

Facing the populists: the effect of populist challengers on mainstream parties' welfare state positions

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Abstract

This article investigates the effect of populists' electoral success on European mainstream parties' positions concerning the economic dimension and the social inclusiveness of the welfare state. Combining data from party manifestos with a Regression Discontinuity Design, this article finds that a populist party obtaining representation constitutes a supply-side mechanism inducing an adjustment over mainstream parties' positions, independently from public opinion changes. Following competition with a populist party, mainstream parties shift their positions in favor of a smaller and more exclusionary welfare state. In terms of programmatic distances, mainstream parties tend to converge with the populists on both the cultural and economic dimension of the welfare state issue.

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1 Introduction

In the past decade, Western Europe has experienced a surge in voter dissatisfaction and disengagement from conventional politics. Populist parties, skilled at strategically appealing to disillusioned voters, have achieved significant electoral success in various European nations, securing parliamentary representation. During their electoral campaigns, they have often garnered consensus on welfare state policies promises. To illustrate, the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S) has consistently advocated for the implementation of a basic universal income to address poverty, while Spain's Podemos has opposed austerity and supports poverty alleviation through state interventions.

While social protection promises may sound as a dominantly leftish electoral strategy, it extends beyond the boundaries of left-wing factions. In 2017, the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) implemented the 500+ Programme in 2017, aiming to support families and higher birth-rates. Parties like the Danish People's Party, Finns' Party, Freedom Party of Austria, Sweden Democrats, and Alternative for Germany combine in their campaigns economic arguments concerning the size of the welfare state with nativist rhetoric that delineates which social groups deserves the state's social protection and which groups should be excluded, typically targeting immigrants. Known as "welfare chauvinism" ([Andersen and Bjørklund, 1990](#)), this agenda is prominent among European right-wing populist parties, especially in countries with a universalistic welfare state tradition.

The confluence of populist parties' electoral success and their focus on welfare state issues raises questions and expectations regarding the responsive measures mainstream political parties will adopt within these domains. Specifically, upon the establishment of a populist party's consolidation within the political landscape, it is rational to anticipate a response from other political entities, particularly in policy spheres that the populist party has strategically utilized to garner consensus. Several factors motivate such an expectation. First, the attainment of parliamentary representation by populist parties makes them into credible competitors for mainstream parties. This prompts the anticipation that mainstream parties will engage in political competition, especially on their salient issues. Second, in accordance with spatial models of voting ([Downs et al., 1957](#)), the electoral success of a novel populist challenger can serve as a signal to mainstream parties of a shift in public

opinion. In this context, mainstream parties may adapt their policy stances on the welfare state in response to a demand-side effect. Third, even in instances where victory in the election is not the primary objective, the entry of a new party into the political landscape has the capacity to influence the positions of other parties, irrespective of the distribution of voters. This supply-side effect is also posited in spatial models of voting.

In this paper, I empirically investigate the existence of such a supply-side effect. The research question is the following: How do European mainstream parties adjust their positions regarding the welfare state after competing with a successful populist party? In particular, how their stances concerning the dimension of the inclusiveness of the welfare state are affected by a populist contestant gaining parliamentary representation?

The complexity of addressing this research question and isolating the supply-side effects from concurrent demand-side effects is exacerbated by the intrinsic elevated levels of endogeneity associated with this phenomenon. In order to address the causality issue, I use a “close election” Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD). This empirical design exploits the exogenous variation provided by the national minimum thresholds of representation to identify the programmatic adjustments made by mainstream European parties after engaging with a populist party that has secured parliamentary representation. The minimum share of votes required to secure a parliamentary seat is determined by the national electoral system and remains beyond the manipulation capabilities of individual parties. Consequently, shifts in parties’ welfare state policies in instances where a populist party obtained a seat in the preceding election are comparable with instances where it narrowly failed to do so. This analytical framework was previously used by [Abou-Chadi and Krause \(2020\)](#) to identify the effect of radical right-wing parties’ success on mainstream parties’ positions on multiculturalism.

The motivation for investigating the empirical existence of such reaction effects derives from the influence that populists can wield on mainstream parties’ positions, thereby potentially influencing policy outcomes. While existing research has predominantly delved into the impacts of populist leadership in government ([Funke et al., 2023](#)), the effects of populist competition on mainstream parties’ positions remain relatively unexplored. A number of empirical studies document an accommodative response of non-populist parties to populists’

positions (Mudde, 2004; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Van Spanje, 2010; Guiso et al., 2017; Wagner and Meyer, 2017). However, these studies often focus primarily on right-wing populist issues like immigration, neglecting economic matters or treat them as minor outcomes. Given that welfare state policies continue to be a fundamental aspect of political discourse in Europe (Krause and Giebler, 2020), and considering the substantial portions of GDP allocated to social protection policies by European governments, investigating these effects it is vital to improve our understanding of populism and of its consequences.

Considering the welfare state issue as a bi-dimensional space composed of an economic dimension (the size of the welfare state) and a cultural dimension (the degree of inclusiveness of the welfare state), and using data from the CMP/MARPOR project about party positions in 23 European countries from 1970 to 2021, this study finds the following effects: First, after competing with a populist with representation, mainstream parties exhibit substantial adjustments in their welfare state positions, encompassing both the economic and cultural dimensions; Second, mainstream parties undergo a shift towards reduced support for welfare state expansions and embrace more exclusionary welfare state policies; Third, overall there is a converging trend between mainstream and populist parties; Fourth, mainstream parties' reaction could be contingent on their overall ideological stance.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2 I provide an extensive review of the relevant literature. Section 3 describes the data and the empirical methodology. Section 4 describes the results of the analysis. Section 5 provides a number of robustness and sensitivity tests. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

2 Literature review

The social sciences have extensively explored the origins of the electoral success of populist parties. On the demand side, several economic and cultural arguments have been employed to this end. Globalization (Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Rodrik, 2021), automation (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2017), financial crises and recessions (Funke et al., 2023), austerity measures (Fetzer et al., 2019), labor market reforms and welfare state arrangements (Dal Bó et al., 2018) have been considered sources of economic insecurity among voters which fostered mistrust in traditional politics (Algan et al., 2017; Morelli et al., 2021; Bellodi et al., 2024).

Considerably less scholarly work exists on the supply side of populists' rise analyses. A strand of the literature in political science employs arguments centered on party competition to elucidate the electoral success of populist parties in Europe. Accordingly, the success of these parties may be connected to the gradual deterioration of European social democracy. This decline is commonly ascribed to the adoption of increasingly rightward economic positions by social democratic parties started in the 1990s, and the consequent perceived incapacity to safeguard the interests of individuals adversely affected by globalization (Kriesi et al., 2008). This dynamic often coincided with the embracing of more progressive positions on cultural issues such as immigration, gender equality, and European integration (Hutter et al., 2016; Green-Pedersen and Otjes, 2019). This dual evolution contributed to the alienation of the core constituency of European Social Democratic parties which lost their ideological coherence (Karreth et al., 2013) and exposed their core constituencies to the attraction of populist parties (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020). This aligns with empirical findings in the political economy literature, such as the work of Dal Bó et al. (2018), which demonstrates that economically insecure groups are more prominently represented within (right-wing) populist parties compared to other political factions.

Under a median voter theorem perspective (Downs et al., 1957), the convergence of social democratic parties towards the median voter's economic preferences made parties previously on the left and right of the political spectrum increasingly similar making them indifferent to segments of the population. This offered populist parties a chance to gain the consensus of indifferent voters by increasing the saliency of the socio-cultural cleavage.

Regarding populists' policy-making and populists' electoral promises, they are typically considered as a form of "irresponsible" politics (Mudde, Cas and Kaltwasser, 2017) due to their large resort to unconditional policy commitments (Morelli et al., 2021; Benczes, 2022). In order to respond to voters' economic insecurity, disillusion, and demands for protection, populists commit to simple and short-termed policies which promise larger protection against the threats perceived by the electorate (Guiso et al., 2017), disregarding any type of external constraint. While such an unconditional approach to policy-making may be electorally rewarding, disregarding financial constraints and experts' assessments can impose relevant costs in terms of worsened government performance and economic outcomes (Bellodi et al., 2024; Funke et al., 2023).

Such populist policy approach is translated in the realms of welfare state policy in two main fashions. First, there are those advocating for excessive expansions of redistributive measures (Dornbusch and Edwards, 1991), a stance prevalent among left-wing populists in Latin America and only residually observed among European left-wing populist parties (Rode and Revuelta, 2015), like the M5S, Syriza, or Podemos. Second, the promotion of the idea that the welfare state should exclusively benefit natives, avoiding additional costs for the protection of non-natives (Andersen and Bjørklund, 1990; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). Such positions are known in the literature as *welfare chauvinism*. Welfare chauvinism emerges as a prominent policy agenda for radical right-wing populist parties (RRWPPs) (Lefkofridi and Michel, 2017; Harris and Römer, 2022). This rhetorical strategy capitalizes on in-group/out-group dynamics by ostensibly addressing the needs of the native "common man" while exploiting cultural cleavages to attribute undue burdens on the welfare system to outsiders (Derks, 2006; De Koster et al., 2013; Schumacher and Van Kersbergen, 2016). In essence, welfare chauvinism can be conceptualized as a form of "selective" welfare state retrenchment. Despite maintaining an overall pro-welfare state stance, RRWPPs advocate for the restriction of welfare rights for specific categories they deem as non-deserving, typically targeting immigrants (Chueri, 2021). While there is consensus that welfare chauvinism predominantly aligns with right-wing positions, academic literature exhibits variability in perspectives concerning its prevalence among left-wing parties. In fact, while some studies suggest that social democratic parties advocate for the expansion of welfare rights for non-

natives ([Sainsbury, 2012](#)), other suggest the existence of welfare chauvinist tendencies even within left-wing parties ([Schmitt and Teney, 2019](#); [Harris and Römer, 2022](#))

Despite a notable expansion in our understanding of the multifaceted nature of populism over the last decade, there remains a relative scarcity of academic work that directly addresses how mainstream parties respond to the challenges posed by populist movements, particularly in the realms of economic and redistributive issues. To the best of my knowledge, only [Schumacher and Van Kersbergen \(2016\)](#) and [Krause and Giebler \(2020\)](#) explicitly address the question of how parties adjust their welfare state positions in the context of competition with populist parties. [Schumacher and Van Kersbergen](#) examine the programmatic reactions of mainstream parties in six European countries when confronted with right-wing populist parties adopting a “welfare chauvinist” position. The study reveals that mainstream right-wing parties tend to adopt more pro-welfare and anti-multiculturalist positions in response to the rise of welfare chauvinist populist parties. Left-wing parties, on the other hand, become more skeptical of multiculturalism while maintaining their overall redistribution positions. Similarly, [Krause and Giebler \(2020\)](#) find that party systems in 18 European countries adjust by embracing pro-welfare measures in response to the electoral success of radical right-wing populist parties. Left-of-center parties, in particular, exhibit a more pronounced reaction in this direction compared to their right-of-center counterparts. While these studies contribute valuable insights to a relatively understudied aspect of party competition, it is noteworthy that their methodological approaches, rooted in time series analyses, may not comprehensively eliminate the potential influence of public opinion and voters’ preferences as confounding factors, thus leaving room to this study to make a significant contribution to the literature.

