



Populism and academic freedom

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Abstract

Academic freedom empowers scholars to influence public discourse and debate, cultivate critical reasoning, discuss ideas that challenge traditional values, and impose a *soft* check and balance on governments. For those reasons, governments have specific preferences regarding the extent of academic freedom, especially when led by populists, whose ideology, values, and strategic features are frequently at odds with the implications of this freedom. Using a quasi-experimental design, we confirm that academic freedom declines significantly under populist governments, a pattern largely independent of their host ideology. Those negative consequences increase after multiple populist terms, and extend more broadly to the substance of speech and the flow of information. Altogether, these results highlight the incompatibility of populism with democratic guarantees.

Keywords Populism · Academic freedom · IV · Weather · Democracy

JEL Classification H11 · I23

1 Introduction

We can think of academic freedom as a normative ideal that protects scholars from external pressure. As such, it constitutes a necessary condition for knowledge seeking by credentialed academics who, at the same time, oversee their peers' work, methods, and ethical practices. In this context, the quality of speech matters, trumping the absolute right to express one's ideas and opinions, which we recognize as an implicit guarantee of freedom of speech. As a result, we can define academic freedom as a fundamental principle that enables universities and research institutions to disseminate knowledge and foster innovation, train the next generation of citizens to critically judge different issues regardless of their emotional and ideological valence, and oversee the work of politicians, policy-makers, and more broadly, the functioning of democratic institutions.

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The influence of scholars and universities in society, and their sway in the political process, has always made academic freedom the target of attacks by politicians and other special interests. However, these attacks seem to have increased in recent years, coinciding with a global trend of democratic backsliding, and, in particular, the success of populists at the polls. Notable examples include the pause on federal funding to Harvard University in 2025, and similar threats to Columbia University, Brown, and the University of Pennsylvania; the long battle between Viktor Orbán's Hungary and CEU, which ultimately led the latter to relocate its campus to Vienna; the purge by Erdogan's Turkey on academia after a failed coup in 2016, which included the direct nomination of rectors and the cancellation of degrees; or the attempts of indoctrination of the curriculum by the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland during their eight years in power.

We argue that academic freedom constitutes a target for populists for several reasons. First, by definition, academic freedom establishes scientific communities as exclusionary groups, which populists seek to portray as "elites" removed from the "people". Those communities are frequently viewed as the birthplace and melting pot of movements and ideas that challenge traditional values, culture, and national identity, often antagonistic to the nativism of populists on the right, and more socially conservative populists on the left (e.g., Smer in Slovakia). Second, universities and academics impose a *soft* check and balance on political processes as well as a government's actions and policies. Academic freedom empowers researchers to analyze and report facts that are potentially unfavorable to a populist leader or party, influencing public discourse and support for the government. Finally, universities seek to cultivate critical reasoning, which is essential to inform and discipline knowledge, judge facts, and assess information. The latter points are especially relevant since indoctrination of the curriculum can help a government to establish a solid base of support, and a grip over what constitutes "knowledge" and "truth", while limiting the adoption of more liberal views in society (Apfeld et al. 2023).

However, the interaction between political processes, institutions, and political decision-makers, on the one hand, and academic freedom on the other, remains relatively understudied. In one direction, we know that democratization, the existence of bicameral legislatures, more ideologically diverse executives, judicial accountability, and economic growth do all positively impact academic freedom (Berggren and Bjørnskov 2022, 2024; Lott 2024). More recently, at the time of this study, Hernández-Huerta and Inclán (2025) has also noted the correlation between populist leaders and changes in academic freedom, focusing on the case of CIDE in Mexico. In the other direction, Kratou and Laakso (2022) highlights the role of academic freedom on democracy and institutional resilience in Africa.

This paper contributes to this discussion by examining the effects of populist tenures in Europe on *de facto* academic freedom. As our base premise, we note that political decision-makers, such as governments, have specific preferences regarding how much academic freedom there should be, considering their ideological positioning and/or their potential interest, for example, in avoiding criticism for their policies and performance. However, because academic freedom enables universities and academics to impose a *soft* check and balance on the government and political processes more generally, and promote ideas and values potentially in conflict with given ideologies, the result is the potential revision by political decision-makers of their preferences over the desirable extent of academic freedom in society. This circularity, as well as the numerous potential other factors affecting both academic freedom and the electoral prospects of a populist party, poses challenges to the

identification of a true effect. To bypass that issue, we adopt an instrumental variables (IV) design, where we identify the probability of a populist party forming and leading a government using the weather conditions observed on an election day.

As a result, we confirm the belief that academic freedom is mostly incompatible with populism. During populist governments, academic freedom declines, on average, by 2.3 index points, which is close to one-fifth of a standard deviation. The pattern is mostly independent of populists' host ideology, even if it appears to be more pronounced with radical-right populist governments. The decline in academic freedom increases when populists remain in office for multiple terms, which is consistent with some of the examples of interference by populist governments in academia in the USA, Hungary, or Poland. Those effects extend more broadly across the substance of speech and the flow of information, as measured by expert assessments on freedom of expression and media freedom. Altogether, these results highlight the incompatibility of populism with guarantees of a democratic system.

As such, this work adds to our understanding of the interaction between political processes and decision-makers on the one hand, and societal actors capable of influencing public discourse on the other, of which universities and academics are prime examples. It also offers a framework for understanding how governments' actions, especially those led by populists, can potentially impact other political and socio-economic dimensions.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In Sect. 2, we describe a theoretical framework illustrating the channels guiding the interaction between academic freedom and populism. In Sects. 3 and 4, we introduce the data used in this paper and describe our empirical strategy. In Sect. 5, we present our results. We conclude this in Sect. 6 with an overview of our findings, a discussion on their possible relevance in other regions and political contexts, and a reflection on the role of the state on education and the future of academic freedom.

2 Theoretical framework

We propose a theoretical framework that aims to isolate the channels through which political decision-making and academic freedom interact. In the process, we highlight some of the main forces and other interests in play. This framework is summarized in Fig. 1, being partially based on the framework proposed in Berggren and Bjørnskov (2022). We discuss its main features and aspects below.

