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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Competing over the 'left behind': the effect of independent local lists on the electoral performance of populist parties

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ABSTRACT

Rising dissatisfaction with established politics has driven widespread partisan dealignment, weakening mainstream parties and fuelling the ascent of populist challengers. Yet alongside populist parties, another group has gained traction across Europe: independent local lists (ILLs). These locally organised groups also present themselves as alternatives to party politics and may channel anti-establishment sentiment. This paper investigates how the rise of ILLs affects the performance of populist parties – particularly in so-called 'left behind' places – and how this relationship varies across populist parties of different ideological types. The analysis draws on an original dataset of local elections in 670 municipalities over four electoral rounds in the Czech Republic, a country in which both populist parties and ILLs have recently emerged and now play prominent roles. Fixed-effects panel models show that the presence of ILLs significantly impedes the electoral performance of populist parties, including in economically deprived contexts. These findings shed new light on the conditions under which local political actors are able to constrain the development of populist parties, offering broader insights into strategic responses to voter grievances and the rising demand for anti-establishment politics.

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Introduction

Rising dissatisfaction with established politics has led to widespread partisan dealignment, weakening mainstream parties and fuelling the ascent of populist challengers – particularly populist radical right parties. There is regional variation in the degree of this anti-mainstream backlash, revealing a 'geography of discontent', and what some have termed the 'revenge of the places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). In highly discontented 'left behind' localities, populist parties have recently achieved notable successes, even taking control of local governments (Drápalová and Wegrich 2021; Paxton 2023). Alongside

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the rise of populist parties, another group challenging established parties has been gaining traction in local politics across many European countries: independent local lists (ILLs). These are local organized political groups that compete only within specific local jurisdictions and are not (formally) linked to any national political party. Similar to populist parties, ILLs define themselves as an alternative to mainstream national parties, often aiming to project a 'non-party' image. This raises critical questions: Are ILLs competitors to populist parties in electoral politics? And under which conditions is this competition most consequential for populist party performance?

This paper explores the relationship between the local electoral performance of populist parties (of various types) and ILLs, with particular attention to local socioeconomic conditions. We investigate the extent to which the growth of ILLs affects the performance of various populist parties, including in contextual settings that tend to be conducive to their electoral success due to socio-economic decline. We focus on the case of the Czech Republic. Once viewed as a poster child for democratic consolidation in Eastern Europe, with a liberal, growing economy and a stable party system, the past decade has seen a rapid growth in the electoral success of both populist parties and ILLs.

Our analysis draws on an original dataset of local council seat shares in 670 municipalities over four electoral rounds (2010, 2014, 2018, 2022) in the Czech Republic and conduct a two-way fixed effects panel data analysis. We distinguish between different forms of populist parties: the centrist populist VV, the technocratic populist ANO, and the populist radical right SPD. We conduct a series of multivariate panel regressions to investigate the influence of local economic deprivation and social capital on support for populist parties, and how competition with ILLs affects this relationship.

Our results indicate the local strength of ILLs has a significant negative effect on the electoral performance of populist parties. This constraining effect varies in significance and magnitude between populist parties of different ideologies, with the strongest impact observed for the centrist populist party ANO, and a significant, although smaller, effect for the radical right SPD. By contrast, we find limited direct effects of local economic deprivation, although it increases in importance in areas with dense social networks and social capital. Importantly, our interaction models show that ILLs shape how economic deprivation translates into populist mobilization: in municipalities with strong ILL presence, the relationship between unemployment and populist support largely disappears. We argue that ILLs can influence the electoral performance of populist parties in local elections, affecting their vote and seat share and, in turn, their access to local executive office. The paper thus demonstrates various conditions under which local political actors shape the development of populist parties in sub-national politics, offering new insights into how non-mainstream political movements of various forms respond to voter grievances and contest representation amidst 'geographies of discontent'.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section presents the literature concerning contextual factors that drive support for populist parties and ILLs, introducing the main explanations from which hypotheses are derived. The third section gives a brief overview of the trajectory of populist parties and ILLs in the Czech Republic and introduces the Czech electoral system at the municipal level. The fourth section describes the data, and the fifth tests the hypotheses, proposes possible mechanisms and presents the results. The final section concludes and speculates on the importance of the findings for other countries and levels of government.

Local contextual factors driving support for populist parties and independent local lists

Existing research demonstrates similarities between populist parties and ILLs, in terms of the roots of their appeal to voters, which invites study of the dynamics of competition between them. According to the now dominant ideational conceptualization of Cas Mudde (2004, 543), populism is ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’. Populist parties holding this ideology have been garnering increasing levels of support across Europe in recent years. The rise of political parties hostile to traditional representative politics has generated fears for the consequences for liberal democracy, especially as such parties have entered government (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Vittori 2022). Over the past decade, populist politicians have held power in several Central and Eastern European states: Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has become a global figurehead of the populist radical right, since advocating for a new model of ‘illiberal democracy’ in a famous 2014 speech. Former Polish leader Jarosław Kaczyński coined the term ‘counter-revolution’ to describe his efforts to combat liberal institutional legacies. These leaders have aimed to reshape the structure and decision-making processes of the EU in line with these ideas (Foy and Buckley 2016). Yet the ideological scope of populism is not confined to the radical right: the so-called ‘thin ideology’ of populism can also be paired with radical left, or, as is common in central and eastern Europe (Engler 2020), technocratic and centrist platforms.

ILLs, on the other hand, are defined as political groups that are not (formally) linked to any national political party, are locally organized, and compete in elections only within specific local jurisdictions (Åberg and Ahlberger 2015). Over the last few decades, ILLs have developed from fringe curiosities to become serious competitors to national parties at the local level in many European countries (Bolgherini and Vampa 2021). Like their populist counterparts, the growth of ILLs has been especially pronounced following the Great Recession, as voters turned away from mainstream parties in favour of alternatives perceived as more responsive and authentic (Drápalová and Vampa 2018; Vampa 2016). In some countries, like Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, and parts of Germany, ILLs are now competitive across large swathes of the local political landscape.

While populist parties pose the most visible challenge to establishment politics at the national level, ILLs increasingly fill that role locally. Both derive support, at least in part, from growing dissatisfaction with establishment politics. This dissatisfaction is structurally rooted in long-term trends of partisan dealignment and the weakening of traditional party attachments (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Mair 2008). Populist parties have capitalized on the void, by portraying establishment politics as the ‘corrupt elite’ and instead projecting themselves as the authentic representatives of ‘the people’ (Schulte-Cloos and Leininger 2022). ILLs are likewise often linked to growing dissatisfaction with national politics and political parties (Åberg and Ahlberger 2015; Angenendt 2018; Gendźwiłł 2012). They tend to define themselves as an alternative to mainstream national parties and often project themselves as ‘non-parties’ (Reiser and Holtmann 2008, 7). Such anti-

party rhetoric is often used to signal protest against party democracy in general (Angenendt 2018).

ILLs claim to embody a different model of representation not based on party politics but rather the direct participation of the local community. Their image of political outsiders sets them apart from traditional forms of political organization and participation (Vampa 2016). Many empirical studies across Europe confirm this anti-party strategy that local parties use to distinguish themselves from their party-affiliated opponents (Aars and Ringkjøb 2008; Boogers and Voerman 2010; Gendźwiłł 2012). Due to their similarities in employing anti-establishment and anti-party rhetoric, and building on such discourse to project a direct, unmediated, and personalized connections with voters, we could expect ILLs and populist parties to compete over similar voters.¹ Indeed, Drápalová and Vampa (2018) find a positive correlation between the presence of local lists in Spanish municipalities and the vote for populist parties at a higher level of government. Consequently, we expect that in municipalities where ILLs are electorally successful, populist parties will struggle to gain equivalent traction. In other words, ILLs may crowd out populist parties by absorbing anti-establishment sentiment at the local level. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1. The seat share of populist parties in local councils will be negatively associated with the presence of independent local lists (ILLs), such that higher seat shares of ILLs will correspond to lower seat shares of populist parties.

Despite the aforementioned parallels, few scholars have so far connected populist parties and ILLs in comparative studies (Angenendt 2018; Drápalová and Vampa 2018; Jankowski, Juen, and Tepe 2022), and the competitive dynamics between them remain unexplored. The remainder of this section outlines the theoretical commonalities in the contextual drivers of support for populist parties and ILLs and develops expectations for the conditions under which support for one may constrain support for the other

Economic deprivation and support for populist parties and ILLs

A prominent strand of the literature on the rise of anti-establishment politics in Europe highlights the role of structural economic change and resulting socio-economic deprivation. According to the widely cited ‘losers of globalisation’ thesis, those who have economically suffered from globalisation-related changes, such as unskilled and low-skilled manual workers, are the most important group from which populist parties draw their electoral support (Beramendi et al. 2015; Kriesi et al. 2008). Relatedly, other scholars emphasise the role of technological change and focus on the ‘losers of economic modernization’ – those who have been disadvantaged by increasing workplace automation and face worsening labour market prospects – as a key electoral constituency of populist parties (Kurer 2020; Kurer and Palier 2019). In brief, whether rooted in actual material displacement or future-oriented economic anxiety, structural economic transformations have led to increasing numbers of citizens who feel economically excluded and politically unrepresented, and are thus drawn to political forces pledging to turn back the clock on such changes and ‘take back control’ (Scheiring et al. 2024). The economically excluded and vulnerable strata of the population

thus constitute a crucial part of the electoral milieu targeted by populist parties (Guriev and Papaioannou 2022).

