, there are substantive theoretical reasons to expect populists to be opposed to the core components of such order, but also indications from qualitative studies and anecdotal evidence that such theoretical expectations do not hold in each and every case. Our quantitative analysis will offer the first systematic assessment of the broader impact that populism has on foreign policy preferences concerning the US-led liberal international order.

*Multilateralism* constitutes the backbone of the liberal international order. It refers to the dense web of international institutions that were created after World War II to facilitate and promote cooperation among states with the aim of solving collective action problems. The recent literature on populism and international politics has pointed towards the fact that not all populists are automatically opposed to multilateralism in a wholesale manner, but rather to the specific multilateral institutions that form the core of the “Western” liberal international order. In some cases, populist governments have actively promoted own regional multilateral organizations to fight hegemonic international “elites” – think of Hugo Chávez’ creation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) and promotion of South American regionalism as a way to implement his Bolivarian revolution against US imperialism. India’s populist prime minister Modi has engaged in global governance

<sup>3</sup> With its focus on clearly defined notions of anti-elitism and people-centrism and the idea of populist governments representing the “volonté générale,” populism is distinct from other, broader, thin-centered ideologies such as statism. According to Voeten (2021: 24), statism can essentially be defined as an opposition to the Western liberal order: “Statism as a thin ideology does not have detailed prescriptions for how domestic societies should be organized, but it does have a vision on where the Western liberal orthodoxy is wrong, not just on one issue but also on many seemingly unrelated issues. Opposition to the liberal order is motivated by a set of collective ideas that emphasize self-determination as ethically good, reserve a prominent role for the state in domestic political economy, favor redistributing resources away from the West, and advocate for the restoration of noninterference into the domestic affairs of states.” In a nutshell, statism entails a number of preferences concerning *international* order and has therefore huge overlaps with our dependent variable.

and multilateralism as this engagement can be considered a useful status-seeking strategy in international politics (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). Recent research has argued that populists are not per se opposed to multilateralism, but that they are rather interested in promoting alternative – illiberal – “scripts” of (regional) multilateral cooperation (Söderbaum et al., 2021). In theoretical terms, opposition to liberal multilateral institutions can be expected to flow from both components of populist thin ideology: anti-elitism and people-centrism. In fact, the US as a hegemonic power are frequently portrayed as the elite or the establishment in world politics, and anti-Americanism is deeply ingrained in both left- and right-wing populisms in various parts of the world (see for example Ostermann & Stahl, 2022). We would thus expect populists to reject multilateral institutions that are strongly shaped by the US or that focus on issues like human rights, but not necessarily multilateralism as such.

Besides anti-elitism, opposition to multilateral institutions espousing liberal values might also be strongly related to populists’ claim to represent the “people.” Such claim will be associated with a call for a return to national sovereignty: populists frequently present themselves as the advocates of the “true people” who will “take back control” in the name of the people. People-centrism is thereby intimately related to sovereinism (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020; Chryssogelos, 2020). Söderbaum et al. (2021, 3) indeed suggest that populists will prefer new forms of multilateral cooperation framed in terms of anti-liberalism, threatened identities, and *popular* sovereignty. By contrast, they will de-legitimize international institutions that fail to represent the “popular will.” As Spandler and Söderbaum (2023, 1025) put it, “populist leaders [...] challenge and replace the conventional liberal legitimacy standards with a specific populist inflection by demanding that IOs should provide governance ‘for the people’ and ‘by the people’, rather than for/by detached elites.” Moreover, Pacciardi et al. (2024) find that populists have various ways of disengaging from international organizations, but that exiting such organizations altogether is rarely an option. All this indicates that – beyond anecdotal evidence of populist governments undermining multilateral institutions – there are theoretical reasons to expect populists in power to be wary of US-led multilateral institutions but not necessarily of multilateralism as such.

Another core feature of the liberal international order is a focus on individual rights and freedoms, which also translates into *efforts to spread human rights and democracy* internationally. Such promotion of liberal values abroad can take various forms, from engagement for norm diffusion to forcible intervention. In the latter form, active promotion of liberal values abroad has been one of the most contentious aspects of the Western liberal world order, and the often illiberal practices of the US have arguably been one of the main drivers of the backlash against it (see Duncombe & Dunne, 2018). There are several reasons to expect populist governments to be particularly opposed to this aspect of the liberal order. First of all, interventionism can be understood as an inherently “elitist” project: the very idea of imposing a system of government on another country clearly entails a claim of superiority (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). Populists at the “receiving end” of democracy promotion efforts will therefore easily attribute such liberal policies to a selfish international elite keen to subjugate the true people. Relatedly, as was mentioned above, populists’ claim to represent the “people” goes hand in hand with a strong emphasis on national sovereignty and with the mission of

protecting the people from external interference. Sovereignism is therefore an important international corollary of populism. Yet, the US-led international order, especially in its manifestation after the end of the Cold War, entails an “almost inevitable [...] erosion of Westphalian sovereignty” (Ikenberry, 2009, p. 79). Democracy promotion will therefore be especially problematic for populists: while they are not intrinsically opposed to liberal democracy (Voeten, 2020, p. 413), they certainly can be expected to have a strong preference against its imposition abroad as this violates national sovereignty and goes against the fundamental idea that popular will should find direct representation. At the same time, for populists in power in those countries that have a tradition of promoting democracy abroad, putting the people “first” can be expected to translate into isolationist policies. According to their logic, the focus of government policies should be on the “people” narrowly defined. Spending scarce resources to bring democracy and human rights to others abroad will be difficult to justify if the rhetorical emphasis of populist governments is always on the primacy of the “people”.

When it comes to human rights, we can similarly expect populists to be extremely skeptical about their promotion abroad. While populism again does not by definition entail an aversion to the implementation of core human rights norms, the construction of the “people” by populist groups and leaders frequently entails the exclusion of some sections of society (Müller, 2017; Urbinati, 2019). Deeply divisive policies have in several instances led to human rights violations by populist governments – from the brutal war on drugs in the Philippines under Duterte (Thompson, 2016) to the establishment of a majoritarian anti-Muslim discourse and the repression in Muslim-majority Kashmir under populist Prime Minister Modi in India (Plagemann and Destradi, 2019). Against this backdrop, we can expect populist governments to be opposed to the kind of advocacy for human rights that is typical of liberal internationalism and that has often led to interventions abroad in the name of liberal values.