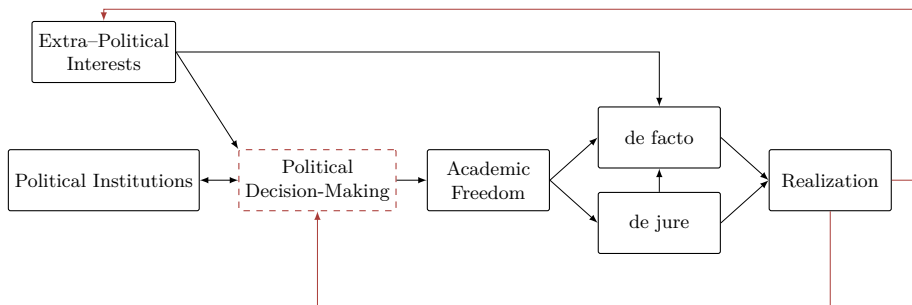


Fig. 1 Theoretical framework

Based on Acemoglu et al. (2005), we depart from the premise that political institutions endow political decision-makers with *de jure* political power, which enables them to exercise *de facto* political power (which they can use to either capture or strengthen existing political institutions). In this work, we focus exclusively on governments as our political decision-makers of interest, especially when led by populist parties. However, in a more general setting, other political actors may have agency and a possible interest in determining the level of academic freedom in a country.

Political decision-makers have preferences over how much academic freedom should exist based on their ideology and electoral promises (which can be, by default, opposed to academic freedom), governing program (for instance, to curb criticism over policies and reforms), the interests of lobbies and pressure groups (who may threaten to shift their support to a different candidate), and opinion polls (and thus, the chances of a party remaining in power). Political decision-makers help to establish *de jure* academic freedom (e.g., its recognition and terms as a legal right), which, in turn, together with the direct action of governments and extra-political actors (e.g., multinational corporations), shape the extent and characteristics of *de facto* academic freedom. However, as noted in Ginsburg (2022) and Spannagel (2025), even formal *de jure* recognition of academic freedom as a right (which remains relatively limited, present in only 52% of the constitutions worldwide) does not shield it from the actions and interference of such actors, mainly due to the existence of gray areas in the definitions and boundaries of this freedom, and the legal tools at their disposal to restrict it (what is known as autocratic legalism).

The willingness to redefine the boundaries and nature of academic freedom is fundamentally driven by universities' and scholars' roles in challenging traditional values, culture, and identity, and their ability to influence and guide public discourse and debate. While the former dimension is, primarily, driven by an ideological tension, the latter can be seen as the result of a *soft* check and balance on a government, which can affect their chances of reelection and the popularity of alternative political platforms, and, more generally, political decision-makers' actions, as well as other extra-political interests (e.g., large corporations or pressure groups), who can put pressure on a government by threatening to redirect their support and resources to an opposing party. We call it *soft* since it is not a formal institution, unlike, for example, the rule of law. At the same time, universities cultivate critical reasoning, teaching students to evaluate and assess information and facts, which enables them to judge a government's actions and policies, and further amplifies the role of academia in driving discourse and debate in society. We note, however, that governments and political decision-makers can also have incentives to protect academic freedom, since the promotion and defense of this type of democratic values can boost a government's credibility, and improve their chances of reelection (Spannagel 2025).

The possible tension between a government and academia can be further exacerbated when populists, especially those with more conservative positions, are in office. Populist parties and their leaders campaign on a thin ideology, primarily established on the separation of society into two antagonistic groups, the "elite" and the "people" (Mudde 2004). Anchored on such a Manichean construct of society, they attempt to portray the scientific community as part of the "elite", as a means of discrediting criticism and any negative assessment of their performance, which, in fact, extends more broadly to civil society and independent media as discussed in Prushankin and Kaltwasser (2024). This antagonism is particularly pronounced among more conservative and nationalist populists, due to the

conflict between their ideological positions and universities' openness to ideas and values that may challenge traditional norms, cultural values, and a narrow view of national identity.

At the same time, populist parties also distinguish themselves strategically. These parties and their leaders rely on democratic institutions to obtain power by mobilizing gradually larger numbers of followers who do not necessarily come from a homogeneous group, but who often form what populists broadly define as the “people” (Weyland 2001). However, once in office, those parties are frequently hostile to those institutions, especially those guaranteeing the rule of law and checks and balances, as discussed in Kyriacou and Trivin (2024) and Zhang (2024).

We note that governments have numerous tools and strategies at their disposal to constrain what is taught and researched, and thus, the direction of public debate and discourse. While populist governments, in particular, have recently used them more often than not, their effectiveness seems to increase with those governments' tenure in office and the erosion of other democratic institutions. One such tool is the selective allocation of public funding and the withholding of resources. In Mexico (Hernández-Huerta and Inclán 2025) and the US (Scott 2019; Meiners and Morriss 2025), threats to withhold or even effective cuts on public funding have been used to restrict or condition teaching and research, as well as management decisions by universities and other research institutes. A second tool takes the form of direct nominations of deans and professors and the dismissal of scholars, as in Turkey (Özkirimli 2017), the Czech Republic (Matthews 2019), or Poland (Radó and Mikola 2025), often to replace them with cronies loyal to the government or its leader. Another tool consists of the use of legal and selective laws against universities and scholars as a means of intimidation and pressure. The result is not only the restriction of academic freedom but also the deterioration of the rule of law. Notorious examples include the legal battle between Viktor Orbán's government and the CEU (Ignatieff 2024) or the charges of corruption and threat of imprisonment against researchers in Mexico by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) (Hernández-Huerta and Inclán 2025). It is also noted in Berggren and Bjørnskov (2022) and Ginsburg (2022) that such legal tools seem to be used more frequently against the social sciences. This aspect is not surprising, though, given that the topics researched in such areas often set governments, policy-makers, and special interests as objects of scrutiny.

In the remainder of the article, we empirically discuss the consequences of populist governments and leaders for academic freedom, focusing on the different channels and mechanisms in play.

