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ARTICLE

Xs we share: Context similarity, culture, and the diffusion of populism

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Abstract

Do populist ideas travel across borders? Anecdotal evidence suggests as much, yet so far we lack a systematic assessment of whether diffusion takes place, and if so under which conditions. We argue that context similarity enables the diffusion of populism among parties as it eases the adaption of populist framing of perceived grievances into the local context. Using a dyadic approach, we analyze diffusion effects among 923 parties in 67 countries from 1970 to 2018. We find that similar levels of political and economic exclusion foster learning from and emulating other parties abroad. We also uncover conditional effects for learning from other parties facing similar levels of income inequality or public sector corruption that hinge on a cultural prescreening. Combined, our results have important implications for a better understanding of diffusion processes in general and the spread of populist ideas around the globe in particular.

Though not a new phenomenon, populism is now certainly a global phenomenon. Its conspicuous advance has led to a lively debate about the concept itself, but has above all resulted in a proliferation of studies that aim at explaining the success of populists. Typically, voter preferences are explored as reactions to unfavorable domestic political and socioeconomic developments, grievances that are subsumed under the broader categories of economic and cultural anxieties linked to structural processes (partially) triggered by international factors. Exposure to globalization in the form of trade and pressures from financial markets or the embeddedness in international organizations such as the European Union not only heightens economic insecurity but also exacerbates problems of democratic governance (Roberts, 2015, 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015; Taggart, 2000, 2004).

While causes of populism are thus placed within countries, discussions of international features such as import exposure combined with labeling populist voters as "globalization losers" acknowledge the importance of contingent factors and their impact on the subjectivity of perceived threats and grievances (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Kriesi, 2014; Milner, 2021). Indeed, the notion of structural processes providing a suitable context for populist responses chimes well with references to different waves of populism that swept European countries or the Latin American region (Gratius, 2007; von Beyme, 1988). Implying not only fertile but also common ground, such imagery conjures up the question of whether the diffusion of populism occurs. Anecdotal evidence suggests as much. For the European context, Rydgren (2005), for instance, argued that extreme right-wing populism is "contagious." The impact of the Latin American experience of Venezuela and Bolivia on the creation of the Spanish left-wing party Podemos is well-documented (de la Torre, 2017), as are the close ties between the leaders of Podemos and the Greek party SYRIZA (Iglesias Turrión, 2015). And while case studies typically allude to some form of diffusion (e.g., Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), we lack a systematic, comparative assessment of the

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"conditions [*sic*] under which party-policy diffusion effects are stronger or weaker" (Böhmelt et al., 2016, p. 407).

Previous studies on party policy diffusion narrowly focused on more apparent features like governing parties and linkages via party families or organizations inter alia. This way, they resembled the classical diffusion study by Ryan and Gross (1943) on the spread of hybrid seed corn among farmers in Iowa, and how interpersonal linkages and farmers' personal characteristics helped to explain temporal differences in the adoption. However, Ryan and Gross (1950) also reasoned that broader conditions (e.g., climate) impact the diffusion process. In this sense, the spread of seed corn is also a matter of certain prerequisites. The soil, for example, has to be fertile, or else nothing can grow. Given a minimum of soil fertility, adopting a seed from a farmer with similar soil composition increases the chances for a rich harvest; if the soil is too different, successful cultivation is unlikely and/or the farmer has to spend inordinate effort for its cultivation.

Expanding the scope of policy diffusion in line with these early considerations, we argue that contextual conditions matter and that parties apply the "availability heuristic" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) using the similarity of contexts as a cognitive shortcut to sort, filter, and weigh information when learning from or emulating populist actors elsewhere. That is, we contend that context similarity—the *Xs we share*, i.e., similarity with respect to unfavorable political and socioeconomic developments like corruption, income inequality, and economic or political exclusion—provide a "fertile ground" that may help cross-country and even cross-regional diffusion of the core populist narrative. The core elements of anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a Manichean worldview of this "master narrative" or "master frame" (Jenne et al., 2021; Rydgren, 2005) lend themselves well to diffusion; at the same time, the chameleon-like nature of populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2000) allows for a local interpretation of the psychological footprint left behind by broader structural processes. Put differently, a "fertile ground" has a dual effect: it helps to "grow" populism locally *and* eases the diffusion of populist ideas to similar places.

However, we expect that the effect of context similarity will be mediated by additional cues parties apply. First, depending on the framing of the key elements of "the people" and "the elite" in light of political and socioeconomic developments, subtypes such as right-wing or left-wing populism will emerge (cf. Hadiz & Chryssogelos, 2017). Sharing the same party family facilitates the adaption of a populist framing as it further reduces the costs of adapting insights gained from elsewhere. Second, we hypothesize that cultural proximity underscoring sociopolitical commonalities will ease the adaptation of populist narratives into the local context (cf. Düpont & Rachuj, 2022).

Analyzing 923 parties in 67 East and West European and North and Latin American countries (including Australia and New Zealand) from 1970 to 2018, we employ a dyadic approach to explore the diffusion of populism. This allows us to analyze not only the direct effects, that is, characteristics of the sender, the receiver plus their relationship (Gilardi & Füglister, 2008, p. 415); it also allows for simultaneously modeling the aggregate effect as a spatial lag (Neumayer & Plümper, 2010, p. 152), resembling the idea of a "critical mass facilitating learning," that captures the notion of a "Populist Zeitgeist" (Mudde, 2004). Indeed, our results for the spatial lags point to such a "Zeitgeist," that is, similar levels of economic and political exclusion ease learning from other parties abroad. Likewise, similar levels of income inequality or public sector corruption facilitate the diffusion of populism, albeit strongly mediated by the sending parties being in the same party family and coming from culturally similar countries. More importantly, the direct effects underscore the interplay of context similarity, party family, and culture, confirming that it is foremost the latter that helps to pre-frame grievances. In sum, our results indicate that assuming independence of party observations (or sole dependence on domestic conditions) neglects the importance the *Xs we share* (or context similarities) play for the diffusion of populist ideas and sheds light on the conditions shaping party policy diffusion in general.

In what follows, we link populism and the diffusion literature and outline how and why we expect populist ideas to diffuse. We proceed with our empirical approach for capturing domestic conditions and context similarity, lay out how we model diffusion, and discuss our results before concluding.

POPULISM AND DIFFUSION, OR: THE DIFFUSION OF POPULISM

Comparative analyses of party policy diffusion evolved from studies about "what moves parties?" (Adams, 2012). Although Kayser (2007) convincingly argued that party competition is no longer purely domestic, Böhmelt and colleagues were among the first to explore the influences of cross-border diffusion on party stances, showing that parties indeed respond to the left-right positions of (larger) governing parties abroad and adapt their own positions accordingly (Böhmelt et al., 2016, 2017; Ezrow et al., 2021). Similarly, Juhl and Williams (2022) find that parties consciously learn from successful members of their own party family in terms of saliency strategies. Likewise, sitting in the same faction of the European

Parliament eases the diffusion of ideas (Senninger et al., 2022). Beyond such evidence of "positive learning," Adams et al. (2022) identify a "foreign populist backlash effect" on parties' left-right positions. Particularly mainstream parties distance their left-right positions from those of populist incumbents abroad whereas populist governing parties still emulate other populist officeholders. Düpont and Rachuj (2022) move beyond left-right positions and take a dyadic approach to pinpoint who learns from whom. They show that shared attributes among parties, for example, being in the same transnational party organization or coming from the same "family of nations," serve as cognitive shortcuts facilitating the diffusion of party manifesto content as it reduces the costs of adapting insights gained from elsewhere. Together, these studies underscore that learning from or emulating are the main causal mechanisms through which policy diffusion occurs, that is, through which parties adapt ideas, rhetoric, or style from others, and that international factors create conditions which ease emulation.[1]