When it comes to *economic openness*, another core feature of the US-led liberal international order, there are less explicit expectations to be derived from populism. Being a thin-centered ideology, populism does not entail any prescriptions about the kind of economic policies that populist governments should follow, and indeed the 1990s saw a wave of neoliberal populism in Latin America (Weyland, 2001; Wajner, 2021). Verbeek and Zaslove (2017) argue that populist parties’ preferences on trade will vary as they will mainly be driven by thick ideology, and empirical studies on Europe show that even among parties of the same “thick ideological” family there are substantial differences in approaches to economic integration (Cavallaro et al., 2018). Yet, in theoretical terms the centrality of the “people” narrowly defined can be expected to contribute to a high degree of skepticism vis-à-vis economic openness on the part of populists. In the broad debate on the causes of populism, one of the most common explanations for the success of populism focuses on the perceived negative consequences of globalization, not just in cultural terms (Kriesi et al., 2008) but also in economic terms (Rodrik, 2017). Populists’ calls for putting their countries “first” – from US President Trump’s infamous slogan “America First” to similar calls by parties such as India’s Bharatiya Janata Party (Madhav, 2020) – entail a rejection of some of the key principles of economic openness. In many cases, this is accompanied by the notion that an international or transnational economic elite is trying to exploit the virtuous people by taking away their jobs or by imposing neoliberal policies on

them. Latin American left-wing populists such as Hugo Chávez have built their entire domestic mobilization strategy on such fears of a US-led transnational capitalist elite bent on exploiting the “people.” But also right-wing populists like Turkey’s president Erdoğan have resorted to the notion of the people being endangered by global financial lobbies and an obscure Western-led ‘mastermind’ (‘üst akıl’) (Taş, 2020).

In sum, populism as a thin-centered ideology is in many ways at odds with the core principles of the liberal international order. We therefore develop the general expectation that *the more populist a government, the more its foreign policy preferences will be at odds with the US-led liberal international order.*

As was mentioned above, thick ideologies can be expected to play an important role in shaping populists’ approaches to world politics. Ultimately, they entail more detailed expectations about what politics should look like, and they determine how populists will define the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’. When it comes to preferences about the US-led liberal international order, *we expect that left-wing populists will be more opposed to it than right-wing populists.* This is so because leftist thick ideologies entail a more explicit rejection of neoliberal economic policies, and therefore are more averse to one important ideal-typical component of the liberal international order; moreover, left-wing thick ideologies entail a more pronounced aversion for US hegemony, which plays an important role given the centrality of the US in the liberal international order.

In order to account for the political context in which populists operate, we also explore whether the preferences of populist governments concerning the liberal international order vary in line with the quality of democracy in their respective countries. While large parts of the literature on populism consider populism to be a genuinely democratic phenomenon given populists’ claim to represent the ‘popular will’, we also know that populists in power end up weakening democratic institutions and checks and balances (Urbinati, 2019; Pappas, 2019). Indeed, several countries governed by populists over longer periods of time such as Turkey or India have experienced democratic backsliding (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016; Tudor, 2023). *We expect populist governments in less democratic countries to be more opposed to the liberal international order as compared to those in more democratic ones,* mainly because of their deeper aversion towards interference with domestic affairs via the promotion of democracy and human rights, as well as because of their suspicion of multilateral institutions that promote democratic norms.<sup>4</sup>

## 4 Empirical strategy

Our country-year data set includes all UN member states with a population of at least 500,000 people from 1975 to 2015 and allows us to test the extent to which populism leads to less pronounced preferences for the US-led liberal international order.<sup>5</sup> We set the end point of our analysis in 2015 in order to measure populist preferences

<sup>4</sup> On the tensions between democratic backsliders and EU institutions, see Winzen (2023).

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that not all countries enter our data set in 1975 due to missing data in one of the main data sets on which our variables rely. This is not a problem as we are interested in changes of the foreign policy preferences *within* one country.

towards the US-led LIO before the US itself openly rejected several of its foundations under President Trump. As populism is not a recent phenomenon, this time span allows us to also include cases from the Cold War-era. A good indicator of a government's foreign policy preferences is its voting behavior in the annual United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The UNGA offers all member states the opportunity to demonstrate their preferences through their voting behavior. This is particularly relevant for smaller states that have less opportunities to do so on the international stage as compared to more powerful states (Moon, 1985). States demonstrate their preferences in the UNGA on a variety of international issues ranging from disarmament to human rights or development. As Mattes et al. (2015, 283) put it, "a country's voting record in the UNGA is a latent indicator of its foreign policy orientation and international alignments; it is a record of how the state wants to be seen by others, the international norms it finds acceptable, and the positions it is willing to take publicly on a wide variety of issues." Since several issues are debated repeatedly in the annual sessions, UNGA voting behavior allows us to examine possible changes in states' foreign policy preferences over time (Bailey et al., 2017, p. 431). Even though domestic audiences are frequently not aware of the actual voting behavior of their governments in the UNGA, meaning that these votes will not directly be used by populist governments for mobilization purposes, we work with the assumption that UNGA votes reflect foreign policy preferences and therefore mirror how populist governments relate to the world and what drives their foreign policy.

We make use of the UNGA voting-pattern measure developed by Bailey et al. (2017), which estimates the ideal point of states over time by using a spatial voting model adapted to the UNGA setting. The measurement is based on votes that take place in multiple UNGA sessions, allowing to identify changes in preferences for each country over time. The *UNGA voting-pattern* provides us with an estimate of the ideal point for each country in each UNGA session, and such ideal point refers to the approval of the US-led LIO (Bailey et al., 2017).<sup>6</sup> The measurement of agreement with the liberal international order has been developed through a statistical procedure, which captures changes in such order over time (see Bailey et al., 2017). It is important to note that this measure differs from mere vote convergence with the United States: it reflects the US-led character of the LIO, that is, the disproportionate influence of the US on such order, but also the fact that the US did not shape that order completely and exclusively.