3 Data

We assembled a dataset on populist tenures and academic freedom, along with several other political and socio-economic variables (described below), spanning the period from 1995 to 2024 for all members of the European Union, as well as Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and the UK. Below, we discuss the main characteristics of our variables of interest, focusing on the classification and evolution of populist governments as well as the definition of and trends on academic freedom.

3.1 Populism

We define populism as a thin ideology based on people-centrism, anti-elitism, and anti-pluralism as in Mudde (2004), frequently embodied by charismatic leaders, and a political strategy focused on popular mobilization and interaction with democratic institutions as noted in Weyland (2001). In that sense, positional differences are often blurred by the ambiguous nature of populism. However, right-wing populists are often characterized by their conservatism on social matters, focusing on traditional values, community, and law and order. Radical-right populists, in particular, accentuate their message primarily along nativist and authoritarian lines (Mudde 2007). On the left, populists focus on a country's socio-economic organization, and highlight economic inequality as the most obvious consequence of politicians and other "elites" ignoring "people's" interests. In some cases, those same parties can also hold socially conservative or even nationalist positions, such as Smer in Slovakia. Radicals on the left further integrate and explore socialist and internationalist features (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2011). Finally, some populist parties highlight a people-elite conflict through valence issues, such as corruption and political competence. They operate in an "hybrid" fashion by taking ownership of issues on each side of the spectrum depending on the context and circumstances (Zulianello 2026).

Unlike some recent papers, such as Funke et al. (2023) and Kyriacou and Trivin (2024), we classify political parties as populists using the PopuList project's list (Rooduijn et al. 2024). That list was assembled using an expert-informed qualitative comparative classification method to identify European populist parties since 1989. That database tracks parties over time, periodically adding or removing a party from the list, while further classifying parties on the radical left or right. We consider the information in the PopulisTree (Zulianello 2026) to identify which parties are defined as valence, and use the remaining parties' positioning in the left-to-right placement in the ParlGov to classify them as either left- or right-wing. We provide in Appendix A [Electronic Supplementary Material] a list of all populist parties and governments considered in our analysis, together with an analysis of the robustness of our conclusions when coding populist governments using more restrictive datasets, such as the PopulisTree and the list in Funke et al. (2023).

A few reasons justify our focus on Europe. First, European countries have a reasonably high level of institutional robustness and stock of academic freedom, which creates both a barrier for populists' actions and policies, but also an incentive for their erosion and capture. Second, there have been enough episodes of populism to test its impact on academic freedom. Finally, differences in the nature and characteristics of populism across the globe constitute a potential source of heterogeneity, making it harder to adequately distinguish the incentives and identify the channels through which populist governments impact academic freedom.¹

¹ The definition and characteristics of populism differ substantially depending on whether we consider the political scene in Europe, Latin America, or Asia. Populism in Europe is fundamentally exclusionary (and primarily nativist) and seeks to rule out certain groups (e.g., scholars, mainstream politicians, immigrants, among others) from particular domains in society. By contrast, populism in Latin America is often inclusionary (also known as ethnopopulism), advocating structural changes in society and the integration of different groups (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2011). Populism in Asia, despite some similarities with populism in Europe, is embodied by autocratic leaders, often established on religious and ethnic divisions and concerns over crime (Kenny 2018). In that sense, to minimize the heterogeneity in our sample, we prefer to focus only on Europe. Moreover, in several countries in those regions, democratic institutions have been historically weaker, making it more challenging to truly isolate the effect of populism on academic freedom.

Figure 2 depicts the evolution of populist tenures in our sample since 1995. We observe an increase in the share of populist-led governments since 2010 in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent euro crisis, peaking around 2015, a period that coincides with the height of the European migrant crisis. In particular, approximately 2/3 of the populist governments in our sample are led by right-wing or radical-right parties (see Table A5), whose conservative and nativist lines align with the backlash from such events. However, the trend in populist support and the emergence of such governments dates back as early as the 2000 s (for example, in Austria and Italy), driven by concerns over immigration, growing multiculturalism, and perceptions by large segments of society that successive governments have prioritized the interests of specific groups. Although the overall share of populist governments has reverted to the mean in recent years, the relative number of government coalitions integrating a populist party and the fraction of seats in national parliaments held by such parties have remained significant. More recently, in fact, we have observed a shift in populist success from countries where such parties peaked earlier, such as Bulgaria and Greece, to countries without a history of populism, such as Germany and Portugal, which accounts for, in part, the stability of the populist seat share in Europe.

3.2 Academic freedom

We measure *de facto* academic freedom using the index maintained by V-Dem.² This index results from a combination of five components: freedom of academic exchange and dissemi-

²We chose not to discuss the effects of populism on *de jure* academic freedom, which refers, for example, to whether academic freedom is recognized as a constitutional right. Changes in it are not common and fundamentally result from periods of democratization. A discussion on how populist tenures impact that dimension would require a much longer series of populist episodes and a different geographical focus.

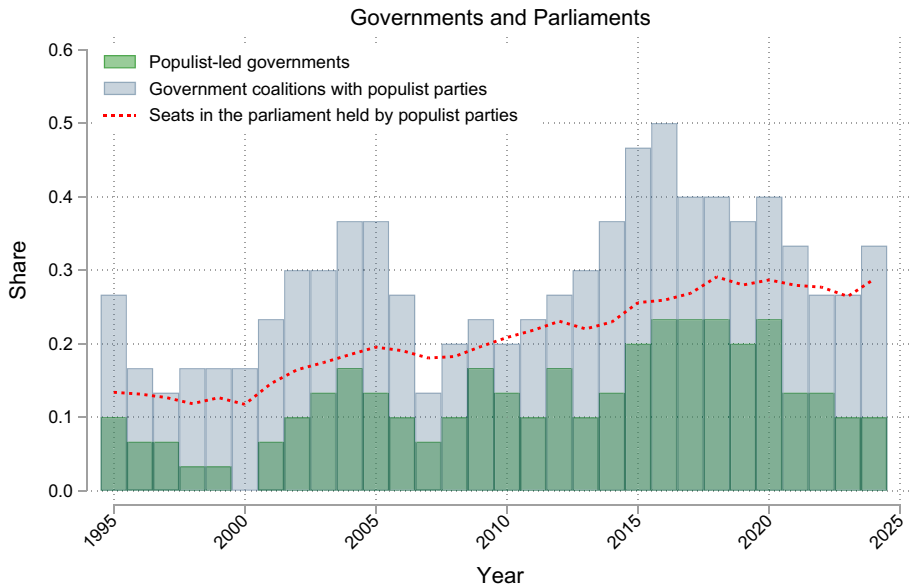


Fig. 2 Share of governments integrating populist parties as either junior or senior partners, and the average share of seats in a national parliament held by populist parties in Europe