3 Data and method

3.1 Data

The data for this study have been collected from multiple sources. First, national electoral results have been sourced from the ParlGov project (Döring and Manow, 2022). I include general elections results for 23 European democracies in the period 1970-2021¹. Second, political parties' positions have been obtained from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP/MARPOR) database. The CMP/MARPOR project contains several variables about parties' programmatic positions coming from the textual analysis of pre-electoral parties' manifestos. Each variable in the CMP is a count of the texts' units expressing a given policy dimension divided by the total number of textual units. Textual units are assigned to mutually exclusive policy categories so that the percentage categories can be considered as conveying information about parties' preference for a given policy dimension. Third, to identify populist parties I use the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al., 2019), which provides a binary and dynamic classification of political parties since 1989. To complement the coverage of the PopuList data, I integrate the PopuList categorization with the results of a novel continuous indicator of party populism (RFPOPI) (Celico, Rode, Rodriguez, 2022, available at SSRN). This indicator scores parties' populism on a 0-10 scale and extends the data coverage about populist parties back to 1970. In the baseline estimations, I classify residual parties as populist if their RFPOPI score is equal or larger than 6².

Both the PopuList and RFPOPI datasets ground their judgements on an ideational definition of populism (Mudde, 2004). Accordingly, populism is a “thin ideology” encompassing four main dimensions (Meijers and Zaslove, 2021; Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016): (1) The notion that the people are homogeneous and indivisible; (2) The belief in a shared general will among the people; (3) The conviction that the elites are inherently corrupt; (4) The recognition of an antagonistic, Manichean confrontation between the people and the elites. In such understanding, populism can be combined with multiple ideological

¹Countries that do not comply with the democratic status requirement over the period considered are excluded from the analysis

²Robustness checks provide estimations adopting an alternative threshold.

orientations (Mudde, Cas and Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2016).

As the purpose of the paper is to evaluate mainstream parties' response to populist parties, I identify mainstream parties as those that participated in at least three elections and achieved an average vote share of 8%³. In Section 5, I provide a robustness check showing that the results remain consistent with the baseline when adopting an alternative definition of mainstream parties. The resulting sample includes only mainstream party-election observations across twenty-three European democracies.

3.2 Empirical design

The attainment of parliamentary representation by a populist party can serve as a powerful signal prompting strategic adjustments by mainstream parties. However, the presence of supply-side mechanisms alongside changes in individuals' preferences presents a significant challenge of endogeneity, complicating the identification of the impact of populist competition on the positions of mainstream parties. Indeed, parliamentary representation is a function of multiple factors: voters' preferences, the electoral system, and parties' characteristics (e.g. candidates' quality and organizational capabilities). While the electoral system can be considered exogenous to party behavior, public opinion and parties' characteristics persist as potential confounding factors and sources of reverse causality.

To solve this identification challenge I follow [Abou-Chadi and Krause \(2020\)](#) and adopt a “close-election” Regression Discontinuity (RD) design in which I exploit the exogenous variation given by minimum national thresholds of representation. The RDD has an intuitive appeal for analyses of electoral contexts. The underlying intuition for identification is based on the premise that, within a narrow margin, mainstream parties competing against populist parties that secure parliamentary representation are comparable to those competing against populists that fail to obtain representation. This comparability is contingent upon parties lacking complete control over their vote share and the representation threshold. Under this assumption, obtaining representation in close elections is treated as a quasi-random event: mainstream parties exposed to a successful populist (surpassing the representation threshold) should exhibit similarity in both observable and unobservable characteristics

³Such definition of the mainstream parties is driven by sample's dimensionality reasons.

compared to those exposed to an unsuccessful populist. While a mainstream party can observe the populist’s electoral success right after the polls’ results, any programmatic reaction will be formalized in the political manifesto of the following election. Thus by comparing the positional adjustment of mainstream parties from time $t - 1$ to time t I can identify the causal effect β of competing with a populist. To this purpose, I use the following specification:

$$\Delta Y_{ij} = \alpha + \beta D_{ij} + f(x_{ij}) + Z_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij} \quad \forall x_{ij} \in (-h, h) \quad (1)$$

where ΔY_{ij} is the variation in the party i programmatic position from one election to another, β constitutes the local average treatment effect (LATE), x_{ij} is the forcing variable (the margin for (non-)obtaining representation with respect to the cutoff), Z_{ij} a control covariate, h is the bandwidth, and ϵ_{ij} is an error term. Suffixes i and j respectively stand for party i in country j . In order to account for the unobserved heterogeneity potentially arising from analyzing countries with different institutional settings, all the estimations are performed including country-fixed effects and clustering standard errors at the country-election level.

In this design, the treatment group consists of mainstream parties that competed with a populist obtaining representation at election $t - 1$, while the control group comprises mainstream parties that competed with a populist failing to secure representation. Accordingly, populist parties are excluded from the sample after assigning the treatment status. As the RDD estimates the discontinuity within a small bandwidth around the cutoff, its effects cannot be extrapolated to the entire population considered. Instead, in this context, the LATE reflects the impact of competing with a “weak” populist, i.e., one who barely entered the parliament.

To estimate the LATE I employ the non-parametric robust bias-corrected estimator with covariate adjustment proposed by [Calonico et al. \(2019\)](#). The advantage of this approach relies in its independence from parametric assumptions and its ability to strike a balance between flexibility and simplicity in approximating unknown regressions on both sides of the cutoff ([Cattaneo et al., 2019](#); [Cerqua and Zampollo, 2023](#)). This procedure entails the determination of an optimal bandwidth h selected through an MSE-optimal selector.

The optimal bandwidth differ in each specification and varies depending on the polynomial degree used to approximate the functions on the two sides of the cutoff.

The identification of the causal effect is facilitated by the exogeneity of minimum national thresholds of parliamentary representation. These thresholds are determined by the electoral system and, at least in the context of European democracies, are unlikely to be manipulated by individual parties (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). However, not all electoral systems in the countries and periods under consideration stipulate a legally defined electoral threshold. In instances where a representation threshold is not legally mandated, I calculate the corresponding “effective thresholds” of representation as defined by Taagepera (2002). Accordingly, the equivalent nationwide threshold of representation corresponds to the vote level at which parties have a 50-50 chance to win their first seat. Using the total number of seats in the assembly (S) and the number of electoral districts (E) it is possible to estimate the average nationwide vote share needed to win the first seat in the assembly (T)⁴:

$$T = \frac{75\%}{\left[\left(\frac{S}{E} + 1\right) \times \sqrt{E}\right]} \quad (2)$$

Therefore, the cutoff is defined as a combination of legally defined electoral thresholds, where available, and effective electoral thresholds. For each party observation at time t , the running variable is determined by the difference between the vote share obtained by the most successful populist party at time $t - 1$ and the corresponding electoral threshold.

Overall, this approach enables the comparison of the positional adjustments of mainstream parties that competed with a successful populist against those that competed with unsuccessful populist parties, eliminating the confounding role of demand-side factors. Nevertheless, one concern might persist regarding the potential impact of the populist party’s ideology as a confounder for the mainstream parties’ adjustment. To address this, I introduce the populist party’s ideology at time $t - 1$ as a covariate in the RDD. This adjustment aims to mitigate the possibility that the response of mainstream parties is driven by the populist party’s ideology rather than its populist connotations. Theoretically, incorporating

⁴The information about both the number of electoral districts (E) and the total number of seats in the assembly (S) have been collected from the “The Constituency Level Elections Archive” (CLEA) (Kollman et al., 2019). Effective thresholds correspond with those identified by Abou-Chadi and Krause (2020).

covariates in the RDD not only enhances efficiency of the estimates but also reduces the size of the confidence intervals (Cattaneo et al., 2019).

3.3 The outcome variables

In Section 2 I have discussed how Western European populist parties have framed redistributive issues in their electoral campaigns in two main directions: unconditional promises about welfare state expansions, and welfare chauvinism. Employing CMP data, I formulate the following two measures to capture the reactions of mainstream political parties in these regards: First, I measure changes in parties' preferences concerning the need to expand or restrict publicly provided social services (Δ Welfare size). Second, I introduce a measure for welfare chauvinism which, given the salience of the welfare state issue in each political platform, proxies parties' changes about how exclusionary welfare state provisions should be (Δ Welfare chauvinism).