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the data from Bailey et al. (2017) do not allow statements to be made about individual thematic decisions in the UNGA. Furthermore, Häge and Hug (2016) point out that a high number of resolutions are adopted as consensus decisions without a vote, whereby this varies over time and topic. In these cases, there is a consensus between the delegates, which therefore means approval. Therefore, like other measures for UNGA votes, the Bailey et al. (2017) data tend to underestimate consensus. Since this bias exists for the entire period of our study, albeit with a certain dynamic fluctuation (Häge & Hug, 2016: 504), the data from Bailey et al. (2017) give us a relatively reliable insight into the preferences of the individual states concerning the US-led LIO on those issues where dissent exists at all. However, the data might underestimate the consensus as agreement in form of unrecorded or consensus votes is not included (Häge & Hug, 2016: 528).

According to Voeten (2021, 39), such measure allows us to identify, in every year, the position of each state vis-à-vis the predominant dimension of contestation that has shaped world politics since 1946. Such contestation has taken place in a low-dimensional ideological space that sees an opposition between two broad notions about how to address a wide range of issues in world politics: “On the one side, there are states who are more comfortable with U.S. leadership, whose preferred image of society is one in which democratic elections allocate political powers, where markets allocate resources, and where courts protect individual rights. On the other side, governments advocate for a greater role of the state in domestic and international economies, emphasize self-determination as ethically good, and favor redistributing resources and authority away from the West and the restoration of non-interference into the domestic affairs of states” (Voeten, 2021, p. 39). In other words, the measure provided by Bailey et al. (2017) captures attitudes towards liberal internationalism (Voeten, 2021, p. 39), measuring shifts in each country’s policy preferences towards the US-led LIO over time. It captures overall preferences with regard to those key elements of the liberal international order that were mentioned above.<sup>7</sup> The higher the values of a country’s *UNGA voting-pattern* estimate, the higher its approval of the liberal international order. The *UNGA voting-pattern* ranges from  $-2.40$ , indicating a strong disagreement with the liberal international order, as in the case of Hungary in 1977, to  $3.15$ , indicating very strong agreement, as in the case of the United States in 1989.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.1 Measuring populism

We are interested in the effect of the degree of populism of a state’s government on its voting behavior in the UNGA with regard to the liberal international order. For our independent variable, we use the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party) data set (Lührmann et al., 2020). The V-Party data set allows us to test the effect of populism on foreign policy preferences as it contains measures that are linked to our definition of populism as thin-centered ideology entailing anti-elitism and people-centrism (Mudde, 2004). Unlike other data collection efforts in this area, such as the Global Populism Database (Hawkins et al., 2019) or the Global Party Survey (Norris, 2020), the V-Party data set allows us to track populism over a much longer time period. As opposed to fine-grained data limited to specific regions (Meijers & Zaslove, 2021), the V-Party data set has the advantage of having a global reach.

The V-Party data set is based on a survey in which experts assess each party’s position on the basis of documents such as election manifestos, press releases, official speeches and media interviews (see Lührmann et al., 2020 for more information).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A measurement of preferences vis-à-vis single elements of the liberal international order is not available in the dataset by Bailey et al. (2017).

<sup>8</sup> This reveals that the measurement of preferences vis-à-vis the liberal international order is not identical with preferences of the United States.

<sup>9</sup> For a critical discussion of the use of expert surveys in measuring populism, see Meijers and Zaslove 2021. For more information on how some of the problems were addressed in the V-Dem dataset, see Lührmann et al. (2020).

As we focus on populist *governments*, we have based our measure of populism on the party to which the head of government belongs.<sup>10</sup> This decision is based on the assumption that, in coalition governments, the head of government will usually belong to the strongest party, which will also have the greatest influence on foreign policy. Even if junior coalition partners might play an important (or even disproportionate) role in foreign policy, for example by controlling the foreign ministry, we expect that a governing coalition will broadly agree on the most fundamental foreign policy preferences – those regarding the core principles governing the international order.

We use the degree of *populism* as independent variable in the main models. This variable is based on an index of the two definitional aspects of populism—anti-elitism and people-centrism. It thus provides us with a measure of how populist the government was in that year. The variable ranges from 0, not populist at all, to 1, very populist. The National Renewal Alliance in Brazil (1978–1981) is the least populist party (0.026), while the Fifth Republic Movement in Venezuela (1998–2009), the party of Hugo Chávez, is the most populist party in our sample (0.993).

In line with the understanding of populism as a thin-centered ideology, populism entails a measurement of *anti-elitism*. This measure is based on a party's rhetoric against elites, understood as small groups that have more power than others in a society. In line with the predominating literature, Lührmann et al. (2020) clarify that the understanding of who belongs to the elite can differ between parties and countries, and that it can refer to actors at the domestic or international level. Therefore, the concept of elite is context-specific in each country. The measurement is an indicator based on a 4-item response from “not at all important” (0) to “very important” (4). The White Path in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2007 to 2009 is the least anti-elitist party in our sample (0.058). Again, Hugo Chávez' Fifth Republic Movement in Venezuela is the party with the strongest anti-elitism component of populism with a score of 3.987 from 1998 to 2009.

The other constitutive dimension of populism measured by the data set is *people-centrism*. This concept involves a glorification of the common people and assumes the existence of a homogenous group that constitutes the “people” and which the party represents. In line with the notion of the “general will” proposed by Mudde (2004), such understanding of the people denies that divergent interests and values exist in society, as only the “will of the people” counts (Lührmann et al., 2020). Again, the measurement is an indicator based on a 4-item response ranging from “never – the party leadership never glorifies and identifies with the ordinary people” (0) to “always – the party leadership always glorifies and identifies with the ordinary people, which they claim to represent” (4). In our sample, the party For a United Ukraine! in Ukraine has the lowest degree of people-centrism with a score of 0.272 (2002–2005). At the other extreme is the United Socialist Party of Venezuela

<sup>10</sup> In 16 countries at different points in time, two or more parties are named as the party of the head of government in the V-Party data set. In these cases, we included the party with the highest populism index, based on the assumption that populism will influence the entire government, as the literature has amply shown that populist discourse tends to spread, even from parties in the opposition (Jakupec, 2017, 2). However, we also ran the models using the party with the lowest populism index, and our results remained similar.