nation, freedom to research and teach, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, and freedom of academic and cultural expression (Spannagel and Kinzelbach 2023). The definitions of each component are found in Appendix A [Electronic Supplementary Material]. Overall, they represent the effective realization of academic freedom along distinct dimensions, as recognized by the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. The index is coded by 2000 country-experts (i.e., typically, five experts per country-year observation), and the data is aggregated using a Bayesian Item Response Theory (IRT) measurement model, which assumes that the components are latent and inferred from experts' ratings established on an ordinal scale. The aggregation of expert responses weights contributions differently, especially when there are significant discrepancies between experts' judgments. For robustness, the V-Dem employs an overlapping coding system, which accounts for persistent biases or deviations across contexts. Assessments from country-year-specific coders are compared with those from "general" coders who provide expertise on several domains and multiple countries. Experts are also asked to code hypothetical scenarios before providing real inputs to detect potential systematic and non-systematic differences across them.³

As depicted in Fig. 3, the more pronounced surge of populist governments around 2010 coincides with a clear decline of academic freedom. More importantly, that drop appears to have accelerated in recent years. Several factors can account for this phenomenon. On the one hand, the effects of populism on institutional resilience are likely to increase with time in office. The longer a populist remains in office, the weaker some institutions become, and the more visible are the effects of any further capture (e.g., Viktor Orbán's dispute with CEU only reached a conclusion after several years marked by policies that gradually extended the government's control over academia). On the other hand, the threat of populism may provoke a reaction from moderate parties, resulting, for example, in an increase in a government's influence on higher education. Additionally, the political polarization brought forward by populists, their skepticism towards science, and their growing influence on campuses contribute to making academia less attractive to scholars, even when those parties are not in power.

³ However, as discussed in Lott and Spannagel (2025), some limitations should be acknowledged. On the one hand, there are conceptual constraints that come from this index's focus on academic freedom as a negative, rather than positive, freedom, and the absence of a direct student-perspective on its level (which is currently only indirectly captured). On the other hand, respondents' disagreement, which is more pronounced at mid-levels of academic freedom, contributes to measurement issues that can introduce uncertainty into the academic freedom variable. Despite these points, the quality of the data in the academic freedom index remains high. As discussed in Appendix C [Electronic Supplementary Material], our conclusions are qualitatively robust even when we restrict our sample to observations where the level of consensus between experts is high (i.e., the posterior standard deviation is low). The attenuation of the estimate seems to reflect the exclusion of observations marked by large declines in academic freedom (e.g., Hungary and Poland). Even though the baseline estimate appears to be driven by more contested observations, we note that the lower and upper bounds of uncertainty in those observations either remained stable (mostly in countries without populist governments) or trended downwards. Therefore, the nature of the disagreement appears to be, primarily, about the severity of the decline in academic freedom, and not necessarily whether the same took place.

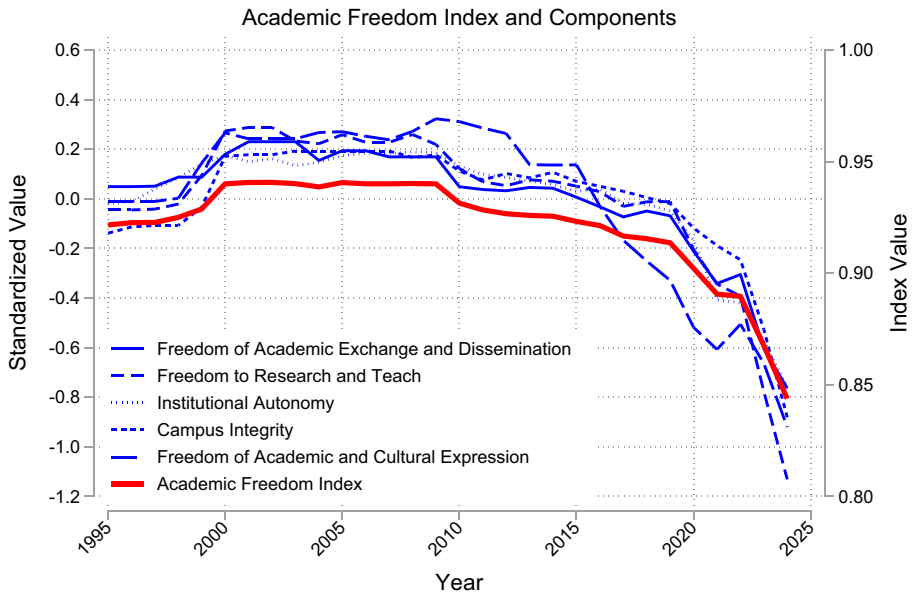


Fig. 3 Average Academic Freedom Index (index values) and its components (standardized values) in Europe

4 Empirical strategy

4.1 Baseline

In the baseline setting, we examine the impact of populist tenures on academic freedom using a dynamic two-way fixed effects (TWFE) model:

$$Y_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta_1 Y_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 X_{i,t} + \delta W_{i,t} + \lambda_i + \tau_t + e_{i,t} \quad (1)$$

where $Y_{i,t}$ represents the academic freedom index in the country i in the year t . To account for the persistent nature of academic freedom, we include its lag as an explanatory variable.⁴ Our variable of interest, $X_{i,t}$, takes the value of one when a populist party leads the government in a country i in year t , and zero otherwise. $W_{i,t}$ is a matrix of country-level control variables including the effective number of parties in the parliament, the average ideological