We posit that populist ideas diffuse in a very similar way. While diffusion is an unobservable process of communication (Rogers, 2003, p. 5), the observable outcome is affected by commonalities that ease or hinder the spread of ideas (Rogers, 2003, pp. 15–16). Hence, we posit that parties learn from or emulate other populists but apply heuristics to filter relevant information when they look across borders. Context similarities hereby function as cognitive shortcuts, as immediate, "visible cues" (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008, p. 214). Resembling "the ease with which relevant instances come to mind" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, p. 207), applying the "availability heuristic"—rather than considering all information—greatly reduces the costs for gaining insights and increases the likelihood of diffusion. Returning to our analogy: assessing whether the soil is similar (enough) before adopting a corn seed facilitates cultivation, that is, "the lower the effort expended to recognize and process information from other parties (elsewhere), the more likely a diffusion of ideas, rhetoric or style becomes" (Düpont & Rachuj, 2022, pp. 614–615).

Demand-side explanations for populism point toward broader underlying structural processes that provide such effort-reducing similarities. Trade and financial globalization and the integration into supranational organizations have dislocated individuals and intensified the perception of failures of political representation (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Kriesi, 2014; Roberts, 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015; Taggart, 2004). The impact of these changing political and socioeconomic circumstances manifests at the individual level as changing attitudes and social values, concerns about immigration, about high levels of corruption, or about the increase in inequality, and related to these concerns, feelings of relative deprivation, of status threat and loss, and declining levels of trust in political actors and institutions, among others (e.g., Doyle, 2011; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Gidron & Hall, 2020; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). The resulting populist appeal to the marginalized, ignored, and forgotten is as diverse as the highlighted factors and will necessarily take on different forms.

It is therefore not surprising that support for populist parties is as multifaceted as the political and socioeconomic environment in which these actors emerge. The subjectivity of perceived grievances fueling the emergence of populist parties seemingly escapes generalizations. Yet, as a malleable belief system that carries a distinct set of ideas about the political world and its actors, the core elements of populism lend themselves well to diffusion. Populism divides this world into "the elite" on the one side versus "the people" on the other, where the divide is fundamentally based on a moral distinction, resulting in a conflictive relationship, that is, politics understood as a moral struggle (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). To resonate, the discursive appeal to popular sovereignty centered on a moral framing of anti-elitism and people-centrism, articulating strong feelings of injustice, betrayal, and shared victimhood has to be adapted to the specific political and socioeconomic setting. Put differently, populists need to be capable of identifying such structural issues and constructing a convincing response to them (e.g., Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020; Hawkins et al., 2019; Moffitt, 2015): just like any other party, populists provide voters with an interpretation of political and socioeconomic events.

Hence, our main hypothesis is that context similarity regarding political and socioeconomic grievances, that is, the *Xs we share*, will be particularly relevant for diffusion as it facilitates the adaptation of the core populist narrative. References to the importance of a "fertile soil" or a suitable context for populist success abound, underscoring that populist actors will interpret these national conditions through a populist lens and provide a suitable framing of the antagonism of "the people" versus "the elite" in the given context (e.g., Jenne et al., 2021; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Roberts, 2019; Taggart, 2000, 2004; Urbinati, 2019). As "the meanings attached to these labels are continually reshaped in conjunction with new social conflicts" (Hadiz & Chryssogelos, 2017, p. 399), we expect that context similarity provides parties with an indication of the suitability and adaptability of the populist message into their local context; in short, we expect that

[1] For a more comprehensive discussion on mechanisms, see Wolkenstein et al. (2020).

> *Context similarity hypothesis*: Political parties respond to levels of populism of parties from countries with similar levels of political and socioeconomic grievances.

However, we assume that the impact of context similarity hinges on additional cues that political parties use to further filter and sort information and consider commonalities. On the one hand, parties will ease the burden of information processing by filtering out irrelevant instances. That is, even though right-wing and left-wing populism are responses to similar underlying deficiencies, ideology will pose limits on the adaptability of the respective populist messages. Given that the framing of socioeconomic grievances, of "the people" and "the elite" will correspond with ideological appeals (Hadiz & Chryssogelos, 2017), it is unlikely that the German right-wing AfD will take cues from left-wing parties such as the Greek SYRIZA, while it is more likely that they will do so from the Spanish right-wing Vox or the French FN.[2] Previous research indeed found that ideological like-mindedness facilitates party policy diffusion (Düpont & Rachuj, 2022; Juhl & Williams, 2022; Senninger et al., 2022), leading us to expect that

> *Party family hypothesis*: Political parties are more responsive to levels of populism of parties from the same ideological block from countries with similar levels of political and socioeconomic grievances.

Similarly, we assume that cultural proximity will mediate the impact of context similarity. Confined to established Western democracies, early research on party policy diffusion ignored cultural affinity as a dimension for adaptation. But commonalities ease diffusion, and indeed, earlier discussions of diffusion processes already included social values or culture (Katz et al., 1963). Reflecting Simmons and Elkins (2004) "learning from cultural reference groups," one may consider it unlikely that a party from Portugal (or, say, Mexico or Canada) would draw inspiration from Kyrgyzstan, even if some political or socioeconomic grievances ("the soil") were to be similar. Admittedly, "culture" appears vague but has gained significance as a concept (Rose, 2019) as well as for explaining the diffusion of public policies (Windzio et al., 2022). Accounting for Castles' (1998) idea of "families of nations," thereby adding variance to the seemingly homogeneous sample of Western democracies, Düpont and Rachuj (2022) detect stronger diffusion effects among parties whose countries share commonalities such as common history, linguistic affinity, and similarities of the political system. Culture may therefore be an important aspect driving the diffusion of populist narratives as they allude to shared understandings of grievances and victimhood that will facilitate a transfer from abroad into the local context. Accordingly, we expect that

> *Cultural proximity hypothesis*: Political parties are more responsive to levels of populism of parties from culturally similar countries with similar levels of political and socioeconomic grievances.

The processes of the domestic political environment and socioeconomic structural developments described in this section provide the backdrop for exploring the diffusion of populism. The next section elaborates on how we intend to take both sides of the same coin into account.

APPROACHING THE DIFFUSION OF POPULISM, EMPIRICALLY

We are not aiming at invoking a general theory able to explain the success of populist parties in different parts of the world nor are we suggesting that diffusion will take preeminence over domestic factors. But we argue that ignoring the spatial interdependence suggested by the broader underlying structural processes fueling (perceived) grievances amounts to "omitted-variable biases fostering overestimation of nonspatial unit-level (domestic, individual) and contextual (exogenous-external) effects" (Franzese & Hays, 2007, p. 156). Correspondingly, we contend that a "fertile ground" for populism has a dual effect: particular political and socioeconomic conditions suitable for framing perceived grievances "locally" in a populist way also help to spread the populist "master narrative" to similar places elsewhere. Here, we introduce our dependent variable thereby defining "what" diffuses. We then outline the data used to capture the domestic context and how this forms the basis for measuring "context similarity," the *Xs we share*. We finally recap our methodological approach.