(2010–2015), a party created by Chávez to bring together different political forces supporting his Bolivarian revolution, which displays a score of 3.98 and thereby has a strong orientation towards people-centered populism.

We are also interested in whether the “thick” ideology of a party, independent from its populist stance, will affect the populist government’s voting. We use the economic left-right scale for each party from the V-Party data set (Lührmann et al., 2020). This variable focuses on the economic stance of the party. It is based on whether a party wants the government to play an active role in the economy (*left-wing*) or it emphasizes a reduced economic role for the government (*right-wing*). On this basis, we construct a categorical variable entailing left-wing ideologies (far left and center-left), right-wing ideologies (center-right and far-right) and centrist ideologies, which we take as reference category in our statistical analysis. The distribution between left-wing and right-wing ideologies is relatively equal, with parties having a left-wing ideology in 25% of all observations and a right-wing ideology in 21%. Parties with a centrist ideology account for 54% of all observations.

In our third hypothesis we are interested in whether the quality of democracy affects the UNGA voting behavior of populist governments. We therefore include the *Electoral Democracy Index* from V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2020) to measure the country’s level of democracy. The electoral democracy index is a basic measure of democratic freedoms, measuring whether the electoral process comes close to the democratic ideal of fair and equal elections. Our Populism measure and the electoral democracy index do not correlate. Thus, populist governments can be found in more or less democratic states.

## 4.2 Controls

To test for a systematic relation between *UNGA voting-pattern* and *populism*, we include a number of variables to control for potential alternative explanatory factors at the party level, the state level, and the international level. At the party level, we consider the number of years the party has been in office in consecutive years (*term*). Parties that are new in office may initially stick to their populist ideology and agenda in foreign policy to show their voters that they are willing to break with past policies, but they might adjust their positions and voting behavior in the UNGA in the longer term, returning to conventional foreign policy preferences. This would be in line with realist theorizing in IR, which assumes that there is an immutable “national interest” and that “politics stops at the water’s edge” (Gowa, 1998). An example is US President Trump initially calling for the US to leave NATO, but ultimately remaining part of it. But the opposite might likewise happen. Several populists stay in power for many years, getting re-elected. As they consolidate their power as the governing “elite,” they can be expected to increasingly resort to foreign policy issues to maintain domestic support, generating a “rally around the flag” effect (see Tir, 2010).

Next, we control for the country’s economic strength by including the GDP per capita as measured by the World Bank. We use the natural logarithm of the data in the main models, but the effects of the explanatory variables remain similar once we

use the absolute number. Since a country's interconnectedness with others can be expected to affect its voting behavior and can also influence whether populists come to power, we control for the country's involvement in *globalization*. The variable is the KOF's (Konjunkturforschungsstelle ETH Zürich) de facto trade globalization index, which is based on the trade in goods and services, and a measurement for trade partner diversity (Gygli et al., 2019).

At the international level, studies have shown that aid dependency may also influence voting behavior in the UN (Dreher et al., 2008). We limit our controls to the amount of US aid received by the country since the *UNGA voting-pattern* measures the country's preference with regard to the US-led LIO (Bailey et al., 2017). We use information from the US Greenbook, which contains annual financial obligations in the economic and military spheres for all countries in the world (constant US-Dollar). Since the data is skewed, we use the natural logarithm of the data to control for the influence of the US on the UNGA voting of states.

## 5 Empirical results

Our data set is at the country-year level and includes 156 countries from 1975 to 2015. A first look at the data already shows a possible relationship between the level of populism and the country's *UNGA voting-pattern*. Figures A1-3 in the appendix<sup>11</sup> show the overall relationship between our dependent variable, the *UNGA voting pattern*, and our main independent variable, *populism*, as well as for *anti-elitism* and *people-centrism*. The scatter plots are in line with our expectation: the higher the level of populism, the lower the country's preference for the US-led LIO.

In a next step, we analyze whether this relationship is systematic. Due to the continuous nature of our dependent variable, we use OLS regression. Since we are interested in how populism affects the country's *UNGA voting-pattern*, as a proxy for preferences related to the liberal international order, we include state-level fixed effects in all models to account for unmeasured, time-invariant factors. We use lagged independent variables to mitigate the potential for reverse causality. Year fixed effects are also included to account for possible changes over time. We run the models without state-level and year fixed effects with comparable results (see Model 2 and 4 for the main models).

Table 1 shows the main results with *UNGA voting-pattern* as the dependent variable and the lagged values of the different populism indicators as explanatory variables. Model 1 only estimates the relationship between the independent and dependent variable with fixed effects and model 2 without any fixed-effects. The other models include the control variables with and without fixed-effects (Models 3 and 4), as well as the two interaction effects to test our second and third hypotheses (Models 5 and 6). Models 1 to 4 include the *populism* index and the findings are consistent with our expectation and descriptive evidence: Populist governments are more likely to reject the US-led LIO. The effect is substantial (Fig. 1): If the level of

<sup>11</sup> The Appendix is available at the Review of International Organizations' webpage.

Table 1 Populist voting (1975–2015)

	(M1)	(M2)	(M3)	(M4)	(M5)	(M6)
	UNGA voting-pattern	UNGA voting-pattern	UNGA voting-pattern	UNGA voting-pattern	UNGA voting-pattern	UNGA voting-pattern
Populism	-0.212*** (0.038)	-0.254*** (0.038)	-0.190*** (0.031)	-0.290*** (0.033)	-0.074+ (0.041)	-0.548*** (0.065)
Left-wing			-0.054*** (0.016)	-0.026 (0.017)	0.091** (0.029)	-0.060*** (0.016)
Right-wing			0.043** (0.013)	0.031* (0.014)	0.068** (0.024)	0.046*** (0.013)
Electoral democracy			0.498*** (0.046)	0.221*** (0.004)	0.471*** (0.046)	0.250*** (0.061)
Term			-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.012*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)
US military aid (log)			0.006*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)
US economic aid (log)			0.008*** (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)
GDP pc (log)			0.044** (0.013)	-0.080*** (0.009)	0.043** (0.013)	0.047*** (0.013)
Globalization			0.000 (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Left-wing # Populism					-0.343*** (0.058)	
Right-wing # Populism					-0.067 (0.069)	
Populism # Electoral Democracy						0.659***