Table 1 provides a description of both variables. To capture the equilibrium between manifesto sentences endorsing or opposing welfare state expansions, I employ the log-odds ratios scaling methodology proposed by Lowe et al. (2011). The rationale is rooted in the need to assess the balance between statements favoring and opposing welfare state measures over time, rather than relying solely on their absolute count. Accordingly, the first component of Δ Welfare size defines party preferences about the expansion or limitation of the welfare state at time t , while the second component denotes the same party preference at time $t-1$. The difference between the two components returns the adjustment across subsequent elections. As for Δ Welfare Chauvinism, the absolute values in the first and second components tell the salience of welfare state adjustments at different elections. As this term is inherently non-negative, it reflects the significance of the welfare state issue within the party platform during a given election, irrespective of its directional stance toward expansion or restriction. This salience component is then multiplied by the intensity of anti-multicultural positions, thereby expressing the degree of nativism applied to the welfare state issue. In the context of both variables, positive values signify policy shifts that favor the expansion of the welfare state and, alternatively, policy shifts that advocate for a more exclusionary welfare state. Conversely, negative values indicate shifts favoring

Outcome measure	Source variables	Definition
Δ Welfare Size	<i>per504</i> (W.S. expansion) <i>per505</i> (W.S. limitation)	$\Delta Welfare_{i,t} = \left(\frac{\log(\text{per504}+0.5)}{\log(\text{per505}+0.5)} \right)_{i,t} - \left(\frac{\log(\text{per504}+0.5)}{\log(\text{per505}+0.5)} \right)_{i,t-1}$
Δ Welfare chauvinism	<i>per504</i> (W.S. expansion) <i>per505</i> (W.S. limitation) <i>per608</i> (Multicult.: neg.)	$\Delta Chauvinism_{i,t} = \left(\left \frac{\log(\text{per504}+0.5)}{\log(\text{per505}+0.5)} \right \times \log(\text{per608} + 0.5) \right)_{i,t} - \left(\left \frac{\log(\text{per504}+0.5)}{\log(\text{per505}+0.5)} \right \times \log(\text{per608} + 0.5) \right)_{i,t-1}$

Table 1: Dependent variables

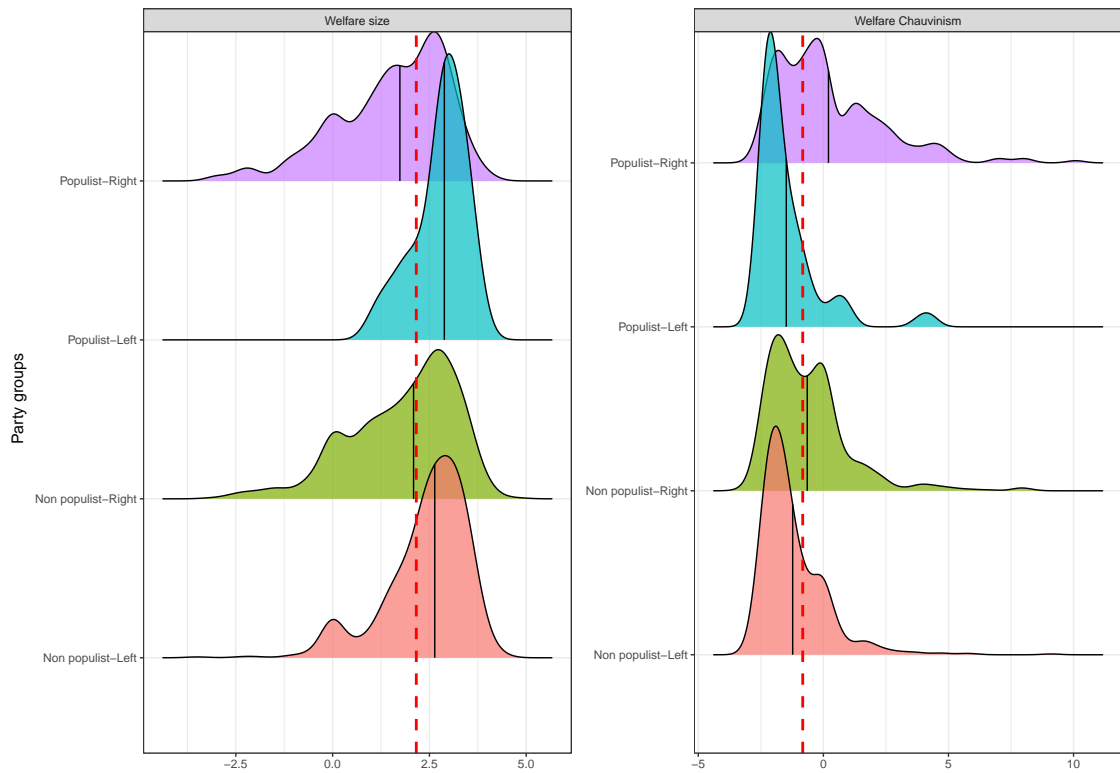
a reduction in the size of the welfare state and a tendency toward a more inclusive welfare state.

Table 2 provides summary statistics for the variables used in the analysis, including the two dependent variables. The first two rows encapsulate information regarding mainstream parties’ policy preferences at each election-observation t : on average, parties within the sample exhibit a preference for welfare state expansions and tend toward non-chauvinist approaches to welfare state rights. The subsequent two rows present the programmatic shift from one election to another. Notably, on average there is a more pronounced variation of parties’ position on the welfare chauvinism issue rather the welfare state size issue. These positive coefficients indicate an overall tendency toward slightly larger and less inclusive welfare states. This aligns with empirical literature emphasizing the increasing saliency of cultural issues compared to economic ones in recent times (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020; Green-Pedersen and Otjes, 2019; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). The last two rows resume the summary statistics for the assignment variable and for an ideological scale of the mainstream parties included in the sample. The final dataset exploitable to the purpose of the RDD comprises 563 observations, with 242 falling within a $\pm 5\%$ representation/non-representation margin.

Finally, Figure 1 displays the positional preferences by party typologies showing the density distributions of party positions across party groups. Rather than showcasing variations over time, Figure 1 illustrates party preferences at each time unit t . These statistics align with expectations from political theory: left-wing populist parties, on average, exhibit a more pro-redistribution stance than the typical party (Müller, 2016), while welfare chauvinism tends to be associated with right-wing populist positions (Schumacher and Van Kersbergen, 2016). Nevertheless, a notable proportion of left-wing populist parties also endorse strong welfare chauvinist positions (Harris and Römer, 2022; Schmitt and Teney, 2019).

Variable	Nr. Obs.	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
Welfare expansions	586	2.171	2.478	1.251	-2.625	4.768
Welfare chauvinism	586	-0.825	-1.236	1.761	-3.305	9.105
Δ Welfare expansion	500	0.059	0.017	1.325	-6.276	5.330
Δ Welfare chauvinism	500	0.161	0.00	1.719	-7.171	9.718
Margin of repr./non-repr. (lag)	563	8.436	6.870	9.547	-4.000	38.740
Left-Right Ideology	628	4.998	4.891	1.953	0.750	8.496

Table 2: Summary Statistics



Note: Black solid lines indicate each group distribution's median. The dashed red lines indicate the mean of the whole sample for each variable.

Figure 1: Distribution of party preferences by party group

3.4 Validity of the RDD assumptions

The appeal of the RD design in electoral contexts derives from the intuitivity of its underlying identification assumption, according to which candidates who win and lose a close election are on average comparable (Eggers et al., 2015). In the context of this analysis, such intuition relies on the fact that that political parties cannot perfectly control the vote share that they receive nor the established electoral threshold, and thus whether they attain or not parliamentary representation. Perfect control over the attainment of representation may entail two situations: first, the case of an electoral fraud; second, a situation in which a mainstream party can manipulate the national electoral threshold. The verification of situations of the kind would imply that the assignment of treatment is no longer as random, undermining the main identification assumption of the RDD and introducing bias in the estimates. Concerning electoral frauds, the existing political science literature generally asserts the absence of such occurrences in the examined European democracies (Hainmueller and Kern, 2008; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). Likewise, with regard to threshold manipulations, there is limited documented evidence indicating strategic interventions by political parties to hinder or facilitate the entry of a competitor during the specified time period and across the considered countries (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020).

In addition to the theoretical considerations indicating the limited relevance of these concerns in my specific context, I empirically examine the continuity of the assignment variable around the electoral threshold among mainstream parties that have encountered a populist competitor. If parties lack perfect control, one would not anticipate any abrupt discontinuity in the density distribution of the assignment variable on either side of the cut-off. The two exhibits in Figure B1 depict the density distribution of the assignment variable and its manipulation test, following the methodology proposed by Cattaneo et al. (2020). Additionally, Figure B2 presents the original Mc Crary test for manipulation (McCrary, 2008). The results from these tests are reassuring, as there is no discernible evidence of significant discontinuities at the threshold. Moreover, the p-values from both tests, $p = 0.45$ for the test following Cattaneo et al. and $p = 0.88$ for McCrary's test, affirm that there is no significant indication of sorting at the threshold. Consequently, the empirical evidence supports the assumption based on the literature about parties' lack of perfect control over

the electoral outcome.

One potential concern, already discussed in Section 3.2, is relative to the role played by the ideology of the populist party. One possibility could be that the response of mainstream parties is a reaction to the previous election populist party’s ideology rather than to its populist connotation. To discard the possibility that the populist’s ideology may be leading some spurious correlations, I test whether the variable for (lagged) populist’s ideology is balanced at the cutoff. If the variable is balanced and no effect is detected, it is possible to exclude that the ideology of the populist party is a confounder of the LATE. Table C1 shows the results from running an RDD with fixed effects but no covariates using populists’ ideology as the dependent variable. The results show that no effect is detected when using different polynomial degrees and different bandwidth sizes, thus allowing to exclude the confounding role of past populist ideology.