Measuring populism

Even though it remains a contested concept, scholars have increasingly converged on a minimal definition of populism. Rooted in a discursive understanding, the ideational approach argues for a core that centers on anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a moralized, Manichean worldview. The resulting moral antagonism depicts the conspiring elite as self-serving, unresponsive, and corrupt, while the virtuous people tend to be glorified as the true representatives of

[2] Renamed in 2018 as *Rassemblement Nationale*.

democratic sovereignty (Hawkins et al., 2019; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). To measure the level of populism of political parties in election year *t*, we create an index rooted in the ideational approach applying new measures of populist rhetoric provided by V-Party (Lindberg et al., 2022). Our sample encompasses all parties that gained more than 5% of the vote share at a given election in 67 East and West European and North and Latin American countries from 1970 to 2018, except for closed autocracies (Lührmann et al., 2018). We capture the multidimensionality of the concept by using three survey items that measure the subcomponents of people-centrism, the salience of anti-elite rhetoric, and the moralized (Manichean) view of opponents.[3] As the three items are not fully substitutable (cf. Silva et al., 2019; see also Wuttke et al., 2020), we use the geometric mean for aggregation. This accounts for the compounded effect of the underlying dimensions, allowing for a smaller degree of compensation (OECD, 2008, pp. 112–116). For ease of presentation, we multiply the original items by 10 resulting in an index from 0 (not populist at all) to a maximum of 40.[4]

The left-hand pane of Figure 1 traces the development of nine parties across the three regions under study that are commonly associated with populism,[5] namely the FN in France, the Austrian FPÖ, Greece's SYRIZA, the PiS in Poland, Hungary's FIDESZ, the Peronists in Argentina, the Bolivian MAS, the PSUV in Venezuela,[6] and the Republican Party in the USA. The right-hand pane, on the other hand, depicts the regional development. Both panes show similar trends, namely an increase in populism over time. However, zooming in on individual parties' trajectory illustrates that the field is comprised of high-flyers and laggards—whereas the FN, the MAS, and PSUV maintain consistently high levels of populism, the FPÖ, the Peronists, and FIDESZ start their ascent far earlier than the Republicans, with PiS and SYRIZA on an upward trend since their establishment. More strikingly, in particular, from 2000 onwards, parties across regions appear to be on a path to (almost) convergence.

The regional aggregation illustrates these trends more markedly. Especially in Latin America, the increase of populism is driven by larger parties whereas we observe an uptick from the 2010s onwards on account of foremost smaller parties in Western countries. After a drop in the early 1990s, Eastern European countries follow a similar pattern, albeit at a higher level. These trends may have arisen by pure coincidence or due to "independent problem solving" (Holzinger & Knill, 2005, p. 786) because parties may have responded to domestic political and socioeconomic grievances in a similar manner. We argue, however, that part of this pattern is the result of party policy diffusion facilitated by context similarities, that is, the *Xs we share*.

Domestic conditions and the "fertile ground"

While our focus is on the diffusion of populism, it is important to point out that domestic politics of course matters. If "the soil is not fertile," populism will not "grow." Indeed, previous research on party policy diffusion highlights that domestic party competition still accounts for the lion's share of explanation (Böhmelt et al., 2016; Düpont & Rachuj, 2022).[7] Thus, domestic conditions have a twofold meaning in our analysis. Given their importance, we control for domestic conditions to avoid misestimating the impact of diffusion. At the same time, the *similarity* of any two countries in terms of their domestic conditions, that is, political and socioeconomic grievances, precisely describes the cognitive shortcuts and visible cues which facilitate fertilization easing the adaption of the populist narrative from elsewhere.

Concerning political and socioeconomic grievances well-suited to be framed in a populist way, thereby creating a fertile environment for populist parties "locally," we consider seven aspects that feature prominently in studies explaining the rise of populism from a mere domestic view point:

- (1) Distinct party platforms: Akin to the cartel-party hypothesis of colluding political elites (Katz & Mair, 1995), arguments about programmatic convergence and unresponsiveness of the political elite have been put forward to explain the rise of populism in Latin America (Mainwaring, 2006; Roberts,

[3] V-Party offers a predefined populism index based on people-centrism and anti-elite rhetoric only. Yet, the use of anti-elite discourse does not make an actor populist (Roberts, 2019) and has been shown to be a function of party ideology (Wiesehomeier, 2019). As the essential distinction between both antagonistic camps is based on morality (cf. Hawkins et al., 2019; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012, among others), we include whether parties use personal attacks against their political opponents and dehumanize or demonize them (see also Urbinati, 2019).

[4] In the supplemental information (SI; pp. 2–11), we describe each item and the resulting index, and cross-validate it, where possible, with extant data from different surveys. As none of these, however, matches V-Party's coverage of parties across space and time, it remains our first choice.

[5] Because V-Party asked experts to retrospectively code parties since the 1970s, issues such as recall bias may be a concern. We test for coder disagreement cross-sectionally and over time but do not find any systematic bias (see the SI, pp. 12–16).

[6] MVR before 2007.

[7] Evidence suggests that "success," particularly in the form of government participation, affects party policy diffusion (Adams et al., 2022; Böhmelt et al., 2016). Nevertheless, an excessive focus on success may underestimate populism's capacity to articulate subjectivities of perceived grievances, as populist content in public debate has become increasingly widespread in countries with more and less successful populist parties (Rooduijn, 2014). Still, in the SI (pp. 39–43), we report additional analyses with governing parties as senders corroborating our main conclusion.