Table 1 (continued)

	(M1)	(M2)	(M3)	(M4)	(M5)	(M6)
Country fixed effects	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES
Year fixed effects	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES
Constant	0.015 (0.082)	0.060 (0.063)	-0.412** (0.126)	0.811*** (0.073)	-0.420*** (0.126)	-0.285* (0.127)
N	4830	4830	4505	4505	4505	4505

+ $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Standard errors in parantheses

*populism* increases from 0.071 to 0.80 (corresponds to the 5th and 95th percentiles of all observations), the value for the dependent variable decreases from 0.089 to -0.0049 (Model 3).

Given the debate on whether populism has a distinct impact on foreign policy, or on whether the latter is rather driven by thick ideologies, in order to test our second hypothesis, we test whether there is an interaction effect between populism and left-wing or right-wing party ideology (Model 5 in Table 1). As the predictive margins for the interaction effects show, populist parties with a left-wing ideology tend to reject the liberal international order much more strongly than populist parties with a centrist or right-wing ideology (Fig. 2). This is in line with the notion of the LIO order being US-led and thereby clearly associated with US hegemony as well as capitalism. Governments led by parties with a left-wing ideology will naturally be more openly skeptical of such order. Importantly, however, our analysis demonstrates that the thin-centered ideology of populism has an impact on preferences vis-à-vis the liberal international order regardless of the thick ideology it is combined with.

To test our third hypothesis, we look at the effect of the quality of democracy and populism on its support of the US-led LIO. As outlined before, we would expect that populist governments in more democratic states will be less opposed to the US-led LIO than those in less democratic states as the former are more open towards issues like democracy and human rights promotion as well as multilateralism. Model 6 in Table 1 tests whether there is an interaction effect between the *electoral democracy index* and *populism*. As the predictive margins for the interaction effects show, populists in less democratic countries tend to reject the US-led LIO much more

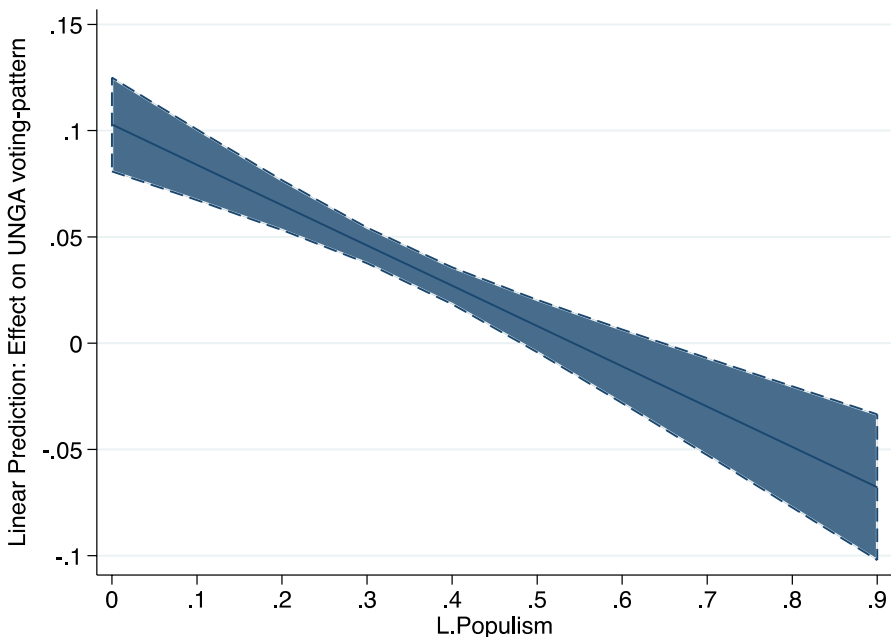
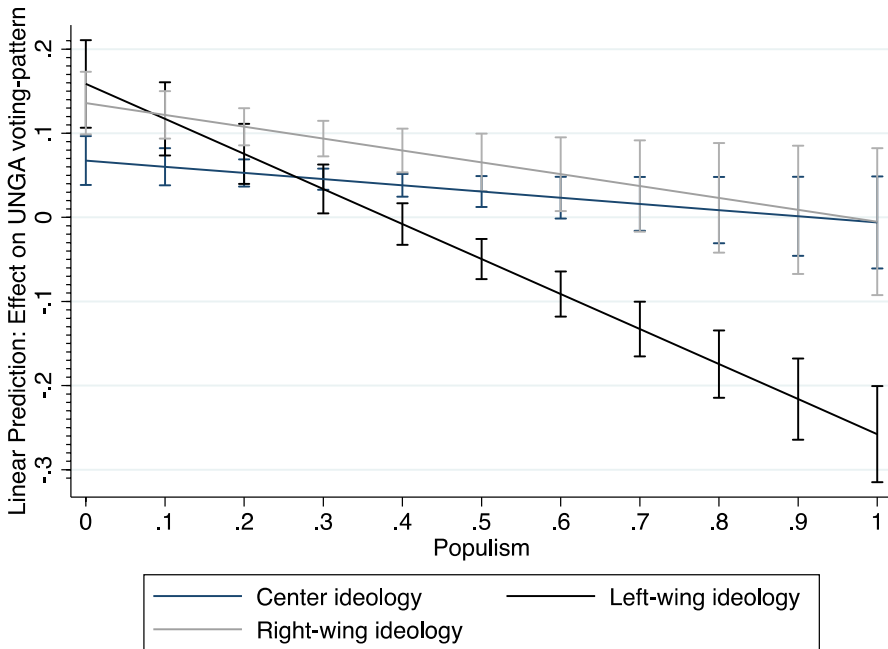