At an aggregated level, the so-called ‘revenge of the places that don’t matter’ thesis draws attention to the geography of economic discontent. According to this perspective, the electoral success of populist (often radical right) parties is concentrated in regions marked by economic decline, demographic stagnation, and relative isolation from national growth centres (Cremaschi, Bariletto, and Vries 2025; Rodríguez-Pose 2018), as well as in areas suffering from public service deprivation (Cremaschi et al. 2025). Specific areas experiencing decline and deprivation have become reservoirs of resentment and electoral strongholds of far-right and anti-establishment parties. In these settings, populist parties tap into collective perceptions of territorial neglect and a sense of being ‘left behind’ by mainstream parties and global economic trends. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H2a. Local economic deprivation will be positively associated with the seat share of populist parties in local councils, such that higher levels of economic deprivation will correspond to an increased seat share for populist parties.

Yet it is important to note that the empirical literature on the relationship between economic deprivation and populist support yields mixed and context-dependent results (Schraff and Pontusson 2023; Sipma and Berning 2021). Moreover, while populist parties are widely seen as the primary beneficiaries of economic decline, they are not the only actors competing for this constituency. In some contexts, voters disillusioned with the mainstream parties that oversaw these economic changes may instead vote for ILLs. In Italy, for example, ILLs indeed perform more strongly in the socio-economically weaker regions of the south, compared to the north and centre of the country, taking control of over 50% of local council seats and becoming the dominant force (Vampa 2016, 592–593). Likewise, in Slovakia independents are more popular in Slovak municipalities with higher rates of unemployment. While populist parties typically respond to structurally rooted discontent with ideologically driven, nationally-oriented critiques, ILLs provide a more pragmatic and localist response to dissatisfaction with mainstream politics. Their focus on practical solutions to address local grievances may resonate with voters experiencing economic deprivation, potentially diverting support away from populist parties in such contexts. Economic deprivation alone, therefore, does not determine populist success; it depends on how grievances are channelled through available local political supply. From these foundations, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H2b. The relationship between local economic deprivation and the seat share of populist parties in local councils is moderated by the presence of independent local lists (ILLs), such that higher seat shares of ILLs weaken the positive association between economic deprivation and populist party seat share.

Social capital and support for populist parties and ILLs

Social capital offers a useful lens for adding further nuance to the relationship between economic deprivation and anti-establishment voting. As Robert Putnam famously

argued in *Bowling Alone* (2000), recent decades have witnessed a decline in civic engagement and political participation in many advanced democracies. According to a long-standing view, a flourishing civil society fosters core democratic values of tolerance and cooperation (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1994), through the activities of both religious and non-religious organizations (Lewis, MacGregor, and Putnam 2013). A decline in social capital, therefore, is widely interpreted as a grave threat to democracy. From this perspective, we might expect that areas with lower levels of social capital are more likely to be dissatisfied with the political system and mistrusting of elites, and therefore more likely to vote for anti-establishment actors, particularly populist parties.

At the same time, the presence of ILLs might indicate stronger local community self-organization and cohesion. Being rooted in local civic networks, they are likely stronger in areas with higher levels of social capital (Reiser and Holtmann 2008). Empirical work supports this interpretation: Angenendt (2018) surveyed political representatives of ILLs in Germany and found that they were active members within their community and were motivated by altruistic values and contributions to the common good. Similar findings were reached by Lundåsen and Erlingsson (2023) in Sweden. Moreover, voters who are members of associations are significantly less likely to vote for populist parties; such expressions of social capital may, therefore, serve as a 'protective shield against populism' (Boeri et al. 2021, 865). From this perspective, one could expect that social capital would have a contrasting relationship with support for populist parties and ILLs, such that:

H3a. Local social capital will be negatively associated with the seat share of populist parties in local councils, such that lower levels of social capital will correspond to an increased seat share for populist parties.

However, recent research has drawn attention to a 'dark side' to social capital, due to its capacity to act as a conduit for anti-establishment mobilization, particularly in economically deprived areas. Rather than solely serving as a civic 'buffer' against anti-establishment resentment, dense local networks may facilitate the diffusion of grievances. According to the 'networks of grievance' hypothesis of Colombo and Dinas (2023), the transmission of local economic decline into support for anti-mainstream parties can thus actually be facilitated by higher levels of social capital. In the United States, support for Donald Trump in 2016 was especially strong in economically distressed communities that nevertheless maintained high levels of local embeddedness and associational life (Rodríguez-Pose, Lee, and Lipp 2021). This suggests that when combined with economic hardship, social capital may reinforce rather than mitigate support for populist parties.

H3b. The relationship between local economic deprivation and the seat share of populist parties in local councils is moderated by social capital, such that higher levels of social capital strengthen the positive association between economic deprivation and populist party seat share.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest a more complex, context-dependent relationship between social capital and anti-establishment voting. In relatively prosperous

municipalities, high levels of civic capital may promote constructive political alternatives, such as ILLs. In more economically deprived areas, however, local networks may serve to reinforce disaffection and channel support toward populist parties. The interaction between economic context and social capital is therefore crucial. Next, we turn to the empirical setting to test these theoretical expectations: the Czech Republic.

Competition between populist parties and independent local lists in the Czech Republic

Until recently, few would have expected that the Czech Republic would join the Eastern European club of populist governments. While the region has long been considered a fertile ground for anti-establishment politics (Hanley and Sikk 2016), the Czech Republic stood out as a model of democratic consolidation before 2011. Following the democratic transition, the party system remained relatively stable, the economy was successfully liberalized, and fiscal discipline was largely maintained. The global financial crisis of 2008 had minimal impact, and the so-called refugee crisis was barely felt. In brief, the main factors said to drive the appeal of populist parties appeared lacking, and, before the 2010s, the phenomenon of populism was largely absent from the Czech political system (Císař and Štětka 2016; Havlík 2019).

Nevertheless, since the 2010s, an ideologically diverse set of populist parties has risen to prominence in the Czech Republic. After electoral earthquakes in 2011 and 2015, during which the two main political parties (the Social Democratic Party, ČSSD, and the aforementioned ODS) imploded, a range of new anti-establishment and populist forces quickly filled the void (Císař and Štětka 2016; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015).

The first notable breakthrough came with *Věci veřejné* (Public Affairs, VV), a local party founded in 2001 in the central district 1 of Prague, which gradually expanded into other urban districts in the city and elsewhere, such as Kostelec and Orlicí (Hloušek 2012). In 2010, VV was re-established as a national party and ran on a platform dominated by anti-establishment and anti-corruption themes – making it the first party in the Czech Republic to explicitly adopt a populist discourse. In the literature, VV is also associated with an ‘entrepreneurial’ party type (Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020). Having entered parliament, in 2011 it joined a coalition government led by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS). However, following internal conflicts and a series of corruption scandals, VV split in 2013 and was dissolved two years later.

A more enduring populist force emerged with the creation of ANO 2011 (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) by Slovak-born businessman Andrej Babiš. ANO represents a distinctive form of technocratic populism, defined less by ideological positioning than by its emphasis on managerial competence and efficiency (Drápalová and Wegrich 2021; Havlík 2019). After winning 18.6% of the vote in 2013, ANO quickly established itself as a major political actor. It joined a coalition government that year, taking control of the finance ministry. Following its victory in the 2017 elections (29.6% of the vote), ANO formed a minority government, with Babiš becoming Prime Minister. Since then, it has consistently led national polling and consolidated its status as the dominant force in Czech politics (Buščíková and Guasti 2019; Císař and Štětka 2016).

In the same period, a populist radical right party also emerged in the Czech Republic. The former businessman and television personality, Tomio Okamura, founded the Dawn

of Direct Democracy party in 2013 in response to widespread corruption scandals in Czech politics. After a split in the party, Okamura re-founded the party as Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) in 2015. SPD has pursued a typically populist radical right agenda focused on direct democracy, opposition to immigration, and Euroscepticism.