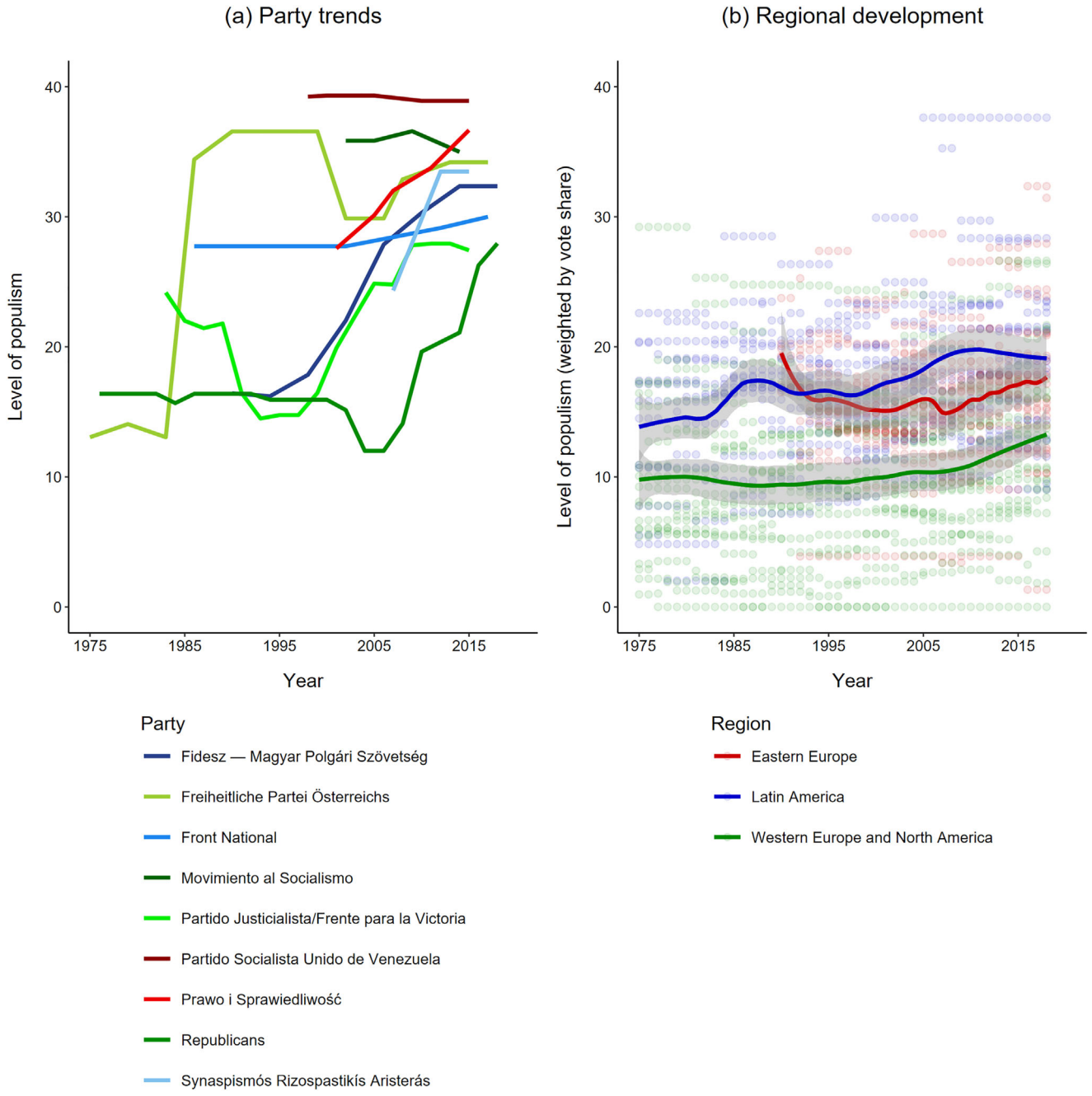

FIGURE 1 Levels of populism—a snapshot. *Notes*: The left pane shows the development of single parties. For the right pane, the party data are aggregated to the country-year level (dots) as a weighted mean using parties' vote shares. The lines represent smoothed conditional means at the regional level of the corresponding country-year observations over time with 95% confidence intervals (in gray).

2015) and advanced democracies (Bornschier, 2019; Kriesi, 2014). We use V-Dem's indicator for *Distinct party platforms* to capture the contingency of the configuration of the party system (Coppedge et al., 2020, p. 93), that is, the logic of ideological convergence and the corresponding space that has opened up for (new) contenders to exploit the perceived crisis of representation (Roberts, 2019).

- (2) Corruption: Populists typically denounce "the elite" as self-serving and corrupt, invoking strong sentiments such as betrayal. Although "corrupted" is thus often used figuratively, "actual" corruption is nevertheless the starkest manifestation of elite malfeasance. Indeed, in a number of countries populist sentiments among the public have been further fanned by corruption scandals involving mainstream parties (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser,

2017). We use V-Dem's measure of *Public sector corruption* capturing the extent to which public sector employees engage in corrupt activities (McMann et al., 2016).

- (3) Political and (4) Socioeconomic exclusion: As populists typically define "the elite" in terms of power (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), they will be able to create credible narratives addressing grievances of those that are excluded based on particular attributes or belonging to a specific group. We employ two indices from the V-Dem survey measuring the degree to which certain *Socio-economic groups* or specific *Political groups* are excluded from the public space resembling a society where large groups are denied access to resources, services, and governed spaces (Coppedge et al., 2020, pp. 276–278).
- (5) Inequality: Similarly, we consider the Gini index of *Income inequality* in equivalized household market income from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (Solt, 2020) to account for concerns about rising inequality.
- (6) Trade and (7) Financial globalization: Our set of variables depicting economic conditions tap into the arguments made about the impact of globalization, and the capability of these processes to create "winners and losers" with "losers" being more likely to vote for populist parties (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Milner, 2021). We use *Trade globalization* and *Financial globalization*, taken from KOF's de facto globalization indices (Gygli et al., 2018) to account for such forces.

Beyond these seven political and socioeconomic grievances, that is, the "fertile ground," we control for factors related to party characteristics and the broader national environment typically employed in studies on populist parties. We consider party organizational characteristics because populist parties tend to be leader-centric (van Kessel, 2013) and party leaders need to be effective at conveying the populist message and shaping public sentiment (Halikiopoulou, 2019; Rydgren, 2007). At the same time, Tavits (2013, p. 7) argued that party organizations that are rooted in society are more likely to be electorally successful. We therefore include two measures from V-Party capturing the *Organizational extensiveness* and the *Intraparty power concentration* of parties (Düpont et al., 2022). Drawing on insights that parties respond to their competitors' strategies at the last election (e.g., Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009), we account for the *Average lagged level of populism* of all competitors (excluding the focal party) at the previous election. Additionally, we control for a party's ideology using V-Party's *Economic left-right position*. In terms of economic conditions, we include *GDP growth*, as constructing a populist narrative during economic good times may be more difficult, while as a pocketbook issue, high levels of *Inflation* will impact citizens' daily lives in a very direct way. We also consider the level of economic development by including *GDP per capita*.[8] Finally, we control for *Regime type* (Lührmann et al., 2018) and time by including decade fixed effects. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables at the party-election year level.

Measuring "context similarity" and modeling diffusion

At its core, diffusion describes a simple process of communication between a sender and receiver being somehow connected (Rogers, 2003, p. 5). However, *modeling* diffusion is not trivial because the technical specification inherently bears the notion of the assumed causal mechanism, heuristics applied, and commonalities that ease or hinder the spread of an idea. For this reason, we follow Neumayer and Plümper's (2016) advice to be explicit regarding five assumptions that underlie modeling diffusion. First, however, we simply have to define "context similarity"—the *Xs we share*—which we operationalize as *the inverse absolute difference between the level of a political or socioeconomic grievance any two parties face at time point* t.

With such a measure of connectedness, we tap into the causal mechanism of learning and emulating (Assumption 1). Learning occurs through observation, interaction, and communication (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Gilardi, 2010). As "[l]earning takes place at least partially through analogy, and lessons are viewed as more relevant the extent to which a foreign case is viewed as analogous" (Simmons & Elkins, 2004, p. 175), context similarity eases adapting the populist narrative of "the people," "us," and "them" to the local context, particularly the more similar the contexts (our factors capturing the "fertile ground") are.

Further, we assume that parties apply heuristics to reduce their efforts by filtering and sorting cases which leads to heterogeneity in exposure (Assumption 2). For one, parties only look at the most recent information available since their last election (similar to Böhmelt et al., 2016; Düpont & Rachuj, 2022; Juhl & Williams, 2022), meaning that a differing number of instances will be available to the focal party at time point t to learn from. Most importantly, however, the sender being from the same party family serves as a binary filter (cf. Böhmelt et al., 2017).[9] Much like an

[8] GDP and inflation data have been log-transformed as they are heavily skewed due to hyperinflation or GDP collapse during economic crises in some countries during our period of observation.

[9] The resulting matrix W captures whether both parties belong to the same bloc of either left, center, or right parties (cf. Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009, p. 834; Böhmelt et al., 2016, p. 403), or not.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of domestic conditions.