⁴ In estimating a dynamic TWFE model, we acknowledge the introduction of dynamic bias from the interaction between that lag and the error term. We note that the large number of periods in our data poses challenges to the estimation of a GMM system, since the number of instruments far exceeds the number of countries (and thus, clusters). However, the literature agrees that with relatively long panels, the bias and subsequent implications arising from that functional form are unlikely to be quantitatively concerning (Beck and Katz 2011). In the baseline setting, with $T = 30$ and $\rho = 0.938$, based on Nickell (1981) formula $(-(1 + \rho)/(T - 1))$, the bias is as high as approximately 6.6%. At the same time, as reported in Table C1, our results remain qualitatively the same when we estimate this same model by expressing academic freedom in first differences, while clustering the standard errors to account for the resulting moving average error, suggesting that the dynamic bias is unlikely to be driving our conclusions. In the same table, we note that the inclusion of additional lags of academic freedom leads to the absorption of a deterministic trend, preserving the qualitative nature of our results.

positioning on a left-to-right scale of the parties in the governing coalition, the existence of a majority in the parliament, whether a country i in year t was part of the European Union, the logarithm of the real GDP per capita, and the logarithm of the population size. Finally, λ_i and τ_t account for unobserved specific (fixed) country and year effects, while $e_{i,t}$ is an idiosyncratic error term.

In parallel, we examine the impact of populist tenures on each component of academic freedom, and check whether our results are restricted to the academic domain by accounting for broader effects on freedom of expression as well as media and press freedom. Based on the framework in Sect. 2, we would expect the effects on academic freedom to represent only one of multiple outcomes within a wider strategy to control the nature of information, and curb the potential sources of criticism over a government's actions and performance.

We distinguish the consequences of populist governments on academic freedom during the first and subsequent terms in power, and discuss whether there is evidence that post-populist governments re-establish academic freedom. We also discuss the potential heterogeneous nature of impacts on academic freedom by host ideology, and examine the boundaries of the effect of populism on academic freedom by considering the potential association between changes in academic freedom and the presence of populists as junior coalition partners and changes in seat share in the national parliament. The list of all variables, their definitions, and summary statistics can be found in Appendix A [Electronic Supplementary Material].

4.2 Identification strategy

We use the weather conditions on the day of the most recent general election as a means of identifying the election of a populist government and its subsequent tenure in office. We can think of several channels through which weather impacts an election outcome and government formation. While we are agnostic about the exact channel(s) activated in the process, two of them have been widely discussed in the literature.⁵ Potentially, the most well-known one relates to the effects of weather on turnout rates and its composition (Gomez et al. 2007; Damsbo-Svendsen and Hansen 2023). In such cases, bad weather either depresses turnout or/and change its composition, especially by reducing turnout among marginal voters (Fowler 2015). These voters are often described as economically insecure and dissatisfied with traditional politics and the establishment, aspects that feature prominently in the populist narrative. Therefore, changes in turnout composition in response to weather conditions would theoretically impact populist electoral success and subsequently forming government.

Another channel through which weather conditions can conceivably affect populist voting relates to its effect on mood and risk-taking. Experimental evidence from Bassi (2019)

⁵ Some reasons prevent us from employing an identification design based on either a DiD (Difference-in-Differences) or SCM (Synthetic Control Method). In both cases, a key obstacle comes from the assumption that the treatment does not contaminate the control group. In fact, we can see populism as being “contagious” across countries, both in terms of party positioning (e.g., it is plausible to assume that a moderate party in one country accounts for and reacts to populist success abroad), voter preferences (which may change in countries without populist governments when populists do well elsewhere in Europe), and subsequently, institutional outcomes. Moreover, especially on an SCM, there are other challenges related to the definition of plausible counterfactuals, similar in both observables and unobservables, as well as the existence of multiple sparse treatments on the same unit (country).

has noted that good weather significantly increases risk tolerance, which translates into a higher likelihood of voting for risky candidates, especially when voters are less informed about candidates' policies, or there is substantial policy ambiguity (e.g., the sort of ambiguity often offered by populists). Using municipal voting outcomes in Switzerland, Meier et al. (2019) also find that worse weather conditions decrease vote share for political change by inducing more conservative and risk-averse attitudes. They hypothesize that weather conditions could have also affected the outcomes of several other high-stakes votes. Panunzi et al. (2024) more explicitly link risk preferences to voting decisions, and find that risk tolerance positively correlates with populist support. Therefore, we can conceivably hypothesize that better weather conditions increase risk tolerance and mood, subsequently improving the electoral chances of a populist. These and other less prominent channels are discussed in Mellon (2025).

We propose an instrument that explores the salience of bad weather in a general election, considering the average temperature on that day, based on data from ERA5, which is maintained by the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF). We obtained the mean temperature on each election day e (and its average if an election was held on multiple days) in the main city or capital of each region r in a country i based on a NUTS II level of disaggregation.⁶ We weight the importance of weather conditions in each region on the electoral outcomes using the share of the national population residing in it in 2013, accounting for the significance of that region's electorate in an election (Table B2 includes the complete list of cities representing those regions).⁷ The resulting average temperature is obtained as

$$\text{Temp}_{i,e,t} = \sum_r \text{pop}_{i,r} \times \omega_{i,r,e,t}$$

where $\text{Temp}_{i,e,t}$ is the average temperature in a country i in the most recent general election e in the year t , while $\omega_{i,r,e,t}$ indicates the mean temperature in a region r in that same country and election, while $\text{pop}_{i,r}$ is the share of the population in a country i living in that region r in 2013. Figures B1 and B2 depict the distribution of average temperatures at the election and country levels. While we acknowledge that this approximation to country-wide weather conditions may introduce some noise (especially in countries with more regional weather variation), we note that this variable primarily seeks to capture the degree of exposure to specific temperatures by voters, making the exposure of more populated regions (which, in principle, represent a larger share of national voting) proportionally more heavily weighted.

We measure the discomfort and stress imposed by the weather conditions during an election by situating average temperatures within thermal stress bands corresponding to specific human physiological and behavioral responses to the thermal environment. We anchor these bands in the Universal Thermal Climate Index (UTCI), on which air temperature is

⁶ Except for the UK, where we use NUTS I due to data availability.