Initially marginal actors in local politics, populist parties have become serious competitors at the municipal level following the 2014 and 2018 local elections. The average vote share for populist parties increased from 3.62% in 2010 to 14.57% in 2014, and 14.9% in 2018, showing a trend of rapid consolidation by populist parties in Czech local politics (Figure 1). In 2018, ANO won in nine regions, secured control of twelve of the largest cities, and gained seats in 71% of local councils in cities with a population of over 2,000 inhabitants. In 2010, VV achieved representation in several large cities, but it was in the 2014 and 2018 local elections where ANO and similarly populist parties really broke through. In the municipal elections of 2014, ANO won in the three largest cities of the Czech Republic: Prague, Brno, Ostrava, and – ending a long period of rule by liberal parties in the capital city – Prague.

However, the strength of populist parties varies considerably from city to city. In 2014 the share of seats controlled by populists ranged from 0 to 48%. In 2018 the variance further increased, so the share of seats controlled by populists ranged from 0 to around 76%. Geographically, as shown in Figure 2, the support for populist parties is also unevenly spread around the country. These patterns raise an important empirical question regarding the electoral performance of populist parties: *Why have some Czech municipalities experienced a sharp rise in populist party representation, whereas others still seem to be relatively immune?*

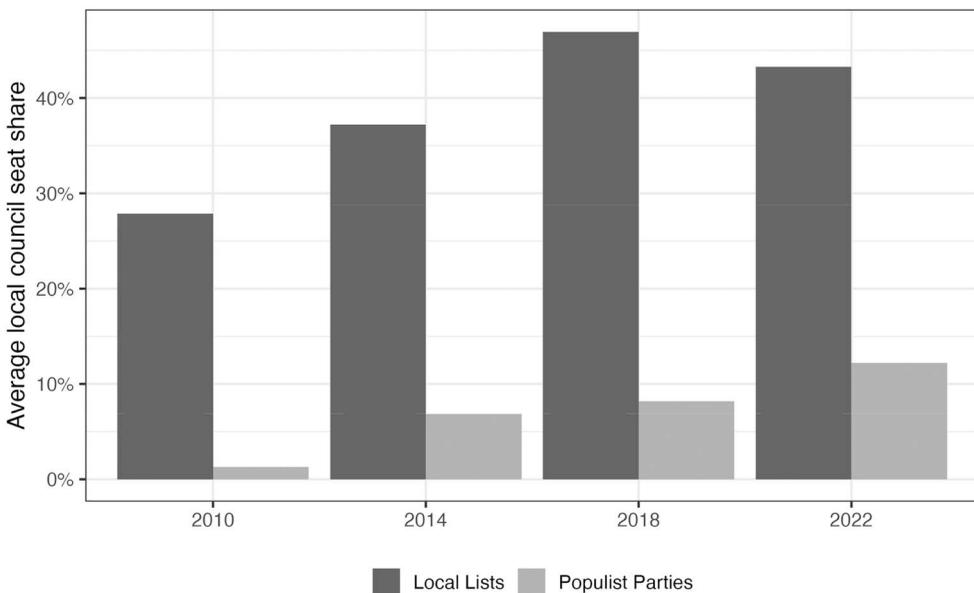


Figure 1. Share of local council seats held by populist parties and independent local lists (ILLs) in the Czech Republic, 2010-2022.

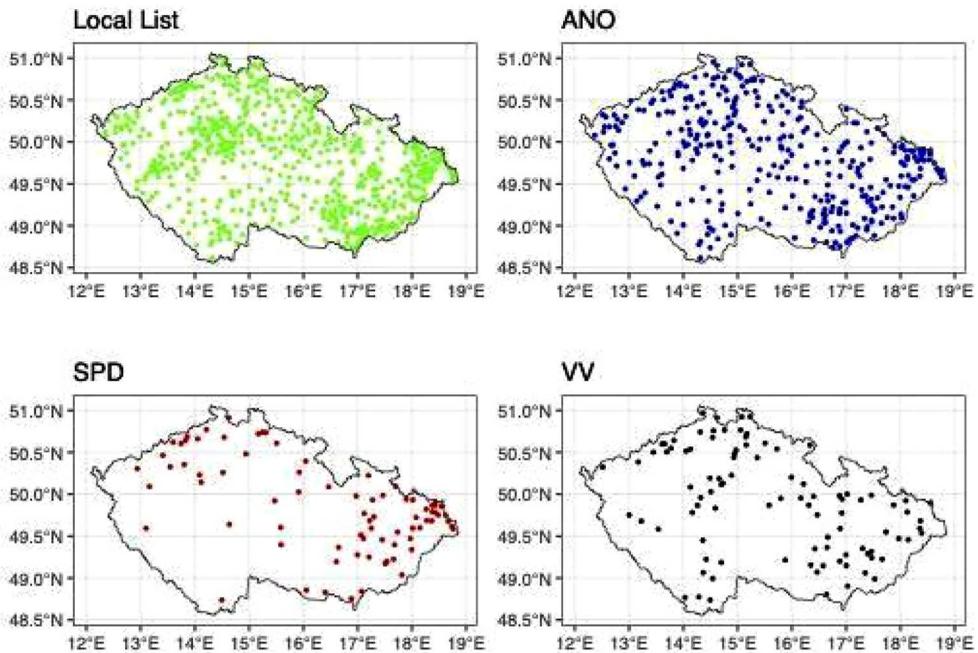


Figure 2. Geographic distribution of party presence in Czech local councils 2010-2018.

ILLs may provide an important part of the answer. Since the beginning of the post-communist period, such groups of independent local candidates have been a prominent feature of Czech local politics (Bernard et al. 2025; Kostelecky et al. 2024). Several studies on Czech local politics point to a robust local subculture of local lists and neighbour-based groups as a distinctive feature of the political landscape (Jüptner 2008; Rysavy and Saradin 2010). The ILLs are a heterogeneous group, predominantly formed by a grouping of independent candidates and local neighbourhood groups that promote local issues or oppose national policies and interventions (Kostelecky et al. 2024). Ideologically, they are very diverse, but very few local lists position themselves clearly on the left or right of the political spectrum. The majority of Czech ILLs present themselves as pragmatic and centrist, focusing on issues concerning the quality of life in their city or specific local problems (Voda 2022). They are frequently groupings of heterogeneous independent candidates united by one or a few local themes. For example, a local list called *Valtice 2018* in the small city of Valtice in South Moravia describes its focus on its Facebook page as follows: ‘We care about our city, so we strive to make it a better place’. Another ILL called ‘ROZVÍJÍME HRADEC - nová Hradecká občanská kandidátka’, from the larger regional town of Hradec Králové, describes its programme as follows: ‘We are a team of people who live in Hradec Králové and love this city. We have a vision of where we would like to take the city, for us, our children and our grandchildren’.

Similar to the populist and radical-right wing parties, the presence of local lists is not uniformly distributed across the territory, with ILLs particularly prominent in smaller municipalities (Jüptner 2008). This variation prompts another important analytical question at the heart of this study: What is the relationship between the variation in support for ILLs

and the aforementioned variation in support for populist parties? More specifically, to what extent does local ILL strength constrain support for populist parties?

In addition to party competition, we consider the structural drivers of support for both populist parties and ILLs. The Czech Republic offers a useful context for this analysis due to the significant variation in economic deprivation across its municipalities. While aggregate economic indicators in the Czech Republic have been relatively strong in recent years, pockets of economic deprivation persist across municipalities. These include elevated unemployment, low personal incomes, and – perhaps most notably – a geographically concentrated private debt crisis. Despite economic growth, many individuals remain financially precarious, with over 150,000 citizens holding ten or more unpaid debts and facing potential foreclosure or distraint (Tait 2019). These burdens are unevenly distributed: in some municipalities, up to 20% of the population face economic distress, compared to less than 3% in others. Such personal experiences of financial hardship, such as unemployment and debt, are expected to undermine trust in institutions and the system and as described above, increase susceptibility to anti-establishment appeals.

We also examine the role of local social capital as a potential constraint on, or facilitator of, populist mobilization. In the Czech Republic, a robust local subculture of organized neighbourhood groups exists in some municipalities but is absent in others (Jüptner 2008; Rysavy and Saradin 2010). These local organizations formed by neighbours are closely linked to the density of local social networks and associational life (Bernard 2010). Due to the strongly secular nature of Czech society, religious associations constitute only a small proportion of these groups.² While social capital and ILLs are conceptually distinct, we treat ILLs as one possible institutional expression of strong local civic networks. We could therefore expect that localities with higher levels of social capital are more likely to channel their political energies into forming ILLs, whereas those with lower levels of social capital are more likely to resort to voting for populist parties.