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Source
Dependent variable					
Level of populism	13.778	8.958	0.000	40.000	V-Party
"Fertile ground"					
Distinct party platforms	1.764	0.998	−1.532	2.992	V-Dem
Public sector corruption	0.295	0.285	0.005	0.974	V-Dem
Socioeconomic exclusion	0.252	0.254	0.009	0.947	V-Dem
Political exclusion	0.190	0.227	0.010	0.978	V-Dem
Income inequality	46.259	5.684	21.933	63.333	SWIID
Financial globalization	58.220	21.316	4.249	99.226	KOF
Trade globalization	49.760	19.564	8.977	87.860	KOF
Controls					
Average lagged level competitors	12.231	7.775	0.000	39.322	Own calculations
Intraparty power concentration	−0.929	2.506	−5.790	7.130	V-Party
Organizational extensiveness	0.755	3.573	−9.136	9.721	V-Party
Economic left-right position	3.097	1.343	0.000	6.000	V-Party
ln(Inflation)	1.979	2.366	−10.600	17.625	V-Dem
ln(GDP growth)	−3.490	1.016	−16.381	2.270	V-Dem
ln(GDP per capita)	9.557	0.802	7.177	11.299	V-Dem

Note: Observations ($N = 3{,}370$) are parties at election years; except for the party level, all variables capturing grievances and economic conditions are 3-year moving averages including the focal election year. The monadic data serve as the base for constructing the dyadic dataset. *Source*: V-Party (Lindberg et al., 2022); V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2020); Standardized World Income Inequality Database (SWIID) (Solt, 2020), and Konjunkturforschungsstelle (KOF) Globalization Index (Gygli et al., 2018).

on-off switch, such a filter mirrors the assumption that some parties are entirely irrelevant to the receiving party (Neumayer & Plümper, 2016, p. 183).

To assess the remaining information at hand, context similarity determines the relative importance of the sender to the receiving party (Assumption 3). The more similar the political or socioeconomic grievances are, the higher the weight, that is, information gained from a sender in a similar context is considered more important. This reflects the ease with which to learn as increasing dissimilarity raises the costs of adapting the populist narrative to the local context.[10] Our dyadic approach to diffusion allows us to interact context similarity with the sending party's level of populism to uncover the direct impact and assess the role of commonalities. Additionally, this information can be aggregated to measure the impact of the weighted levels of populism of all (relevant) senders on the focal party. Such a spatial lag resembles the idea that a certain (populist) "Zeitgeist" bolsters diffusion.[11]

Connectivity can further have multiple dimensions (Assumption 4; Neumayer & Plümper, 2016, p. 187). Beyond context similarity, we include cultural similarity as a further dimension and weighted matrix W describing commonalities (cf. Düpont & Rachuj, 2022, p. 618). Data come from Besche-Truthe et al. (2020) who created a time-varying, dyadic network of cultural proximity taking characteristics such as dominant religion, language, gender relations, civil liberties, rule of law, and colonial influence, among others, into account.[12] Theoretically ranging from 0 to 10, if two countries do not share any of these commonalities (e.g., Spain and Albania have a value of zero in 2000), the sending parties become irrelevant for the recipient. The more two countries have in common (in 2000, Spain had a value of 3 with Greece, of 5 with Germany, and 6 with Italy), that is, the more culturally similar they are, the more important those parties for the receiver. We assume conditional dimensionality in that culture may serve as a "pre-frame" to any grievance (i.e., factors capturing the "fertile ground") which further eases the local adaptation of populist narratives from elsewhere.

Finally, we have to consider directionality of diffusion (Assumption 5). In line with previous analyses of party policy diffusion, we assume the spatial effects to

[10] Given the subjectivity of grievances, the decisive factor is not an "objectively" high level of an indicator such as corruption. Rather, context similarity is high if both parties either face similarly high levels of corruption *or* similarly low levels. Even in objectively low corruption environments, a populist narrative can successfully be built. Adapting a populist narrative from a country with quite a different level of, for instance, public sector corruption requires more effort; in short: it is the *similarity* that eases adaption.

[11] When generating the spatial lags, we abstain from row-standardizing the connectivity matrix assuming a party is more eager to emulate other parties abroad the more exposed it is (Neumayer & Plümper, 2012).

[12] We have no priors as to which aspect drives diffusion and therefore use an indicator that weighs these characteristics equally.

be unidirectional, that is, to be either consistently positive or consistently negative (Neumayer & Plümper, 2016, p. 189).

In short, when parties start looking across borders they are confronted with a vast amount of information. They might apply filters and weights to sort out relevant observations and disregard other information. Resembling the "availability heuristic" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), we expect that the more similar the contexts are—and bolstered by party family and cultural similarity—the easier it is for a party to translate and adapt the populist narrative from other parties abroad.

Method

Our point of departure is a monadic dataset describing the domestic context with parties during election years as a unit of observation. From this, we build a dataset of *pairs of parties* where each dyad represents the most recent information of a sending party j available to the focal, receiving party i at election time point t. Comprising 923 parties in 67 countries from 1970 to 2018, this results in 1,103,067 directed dyads.

A dyadic approach to diffusion is well-suited as it allows for both, analyzing the direct impact of sender parties on the receiver *and* modeling the aggregated impact. We can thus examine the role of commonalities (Gilardi & Füglister, 2008, p. 415) *and* the idea of a "critical mass of adopters fueling diffusion processes" (Neumayer & Plümper, 2010, p. 152). Consequently, our model specification to explain the level of populism of party i in election year t is as follows:

$$y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{it} + \rho \sum_j \left(W^1_{ijt} * W^2_{ijt} * \cdots * W^n_{ijt} \right) y_{jt} + \beta_2 \left(W^1_{ijt} * W^2_{ijt} * \cdots * W^n_{ijt} \right) y_{jt} + u + e.$$

Assuming that diffusion will not take preeminence over domestic factors, our models include a vector X_{it} of domestic variables encompassing political and socioeconomic grievances (the "fertile ground") and "controls" (see Domestic Conditions, or: the "fertile ground"). Next is the spatially lagged dependent variable capturing the aggregated impact of diffusion with the matrices W^1_{ijt} to W^n_{ijt} measuring context similarity, party family ties, and cultural similarity (see Measuring "Context Similarity" and Modeling Diffusion). For uncovering the direct effect, we add an interaction term of the sender level of populism y_{jt} with the spatial matrices W.[13] e is the error term, and u is the random effect because party stances have a hierarchical structure that requires some attention.

Observations are nested in parties which are nested in countries; at the same time, they are also nested in elections. Among the issues that arise out of this structure are contemporaneous or serial correlation, and unobserved heteroscedasticity across countries (Meyer, 2013, pp. 225–228). Still, multilevel analysis is suitable to account for some of them (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2012). Analyzing only established Western democracies, some studies suggest that unobserved election-specific factors are most important (e.g., Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009). Given our much broader scope, however, inspecting the intraclass correlation (cf. SI, p. 24) revealed that most parts of the total variance are attributable to differences between parties and countries and that overly complex nesting including a regional level was of no use. Following Meyer's (2013) suggestion, we therefore estimate three-level random-intercept regression models with parties as L2 and countries as L3. This also allows to include the two-party organizational indices that are rarely changing and partly resemble "quasi" party fixed effects. We still consider decade fixed effects to deal with temporal trends and shocks (Plümper & Neumayer, 2010) because parties may incidentally respond to certain circumstances in a similar manner. As a side effect, this also prevents overestimating the aggregated effect of diffusion as the spatial lags otherwise would capture temporal simultaneity (Franzese & Hays, 2007, p. 142).

With the data and method at hand, we are now able to assess our three hypotheses that context similarities ease the diffusion of populism, bolstered by party family ties and cultural similarity.