Fig. 1 Predictive margins for Model 3 (Table 1) with 95% confidence interval



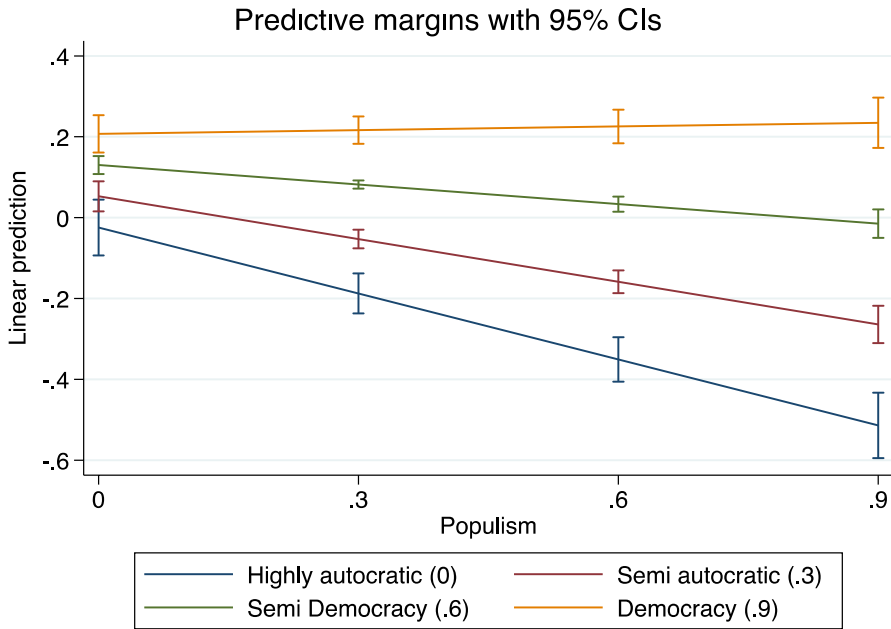
**Fig. 2** Predictive margins for the interaction effects for ideology and populism on UNGA voting-pattern (M5) with 95% confidence intervals

strongly than populists in democracies (Fig. 3). This is consistent with the argument that democratic states are generally more supportive of the US-led LIO than more autocratic ones, which were often heavily criticized for their poor performance on democracy and human rights.

We found consistent effects of the control variables in all models (Table 1). Parties that have been in power longer tend to reject the liberal international order more explicitly, most probably in a mobilization effort aimed at creating a “rally-around-the-flag” effect to keep domestic support alive even after having become the governing “elite.” In line with previous research, rich countries are also more in favor of the liberal international order. Not surprisingly, the level of military aid and economic aid from the US both are positively correlated with the acceptance of the US-led liberal order.

## 5.1 Populist governments and the United Nations

In line with our theoretical argument, we have shown that populist governments are more likely to reject the US-led LIO in UNGA votes. At the same time, building upon the findings of recent qualitative studies on populists’ approaches to and (de)legitimation of multilateral institutions (Söderbaum et al., 2021; Spandler & Söderbaum, 2023), we argued above that there are no reasons to expect populists to be opposed to multilateralism as such, but just to multilateral institutions that are shaped by the hegemonic power US or that promote liberal values perceived as undermining popular

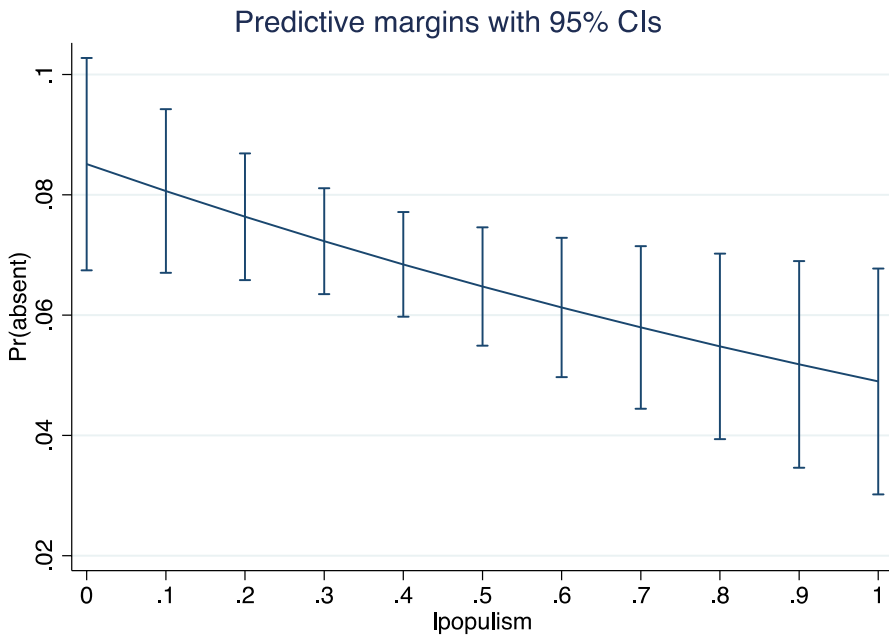


**Fig. 3** Predictive margins for the Interaction effects for Electoral democracy and populism on UNGA voting-pattern (M6) with 95% confidence intervals. Note: To simplify the presentation, the interaction effects for the electoral democracy index are presented in .3 increments. The corresponding value of the electoral democracy index is shown in brackets

sovereignty. We would thus expect populists not to be opposed to the UNGA with its universal membership, and especially not to the UNGA, which is not just the only universal body in the UN, but also embodies an egalitarian ideal via its one country-one vote principle. To this end, we ask how populists behave in the UNGA and more specifically whether they are more likely to evade voting and thus multilateral cooperation. For this purpose, we use the UNGA Resolutions Voting Data and Issue Categories (UNGA-RES) dataset (Voelsen, 2021). The study period here is from 1995 to 2015 and refers to the votes of individual countries on individual resolutions in the UNGA. The dataset contains information on each vote and whether the respective country took part in the vote. We use this information to create a binary variable that is coded “1” if the country did not participate in the vote. The logit model includes all previous control variables and clustered errors at the country level (Table A2).

There is a negative effect indicating that populist governments are less likely than other governments not to participate in UNGA votes (Fig. 4). Populists have therefore not turned their backs on the UNGA and chosen an exit option, even in the context of the US-led LIO, but have participated in the votes.