Context: local government organization in the Czech Republic

The institutional framework of local government in the Czech Republic is important to outline, due to its influence over the dynamics of electoral competition examined in this study. Czech local elections employ a proportional system with indirect election of the mayor. According to comparative typologies of local governance, the Czech system is classified as a ‘collective body’ type with a ‘collegial leader’ form of mayor (Bäck, Heinelt, and Magnier 2006, 34; Mouritzen and Svara 2002). Electoral competition at the local level operates under an open-list system. City councillors are elected using the D’Hondt formula, and parties must obtain at least 5% of valid votes to qualify for seat allocation. Municipal elections are held every four years. The electoral system is notably complex (Jüptner 2008). Voters receive a single ballot but have as many votes as there are seats on the council. They may vote for an entire party list, individual party candidates, or candidates from different parties. Seats are allocated based on the total number of votes each party receives. The mayor is then elected indirectly by an absolute majority of councillors during the first council meeting. This electoral system often results in broad coalition governments. These institutional features are crucial to understanding the competitive environment for populist parties and ILLs. The openness of the ballot structure, the proportionality of seat allocation, and the prevalence of governing

coalitions together create an electoral context that allows smaller or locally focused actors to compete effectively, and, in many cases, to govern (Kostecky et al. 2024). This makes the Czech case a crucial case, due to institutional features which are especially conducive to the emergence of new political forces, whether populist parties or ILLs.

Data and methods

The analysis focuses on local electoral results of all Czech municipalities with populations above 2,000 inhabitants across three electoral cycles from 2010 to 2022. This period captures the entirety of the rise of populist parties in the Czech Republic. The threshold of 2,000 inhabitants was chosen for three primary reasons. Firstly, municipalities at this size maintain proportional representation in their electoral systems. Including smaller towns with fewer council seats would unfairly disadvantage minor parties and risk distorting results, given that we are interested in the share of council seats won by populist parties and ILLs. Secondly, parties are significantly weaker in cities below 2000 inhabitants, which alters the nature of political competition (Kouba and Lysek 2023). Moreover, municipalities below this threshold often operate under different budget allocation procedures, complicating comparability. Finally, data availability diminishes notably in smaller municipalities. The resulting sample comprises 637 cities out of a total of 6,200, covering approximately 82% (7,435,970 inhabitants) of the Czech population.

The dependent variable is the local electoral success of populist parties, operationalized, following existing studies (Drápalová and Vampa 2018; Vampa 2016), as the share of seats won by populist parties in the main representative institution at the local level – the municipal council. We have also included populist vote shares at the local level as an alternative dependent variable (results provided in the appendix Table A5). The populist political party variable includes parties recognized as populist according to the Populist expert survey (Rooduijn, Pirro, Halikiopoulou, Froio, Kessel, et al. 2024; Rooduijn, Pirro, Halikiopoulou, Froio, Van Kessel, et al. 2023). In the 2010 elections, the populist category included the centrist populist party, VV. In 2014, 2018 and 2022, the category included the technocratic populist party, ANO and the populist radical right party, SPD.³ By comparing different ideological types of populist parties, we aim to assess the role of both ‘thin’ populist ideology and its interaction with different ‘host’ ideologies (Hunger and Paxton 2022). The data used for this study are taken from the archive of the Czech Statistical Office (www.volby.cz).

To measure the local strength of ILLs, we use the share of seats won by purely local lists in the municipal council. The ‘local lists’ category includes citizens’ groups and associations that compete for municipal representation but do not rely on the labels and direct organizational support of national (or regional) political actors. Lists that run only in one municipality and are only loosely and not explicitly associated with national parties or movements are still considered ‘local’, as are independent local candidates not affiliated with any party. Regional parties and parties composed by coalition of mayors and local politicians like STAN or Starostové pro Liberecký Kraj are coded as regional parties and excluded from LL category.

Economic deprivation is operationalized as the level of unemployment in each municipality during the electoral year. Although the average unemployment rate in the Czech Republic is relatively low in the observed period, it varies significantly across

municipalities. As an alternative indicator of economic deprivation, we also use the proportion of the city population facing financial foreclosure, aggregated at the municipal level. The data were collected by a private NGO (Mapa Exekucí) from national and local executor offices and matched into the dataset using the municipal tax reference number (IČO). Personal default, economic distraint or bankruptcy serves as a suitable indicator of financial deprivation because, similar to other Eastern European countries, many poor people in the Czech Republic belong to the working poor category. While we have unemployment data for all three of the electoral cycles studied, the foreclosure dataset only covers the last three electoral cycles (2014, 2018 and 2022). As a result, the latter is only used as part of robustness checks (in Appendix, see Table A3).

Social capital is operationalized through the number of civil society organizations present within the municipality (per capita). These are divided between those who are religious and non-religious in nature. The non-religious organizations include all clubs, associations, sport associations and NGOs active in a municipality that are not expressly linked with church. The religious organizations include all clubs, associations and NGOs that explicitly expressed their affiliation with the church. These data are taken from the Czech statistical office for the years 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022.

In addition, we use a standard battery of control variables that represent factors associated with the rise of populism in the EU. City size (logged) is measured by the number of inhabitants registered in a municipality during the electoral year, with data retrieved from the National Statistical Office.⁴ Scholars subscribing to the post-materialist hypothesis argue that higher levels of socio-economic development foster value orientations and forms of political participation that are less receptive to populist appeals (Inglehart & Welzel 2005). Thus, wealthier and more educated populations are expected to be less susceptible to populist mobilisation. Due to the lack of information on local GDP, we use the local budget size per capita (in thousand Czech crowns). The size of the local budget is mostly determined by vertical transfers, as well as the proportional share of local business, income and housing taxes.⁵ The data were compiled from the Czech Ministry of Finance database and include central transfers, locally collected taxes, and revenues from municipal assets (buildings, rents) during the electoral year. We also control for the quality of local government, measured by the budget deficit levels of local municipalities. The deficit is calculated as a difference between income and spending in a given year and logged. Cities with large deficits and high debt levels are expected to be perceived by citizens as wasteful. These data were sourced from the Czech Ministry of Finance database.

To test further the expectation that the electoral success of populist parties is driven by specific values and attitudes – such as opposition to immigration (Bornschieer 2010) – the analysis includes a measure of local ethnic heterogeneity (share of foreigners residing in the city). These data were also collected by the Ministry of Interior and Cizinecká Police, which track the registration of local residency on an annual basis. Finally, we account for local electoral fragmentation using a number of parties that gained votes in a given election as an indicator of the effective number of parties. Local party fragmentation can indicate electoral opportunities for populist parties and ILLs, and thus influence the presence of both types of political actor (Kestilä and Söderlund 2007).

As our analysis is conducted at the municipal level, all data are aggregated. We therefore acknowledge the potential for ecological fallacy and do not infer individual-level

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on local council seat shares of populist parties and independent local lists (ILLs) in Czech municipalities, 2010–2022.

	Mean	Standard deviation	95% CI lower bound	95% CI upper bound
Populist parties				
2010	.0130579	.0016481	.0098259	.01629
2014	.0685101	.0036706	.0613115	.0757087
2018	.0820833	.0044971	.0732639	.0909028
2022	.1118589	.1645076	-.0526487	.2763665
ILLs				
2010	.2789033	.0091315	.2609952	.2968114
2014	.371885	.009962	.3523482	.3914218
2018	.4694413	.0110211	.4478275	.4910551
2022	.4607135	.3418857	0.1188278	0.8025992

motivations from these patterns. Rather, our analysis focuses on how variation in local political supply and contextual conditions shapes the territorial distribution of support for populist parties and ILLs.

To test the hypotheses, we perform panel data regression with two-way fixed effects (FE) using municipality-clustered standard errors and year dummies. This approach allows us to control for all time-invariant municipal characteristics – such as historical legacies, institutional structures, or long-standing civic cultures – while estimating within-municipality effects of changing contextual factors. This enables us to isolate the effect of ILL strength, economic deprivation, and social capital on populist performance, while controlling for potentially confounding local characteristics and temporal shocks. The dependent variable is the share of seats won by populist parties in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022 (Table 1), and the populists' vote share in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022. The relationship between the local electoral success of populist parties, the local council seat share of ILLs, and various local contextual factors is analysed in the following section.

Findings

An initial correlation analysis of the local council election results in the Czech Republic between 2010 and 2022 provides preliminary support for the first hypothesis, indicating a consistent and statistically significant negative association between the local seat shares of all three populist parties and the ILLs. As shown in Table 2, this correlation is strongest for ANO, followed by the pooled populist category, SPD, and VV. The correlation table with populists' vote shares is shown in Table A7 in the Appendix and presents the same negative correlation between ILLs and different populist parties. These results suggest that municipalities where ILLs perform well tend to have lower levels of populist representation on local councils. The strength and consistency of this inverse relationship across multiple populist parties – despite their differing ideological profiles – points to a shared electoral space, in which ILLs may serve as an alternative outlet for anti-establishment sentiment. These patterns provide initial descriptive evidence for the hypothesis that ILLs constrain populist success at the local level.