Xs WE SHARE AND THE CONDITIONAL DIFFUSION OF POPULISM

We posit that cross-border diffusion adds an important part for better understanding the emergence and spread of populism beyond mere domestic explanations. Yet, as pointed out, to account for the importance of domestic explanations, all our regression models include a vector of domestic-level conditions. Unsurprisingly, results (see the SI, pp. 29–48 for more detail) corroborate the common wisdom that grievances (e.g., exposure to globalization, corruption, or inequality) and party-level characteristics (e.g., intraparty power concentration) matter for explaining increases in populist content locally. Still, particular domestic conditions that provide a "fertile ground" locally for framing perceived grievances may also help in spreading the populist "master narrative," particularly when parties apply the "availability heuristic" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) using context similarity,

[13] In the SI (pp. 27–29), we additionally provide the results of spatial lag models based on the monadic data. While the results support our main conclusions, such models are ill suited to disentangle the interplay of context similarity, culture and party family ties—an advantage of the dyadic approach.

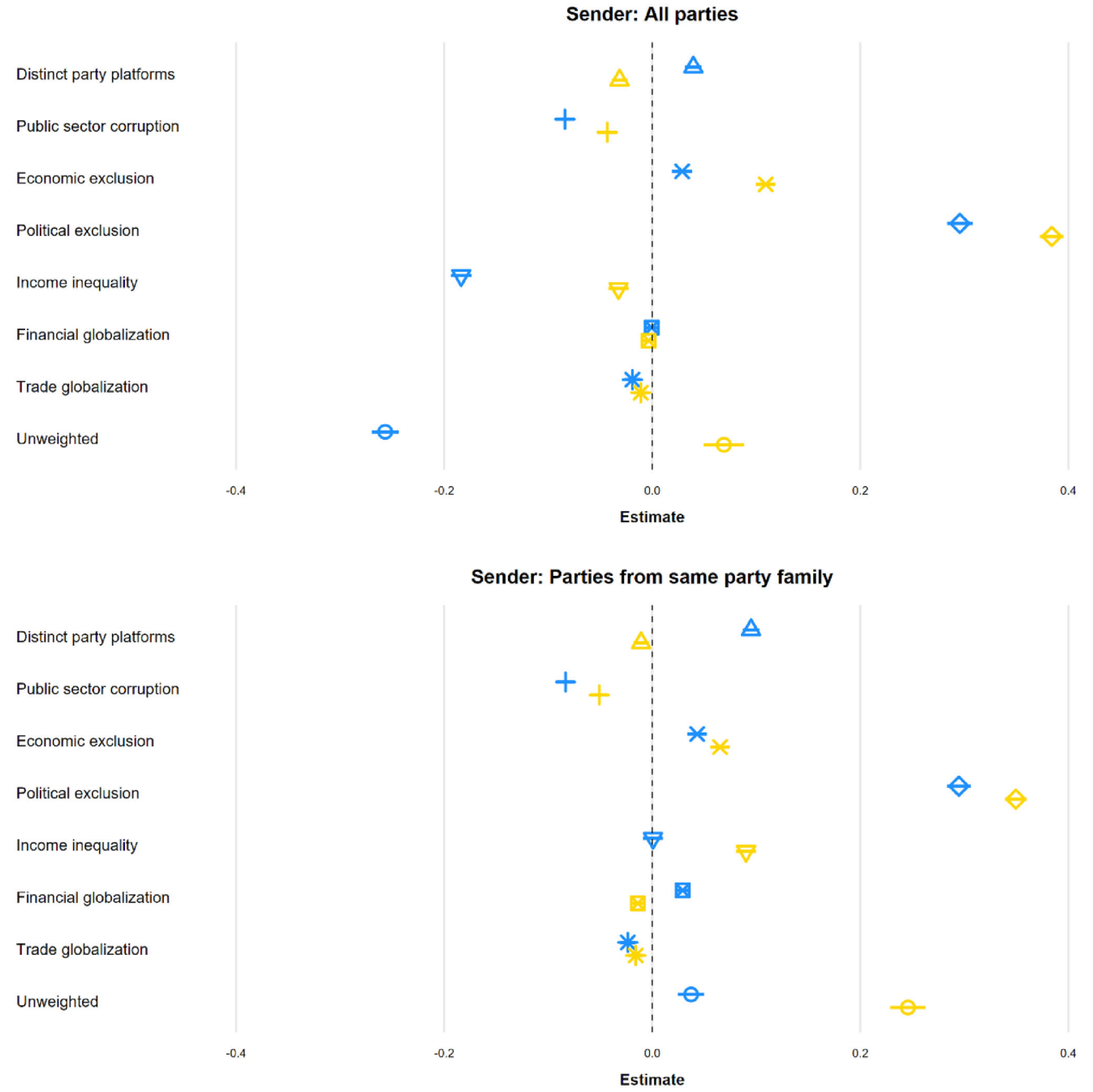

FIGURE 2 Effect of spatial lag variables on the level of populism. *Notes*: Coefficient plot with 99.9% confidence interval; point estimates are standardized regression coefficients from dyadic random intercepts models (L2: parties, L3: countries); the upper pane shows the effect if all parties are sender, or parties of the same party family, respectively, weighted by context similarity (focal row on the *x*-axis); spatial lags without culture in blue, including culture as additional weight in yellow.

the *Xs we share*, as a cognitive shortcut to sort, filter and weigh information when emulating populist actors elsewhere.

Figure 2 shows the aggregated impact of diffusion with the spatial lags capturing trends that can be considered a populist "Zeitgeist." We indeed find—in general—support for our *context similarity hypothesis*, that is, parties respond to levels of populism of parties from countries with similar levels of political and socioeconomic grievances.

The upper pane of Figure 2 shows the standardized coefficients of the spatial lags when receiving parties take all instances into account and weigh information solely using context similarity as a visible cue. The lower pane reflects our *party family hypothesis* assuming that parties apply an additional shortcut,

and further reduce their efforts by filtering based on common ideology. The blue and yellow coefficients, in turn, resemble our *cultural proximity hypothesis*; spatial lags in yellow include cultural similarity as a further dimension and weight by providing a "preframe" to any grievance which further eases diffusion and local adaptation.

Looking at the diffusion of populism from this "bird's eye perspective," a threefold pattern emerges: For one, while trade and financial globalization have been linked to grievances that create a fertile environment for populist parties domestically, sharing similar levels of these grievances does not make diffusion more likely.

Second, a similar level of political exclusion bolsters the diffusion of populist ideas—regardless of whether the sending parties are from the same party family, or not. Yet, as the spatial lags contain the sending parties' weighted levels of populism, its scale is hard to interpret. An increase can be due to an increase in the sending parties' levels of populism, due to an increase in context similarities, or both.[14] To gain insights into effect sizes, we can raise the spatial lag of all parties weighted by similarity in political exclusion from one standard deviation (SD) below to one above its mean (holding all other covariates constant): this increases the focal party's predicted level of populism by 0.73 points or by 0.82 when additionally weighted by culture. As expected, the impact of diffusion is weaker than that of factors fostering populism from a purely domestic point of view. For example, raising *Intraparty power concentration* or *Trade globalization* from one SD below to one SD above their mean helps to "grow" populism locally by increasing a party's level of populism by 1.71 and 1.27 points, respectively. Our results thus confirm the preeminence of domestic conditions; nevertheless, they underscore that diffusion adds an important part to understanding the spread of ideas among parties—and populism in particular. We find a similar effect for economic exclusion, albeit less pronounced. Generally speaking, a populist framing around excluded groups appears well-suited for adapting such narratives to easily feed them into one's own "local" version.