⁷ We do not have population data at this granular level (i.e., regional) before that year. As such, we implicitly assume that, despite demographic changes, the relative share of the national population across most regions in Europe has remained the same since 1990. Some examples support this assumption. For example, since 1999, the share of the population residing in the Paris and London regions has not changed much, going from 13.3 to 12.3% in the former, and 18.5 to 18.3% in the latter. In Berlin, the change was from 4.2 to 4.4% of the German population. In that sense, we believe that considering only population data from 2013 to establish weights does not significantly affect the precision of our instrument and, thus, our conclusions.

the dominant component (Jendritzky et al. 2012). This is a widely used biometeorological framework that maps meteorological conditions into equivalent temperature ranges marking human thermal stress. Under that classification, temperatures above and below the stress bands impose increasing levels of heat and cold stress, respectively. We acknowledge that acclimatization in different regions may lead to distinct strategies and forms of resistance to stress induced by high and low temperatures.⁸ However, the intuition behind thermal stress indices lies primarily in human physiology and its respective behavioral response, rather than tolerance and habit. As such, departures from zones of comfort still produce responses and influence behavior, for example, in the same way that low daylight affects mood in Nordic countries, despite it being common during long periods of the year. In Appendix B [Electronic Supplementary Material], we discuss some of the possible limitations of an analysis based on differences against historical averages as a way of reflecting acclimatization, and show in Table B7 that such instruments are not significant determinants of the probability of observing a populist government. In Table B8, we consider two alternative instruments with thermal stress bands adjusted based on whether a region has traditionally experienced particularly warm and cold seasons as to understand whether acclimatization attenuates thermal stress. We find that such instruments remain significant and robust determinants of populist governments, minimizing the concerns over the possible role played by acclimatization in our identification design. We note, nonetheless, that our approach does not necessarily invalidate (or is even incompatible with) the role of unexpected or relative weather shocks in shaping mood, risk tolerance, or turnout, and subsequently, voting outcomes. In fact, we could interpret and potentially justify the absence of an effect when considering differences against historical averages as the outcome of moderate weather variation, and thus, as a reflection of an insufficient number of unexpected shocks.

We define the salience of the stress induced by cold and hot temperatures as $\text{cold}_{i,e,t} = \max\{0, \text{Lower Bound} - \text{Temp}_{i,e,t}\}$ and $\text{hot}_{i,e,t} = \max\{0, \text{Temp}_{i,e,t} - \text{Upper Bound}\}$. Because thermal stress is more persistent and salient in certain seasons of the year, we allow for cold stress in elections held in the Autumn and Winter periods, and hot stress in the Spring and Summer periods. We standardize each variable and combine them into a single index of bad weather, defined as

$$\text{bad_weather}_{i,e,t} = \text{cold}_{i,e,t} + \text{hot}_{i,e,t}$$

Because the endogenous variable is determined by the outcome of the most recent general election in a year t , any factor that contributes to the election of a populist in that year also determines the probability of such a party holding office until the following general election. For that reason, the weather in an election is used as a determinant of a populist party holding office in periods $\bar{t} + 1$, $\bar{t} + 2$, and so forth.⁹

⁸We focus on average air temperature rather than the UTCI because, not only is it the dominant component in that index, but also because the index requires making assumptions about clothing, time, and activity. The result would lead to the introduction of some form of measurement error, which could weaken our instrument. Our approach, in this sense, allows us to construct a more transparent and less noisy metric for thermal stress.

⁹We have also considered as instruments other metrics, such as the average precipitation as well as different thresholds for rainfall. None of which was a significant determinant of the probability of observing a populist government in stage one (see Table B8).

We focus our analysis on a conservative core of the thermo-neutral range and define the interval 12°C - 23°C as the band of no/minimal thermal stress (the lower and upper bounds). This narrower band lies well inside the UTCI “no thermal stress” region, which avoids sensitivity to extreme heat and cold observations, and prevents placing undue leverage on extreme observations. However, for robustness, we also estimated IV models using instruments based on the no/minimal thermal stress bands as defined in the UTCI and on small variations of the upper and lower bounds, together with the cold and hot components separately. In these cases, the instruments remained significant determinants of observing a populist government (see Table B4).

4.3 Inference

In deciding the adequate estimation technique to recover the causal impact of a populist government on academic freedom, we need to consider two aspects. First, as we have noted above, our endogenous variable is binary, indicating whether a populist held office in a country i in a given year t . While a 2SLS is commonly employed in IV designs with such variables, its efficiency relies on the linear setting, in its first stage, adequately approximating the conditional expectation, which is an assumption that becomes harder to satisfy when the treatment is rare, as in our case, where only 12% of the observations indicate the existence of a populist government. The rarity of the treatment aggravates the concentration of out-of-range predictions (i.e., outside the 0-1 interval) and the potential misspecification of the conditional expectation function, penalizing efficiency by limiting how much variation in the endogenous populist variable can be attributed to the instrument (bad weather). A non-linear specification can better handle and represent this structure and the treatment assignment mechanism, improving the specification of the conditional mean, and thus, more efficiently using the variation provided by the instrument. Considering these aspects, without requiring strong joint distributional assumptions, we estimate, instead, the two-step IV method (Procedure 21.1) proposed in Wooldridge (2010). In the first step, we estimate the probability of observing a populist government on our instrument and exogenous controls using a probit model. In the second step, we include the fitted probabilities from the first step as an instrument in a 2SLS estimator. As discussed in Wooldridge (2010) and Xu (2021), this procedure generates a consistent and more efficient IV estimator. In Appendix B [Electronic Supplementary Material], we provide the estimates using a 2SLS, the two-step IV method, a control function with a non-linear stage one (Probit), and a conditional mixed process (CMP) combining a non-linear first-stage and a linear second-stage. The 2SLS produces substantially larger standard errors as a result of the issues noted above. However, the point estimates are consistent across these four different specifications. The effective F-statistics (Olea and Montiel, and Carolin Pflueger. 2013) suggest that the instrument strongly contributes to the identification of the populist treatment, while the significance of our estimates is robust when adjusting the t-ratios based on the first-stage F-statistic following the tF procedure in Lee et al. (2022) and further recommended in Lal et al. (2024). Finally, we also note, but reserve a more careful discussion for the next section, that the residual from the CF and the correlation between the error terms in the CMP are not significant, suggesting that our

populist treatment is not likely endogenous to academic freedom. The same conclusion is supported by the results of the Durbin-Wu-Hausman endogeneity test.¹⁰