Next, we turn to a multivariate panel regression analysis to test the relationship between three local contextual factors and the seat shares of populist parties (ANO, and SPD) and ILLs. In the case of VV, we proceed with OLS with robust standard errors. Table 3 presents the results, with separate models for each of the three populist parties

Table 2. Correlation between the local council seat shares of independent local lists (ILLs), ANO (technocratic populist), SPD (populist radical right), VV (centrist populist), and all populist parties combined.

	Populist (all)	ANO	SPD	VV	ILLs
Populist (all)	1.000				
ANO	0.9622*	1.000			
	0.0000				
SPD	0.5311*	0.2804*	1.000		
	0.0000	0.0000			
VV	1*	.	.	1.000	
	0.0000				
ILLs	-0.4951*	-0.5631*	-0.2937*	-0.1472*	1.000
	0.0000	0.0000	0.0013	0.0000	

Notes: N.B. Election years analysed for ANO are 2014, 2018 and 2022; for SPD 2014, 2018 and 2022; for VV 2010, and for all populist parties combined, 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022.

– ANO, SPD, and VV – as well as a pooled model combining all populist parties. We observe distinct patterns of association between the populist parties and ILLs, even after controlling for a range of socioeconomic and institutional factors.

Consistent with our expectations in H1, we find a robust and statistically significant negative relationship between the presence of ILLs and the local seat shares of populist parties. This negative relationship is robust to a series of model specifications, alternative operationalization of the dependent variable and robustness checks (see Tables A3–A5 in the Appendix). The coefficient for ILLs' seat share is negative and statistically significant across all models estimated for ANO, SPD, VV and in the pooled model combining all

Table 3. Multivariate panel regression analysis of the determinants of Czech populist parties' local council seat shares (two-way fixed effects).

Variables	ANO model1	SPD model2	VV model3	Populist (all) model4
H1. ILLs	-0.123*** (0.0186)	-0.0270*** (0.00656)	-0.0339*** (0.01000)	-0.137*** (0.0150)
H2a. Unemployment	-0.00403 (0.00328)	-0.000961 (0.00158)	-0.000231 (0.000510)	0.00336* (0.00177)
H3a. Religious organizations	-2.209 (1.613)	1.531* (0.914)	3.258 (5.807)	-1.660 (1.785)
H3a. Civil society organizations	-2.185 (1.957)	-2.561** (1.037)	-4.529 (6.220)	-4.392** (1.990)
Local govt. Deficit (log)	-0.000124 (0.00220)	-0.000763 (0.00117)	-0.00114 (0.00152)	-0.000294 (0.00221)
Population size (log)	-0.217** (0.104)	-0.162*** (0.0445)	-0.00182 (0.00716)	-0.318*** (0.0658)
Local govt. budget size (thousand czk)	-0.0313 (0.0205)	0.0133 (0.00982)	-0.00242 (0.00641)	-0.0440*** (0.0144)
Foreign-born population	0.469 (0.364)	0.420** (0.198)	0.191* (0.103)	0.543* (0.290)
Number of parties (votes)	0.000237 (0.00230)	0.000716 (0.000974)	0.00218*** (0.000768)	0.00438** (0.00217)
Constant	2.324*** (0.883)	1.230*** (0.361)	0.0647** (0.0288)	3.205*** (0.545)
Observations	1,272	1,272	400	1,672
R-squared	0.176	0.234	0.067	0.338
Number of id	724	724	400	754
Id effect	yes	yes	no	yes
Years effect	yes	yes	no	yes

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

populist parties. Substantively, the results indicate that a one-percentage point increase in ILLs' seat share corresponds to a decline in the seat share of populist parties – by approximately 0.12 points for ANO, 0.027 points for SPD, 0.033 for VV, and 0.13 points in the aggregate. To illustrate, in a 13 seat council, each additional seat won by an ILL would translate into a loss of roughly 1.4 seats for ANO and 0.3 seats for SPD. In larger municipalities with 21-seat councils, the effect of local lists would amount to about two seats fewer for populist parties. These are sizeable effects, especially for ANO and the pooled model, suggesting that ILLs exert meaningful competitive pressure on populist parties at the local level. Although the coefficient for VV is also negative and statistically significant, the R-squared value for this model is relatively low (0.067), indicating that it explains only a small portion of the variation in VV's seat share across municipalities and over time.⁶

Regarding H2a, that economic deprivation will foster support for populist parties, we find only minimal support, across party types. Unemployment rates, our proxy for economic marginalization, are positively associated only in the pooled model with all populist parties aggregated and it is significant only at 0.1. The relationship is not statistically significant for ANO, SPD or VV when examined separately. These results suggest that the populist and radical right parties in the Czech case have not systematically benefitted from economic distress at the municipal level. Our robustness check using votes rather than seats leads to similarly insignificant results.

Next, we turn to H2b, which proposes that the relationship between local economic deprivation and populist support is moderated by the strength of ILLs. As shown in [Table 4](#), the interaction term between unemployment and ILL seat share is statistically significant and positive for both ANO, SPD as well as the pooled populist model. This indicates that the impact of economic deprivation on populist party success depends on the local strength of ILLs: populist parties gain more support from rising unemployment where ILLs are weak, but this relationship diminishes or disappears where ILLs are strong. These interactions are visually depicted in [Figure 3](#), which plots the marginal effects of unemployment on seat shares for SPD and ANO, across three levels of ILL presence. The graphs show that the adverse impact of rising unemployment on the electoral fortunes of these parties is strongest in areas with weak ILL representation. In contrast, in municipalities with a high share of ILL seats, the relationship between unemployment and populist vote share is negligible or flat. These results indicate that ILLs act as a buffer against the translation of economic discontent into support for both the populist radical right party SPD as well as the technocratic populist party ANO. The interaction effects are not significant for VV, suggesting that the constraining role of ILLs in conditions of local economic deprivation might be less pronounced for centrist variants of populism.

Turning to H3a, which predicts that social capital dampens populist success, the evidence is more limited. The density of civil society organizations is negatively and significantly associated with support for SPD, suggesting that local associational activity may indeed curb radical right populism at the local level of politics. However, this relationship does not hold for ANO, VV, or in the pooled model. Interestingly, the number of religious organizations, another proxy for social capital, has an opposite sign and it is positively, although weakly, related to SPD seat share. These results point to diverse role of social capital for different parties. It also suggests that the different facets of social capital interact differently with support for radical right parties.

Table 4. Interaction effects of local unemployment rate and ILL seat share on populist parties' seat shares

Variables	ANO model1	SPD model2	VV model3	Populists (all) model4
Unemployment	-0.00641* (0.00358)	-0.00259 (0.00168)	0.000263 (0.00116)	-0.00109 (0.00183)
Local lists	-0.155*** (0.0252)	-0.0489*** (0.00963)	-0.0153 (0.0244)	-0.227*** (0.0215)
H2b. Unemployment#ILLs	0.00757** (0.00359)	0.00518*** (0.00162)	-0.00179 (0.00264)	0.0172*** (0.00248)
Local govt. deficit (log)	0.000451 (0.00218)	-0.000369 (0.00119)	-0.00106 (0.00154)	6.77e-05 (0.00211)
Religious organizations	-1.951 (1.596)	1.708* (0.896)	3.723 (6.000)	-1.577 (1.703)
Civil society organizations	-2.392 (1.939)	-2.703*** (1.029)	-5.010 (6.392)	-4.621** (1.887)
Population (log)	-0.198* (0.104)	-0.149*** (0.0445)	-0.00198 (0.00709)	-0.253*** (0.0632)
Local govt. budget size per capita (log)	-0.0316 (0.0204)	0.0131 (0.00971)	-0.00237 (0.00637)	-0.0381*** (0.0143)
Foreign-born population	0.461 (0.358)	0.415** (0.197)	0.188* (0.103)	0.615** (0.265)
Numbe of parties (votes)	0.000172 (0.00228)	0.000672 (0.000964)	0.00224*** (0.000745)	0.00345 (0.00210)
Constant	2.171** (0.888)	1.126*** (0.363)	0.0592** (0.0276)	2.608*** (0.519)
Observations	1,272	1,272	400	1,672
R-squared	0.181	0.245	0.068	0.371
Number of id	724	724	400	754
Id effect	yes	yes	no	yes
Years effect	yes	yes	no	yes

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

To further probe the conditional effects of local context on populist party success, we test H3b, which posits that social capital moderates the relationship between economic deprivation and support for populist parties. Specifically, we interact the local unemployment rate with a measure of social capital, captured by the density of (secular) civil society organizations. The results are presented in Table 5, with marginal effects visualized in Figure 4. We find statistically significant interaction effects for SPD and pooled models. These results suggest that in municipalities with higher levels of civil society activity, the otherwise weak or negative effect of unemployment on populist support becomes significantly more positive. In the case of SPD, for instance, the relationship between economic deprivation and local seat share is negligible in contexts with low associational density, but becomes markedly stronger and positive as the number of civil society organizations increases. These findings show that, rather than dampening support for populist parties in economically deprived areas, higher levels of social capital appear to amplify the mobilizing effect of economic hardship – particularly for the SPD. The results are also very similar for the pooled model. This suggests that civil society may act less as a buffer against populist mobilization, and more as an infrastructure that, under certain conditions, actually facilitates it.