This more nuanced finding on populism and multilateralism indicates that while populists oppose the tenets of liberalism and US control, they continue to actively participate in the UN. Qualitative evidence from non-populist and populist governments with varying thick ideologies in Bolivia, India, Italy, the Philippines, and Turkey indicates that populists are not more likely than non-populists to fundamentally



**Fig. 4** Predictive margins for the likelihood that a populist government is absent from a voting of a resolution in the UNGA (Table A2) with 95% confidence intervals

question the existence or the importance of the United Nations. Despite his scathing attacks against UN officials who had criticized his “war on drugs,” inducing him to even threaten to leave the UN (BBC News, 2016), the Philippines’ President Duterte did not follow up on that threat and in 2021 he argued: “only multilateralism can deliver the global public goods we need” (UNGA, 2021). Yet, like several other populist governments he was very critical of power hierarchies within the UN, and especially of UNSC permanent membership reflecting an outdated and elitist hegemony of great powers. As Turkish President Erdoğan put it: “The current order, which protects the powerful, disregards the rights of the weak, and confines the humanity’s fate to the mercy of five countries, is not sustainable. The United Nations Security Council urgently needs to be reformed with a comprehensive and inclusive approach.” (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2023). In making a similar connection to the plights of the “people” and condemning liberal interventionist practices, Bolivia’s left-wing populist President Evo Morales stated: “I wonder what the United Nations is for. What do we have treaties and conventions for? What use is multilateralism? Human multilateralism we welcome; inhuman interventionism will be combated by people all over the world. I believe that as a union leader and as someone from one of the most humiliated sectors in the history of Latin America, the indigenous peasant peoples.” (UNGA, 2013). Populist leaders thus seem to translate their anti-elitist rhetoric to the international level, criticizing the inequality in bodies like the UNSC, while participating even more actively than less populist governments in UNGA voting.

## 5.2 Controls

Since the measurement of populism is an index that brings together the two dimensions of anti-elitism and people-centrism, we are also interested in identifying whether one of these constitutive dimensions has a stronger effect. In theoretical terms, we can expect anti-elitism to lead to foreign policy preferences that are explicitly opposed to the core principles of the US-led LIO. Some scholars highlight that populists whose thin-centered ideology is strongly anti-elitist will end up constructing conspiracy theories about nefarious foreign elites keen on harming the “true people” (Destradi et al., 2020). The rejection of the LIO is also frequently linked to a deep skepticism towards globalization, with its stretching of interconnectedness across borders, its intensification and acceleration of global flows and processes, and its deepening enmeshment of the local and the global (Held & McGrew, 1998; Zürn, 2004). All this is seen as an elitist project designed to harm the hard-working, inherently good people, who end up being the losers of globalization (Marks, 2004).

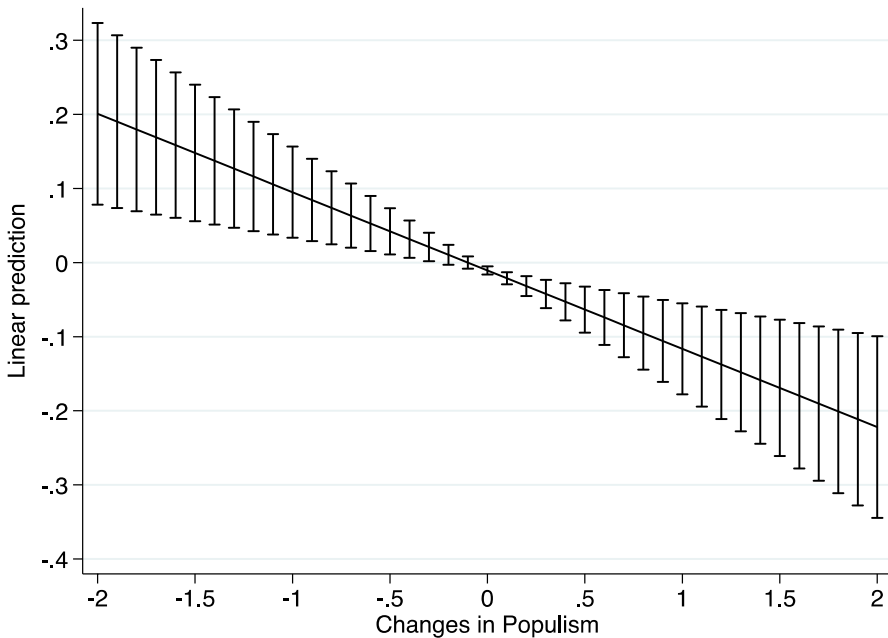
By contrast, populists whose thin ideology has a stronger “people-centric” streak can be expected to focus on emphasizing the virtues of the people, and this might induce them to adopt a foreign policy discourse centered on highlighting the greatness of the nation (Destradi et al., 2020). They will still be suspicious of the LIO, but they will not necessarily consider it an existential threat to a strong – and arguably much more resilient – people. Indeed, if the “true people” is magnified in its virtues and strengths, populists will call for it to withstand the negative implications of the liberal international order, but they might not need to reject such order *tout court*.

We test the effect of the two components of populism on *UNGA voting-pattern* separately in Models 4 and 5 (Table A1). As we hypothesized, both forms of populism have a statistically significant negative effect. If the level of *anti-elitism* increases from 0.157 to 3.134 (corresponds to the 5th and 95th percentiles of all observations), the value for the dependent variable decreases from 0.079 to -0.043. *People-centrism* has a comparably strong effect: If the value of *people-centrism* increases from 0.701 to 3.859 (corresponds to the 5th and 95th percentiles of all observations), the value for the dependent variable decreases from 0.119 to -0.039. In sum, both dimensions of populisms have a negative effect on the acceptance of the US-led LIO.