Second, it is reasonable to assume that a populist party winning an election and holding office depends on unobserved heterogeneity, which is country-specific. For example, certain countries have specific cultural traits and a history that can contribute to or prevent the emergence of populists and their electoral success. In our case, including country dummies to account for such heterogeneity would introduce some incidental parameter bias and, in particular, the relative rarity of the treatment would contribute to perfect separation (prediction) of a large share of our observations, substantially reducing the sample size. For that reason, we estimate the reduced form for the populist variable by including the country averages of the exogenous controls (which correspond to a correlated random effects model established on a Mundlak device) following Wooldridge (2010) as

$$X_{i,t} = \theta + \pi_1 Y_{i,t-1} + \pi_2 Z_{i,t} + \zeta_1 W_{i,t} + \zeta_2 \bar{W}_i + \gamma \tau_t + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (2)$$

where $Z_{i,t}$ represents our instrument, and $\bar{W}_i$ is a matrix of panel-specific means of the exogenous variables. In step two, given the strength of bad weather as an instrument for a populist government, we estimate an IV (2SLS) using the fitted probabilities from the reduced form above as an instrument for a populist government together with the same set of controls.

The results in step one indicate that the instrument is a significant determinant of observing a populist party in office at 1% (see Table B3). The respective sign is negative and consistent with the expectation that worse weather conditions penalize a populist's chances of winning an election and forming government. As such, a one-standard-deviation increase in our bad weather index decreases the probability of observing a populist government by approximately 9 p.p. We also note in Table B6 and Figure B4 that the instrument does not predict pre-trends in academic freedom.

As falsification and robustness tests for our instrument, we conducted a permutation test by randomly reassigning weather shocks across elections and re-estimating the first stage. As depicted in Figure B4, the actual estimated coefficient of bad weather lies at the extreme tail of the placebo estimates' distribution. Therefore, the link between weather conditions and populist victories is unlikely to be an artifact of model structure or random chance. We have also considered several other placebos using weather conditions in non-election periods to identify a populist event (Table B5), further supporting the validity of our instrument.

¹⁰ In the next section, we take one step further and discuss the effects on academic freedom based on a populist's host ideology, and during post-populist governments. However, we note that our identification strategy does not adequately account for the election of a post-populist government, while academic freedom may have heterogeneous effects across host ideologies, thus requiring more than one instrument for identification. While we could use our instrument to identify a particular ideology in office, we would be falsely classifying other governments as non-populist, at the same time that a sub-sample analysis would introduce selection bias. Moreover, each of the sub-categories is rarer than our main variable of interest, making the identification more challenging, especially due to convergence and perfect prediction issues. For those reasons, our conclusions when discussing those results should be taken cautiously and primarily indicative of a degree of association between academic freedom and each of those dimensions, even if the consistency of the TWFE when populist tenures are pooled together offers some reassurance on their validity and our ability to capture the true consequences of populism.

5 Results

5.1 Populist governments

The results in Table 1 confirm the initial belief that populist executives hurt academic freedom. During their tenure, academic freedom decreases by almost one-fifth of a standard deviation, which is roughly equivalent to 2.3 index points. This result adds further evidence about the incompatibility of populism with different democratic guarantees, in line with the evidence in Kyriacou and Trivin (2024), Zhang (2024), and Gutmann and Rode (2025).

This result, more broadly, is consistent with the view that, in cases of democratic backsliding, governments and leaders may try to capture specific institutions in order to manage potential opposition and ensure societal cooperation aligned with their agenda and policies (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019). In this context, both academics and university students can be seen as the “potential opposition” to a populist leader. At the same time, as noted in Pelke (2023), academic freedom helps prevent democratic regression, since universities are frequently a breeding ground for protests, while scholars are some of the most vocal (and credible) actors who can denounce acts and episodes revealing the potential autocratization of the political system. For these reasons, it is not a surprise for universities and faculty to constitute reasonable targets of populist governments.

These negative effects span across the different dimensions of academic freedom (Fig. 4), which can be hampered in several ways. Some examples include, but are not limited to, the indoctrination of the curriculum, the revocation of accreditation of certain courses promoting ideas and principles opposed to “traditional values” and culture, the prosecution of students and dismissal of professors, the nomination or blockage of the appointment of professors and deans, restrictions on funding, or attempts to dictate teaching methods and the language of instruction. However, dimensions related to freedom to research and teach, and the dissemination of findings and ideas to both academic and non-academic audiences appear to be more severely impacted than others. These are dimensions where we are more likely to observe some tension between the nature and substance of academic scholarship and specific ideological values. These are also domains where the characteristics of certain research can more explicitly exert a *soft* check and balance on political processes, actions, and policies, and guide public debate and discourse in a particular, and potentially undesirable, direction.

The multidimensional impact of populist actions (i.e., their impact across one or more dimensions) helps explain not only the substantial overall decline in academic freedom,

Table 1 The effect of populist tenures on Academic Freedom

	TWFE	TWFE	IV
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Populist	−.184** (.078)	−.177** (.074)	−.180** (.087)
Country-level controls	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	870	870	840
Effective F-statistic	—	—	72.209
Durbin-Wu-Hausman (<i>p</i> -value)	—	—	.460

Clustered standard errors at the country level in parentheses. The dependent variable is standardized with a mean of zero and a standard deviation equal to one. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

especially since 2010, but also highlights the potential challenges that educational institutions face in order to resist governmental pressure. More broadly, these results expose the willingness, in general, of populist executives to control information and prevent criticism against their policies, actions, and conduct, attenuating efficacy of any *soft* check and balance on their actions and policies.¹¹