We have performed several robustness checks that are reported in the Appendix. We substituted unemployment with the share of the local population experiencing economic distress (Table A3) and registered civil society organizations with money donated to the national Christmas charity per capita in each locality (Table A4). We also used an

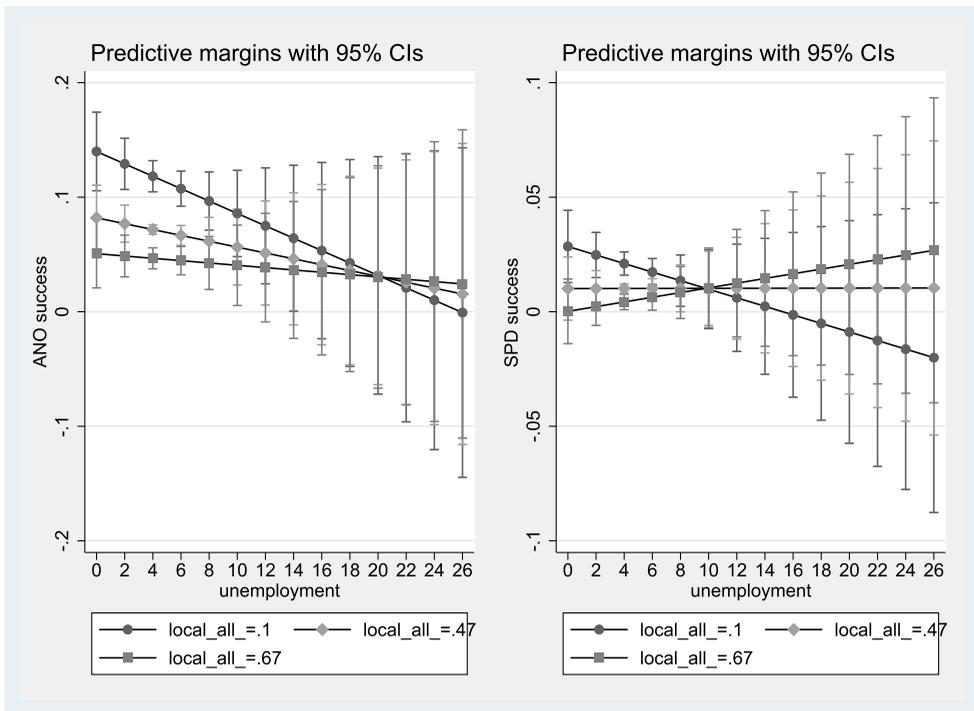


Figure 3. Interaction effects of local unemployment rate and ILL seat share on populist parties' local council seat shares (SPD and ANO).

alternative operationalization of populist party success, substituting populist party seat shares with populist party vote shares (Table A5). The results confirm the previous findings, and the negative effect of ILLs is strong and significant across all models.

Discussion

Amidst widespread partisan dealignment and mounting dissatisfaction with establishment politics, populist parties have emerged as dominant challengers across Europe. Yet they are not the only political actors gaining ground. This paper has drawn attention to a frequently overlooked competitor: independent local lists (ILLs). Focusing on the Czech Republic, we examined the local conditions under which populist parties succeed – or are constrained – in municipal elections, with particular emphasis on their interaction with ILLs. Adopting a subnational perspective, our analysis traced the electoral performance of ideologically diverse populist parties across 637 municipalities over four electoral cycles (2010–2022). In doing so, it contributes to a growing but still limited body of research that examines populist mobilization beyond the national level but across varied local political contexts (Otjes 2018, 2019; Paxton 2020, 2023; Vampa 2020).

Our findings reveal that the local strength of ILLs has a significant constraining effect on the electoral performance of populist parties. Municipalities with higher ILL representation consistently exhibit lower populist seat and vote shares, even after controlling for economic deprivation, social capital, and a comprehensive set of controls. Substantively, a

Table 5. Interaction effects of local unemployment rate and social capital on populist parties' seat shares

Variables	ANO model1	SPD model2	VV model3	Populists (all) model4
Unemployment (share)	-0.00402 (0.00340)	-0.000231 (0.00163)	-0.000820 (0.00129)	0.00150 (0.00190)
Civil society organizations	-2.207 (2.297)	-4.057*** (1.190)	-5.553 (6.120)	-5.739*** (2.119)
H3b. Unemployment#Civil society org.	0.00716 (0.358)	0.491*** (0.165)	0.0989 (0.173)	0.460** (0.202)
Local lists	-0.123*** (0.0188)	-0.0253*** (0.00658)	-0.0339*** (0.0100)	-0.136*** (0.0150)
Local govt. deficit (log)	-0.000123 (0.00220)	-0.000686 (0.00115)	-0.00114 (0.00152)	-0.000228 (0.00221)
Population (log)	-0.216** (0.105)	-0.135*** (0.0426)	-0.00169 (0.00713)	-0.304*** (0.0649)
Local govt. budget size (thousand czk)	-0.0313 (0.0204)	0.0125 (0.00940)	-0.00248 (0.00640)	-0.0464*** (0.0143)
Foreign-born population (share)	0.469 (0.363)	0.398** (0.197)	0.191* (0.103)	0.565* (0.290)
Religious organizations (share)	-2.208 (1.621)	1.632* (0.974)	3.220 (5.840)	-2.734 (1.825)
Number of parties (votes)	0.000237 (0.00230)	0.000730 (0.000963)	0.00218*** (0.000767)	0.00438** (0.00216)
Constant	2.320*** (0.898)	0.998*** (0.345)	0.0707** (0.0303)	3.117*** (0.540)
Observations	1,272	1,272	400	1,672
R-squared	0.176	0.250	0.067	0.341
Number of id	724	724	400	754
Id effect	yes	yes	no	yes
Years effect	yes	yes	no	yes

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

one percentage point increase in ILL seat share is associated with a decline of approximately 0.12 points for ANO, 0.03 points for SPD, and 0.14 points in the pooled populist model, highlighting a meaningful degree of competition between ILLs and populist actors. In practical terms in a typical 21-seat local council, an 11-percentage point change in ILL seat share equates to a loss of roughly two seats for populist parties. However, this constraining effect is not uniform across populist party types. The negative association is strongest for ANO, a technocratic-centrist party, and somewhat weaker but still statistically significant for SPD, a populist radical right party. For VV, while the coefficient is also negative and statistically significant, the model's low explanatory power suggests a more ambiguous or idiosyncratic relationship. These results indicate that ILLs and populist parties draw from overlapping pools of anti-party sentiment, but the degree of competition varies depending on the ideological orientation of the populist party.

While much of the existing literature on populism highlights structural drivers and contextual factors, our findings highlight the crucial role played by the ILLs to explain the performance of populist parties in local politics. Contrary to expectations, local unemployment – our indicator of economic deprivation – is not significantly associated with the performance of any of the populist parties when considered in isolation (a positive relationship emerges only in the pooled populist model). This suggests that, at least in the Czech context, economic hardship alone does not predict populist support as robustly as the local political supply of alternatives. In addition, our interaction models

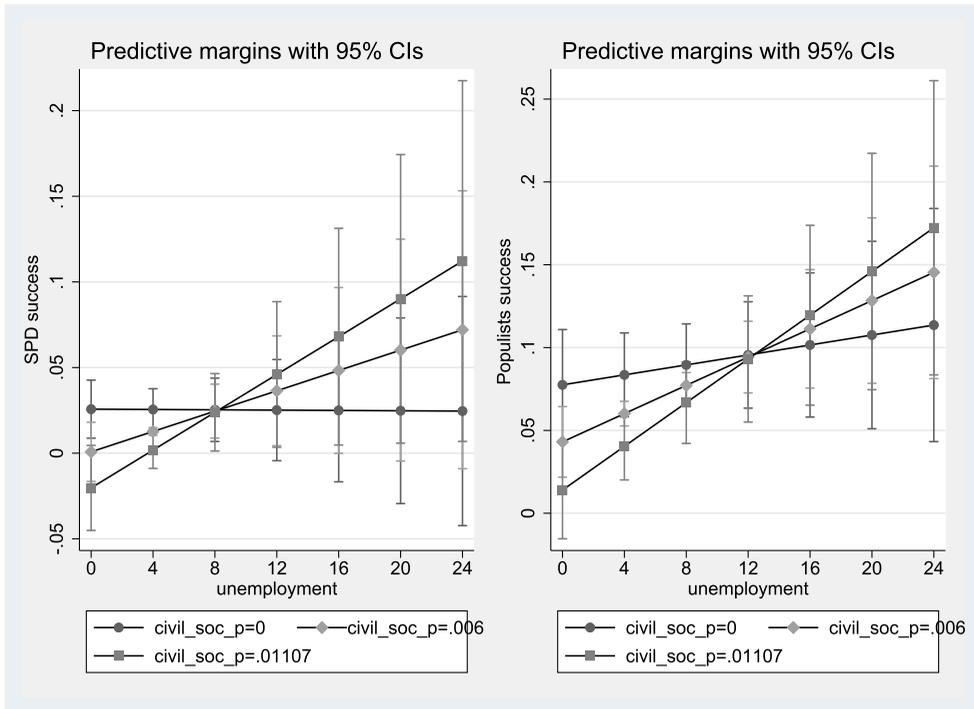


Figure 4. Interaction effects of local unemployment rate and local civil society organizational presence on populist radical right party (SPD) and populist parties' (pooled model) seat shares.