4 Results

Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) analyses typically begin with a graphical representation of the estimated discontinuity in the dependent variable. Figure 2 illustrates the presence of such a discontinuity for both dependent variables. The X-axis represents the assignment variable, derived from the difference between the populist’s vote share and the national electoral threshold, while the Y-axis depicts the magnitude of traditional party programmatic change from one election to another. Each blue dot denotes the average value of the dependent variables binned using the Mimicking Variance method (MV), allowing for different bin sizes on the left and right side of the cutoff (Cattaneo et al., 2019). The size of the discontinuity at the cutoff reflects the adjustment made by treated mainstream parties after competing with a successful populist, compared to their non-treated counterparts. Exhibit 2a and 2b respectively indicate that after competing with a populist with representation, mainstream parties adjust their positions in favor of a smaller and more exclusive welfare state.

However, as the graphical analysis alone cannot ascertain the significance of these discontinuities, Table 3 complements the visual representation with the results from local non-parametric estimations. Table 3 presents results for both first and second-order polynomials,

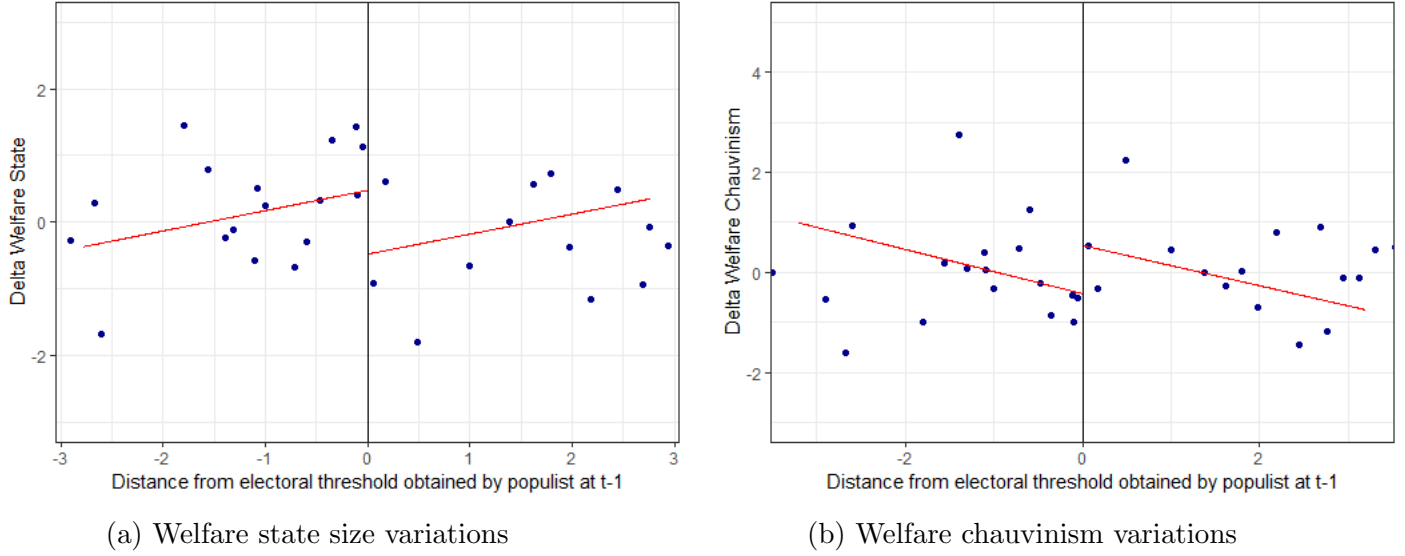


Figure 2: Mainstream parties' positions adjustment.

Estimation	Local			
	Δ Welfare Size		Δ Welfare chauvinism	
Variable	1	2	1	2
Polynomial order	1	2	1	2
LATE	-0.862** (0.368)	-1.899*** (0.301)	1.451*** (0.366)	1.818*** (0.251)
Bandwidth	2.696	3.209	3.016	2.764
N_-/N_+	58/65	66/93	63/85	58/76

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses, clustered at the national election level. P-values: ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

Table 3: RDD main results

ensuring that the identification of a discontinuity is not contingent on the functional form adopted for estimating the functions on each side of the cutoff.

These estimates confirm the picture obtained from Figure 2. As for Δ Welfare Size I observe a negative coefficient in a range between -0.86 and -1.90, depending on the degree of the polynomial adopted in the estimation. As for Δ Welfare Chauvinism, the coefficient is positive in a range between 1.45 and 1.82. In both cases the estimated discontinuities are significant at conventional levels. This result indicates that, on average, mainstream parties exposed to “weak” populist parties with representation adjust their positions on redistributive issues embracing more restrictive and less inclusive welfare state policies.

The size of these effects is substantively meaningful. Indeed, in both cases they account

for approximately one standard deviation of the positional shifts considered. In another fashion, the coefficients for the Δ Welfare size variable account for the 25% to the 55% of the positional difference existing between the Italian Democratic Party (PD) and the Five Star Movement (M5S) in 2013, when the M5S obtained parliamentary representation for the first time putting a strong emphasis on social policy issues. For the Δ Welfare Chauvinism variable, the magnitudes account approximately between the 60% and the 75% of the positional difference between the M5S and the PD at the same election.

While these findings suggest that by mechanisms of party competition, populism can influence the redistributive positions of mainstream parties, they do not account for the possibility that mainstream parties might respond differently depending on their own overall ideological stances. In this sense, the effects shown in Table 3 may result from compensatory dynamics between left and right-wing mainstream parties. To address the concern of compensation effects across different ideologies, I replicate the baseline RDD estimations on two ideologically distinct subsamples, specifically left-wing and right-wing parties. The results are presented in Table 4. This analysis suggests the potential presence of heterogeneous effects among left and right-wing mainstream parties. As a matter of fact, the overall effect found for the Δ Welfare Size variable completely derives from the adjustment of right-wing parties, which become significantly more anti-welfare state expansions. No significant effect is found on left-wing mainstream parties. Regarding welfare chauvinism, the overall effect is instead shared across ideologically different mainstream parties.

These results have a number of implications, first, left and right parties tend to respond to the populist challenge analogously on the cultural dimension, accommodating welfare chauvinist positions. This confirms evidence from the literature expecting a homogenous effect of populism over ideologically different parties (Rooduijn et al., 2014). Second, left-wing parties apparently don't engage in competition with the populist on the economic dimension of the welfare state, whereas right-wing parties do. Third, besides competing on populists' core issues, such as welfare rights for non-natives, mainstream parties shift their positions also on populists' non-core issues, like economic ones.

A plausible interpretation of these findings may unfold as follows. On one hand, right-wing parties, in response to the populist challenge, tend to advocate for an overall reduction

Estimation Variable	Local			
	Δ Welfare Size		Δ Welfare chauvinism	
Polynomial order	1	2	1	2
Subgroups estimations				
LATE Left-wing	0.268 (0.587)	-0.038 (0.719)	1.869** (0.758)	2.201*** (0.621)
Bandwidth	2.540	4.078	3.084	3.718
N_-/N_+	20/32	28/57	27/44	27/57
LATE Right-wing	-2.030*** (0.555)	-3.108*** (0.918)	1.319*** (0.461)	1.834*** (0.561)
Bandwidth	2.240	3.378	2.171	3.506
N_-/N_+	31/24	36/47	31/24	36/49

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses, clustered at the national election level. P-values: ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

Table 4: RDD results by ideology subsamples

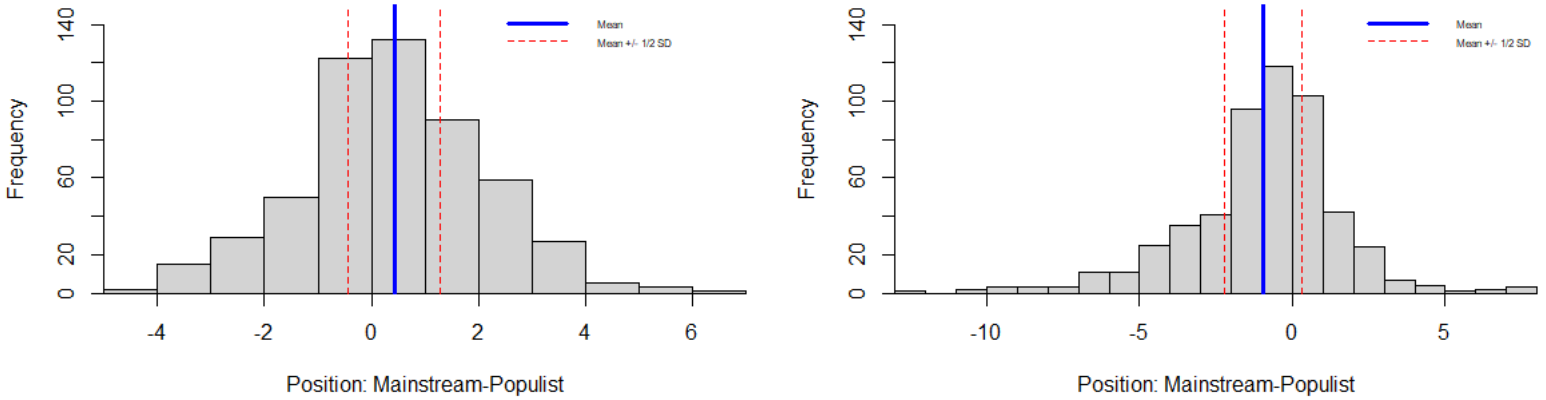
in resources allocated to the welfare state, specifically by curtailing expenditure on welfare benefits for non-natives. This position aligns with traditional right-wing ideology, characterized by skepticism towards state intervention in the economy and a more conservative stance on multiculturalism.