As a third pattern, our analysis reveals some noteworthy effects: For one, the spatial lags including cultural similarity point toward stronger diffusion effects supporting our *cultural proximity hypothesis*. This is in line with Düpont and Rachuj's reasoning that learning from cultural reference groups (cf. Simmons & Elkins, 2004) "play[s] a particular role in party policy diffusion" (Düpont & Rachuj, 2022, p. 618). Moreover, the spatial lags of context similarity regarding distinct party platforms, public sector corruption, and income inequality appear to be heavily conditional and are—surprisingly—negative at times. Negative spatial lags are not unusual, though seldom reported because they typically run counter to expectations (Kao & Bera, 2016).[15] Here, larger values of the aggregated effect indicate that the focal party is exposed to more populist narratives from more similar contexts but responds to these stimuli by dampening its own populist appeal, implying negative learning, that is, learning "what not to do." While these effects warrant future research, a possible explanation may be that public sector corruption entails specific elites, even involving (governing) populist parties themselves, and parties rather avoid becoming "copycats." Income inequality similarly may involve some sort of "blame game" tied to distribution issues which, in turn, are heavily linked to ideology (Bobbio, 1996). This may explain why parties are positively affected by parties that are ideologically like-minded and culturally similar whereas the effect turns negative when all parties are considered including those from ideologically opposite camps.

Evidently, the most interesting result is that party family, culture, and context similarity regarding grievances seem to interact, bolstering the diffusion of populism. Due to the nature of spatial lags to aggregate all (weighted) inputs a party receives, they are less suited to uncover which role each one has, though. Implying a slight shift of focus to commonalities, we now put the direct "connection" of two parties into the spotlight as this allows for uncovering the mediating effect by interacting the sending party's level of populism with context similarity, culture, and party family ties.

Figure 3 plots the marginal effect (ME) of the sending party's level of populism on the linear prediction of the receiving party's level at time *t*. The lines visualize how the slope of the sender level changes as a function of grievance and cultural similarity and party family ties (cf. Mitchell, 2012, p. 162). Given that we are dealing with three metric and one factor variable which makes plotting all effects nearly impossible, we present four idealized scenarios.[16] The scenarios are as follows:

- The sending party is *not* from the same party family, and context similarity is low.
- The sending party is *not* from the same party family, but context similarity is high.
- The sending party is from the same party family, but context similarity is low.

[14] Additionally, the estimated coefficient of a not row-standardized connectivity variable cannot be interpreted as the effect of a one-unit change of the sending parties' level of populism (cf. Plümper & Neumayer, 2010).

[15] But see Adams et al. (2022) for a negative effect of populists in government abroad on parties' left-right positions.

[16] The models follow the logic of combining a "continuous by continuous by continuous interaction" (cf. Mitchell, 2012, chap. 6) with a "pooled-sample estimation" (cf. Kam & Franzese, 2007, chap. 5).

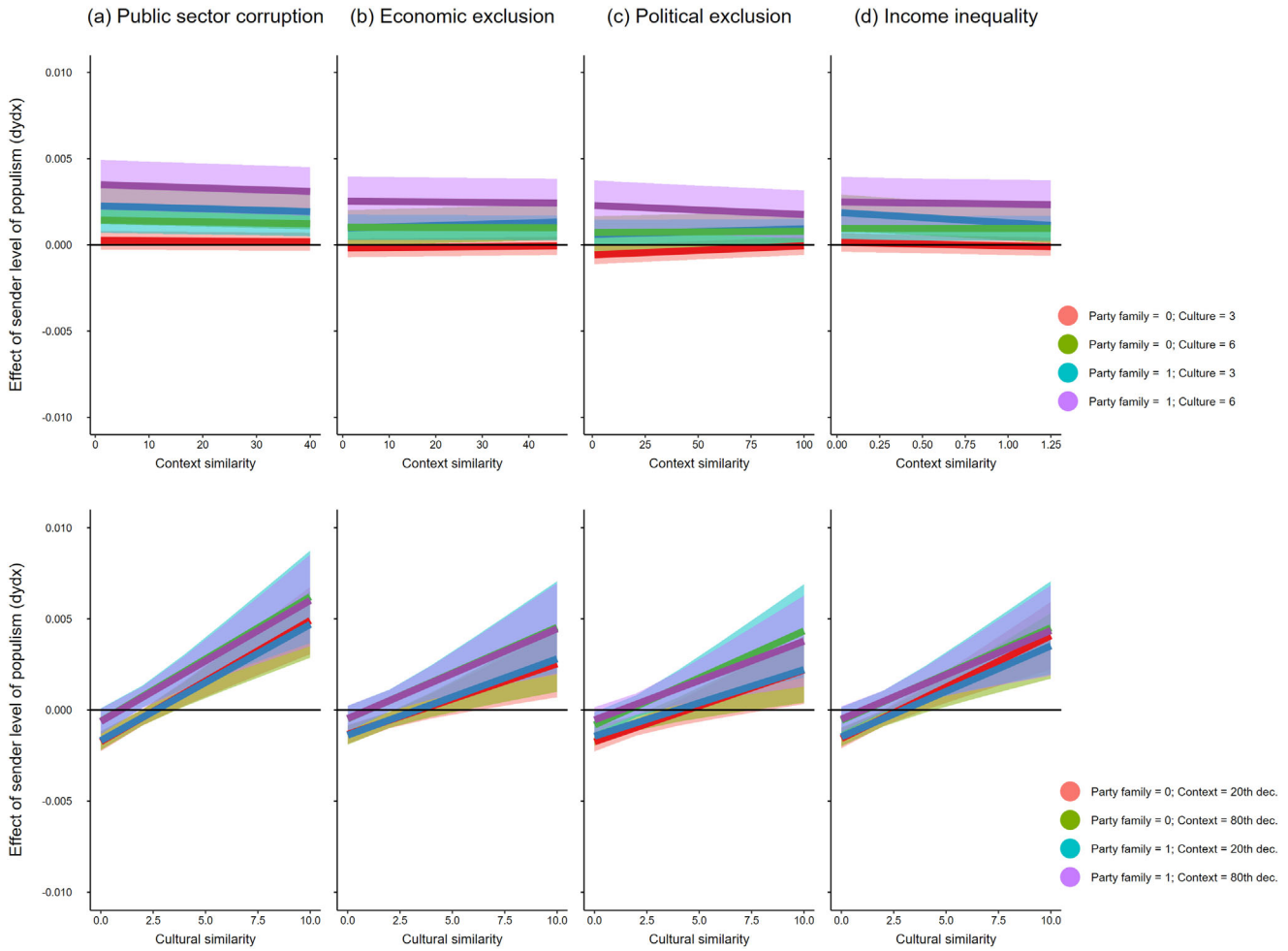

FIGURE 3 Interactive effect of party family, grievance, and cultural similarity. *Notes*: Average marginal effect plots with 95% confidence intervals over levels of the conditioning variable from minimum to 90th percentile; effect of level of populism of the sending party on the linear prediction obtained from dyadic random intercepts models (L2: parties, L3: countries).

- The sending party is from the same party family, and context similarity is high.