reveal that ILLs condition how economic deprivation translates into populist mobilization. The adverse impact of rising unemployment on the electoral performance of ANO and SPD is strongest in municipalities where ILLs are weak or absent. In contrast, in areas with strong ILL presence, the relationship between unemployment and populist support largely disappears.

Taken together, these results reinforce our core argument: local political competition with ILLs is a crucial explanatory factor for the performance of populist parties. By contrast, economic and social contextual factors exert more conditional and party-specific effects. These findings underscore the importance of accounting for local political alternatives when analysing how socio-economic grievances translate into support for anti-establishment actors. This paper builds on existing studies of competition between populist parties and ILLs (Jankowski, Juen, and Tepe 2022; Wallman Lundåsen and Erlingsson 2023) and demonstrates the strength of ILL influence over populist party performance, even in economically and socially marginalized contexts. Our findings carry several important implications for the study of populism, party competition, and democratic responses.

The influence of local contextual factors is shown to vary sharply across populist party types, demonstrating the need to disaggregate populist actors by ideological family. The appeal of technocratic, radical-right, and centrist populists is not uniform, but shaped by their interaction with specific territorial and political conditions. These differences suggest that the competitive pressures faced by populist parties are not only structural but also

ideologically contingent: for example, technocratic populists like ANO may be especially vulnerable to locally embedded alternatives such as ILLs, while the radical right may remain more resilient due to distinct forms of mobilization and grievance appeals. Future research should further investigate the supply side of populism at the subnational level, with attention to how different populist party forms respond to localized pressures and competition. In doing so, scholars should also consider the independent effects of populism as a ‘thin’ ideology, in contrast to the varying impacts of its accompanying host ideologies (Castanho Silva, Fuks, and Tamaki 2022; Hunger and Paxton 2022). Our findings also complicate the commonly held view that social capital acts as a democratic resource, and a buffer against populist forces (Putnam 2000). In some settings, civic associational life appears to amplify, rather than dampen, the populist mobilization of local economic grievances. These results lend support to recent work on the ‘dark side’ of social capital (Colombo and Dinas 2023), and call for more nuanced theorization of civil society’s political role in contexts of disaffection.

More broadly, the findings demonstrate that the local arena is not simply a microcosm of national politics but a distinct and diverse space of political contestation. Within localities, alternative institutional forms – such as ILLs – are able to absorb or redirect anti-establishment sentiment in ways that may reshape broader patterns of political mobilization. However, we do not claim that ILLs are necessarily normatively preferable to populist parties, nor that voting for ILLs prevents voters from voting for populists in national elections. ILLs are a heterogeneous group, and different kinds of data – such as surveys of ILL voters and candidates – are needed to assess whether they represent civic-minded local engagement or merely localized discontent. The consequences that would follow from an increasing proliferation of successful ILLs are also uncertain. Their success may contribute to vertical fragmentation between electoral arenas, further weakening the connection between voters and national parties, and diminish the role of mass parties in integrating citizens’ concerns and preferences. Such fragmentation may also complicate coordination, collaboration in policymaking, and the implementation of policies across government levels.

While our analysis focuses on a single case with specific institutional and politico-cultural features, the mechanisms identified are theoretically relevant beyond the Czech context – particularly in countries with a strong presence of ILLs, proportional representation at the local level, and low levels of party institutionalization in municipal politics. Future research should further investigate the ideological character of ILLs, explore the potential heterogeneity of their programmatic commitments, and test whether similar dynamics are observable in other European cases where such localist alternatives have also gained traction. Findings from Sweden (Broms and Drapalova 2022), and Germany (Jankowski, Juen, and Tepe 2022) support this idea. Furthermore, more individual-level data on local political behaviour and voting is required to confirm whether our findings align with individual political motivations.

Finally, while the electoral strength of ILLs may help constrain populist parties, it offers no straightforward strategy for mainstream actors seeking an effective response to such parties (Dilling and de Jonge 2025). National parties face inherent difficulties in shedding their institutional identities and credibly adopting anti-establishment profiles. However, Vampa (2016) suggests that parties can disguise themselves, reorganize, and present themselves as new political entities – as shown in the frequency of Italian national

parties using local lists to garner more votes at a local level. Doing so may enable mainstream parties to overcome reputational barriers and more effectively contest populist parties, including in marginalized locations. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether voters will perceive such ‘localisation’ of national politics as a genuine political renewal or view this as mere political branding.

Notes

1. Moreover, there are several examples of current populist parties that originated in local movements or groups of local lists (Bolgherini and Vampa 2021) – such as Barcelona en Comú, the left-wing municipalist platform that helped spawn *Podemos* in Spain; Italy’s eclectic Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*), which grew out of local civic lists inspired by Beppe Grillo; and the centrist *Leefbaar Nederland*, which formed from municipal ‘Leefbaar’ groupings like *Leefbaar Utrecht* in the Netherlands.
2. Among a study of 29 European countries, the Czech Republic reported the lowest levels of general religiosity (Kestilä and Söderlund 2013).
3. While technocracy and populism present contrasting, in many ways opposing, ideal forms of representation (Caramani 2017), there are a number of similarities between them which allow for their combination, sometimes described as ‘techno-populism’ (Bickerton and Accetti 2021).
4. The National Statistical Office can be accessed at: www.csu.gov.cz.
5. Due to the structure of local budgets and predominantly national unemployment and social subsidies schemes, the local budget does not overlap with our indicator of economic deprivation. Instead, it reflects the financial resources available to municipal administrations.
6. This low explanatory power is probably due to the low number of cities where VV gained seats, leading to a zero inflated data structure. In the analysis with VV vote shares, the R-squared increases to 0.10.

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Disclosure statement

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Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
DV					
Populists (all)	2,792	.0738953	.124176	0	.6888889
ANO	2,133	.0811383	.1192131	0	.6666667
SPD	2,133	.011468	.0347844	0	.4666667
VV	659	.0133332	.0434231	0	.5714286
ILL	2,792	.3890776	.2936701	0	1
Controls					
Population	2,764	11255.83	54348.88	2002	1400000
Unemployment	2,764	6.065248	4.06087	.2913333	25.89
Local budget (thousands Czk)	2,907	364314.6	3400878	18241.17	1.20e + 08
Personal bankruptcy (share)	2,098	7.942612	4.963196	0	53.4
Deficit (thousands Czk)	2,907	7869.086	321856.2	−2032534	1.55e + 07
Number of volunteer groups for Xmas charity	409	37.66015	72.04386	0	622
Funds collected for Xmas charity	411	168954.9	350682	0	3670142
N civil society organization (secular)	2,767	86.06072	669.9436	0	21153
N civil society organization (church)	2,767	54.9429	525.6439	0	21241
Foreign born citizens	2,767	644.6285	7249.484	3	235846
University degree (share)	2,724	9.963506	4.44783	1.43	30
Catholics (share)	2,724	11.76473	9.887086	.901756	58.89075
Number of parties (votes)	2764	4.276811	3.578408	1	35

Table A2. Descriptive statistics on seat shares of populist parties and independent local lists in Czech municipalities, 2010–2022.

	Mean	Standard deviation	95% CI lower bound	95% CI upper bound
Populist parties				
2010	.0130579	.0016481	.0098259	.01629
2014	.0685101	.0036706	.0613115	.0757087
2018	.0820833	.0044971	.0732639	.0909028
2022	.1118589	.0055838	.1009104	.1228074
ILIs				
2010	.2789033	.0091315	.2609952	.2968114
2014	.371885	.009962	.3523482	.3914218
2018	.4694413	.0110211	.4478275	.4910551
2022	.4607135	.0116044	.4379599	.4834671
ANO				
2010	0	(omitted)		
2014	.0669788	.0035889	.0599404	.0740172
2018	.0751251	.0042083	.0668722	.0833781
2022	.089925	.0047517	.0806068	.0992432
VV				
2010	.0130579	.0016481	.0098259	.0162899
2014	0	(omitted)		
2018	0	(omitted)		
2022	0	(omitted)		
SPD				
2010	0	(omitted)		
2014	.0015313	.0007602	.0000404	.0030222
2018	.0069582	.0008173	.0053554	.00856
2022	.0219339	.001579	.0188374	.0250303

Robustness checks

Table A3. Multivariate panel regression analysis of the determinants of Czech populist parties' local council seat shares with distraint (%) instead of unemployment (fixed effects).