Conversely, left-wing parties do not necessarily alter their stance on the overall scale of social expenditure. Instead, they appear to propose alternative mechanisms of redistribution that may disproportionately affect non-natives. Recent literature acknowledges the existence of a "progressives' dilemma," wherein left-wing parties grapple with the tension between promoting inclusive equality and adhering to a nationalist interpretation of equality, which may entail restricting access to the welfare state for non-nationals (Eger and Kulin, 2021). In line with observations from other studies (Harris and Römer, 2022), the results from this study suggest that left-wing parties, when confronted with the populist challenge, may opt for reductions in the welfare state rights of non-natives.

4.1 Positional distances

While interesting, the results shown in Tables 3 and 4 consists in unilateral shifts of mainstream parties, yet they do not provide insight into whether mainstream parties and their populist competitors converge or diverge after engaging in electoral competition.

Therefore, as a complementary analysis, I introduce a measure of positional convergence/divergence to better uncover the dynamics of mutual positioning on the two policy sub-dimensions considered so far. First, I calculate the difference between the positions of mainstream parties from the most relevant populist at every election t . The metrics of these distances are shown in the histograms in Figure 3. These figures confirm in another fashion from Figure 1 that welfare chauvinism emerges as an issue where populist parties exhibit more extreme positions, while their positions are comparatively more balanced on the economic dimension of the welfare state. Second, after computing the Euclidean distance separating the positions of each traditional party from the positions of the most successful populist party, my measure of convergence/divergence is given by the difference between the measured distances for party i at election t and the corresponding distance at election $t - 1$. Positive values indicate positional divergence while negative values indicate positional convergence. I implement these measures of convergence/divergence into the same



(a) Welfare size

(b) Welfare chauvinism

Figure 3: Mainstream to populist positional distances

RD design to check whether having competed with a successful populist party determines convergence/divergence dynamics. The negative coefficients in Table 5 illustrate that among the treated observations there is a significant reduction of the distance from the populist. This is suggesting a converging dynamic toward the populists' positions which is sizeable. As for the economic dimension of the welfare issue, treated mainstream parties converge to the populist's position by approximately one third of the standard deviation of the distance

Estimation Variable	Local			
	Welfare size dist.		Welfare Chauvinism dist.	
Polynomial order	1	2	1	2
LATE	-0.624*** (0.100)	-0.666*** (0.084)	-3.121*** (0.067)	-2.912*** (0.179)
Bandwidth	3.134	4.568	1.800	3.915
N_-/N_+	27/83	28/120	17/41	27/101

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses, clustered at the national election level. P-values: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 5: Positional convergence

between a populist and a mainstream party. As for the cultural dimension, this magnitude accounts from 110% and 120% of the corresponding standard deviation. Appendix D shows tests for the sensitivity of the estimates to alternative bandwidths and RDD features ⁵.

These estimates are documenting an average convergence between populist and mainstream parties which could be interpreted as evidence of a “populist contagion”, as in the sense of [Mudde \(2004\)](#). Unfortunately, the construction of such distance measures combined with the RDD characteristics implies a significant loss of observations which does not allow to perform any estimation by ideological subgroups so as to identify any heterogeneous effects among left and right-wing parties.

5 Robustness and sensitivity tests

In this section, I provide a series of robustness and sensitivity tests to support the validity of the main results presented in Table 3. First, I test the sensitivity of the results to the selection of alternative bandwidths with respect to those determined in the main estimations. If the estimated LATEs were substantially affected by the size of the chosen bandwidth, this would cast doubts about the validity of the results. Figure 4 shows the LATE estimated using a number of alternative bandwidths spanning from 2 to 6 points of the victory/loss margin, spaced by 0.5 intervals. The two exhibits contain estimations using linear and quadratic polynomials. The LATEs of both dependent variables remain relatively stable, significant, and consistent with the coefficients’ signs of the results found in Table 3.

Second, I assess the potential presence of discontinuities away from the cutoff, as the

⁵The number of tests viable on these measures is reduced by the small size of the sample available.

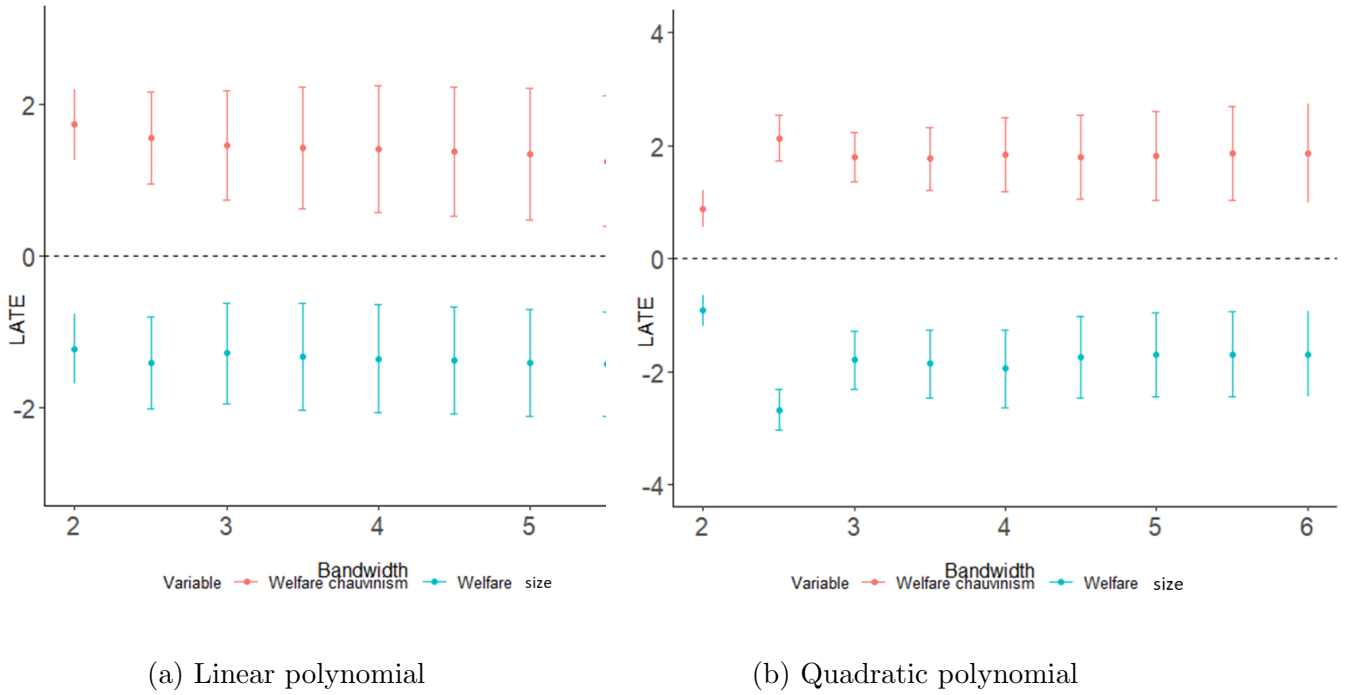


Figure 4: Alternative bandwidths sensitivity

existence of effects at alternative cutoffs could raise concerns about the validity of the RD design (Imbens and Lemieux, 2008; Cattaneo et al., 2019). The expectation here is to find no significant effect. Figure 5 illustrates the outcomes of such falsification tests employing placebo cutoffs. On the right-hand side of the cutoff, I conduct RD estimations at three alternative cutoffs, each at a 1% vote share distance from the other. On the left-hand side, due to the relatively smaller sample size, which restricts testing for several placebo cutoffs, I follow the approach of Imbens and Lemieux (2008) and test for the presence of discontinuities at the median of the assignment variable on that side of the cutoff. This testing at the median of the assignment variable enhances the test’s power to detect discontinuities. While the results for the Δ Welfare size variable align with theoretical expectations, at $c=3$ both linear and quadratic estimations for the Δ Welfare chauvinism variable suggest the presence of a discontinuity.

Third, an extensive set of robustness and sensitivity tests is contained in Table 6. In the first block, I check for the sensitivity of the main results to alternative RDD features’ specifications. First, I check whether using an Epanechnikov kernel instead of a triangular one alters the results. Second, I check if any substantial differences arise when adopting an alternative optimal bandwidth selector that allows for different bandwidths sizes on

each side of the cutoff (MSE-two). Both linear and quadratic estimations report significant coefficients consistent with those obtained in Table 3.

In the second block, I check whether the results are sensitive to the elimination of observations very close to the cutoff, following the “donut-hole” test described in (Cattaneo et al., 2019). The intuition behind this test is to remove a number of observations in a small radius around the cutoff and repeat the estimations, as observations closer to the cutoff are the ones more likely to suffer from manipulation (in cases where manipulation is suspected) or driving the results of local estimations. Using a radius around the cutoff up to 0.3 points of the assignment variable, the resulting LATEs remain largely statistically significant and consistent with those obtained in Table 3, although magnitudes vary.