Furthermore, we run a series of robustness checks based on our main models to increase confidence in our results (see Appendix for full models). The populism data is based on an expert survey, which can lead to problems due to under- or over-reporting of populism for different countries and decades. While V-Dem has already applied a very sophisticated system to identify possible skews (see Lührmann et al., 2020), some problems risk to remain. To control for this, we carried out a robustness check with the lowest expert estimates for the populism variables. This should make it more difficult to find a statistically significant correlation, since populism should be underestimated in these measures. If we take these low estimates for the populism variables, rather than the best measure as in the main models, our results remain stable – populism decreases the probability that the state votes in line with the norms of the liberal international order (Table A1).

We run the models without the economic controls as they reduce the numbers of observations due to missing values. With the exemption of a now not significant result for anti-elitism, all other results are similar (Table A3). Because the LIO is conceptualized as US-led in the data set we use, we excluded both the US and the UK, the main proponents of such order, individually and jointly from our sampling in some of the checks. The results remain stable (Table A4). Finally, we included a dummy to indicate the post-Cold War period, since the time periods differ not only in terms of the structural features of the international system, but also in terms of the features of the international order (Ikenberry, 2009). The effect is negative and significant, meaning that the rejection of the liberal international order was stronger in the decades after the Cold War as one would expect (Börzel & Zürn, 2021). Nevertheless, all populism indicators are still statistically significantly correlated with a decrease in *UNGA voting-pattern* (Table A5). The same holds true when we include, instead of a cold war dummy, a dummy for the post-1999 period in order to differentiate between the so-called ‘neo-liberal neo-populist wave’ (Wajner, 2021: 653) from the start of our available data in 1975 until 1999; and for the so-called ‘progressive neo-populist wave’ (ibid.) from 2000 until the end of our data in 2015 (Table A6).

If our results are robust, we should expect to observe an effect when a change in government occurs in a country, either towards or away from a populist regime. In order to capture this as close in time as possible, we created a variable that measures the *changes in populism* compared to the year before and a comparable variable for



**Fig. 5** Predictive margins for the likelihood of the effect of changes in populism on changes in the *UNGA voting-pattern* (M2, Table A7) with 95% confidence intervals. Note: A minus change in populism indicates a shift to a less populist government compared to the prior year

the changes in the *UNGA voting patterns* variable. As Fig. 4 in the Appendix shows, in most cases there are only marginal changes in both variables on an annual basis (see A-8 for an overview of cases). This is to be expected, as in most cases the same government is involved. The large swings are usually associated with a change of government and also have a corresponding influence on the country's voting behavior in the UNGA. We run the same models as before but now including a difference measure as dependent and independent variable. In line with our theoretical expectations, the greater the jump in the intensity of populism of a government compared to the previous year, the more marked the change in UNGA voting patterns (Fig. 5).

## 6 Conclusion

The literature on the crisis of the liberal international order has long claimed that populism has detrimental consequences for the core principles of such order, but it has so far not empirically substantiated this claim. In turn, the literature on populism has long ignored the important international consequences that populism might have. With this contribution, we have brought together these two bodies of literature, providing an empirical confirmation of the impact of populism on foreign policy preferences with regards to the core principles of the US-led LIO.

Our findings are straightforward: populism is associated with foreign policy preferences opposed to the core principles of the US-led LIO. The skepticism of “liberal” multilateralism, economic openness, and the promotion of liberal democracy and human rights has shaped populists' approach to international politics over the past four decades.

In our empirical analysis we also accounted for differences among populist governments and we found that, indeed, not all populists are the same, but that populism “as such” matters when it comes to preferences on the international order. We found that there is no substantial difference among populists who tend to emphasize more anti-elitism vs. those who place greater emphasis on people-centrism. By contrast, the thick ideologies that are combined with populism have a stronger impact: left-wing populist governments will be more prone than centrist or right-wing populist governments to develop preferences opposed to the US-led LIO. Importantly, however, populism, despite being a thin-centered ideology, has an impact on preferences vis-à-vis the LIO regardless of the thick ideology it is combined with. We also found that populists in less democratic states tend to be more opposed to the LIO than those in more democratic ones. So apart from populism as a thin-centered ideology, both thick ideology and the political system influence the preferences of populist governments towards the US-led LIO. Regarding populists' attitudes towards multilateral institutions, we did not find that populism makes governments less likely to participate in UNGA votes. Populists are not opposed to multilateralism as such, but rather to multilateral institutions that emphasize liberal principles such as democracy promotion or human rights and that entail power hierarchies.

Our findings are important for several reasons. First, they lend support to the long-held assumption that populism indeed undermines the core principles of the LIO. As populism spreads all over the world, this should be expected to have major consequences for multilateralism, free trade, democracy, and human rights. Importantly, we need to acknowledge that populism has spread to many still understudied countries, including in the Global South. While our empirical analysis stopped in 2015, the fact that we have populists in power in important emerging powers, from India to Turkey, but also in a range of smaller states in all world regions (as well as increasingly successful populist parties across Europe, as the 2024 European Parliament election has shown) underscores that the LIO is braced to face more substantial challenges in the future. More research is needed that addresses the specificities of populism in various world regions and delves deeper into how exactly populist preferences translate into populist foreign policy.

Second, our findings provide a systematic confirmation that populism does indeed have implications for international politics. While this has mostly been discussed via case studies and qualitative comparisons so far, we were able to identify the impact of populism as a broader trend in international politics. Populism is a thin-centered ideology primarily focused on domestic issues, but once populists come to power, such ideology will have important consequences for their countries' conduct in international affairs. For international institutions and for governments interacting with populists, this implies a need to devise new strategies on how to engage with them. Our more fine-grained findings on various types of populist governments reveal that cooperation will be most difficult with left-wing populist governments and with those in hybrid democracies or autocracies. At the same time, an international order that is less focused on the US and more pluralistic might produce less skepticism and rejection on the part of populist governments.

Third, and relatedly, our findings open up a range of new avenues for further research. If populism does indeed have international consequences, we should try to uncover them in greater detail. Besides the issue of overall disagreement with the broad features of the international order, future research should delve into the impact of populism on the provision of global public goods, on engagement in crisis management, on trade policies, and so forth. Moreover, we need a better understanding of how and why populists engage to varying degrees in different multilateral institutions and, more generally, of the complex interplay of thin and thick ideologies in shaping these components of populist foreign policy.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** There is no conflict of interest/there are no competing interests to report.

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