Variables	ANO model1	SPD model2	Populists (all) model4
Local lists	−0.124*** (0.0187)	−0.0283*** (0.00656)	−0.152*** (0.0200)
Distraint (share)	−0.00169 (0.00171)	−8.22e-05 (0.000548)	−0.00177 (0.00176)
Deficit (log)	−0.000163 (0.00221)	−0.000878 (0.00119)	−0.00104 (0.00253)
Religious organizations (share)	−2.165 (1.588)	1.621* (0.900)	−0.544 (1.823)
Civil society organizations (share)	−2.187 (1.970)	−2.657*** (1.013)	−4.845** (2.135)
Population (log)	−0.208** (0.0941)	−0.142*** (0.0391)	−0.350*** (0.115)
Local government budget size thousands czk (log)	−0.0345* (0.0204)	0.0113 (0.00974)	−0.0232 (0.0213)
Foreign-born population	−1.94e-07 (3.39e-07)	1.01e-06*** (3.80e-07)	8.12e-07 (5.57e-07)
Number of parties	8.70e-05 (0.00241)	0.00102 (0.000983)	0.00111 (0.00268)
Constant	2.283*** (0.817)	1.085*** (0.322)	3.368*** (1.010)
Observations	1,272	1,272	1,272
R-squared	0.172	0.228	0.268
Number of id	724	724	724
years effect	yes	yes	yes
FE	yes	yes	yes

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table A4. Multivariate OLS regression analysis of the determinants of Czech populist parties' local council seat shares with local charity donations per capita instead of number of local civil associations (robust standard errors) for year 2018.

Variables	Model 1 ANO	Model 2 SPD	Model 3 ANO + SPD
Local parties (seats)	-0.159*** (0.0400)	-0.0191** (0.00909)	-0.178*** (0.0413)
Population (log)	0.0519*** (0.0153)	0.00474 (0.00478)	0.0566*** (0.0151)
Unemployment	0.00980** (0.00447)	0.00584*** (0.00222)	0.0156*** (0.00541)
Local government budget size per capita (log)	-0.0405 (0.0461)	-0.0142 (0.0129)	-0.0547 (0.0507)
Local government admin. Spending per capita (log)	0.0459 (0.0420)	0.00362 (0.00703)	0.0495 (0.0425)
Deficit (log)	-0.00225 (0.00746)	-0.00124 (0.00225)	-0.00349 (0.00818)
Foreign-born population	2.52e-06 (5.90e-06)	-1.04e-06 (3.58e-06)	1.48e-06 (6.03e-06)
Local charity donations (per capita)	-0.000564* (0.000338)	-0.000176 (0.000121)	-0.000740* (0.000378)
Constant	-0.283 (0.398)	0.0849 (0.118)	-0.198 (0.446)
Observations	124	124	124
R-squared	0.487	0.237	0.536

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table A5. Multivariate panel regression analysis of the determinants of Czech populist parties' (ANO, VV, SPD and populists all) local vote shares instead of local council seat shares (two-way fixed effects) for years 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022.

Variables	ANO vote shares model1	SPD vote shares model2	VV vote shares model3	populists (all) votes shares model4
H1. Local Lists seats	-15.38*** (2.141)	-1.867* (0.973)	-4.833** (1.889)	-10.91*** (1.254)
H2. Unemployment (share)	-0.705 (0.453)	-0.0564 (0.250)	0.0418 (0.108)	0.258 (0.161)
H3a. Religious organizations	-294.4 (248.8)	125.6 (110.6)	419.0 (1,027)	-80.00 (156.1)
H3a. Civil society organization	-197.3 (294.5)	-260.0* (132.9)	-586.8 (1,080)	-417.1** (191.6)
Local government budget size (log)	-11.80** (4.631)	1.596 (1.622)	-1.178 (0.992)	-4.900*** (1.436)
Population (log)	-35.32*** (13.36)	-19.46*** (6.387)	0.143 (1.210)	-26.82*** (6.097)
Deficit (log)	0.342 (0.390)	-0.325 (0.219)	-0.144 (0.299)	-0.0686 (0.195)
Foreign-born population (share)	74.05 (52.32)	45.39* (27.37)	22.03* (13.31)	43.62 (27.04)
Number of parties	-0.319 (0.284)	0.201 (0.128)	0.557*** (0.140)	0.355* (0.197)
Constant	459.2*** (115.4)	150.7*** (53.65)	13.53*** (4.042)	285.1*** (50.23)
Observations	920	920	229	1,672
R-squared	0.239	0.278	0.100	0.322
Number of id	604	604	229	754
Years effect	yes	yes	no	yes
FE	yes	yes	no	yes

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table A6. Interaction effects of local unemployment rate and ILL seat share on populist parties' vote shares.

Variables	ANO model1	SPD model2	VV model3	Populists (all) model4
Unemployment	-1.062** (0.451)	-0.156 (0.253)	0.260 (0.216)	-0.148 (0.169)
Local lists	-22.99*** (3.649)	-3.990*** (1.515)	4.958 (6.101)	-19.17*** (1.814)
Unemployment#Local lists	1.804** (0.726)	0.504 (0.326)	-0.949 (0.603)	1.568*** (0.224)
Deficit (log)	0.416 (0.389)	-0.304 (0.220)	-0.161 (0.304)	-0.0357 (0.185)
Religious organizations	-254.2 (252.1)	136.8 (112.6)	567.4 (1,049)	-72.45 (149.2)
Civil society organizations	-207.4 (288.5)	-262.8** (132.2)	-741.7 (1,101)	-437.9** (182.2)
Population (log)	-33.39** (13.35)	-18.92*** (6.460)	0.0119 (1.173)	-20.86*** (5.891)
Local government budget size (log)	-11.54*** (4.455)	1.670 (1.611)	-1.043 (0.935)	-4.360*** (1.422)
Foreign-born population (share)	80.09 (50.11)	47.08* (27.06)	22.29 (13.57)	50.21** (24.86)
Number of parties	-0.338 (0.281)	0.196 (0.127)	0.568*** (0.138)	0.270 (0.191)
Constant	439.9*** (114.1)	145.3*** (54.41)	10.86*** (4.055)	230.6*** (47.96)
Observations	920	920	229	1,672
R-squared	0.255	0.284	0.112	0.356
Number of id	604	604	229	754
Years effect	yes	yes	no	yes
FE	yes	yes	no	yes

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table A7. Interaction effects of local unemployment rate and social capital on populist parties' seat shares.

Variables	ANO model1	SPD model2	VV model3	Populists (all) model4
Unemployment	-0.713 (0.457)	-0.0361 (0.247)	0.135 (0.272)	0.0584 (0.174)
Civil society organizations	-145.1 (312.0)	-390.7*** (138.5)	-424.6 (1,072)	-562.0*** (205.3)
Unemployment#civil society organizations	-18.53 (49.64)	46.37** (23.10)	-14.73 (33.00)	49.52*** (18.36)
Local lists	-15.43*** (2.155)	-1.761* (0.982)	-4.845** (1.895)	-10.83*** (1.252)
Deficit (log)	0.343 (0.391)	-0.329 (0.215)	-0.148 (0.301)	-0.0616 (0.194)
Religious organizations	-301.4 (247.4)	142.9 (110.0)	417.1 (1,024)	-195.5 (162.0)
Population (log)	-37.08*** (13.74)	-15.05** (6.800)	0.0961 (1.204)	-25.30*** (6.024)
Local government budget size (log)	-11.74** (4.651)	1.440 (1.555)	-1.154 (0.986)	-5.161*** (1.423)
Foreign-born population (share)	76.16 (51.66)	40.11 (28.07)	22.07* (13.33)	46.05* (26.95)
Number of parties	-0.320 (0.285)	0.202 (0.128)	0.558*** (0.140)	0.355* (0.196)
Constant	473.7*** (117.2)	114.3* (58.23)	12.66*** (4.552)	275.6*** (49.82)

(Continued)

Table A7. Continued.

Variables	ANO model1	SPD model2	VV model3	Populists (all) model4
Observations	920	920	229	1,672
R-squared	0.240	0.288	0.100	0.327
Number of id	604	604	229	754
Years effect	yes	yes	no	yes
FE	yes	yes	no	yes

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$