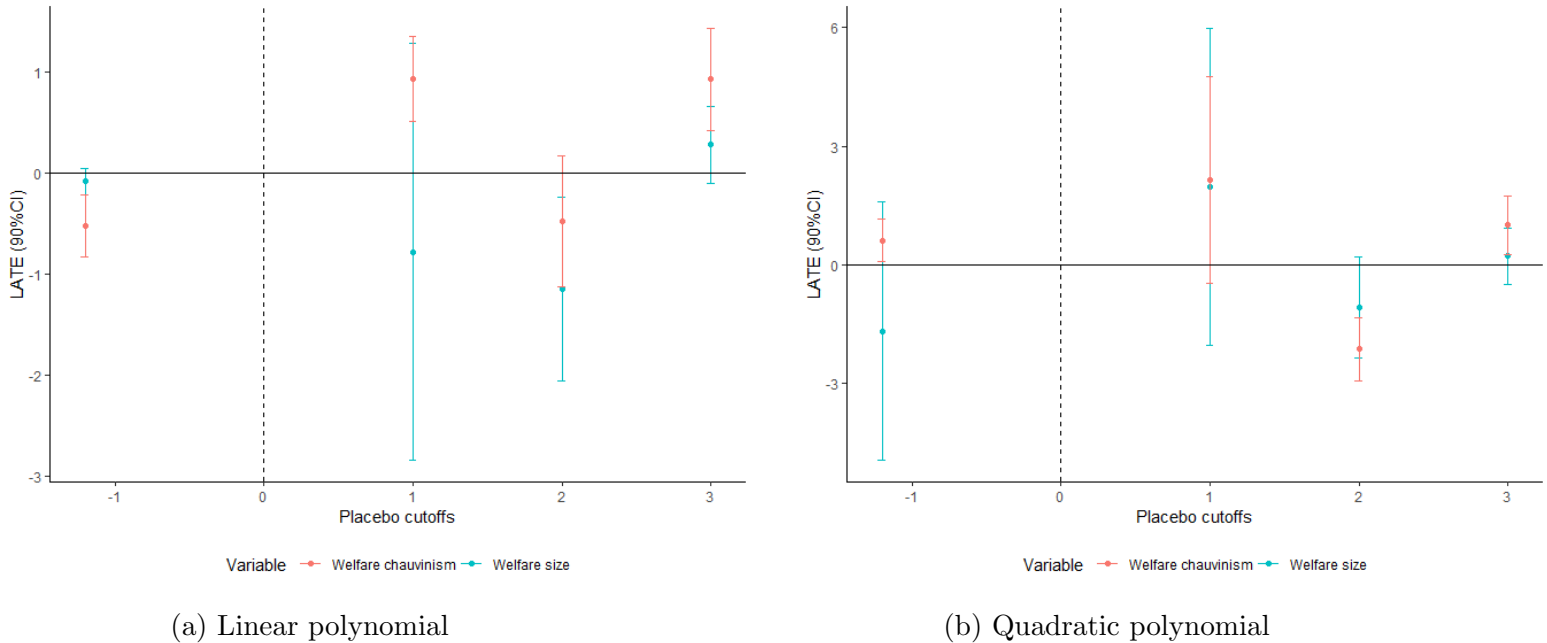


Figure 5: Placebo cutoffs

In the third block, I examine the robustness of the results under alternative definitions. First, I investigate whether the findings remain consistent when exclusively using the legally defined national threshold for representation. As the effective thresholds for parliamentary representation, as defined in Taagepera (2002), only approximate the real thresholds and cannot be considered entirely exogenous to party behavior, I repeat the estimations, excluding observations where the effective thresholds were utilized. Overall, the sign of the coefficients remains in line with the main estimates, although the levels of significance and the size of the effects are substantially affected. Second, I propose an alternative definition

of mainstream parties. To benefit from a larger sample size, I initially considered all parties with an average vote share of 8% in at least three elections as mainstream. In this test, I restrict the sample to only those parties with an average vote share of 10% in at least four elections, following the practice of other scholars (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). The test yields coefficients consistent with those in Table 3. Third, I introduce a variation in the definition of populist parties. The original definition was based on a combination of two indicators: a binary one (PopuList) and a continuous one (RFPOPI) for residual cases. Acknowledging the potential arbitrariness in choosing the threshold for classifying a party as populist/non-populist, I propose an alternative definition where I raise the RFPOPI threshold from greater than or equal to 6 to greater than or equal to 8. As observed in the previous test, only the magnitudes of the effects are slightly affected, while the overall result of the test is consistent with the baseline results. In the last two tests, I check whether the results remain robust to alternative definitions of the dependent variables. In this respect, I use the number of quasi-sentences in favor of a welfare state expansion from the CMP (per504) to proxy positions about the economic dimension of the welfare state and I use the formulation of Schumacher and Van Kersbergen (2016) to proxy welfare chauvinism⁶. Despite the variations in size, most results remain significant and consistent with the main results.

Table C2 in the Appendix, shows a further placebo test to challenge the causal validity of my RD design. As environmental protectionism is not a salient issue for most populist parties, especially RRWPs (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020), the electoral success of a populist should not influence mainstream parties' positions over this issue. The results contained in Table C2 show no significant discontinuity when using environmental protection as a dependent variable⁷, thus confirming the theoretical expectation.

Finally, Tables C3 and C4 contain linear and quadratic iterations of a jackknife analysis by which I test whether the results are driven by any given country-observations in

⁶The alternative Δ Welfare chauvinism uses CMP variables and is defined, accordingly to Schumacher and Van Kersbergen, as: (Welfare state expansions + Equality - Welfare state limitations) \times Multiculturalism (negative)

⁷The environmental protection variable is constructed summing anti-economic growth positions (per416) and pro-environment position (per501) minus pro-economic growth positions (per410).

the sample. The jackknife analysis consists in repeating iteratively the estimations, each iteration including all the observations but those from a given country. As Tables C3 and C4 display, despite variations in magnitudes of the estimated coefficients, results are overall consistent with the baseline findings.

All in all, all the tests performed in this section support the main findings, allowing me to claim with reasonable confidence that the populists' success has a causal effect on the change of mainstream parties' social policy platforms at the following electoral round.

Variable	Δ Welfare Size		Δ Welfare chauvinism	
	1	2	1	2
1) RDD features				
Alternative kernel: Epanechnikov	-1.350*** (0.389)	-3.477*** (0.258)	1.650*** (0.446)	2.297*** (0.35)
Alternative bandwidth selector: MSE-two	-1.278*** (0.329)	-1.613*** (0.375)	0.585* (0.334)	1.28*** (0.181)
2) Observations close to cut-off				
Radius around cutoff = 0.1	-1.635** (0.667)	-4.008*** (0.882)	-0.586 (0.642)	2.476*** (0.887)
Radius around cutoff = 0.2	-7.021*** (1.841)	-1.666** (0.963)	5.144 (8.532)	3.371*** (0.986)
Radius around cutoff = 0.3	-1.799 (1.496)	-3.166*** (0.645)	2.249** (0.665)	1.382* (0.707)
3) Alternative definitions				
Legal thresholds	-0.496 (0.329)	-0.889** (0.415)	0.232 (0.150)	0.913*** (0.271)
Mainstream party (10% v.s. in 4 el.)	-1.193 (0.505)	-2.308*** (0.708)	1.941*** (0.493)	2.212*** (0.533)
Populist party (RFPOPI \geq 8)	-1.136*** (0.339)	-1.634*** (0.385)	1.607*** (0.351)	1.784*** (0.386)
Δ Welfare Size (per504)	-0.702*** (0.069)	-1.265*** (0.131)	-	-
Δ Welfare chauvinism (Schumacher and Van Kersbergen)	-	-	1.753 (2.069)	4.530*** (1.346)

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses, clustered at the national election level. P-values: ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

Table 6: Robustness and sensitivity checks

6 Discussion and conclusions

Political economy literature recognizes a multitude of economic, institutional, and cultural effects on Western societies relatable to populist governance. Yet, these effects are not limited to cases where populists are in government. Through mechanisms of political competition, populist parties can influence mainstream parties' programmatic positions about economic policy-making and thus potentially affect government political action, even without being in power. Despite the recent increase in interest in how parties react to each other, the question of how mainstream parties react to the populist challenge in economic policy areas has remained relatively overlooked. Most available empirical studies are correlational and do not disentangle parties' positioning effects from changes in public opinion.

This paper contributes causal empirical insights into the manner in which populism can impact distinct policy domains through party competition mechanisms, thereby influencing the configuration of the political spectrum. Leveraging cross-national data from European parties' electoral manifestos, this study demonstrates that the attainment of representation by a populist party serves as a supply-side mechanism, leading to adjustments in the economic policy positions of mainstream parties, independently of shifts in public opinion. To address endogeneity concerns arising from programmatic adjustments in response to evolving public preferences, the study employs a Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD), exploiting the exogenous variation introduced by minimum national thresholds of representation.

Concentrating on the realm of welfare state policies, this study finds that subsequent to the electoral success of populist parties, mainstream parties, on average, diminish their inclination towards further expansions of the welfare state while concurrently embracing more exclusive models of social protection. Examining the cultural dimension, these results affirm the positive correlation observed by [Schumacher and Van Kersbergen \(2016\)](#) and [Krause and Giebler \(2020\)](#) between the success of populist movements and welfare chauvinism. Nevertheless, my results diverge from [Krause and Giebler \(2020\)](#) with respect to the economic dimension of welfare state policy, where they found a positive association between populists' success and mainstream parties' pro-welfare positions. Also, I find that after the consolidation of a populist contestant within the party system, the positional dis-

tance between mainstream and populist parties decreases both with respect to the welfare state inclusiveness issue and relatively to the appropriate economic size of the welfare sector. In this sense, the findings of this paper support the existence of a “populist contagion” (Mudde, 2004), at least in areas related to social protection policies.

Without questioning the causal value of these effects, it is crucial to acknowledge the limited external validity of the empirical design employed in this study. The presented evidence specifically illustrates the effects exerted by “weak” populist parties with representation on the positions of mainstream parties and should not be extrapolated to the case of populist parties that achieve substantial electoral success. While there is a reasonable expectation that these effects might be even more pronounced in the presence of a strong populist competitor, determining the extent of such effects remains an open empirical question.

Moreover, it is important to note that these results do not inherently suggest that government actions will inevitably align with the positional adjustments outlined in this paper. However, adhering to models of promissory representation, wherein parties are expected to uphold their electoral commitments to avoid future electoral repercussions (Thomson and Brandenburg, 2019; Mansbridge, 2003), it is reasonable to anticipate that parties would exert influence on the executive branch, aiming at increasing the likelihood that their pre-electoral policy positions are effectively translated into tangible policy actions.