In the upper row of the figure, we fix cultural similarity at typical values, that is, 3 and 6 (80th and 95th percentile, respectively) which mirrors the cultural similarity of for example, Spain to Greece and Italy, and let context similarity regarding public sector corruption, socioeconomic and political exclusion, and income inequality vary for each of the four cases. In the bottom row, we change the perspective and set context similarity of those grievances to representative values, that is, the 20th (low) and 80th percentile (high), and let cultural similarity vary.

Figure 3 supports both our *party family* and *cultural proximity hypothesis*. Because in a "linear regression model, the ME equals the relevant slope coefficient" (Cameron & Trivedi, 2009, p. 333), one particular point on a line can be interpreted as the regression coefficient of the sender level for the given conditions. In the top row, we see an expected ordering, that is, there is a statistically significant positive effect the stronger the commonalities, whereas the sender's impact vanishes if both do not share party family ties and cultural similarity is low. As the sender level's slope remains quite constant over levels of context similarity this supports the notion that party family and cultural similarity can act as a "pre-frame," which makes it easier to adapt the populist narrative surrounding the respective grievance. This becomes even more evident when looking at the bottom row. The two scenarios where grievance similarity is high overlap, regardless of shared party bloc membership, that is, a high similarity has a similar impact as belonging to the same party family. Most striking, however, is the effect of the "cultural lens." Coming from culturally very dissimilar countries renders the diffusion effect statistically insignificant. With increasing cultural similarity, the effects reach statistical significance at values of ≈ 3 when they also share a high level of context similarity, but later if the context is dissimilar. Put differently, ideological like-mindedness and shared grievances

can work in parallel—but it is cultural similarity that has the strongest effect in boosting the diffusion of populism.

While ME plots are well-suited for visualizing the interplay and how the slope changes over levels of the conditioning variables, predicted values are often easier to grasp. We assume an "average" receiver party[17] and a sender party with a populism score of 34 which is roughly the level Fidesz, the FPÖ, SYRIZA, or MAS had around 2014 (see Figure 1). Under *ceteris paribus* conditions, the predicted level of populism of the receiver is 14.50 if they do not share the same party family, cultural similarity is rather low, and similarity regarding economic exclusion is also low. For a receiving party with high grievance similarity, the predicted level hardly changes (14.50), hence the flat line in the upper row of Figure 3. If high grievance similarity meets shared party family, the predicted value is 14.54. The same value is predicted if both parties do not share ideological ground but grievance similarity and cultural similarity are high. Finally, if all favorable conditions are met, that is, high grievance *and* cultural similarity *plus* shared party family, the predicted level of populism of the receiver increases to 14.58.

This change seems small; yet, recall that we are merely looking at the direct effect one populist sender party alone would have on the receiving party's level of populism. And the more exposed a party is—in our sample, the average number of connections a party has per election is 327 (median 349)—the more eager it may be to learn from or emulate other parties abroad (Neumayer & Plümper, 2012). Admittedly, the effects would not simply add up due to the different weights of each sender; and the focal party certainly receives information that is contradictory, at times counteracting each other. This, however, brings us back to the spatial lags above because they precisely captured the aggregated diffusion effects.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we systematically explore the diffusion of populism arguing that context similarity serves as a cognitive shortcut that helps parties to sort and weigh the information from abroad, akin to applying the "availability heuristic" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Analyzing 923 parties in 67 countries from 1970 to 2018, our analysis finds systematic evidence for the diffusion of populist ideas among parties across borders. While our results confirm the preeminence of domestic-level explanations, they underscore that diffusion adds an important part to understanding populism as a global phenomenon. On the one hand, the results of the spatial lags, resembling the idea that a "critical mass fuels diffusion processes" (cf. Neumayer & Plümper, 2010, p. 152), highlight that not all domestic conditions matter for the diffusion of populism. On the other hand, the results of the direct effects, taking mediating factors into account, underscore that it is foremost cultural affinity that facilitates the adaption of populist content from elsewhere into one's own narrative.

Put differently, taking the *similarity* of the "soils" into account helps to shed light on the elements that ease the adaption of corn seed. In particular, our analysis reveals that some socioeconomic grievances such as trade and financial globalization, are important to "grow" populism "locally," but simply do not matter for the diffusion of populist ideas. A lack of representation and exclusion of socioeconomic and especially political groups, in turn, per se facilitate the adaptation of the core populist narrative, likely because it already provides demarcation lines between different groups, between "the people" versus "the elite," and between "us" and "them." Similar to Adams et al. (2022), we also find evidence for "negative learning," that is, parties rather downplay their populist appeal in response to other parties particularly when levels of public sector corruption and income inequality are similar, most likely to avoid being negatively associated by voters with bad policy outcomes when emulating other populists abroad. Noteworthy, almost all effects of context similarity regarding (perceived) grievances are more pronounced when being preframed trough a "cultural lens." Our results thus add to Düpont & Rachuj, 2022, p. 618) reasoning that "cultural spheres" may "play a particular role in party policy diffusion providing the right amount of effort reduction vs. wealth of information to still arrive at 'satisficing decisions'."

In addition, our results pave the way for future research in at least three directions: First, previous studies of party policy diffusion focused on characteristics of the sending parties but our results suggest that diffusion effects also depend on certain characteristics of the receiving party. While Düpont and Rachuj (2022) already shifted the focus to commonalities and receiver characteristics, future research on "heterogeneity in responsiveness" (Neumayer & Plümper, 2012) appears warranted, given that there seem to be instances of "negative learning" or bi-directional diffusion effects—as highlighted by our results on political corruption and income inequality.

Second, our study shows that commonalities beyond characteristics at the party level matter for diffusion. More specifically, the context and conditions under which parties operate affect the efforts required to emulate other parties abroad—a factor that has not been acknowledged in studies of party policy diffusion so far. This way, our quantitative "bird's eye view" can also inform future qualitative

[17] That is, all covariates set at their mean, factor variables at mode.

studies aiming to trace the causal mechanisms of learning or emulating (George & Bennett, 2005). Such studies could, for example, illuminate the in-depth processes of how parties obtain information, how they assess, weigh, and filter context similarity, and how this informs their decision which ultimately may lead to convergence, that is, the observable outcome of the diffusion process. Moreover, depending on what is assumed to diffuse, different context similarities come to mind, for example, environmental degradation when analyzing the diffusion of "green" ideas or unemployment rates when analyzing labor market policies. Once zooming in on the diffusion of specific ideas, aspects such as the similarity of preceding policies, desired policy outcomes, or institutions may gain importance. Consequently, the demarcation line to diffusion studies of public policies starts to vanish tying in with recent efforts of analyzing the "politics of policy diffusion" (Gilardi & Wasserfallen, 2019).

Finally, previous research focusing on (Western) European countries was largely able to sidestep cultural aspects. However, our results underscore that culture is an important part of the diffusion of ideas across borders, supporting the notion that Simmons and Elkins' (2004) "learning from cultural reference groups" also matters for explaining and understanding the diffusion of *party* policies. As "cultural proximity" entails a broader scope of sociopolitical commonalities, for example, affinity in language, dominant religion, colonial legacies, political rules, norms, and institutions (Besche-Truthe et al., 2020), culture seems to serve as an underlying "common ground" that particularly eases diffusion because it reduces the efforts for adapting insights from abroad. The applied measure of cultural similarity weighs different aspects equally, but we suggest that prospective studies may gain from and be enriched by dissecting cultural aspects in greater depth. One may wonder, for example, whether affinity in language is more important than common history or sociopolitical aspects. This, however, will require different data, further methods, and much more in-depth theorizing about culture and the interplay with further *Xs we share* beyond our analysis here.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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