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Appendices

A List of populist parties

Table A1: List of populist parties with representation

Country	Party acronym	Party name	Ideology
Austria	FPO	Freedom Party of Austria	Right
Austria	BZO	Alliance for the Future of Austria	Right
Austria	TS	Team Stronach	Right
Belgium	VB	Flemish Block Flemish Interest	Right
Belgium	FN	National Front	Right
Belgium	LD LDD	List Dedecker Libertarian, Direct, Democratic	Right
Bulgaria	BBB	Bulgarian Business Bloc	Right
Bulgaria	NDSV	National Movement Simeon II	Right
Bulgaria	Ataka	Attack	Right
Bulgaria	RZS	Order, Lawfulness and Justice	Right
Bulgaria	GERB	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria	Right
Bulgaria	NFSB	National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria	Right
Bulgaria	BBZ	Bulgaria Without Censorship	Right
Bulgaria	Volya	Will	Right
Croatia	HDSSB	Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja	Right
Croatia	HL-LR	Croatian Labourists – Labour Party	Left
Croatia	ZiZi	Human Shield	Right
Croatia	Most	Bridge of Independent Lists	Right
Czech Republic	SPR-RSC	Rally for the Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia	Right
Czech Republic	VV	Public Affairs	Right
Czech Republic	UPD	Dawn of Direct Democracy	Right
Czech Republic	ANO	Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011	Right
Czech Republic	SPD	Freedom and Direct Democracy	Right
Denmark	FrP	Progress Party	Right
Denmark	DF	Danish Peoples Party	Right
Denmark	NB	The New Right	Right
Estonia	SK	Independent Royalists	Right
Estonia	EKo	Estonian Citizens	Right

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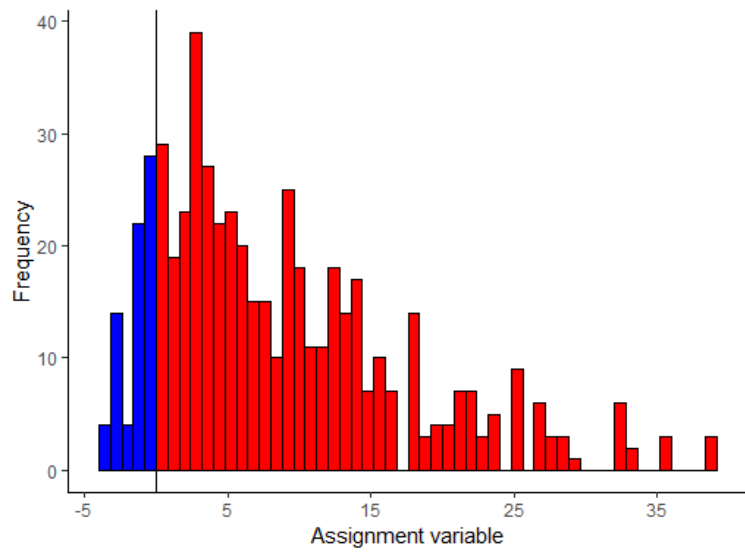
Country	Party acronym	Party name	Ideology
Estonia	ERa/EKR	People's Union of Estonia / Conservative People's Party	Left
Finland	SP P	Finnish Party True Finns	Right
France	FN	National Rally	Right
France	FI	Unbowed France	Left
Germany	PDS Li	PDS The Left	Left
Germany	AfD	Alternative for Germany	Right
Greece	PASOK	Panhellenic Socialist Movement	Left
Greece	POLAN	Political Spring	Right
Greece	DIKKI	Democratic Social Movement	Left
Greece	LAOS	Popular Orthodox Rally	Right
Greece	SYRIZA	Coalition of the Radical Left	Left
Greece	ANEL	Independent Greeks	Right
Greece	MeRA25	European Realistic Disobedience Front	Left
Greece	EL	Greek Solution	Right
Hungary	MDF	Hungarian Democratic Forum	Right
Hungary	FKgP	Independent Small Holders Party	Right
Hungary	SzDSz	Alliance of Free Democrats	Left
Hungary	MIEP	Hungarian Justice and Life Party	Right
Hungary	Fi-MPSz	Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union	Right
Hungary	Fi+KDNP	Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Party / Christian Democratic People's Party	Right
Hungary	Jobbik	Jobbik Movement for a Better Hungary	Right
Iceland	B-H	Civic Movement – The Movement	Right
Iceland	FIF	People's Party	
Iceland	FIF	People's Party	Right
Iceland	M	Centre Party	Right
Ireland	SF	Sinn Fein	Left
Italy	LV	Venetian League	
Italy	LN	North League	Right
Italy	FI-PdL	Go Italy – The People of Freedom	Right
Italy	FdI	Brothers of Italy	Right
			<i>Continue on the next page</i>
Italy	M5S	Five Star Movement	Left

Country	Party acronym	Party name	Ideology
Italy	M5S	Five Star Movement	Right
Latvia	TSP	National Harmony Party	Left
Latvia	TKL-ZP	People's Movement for Latvia – Siegerist Party	Right
Latvia	DPS	Democratic Party Saimnieks	Right
Latvia	LSDSP	Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party	Left
Latvia	PCTVL	For Human Rights in a United Latvia	Left
Latvia	S	Harmony	Left
Latvia	RP	Reform Party	Right
Latvia	NsL	For Latvia from the Heart	Right
Latvia	KPV-LV	Who owns the state?	Right
Lithuania	JL	Young Lithuania	Right
Lithuania	DP	Labour Party	Left
Lithuania	TT-LDP	Order and Justice – Liberal Democratic Party	Right
Lithuania	TPP	National Resurrection Party	Right
Lithuania	DK	The Way of Courage	Left
Lithuania	LCP	Lithuanian Centre Party	Right
Lithuania	DK	The Way of Courage	
Luxembourg	AR ADR	Action Committee Pensions Alterna- tive Democratic Reform Party	Right
Malta	PN	Nationalist Party	Right
Malta	PL	Malta Labour Party	Left
Netherlands	D66	Democrats 66	Left
Netherlands	SP	Socialist Party	Left
Netherlands	CD	Centre Democrats	Right
Netherlands	LPF	Fortuyn List	Right
Netherlands	LN	Livable Netherlands	Right
Netherlands	PVV	Party for Freedom	Right
Netherlands	FvD	Forum for Democracy	Right
Norway	Fr	Progress Party	Right
<i>Continue on the next page</i>			
Poland	S	Solidarnosc	Left
Poland	PC	Centre Agreement	Right

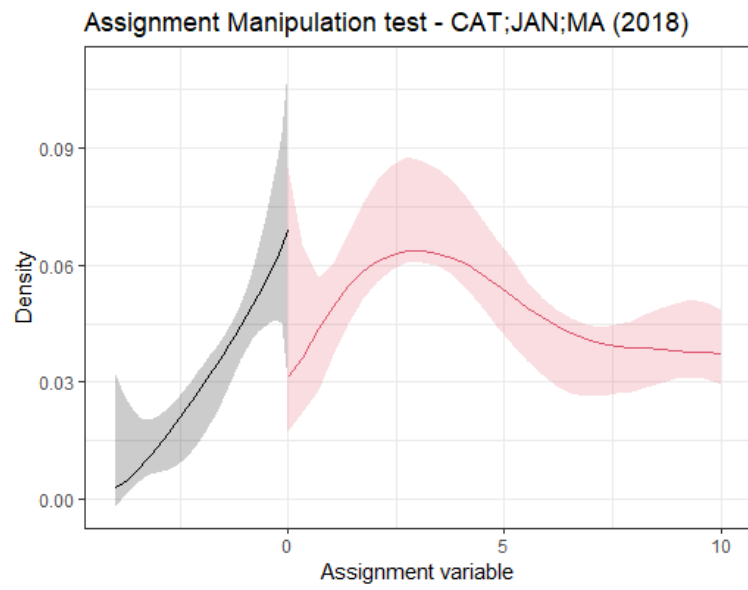
Country	Party acronym	Party name	Ideology
Poland	KPN	Confederation for Independent Poland	Right
Poland	SRP	Self-Defense of the Republic Poland	Left
Poland	LPR	League of Polish Families	Right
Poland	PiS	Law and Justice	Right
Poland	K	Kukiz'15	Right
Portugal	APU	United People Alliance	Left
Portugal	CH	Enough	Right
Romania	PUNR	Romanian National Unity Party	Right
Romania	PRM	Greater Romania Party	Right
Romania	PP-DD	People's Party – Dan Diaconescu	Left
Romania	PSD	Social Democratic Party	Left
Slovakia	SNS	Slovak National Party	Right
Slovakia	ZRS	Association of Workers of Slovakia	Left
Slovakia	SOP	Party of Civic Understanding	Left
Slovakia	PSNS	Real Slovak National Party	Right
Slovakia	Smer	Direction – Social Democracy	Left
Slovakia	ANO	Alliance of the New Citizen	Right
Slovakia	OLaNO	Ordinary People and Independent	Right
Slovakia	SR	We are family – Boris Kollar	Right
Slovenia	SDS	Slovenian Democratic Party	Right
Slovenia	ZL-SD	United List – Social Democrats	Left
Slovenia	SNS	Slovenian National Party	Left
Slovenia	NSI	New Slovenia – Christian People's Party	Right
Slovenia	SLS	Slovenian People's Party	Right
Slovenia	ZdLe	United Left	Left
Slovenia	LMS	List of Marjan Sarec	Left
Slovenia	L	The Left	Left
Spain	P	We Can	Left
Spain	EM GCE	En Masse Common Group of the Left	Left
Spain	ECP	In Common We Can	Left
<i>Continue on the next page</i>			
Spain	ERC	Republican Left of Catalonia	Left
Spain	Vox	Voice	Right
Sweden	NyD	New Democracy	Right

Country	Party acronym	Party name	Ideology
Sweden	SD	Sweden Democrats	Right
Switzerland	SVP-UDC	Swiss People's Party	Right
Switzerland	FPS	Automobile Party Freedom Party of Switzerland	Right

B Manipulation tests



(a) Assignment variable's distribution



(b) Cattaneo et al. (2020)'s test

Figure B1: Manipulation test

Mc Crary's test

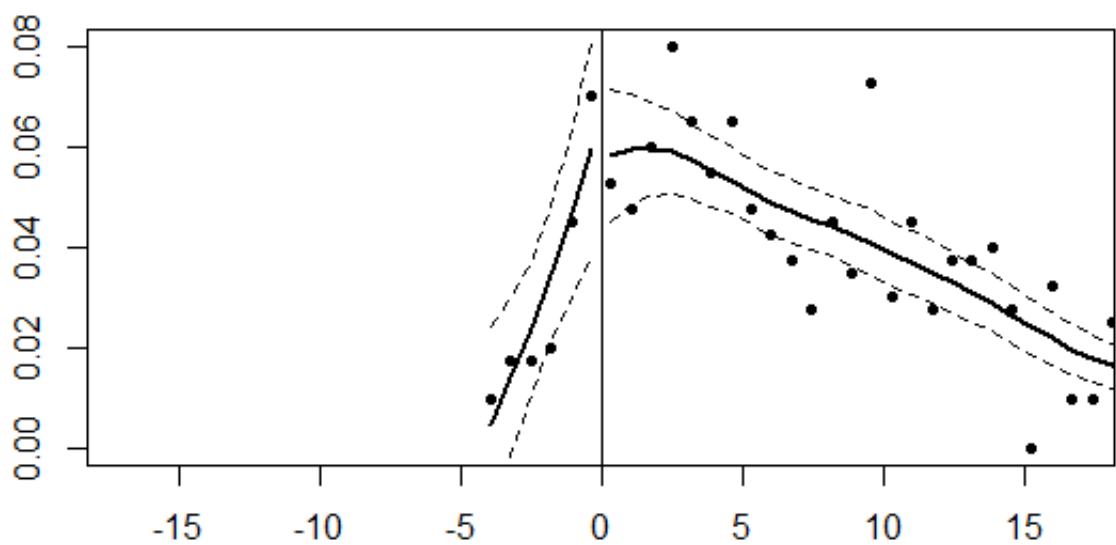


Figure B2: McCrery (2008)'s manipulation test

C Further tests

Variable	Populist parties' lagged ideology					
	1			2		
Polynomial order						
Bandwidth	$h^*=1.60$	$2h^*$	$3h^*$	$h^*=3.00$	$2h^*$	$3h^*$
LATE	-1.680 (1.478)	0.202 (1.341)	0.516 (1.212)	-2.369 (1.480)	-0.097 (1.430)	0.840 (1.388)
N_-/N_+	47/45	65/111	69/160	65/98	69/194	69/255

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses, clustered at the national election level. P-values: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table C1: The confounding role of populists' ideology

Variable	Δ Environment protection					
	1			2		
Polynomial order						
Bandwidth	$h^*=2.46$	$2h^*$	$3h^*$	$h^*=3.66$	$2h^*$	$3h^*$
LATE	0.024 (0.195)	-0.065 (0.121)	-0.068 (0.133)	-0.173 (0.233)	-0.105 (0.155)	-0.031 (0.142)
N_-/N_+	51/59	64/139	64/192	63/105	64/192	64/271

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses, clustered at the national election level. P-values: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table C2: Mainstream parties' positions on environmental protection

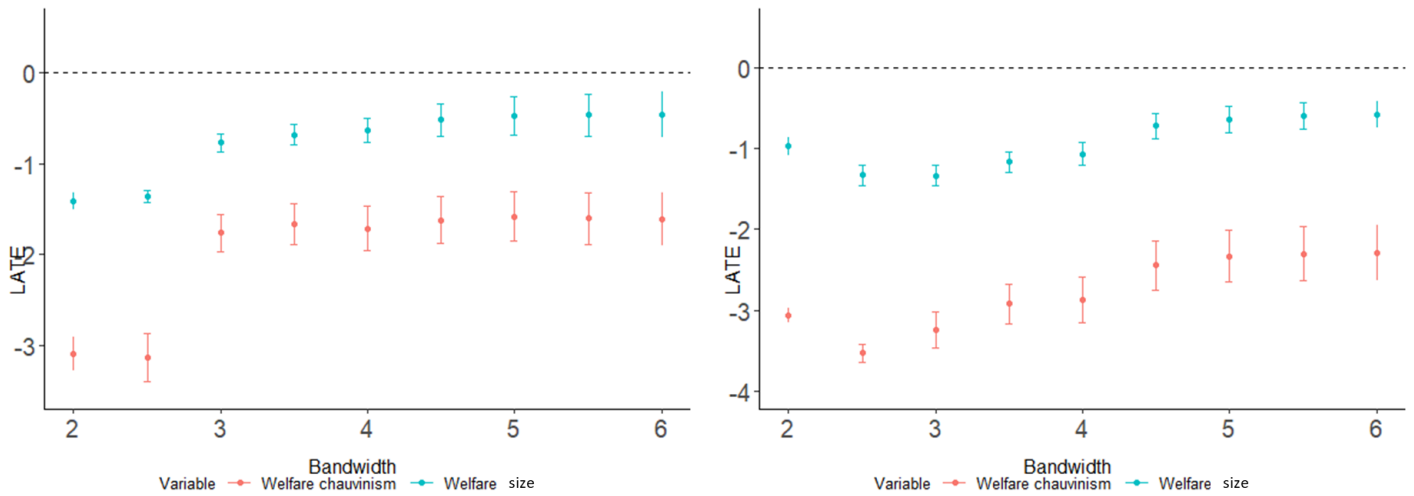
Estimation Country	Linear			Quadratic		
	Coef.	Std.Err	P-val	Coef.	Std.Err	P-val.
Austria	-1.18	0.34	0.00	-1.85	0.28	0.00
Bulgaria	-0.97	0.34	0.00	-1.93	0.26	0.00
Czech Republic	-1.84	0.28	0.00	-1.98	0.36	0.00
Denmark	-1.20	0.34	0.00	-1.73	0.36	0.00
Estonia	-1.21	0.33	0.00	-1.94	0.31	0.00
Finland	0.16	0.37	0.66	-0.48	0.31	0.13
France	-1.12	0.34	0.00	-1.88	0.32	0.00
Germany	-1.35	0.46	0.00	-2.27	0.53	0.00
Greece	-1.11	0.34	0.00	-1.90	0.30	0.00
Ireland	-1.76	0.14	0.00	-2.02	0.18	0.00
Italy	-0.54	0.49	0.28	-1.90	0.30	0.00
Latvia	-0.95	0.35	0.01	-1.90	0.30	0.00
Luxembourg	-1.16	0.34	0.00	-2.01	0.34	0.00
Netherlands	-0.86	0.32	0.01	1.53	0.26	0.00
Norway	-0.96	0.47	0.04	-5.75	1.74	0.00
Poland	-0.99	0.34	0.00	-1.87	0.30	0.00
Portugal	-1.06	0.34	0.00	-1.90	0.29	0.00
Romania	-1.15	0.34	0.00	-1.91	0.29	0.00
Slovakia	-1.11	0.34	0.00	-1.87	0.32	0.00
Slovenia	-1.08	0.34	0.00	-1.90	0.30	0.00
Spain	-1.10	0.34	0.00	-1.87	0.32	0.00
Sweden	-1.93	0.31	0.00	-2.80	0.25	0.00
Switzerland	-1.11	0.34	0.00	-1.90	0.30	0.00

Table C3: Jackknife analysis: Δ Welfare Size

Estimation Country	Linear			Quadratic		
	Coef.	Std.Err	P-val	Coef.	Std.Err.	P-val.
Austria	1.93	0.33	0.00	2.25	0.30	0.00
Bulgaria	1.94	0.33	0.00	2.23	0.31	0.00
Czech Republic	1.89	0.33	0.00	2.17	0.26	0.00
Denmark	1.90	0.32	0.00	2.15	0.33	0.00
Estonia	1.74	0.29	0.00	2.02	0.27	0.00
Finland	1.03	0.33	0.00	1.60	0.28	0.00
France	1.96	0.33	0.00	2.28	0.31	0.00
Germany	2.44	0.39	0.00	2.95	0.40	0.00
Greece	1.97	0.33	0.00	2.28	0.31	0.00
Ireland	2.19	0.22	0.00	2.47	0.24	0.00
Italy	1.96	0.34	0.00	2.25	0.33	0.00
Latvia	1.99	0.33	0.00	2.28	0.31	0.00
Luxembourg	1.96	0.33	0.00	2.28	0.32	0.00
Netherlands	1.81	0.33	0.00	2.22	0.32	0.00
Norway	2.11	0.43	0.00	2.45	0.41	0.00
Poland	1.97	0.33	0.00	2.27	0.31	0.00
Portugal	1.99	0.33	0.00	2.28	0.31	0.00
Romania	1.99	0.33	0.00	2.28	0.32	0.00
Slovakia	1.97	0.33	0.00	2.28	0.31	0.00
Slovenia	1.97	0.33	0.00	2.28	0.31	0.00
Spain	1.92	0.33	0.00	2.28	0.31	0.00
Sweden	2.17	0.36	0.00	2.78	0.33	0.00
Switzerland	2.11	0.34	0.00	2.28	0.31	0.00

Table C4: Jackknife analysis: Δ Welfare chauvinism

D Convergence/Divergence estimations: sensitivity



(a) Linear polynomial

(b) Quadratic polynomial

Figure D1: Bandwidth sensitivity for convergence/divergence measures

Variable	Welfare Size dist.		Welfare Chauvinism dist.	
	1	2	1	2
Polynomial order				
1) RDD features				
Alternative kernel: Epanechnikov	-0.550*** (0.080)	-0.657*** (0.089)	-3.020*** (0.084)	-2.806*** (0.195)
Alternative bandwidth selector: MSE-two	-0.732*** (0.329)	-1.130*** (0.086)	-3.121*** (0.067)	-3.901*** (0.208)

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses, clustered at the national election level. P-values: ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

Table D1: Sensitivity tests: positional convergence/divergence