Our results also suggest that the TWFE estimates are consistent, and thus, that a populist party holding office does not seem to be driven by preexisting levels of academic freedom, while their subsequent tenure appears to depend on other factors. Altogether, the potential *soft* check and balance made possible by academic freedom does not seem to systematically shorten or extend a populist's stay in office. This result, however, masks some heterogeneity when we look at different forms of academic freedom. In particular, the TWFE attenuates the effects of populism on the freedom for scholars to disseminate academic findings and share research findings with non-academic audiences and the media (Freedom of Academic Exchange and Dissemination), and the extent of the infringements on campus integrity through political interference, intimidation, and surveillance (Campus Integrity). The latter primarily reflects a possible reaction to student demonstrations and public positions by

¹¹ Concrete examples at the country level can be found in the annual reports by the Parliament (2023, 2024, 2025), issues by the Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org>), and reports by the Scholars At Risk Network (2025). For a detailed discussion and historical overview on academic freedom and the influence of political decision-making on it, for example, check Scott (2019). For a discussion of the events in Hungary during Orban's tenure, check Ignatieff (2024). Finally, we note, as further reflection, that the number of cases involving legal action or the dismissal of professors and teachers is not indicative of the extent to which a government restricts academic freedom. In fact, we can reasonably assume that a small number of cases are sufficient to signal a government's intentions and enforce more widespread censorship.

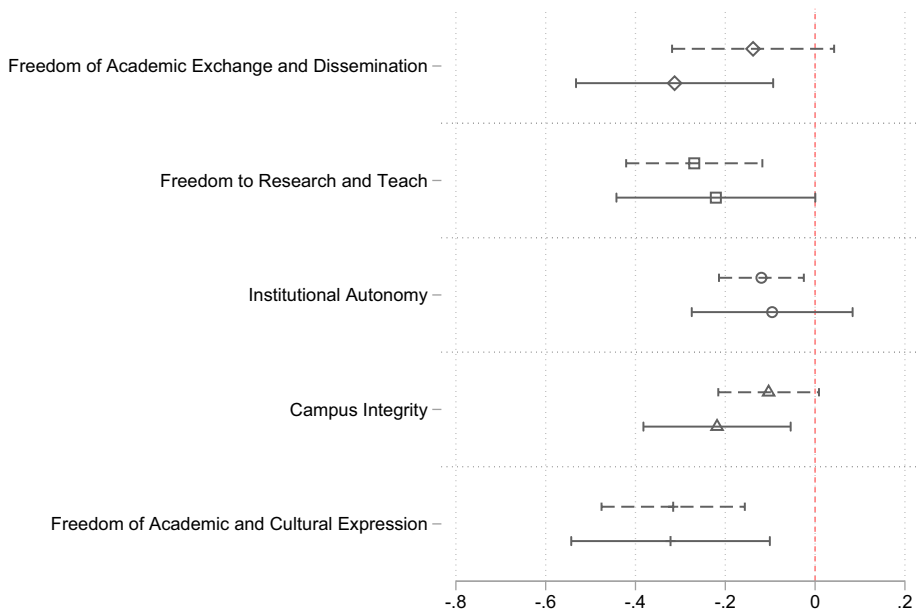


Fig. 4 Populist tenure on each component of the academic freedom index. Dashed lines represent the confidence intervals from the TWFE estimates. Solid lines represent the confidence intervals from the IV estimates. Estimation results on Table C3

scholars (e.g., with respect to the conflict in Palestine) and universities (e.g., the CEU in Hungary) as noted in multiple reports by the Parliament (2023, 2024, 2025). The former can be seen as being fundamentally tied to the ideological tension between populism and some research topics and conclusions, as well as the possible assessment and criticism of a government's policies and actions. Overall, these results reflect the intricate and complex dynamic mediating the relation between populist governments and academia.

5.2 Time in office and aftermath

We proceed by examining how the impact of populism on academic freedom unfolds with time in office, and whether any damage is undone following their departure. As depicted in Fig. 5, the effects of populist governments on academic freedom seem to increase after multiple terms in office, which is consistent with various examples in the US and Europe.¹² For instance, the explicit attempts of the Trump Administration to restrict different forms of academic freedom (e.g., by calling for restrictions on what can be researched and taught; by claiming that institutions had not done enough to deal with antisemitism in their campuses; or by requesting personal information of certain students and faculty) became more visible and “effective” during the second term (e.g., in Columbia and Harvard universities). As discussed above, in Hungary, the battle between Viktor Orbán's administration and CEU unfolded over ten years, until the latter moved its campus to Vienna (Ignatieff 2024), while in Poland, the indoctrination of the curriculum was also gradual during PiS's eight-year tenure in office (Radó and Mikola 2025). These episodes and their evolution have also been noted in Bos and Kneuer (2026), who reported on their increase in scope and severity with the length of Fidesz and PiS tenures in office.

At the same time, Fig. 5 also suggests that academic freedom rebounds during the first post-populist government. However, that trend appears to stop there. By the second post-populist government, changes in academic freedom are no longer significant. Because we lack exogenous variation to identify post-populist governments, these results offer only descriptive evidence in favor of a recovery in academic freedom rather than a causal effect. One possible interpretation of this result is that it primarily reflects improved expectations and a more positive overall climate underlying the interaction between political power and higher education during the first post-populist government, rather than changes in legislation protecting academic freedom, which would require time and are hard to pass through, especially if a government does not hold a majority in the parliament. For these reasons, we should be cautious in reading into this result, given the scope for measurement error introduced by experts' subjective assessments on academic freedom during such transitions. At the same time, the absence of a continuous effort to improve and protect academic freedom is consistent with the scenarios proposed in Acemoglu et al. (2013) and Chesterley and Roberti (2018), where mainstream parties may have an incentive to refrain from strengthening certain institutions when the prospect of a populist party winning an election increases. The rationale is that, by keeping certain institutions or, in this case, freedoms, weakly protected, moderate parties can try to speak to and attract marginal voters concerned about the prospect of a populist capturing democratic institutions or further reducing those freedoms.

¹² We note that, in this case, the TWFE estimates are also consistent with the results of an IV. Since the estimated effect of a post-populist government on academic freedom is not identified through exogenous variation, we provide in Fig. 5 only the TWFE estimates. The IV estimates are found in Table C4.

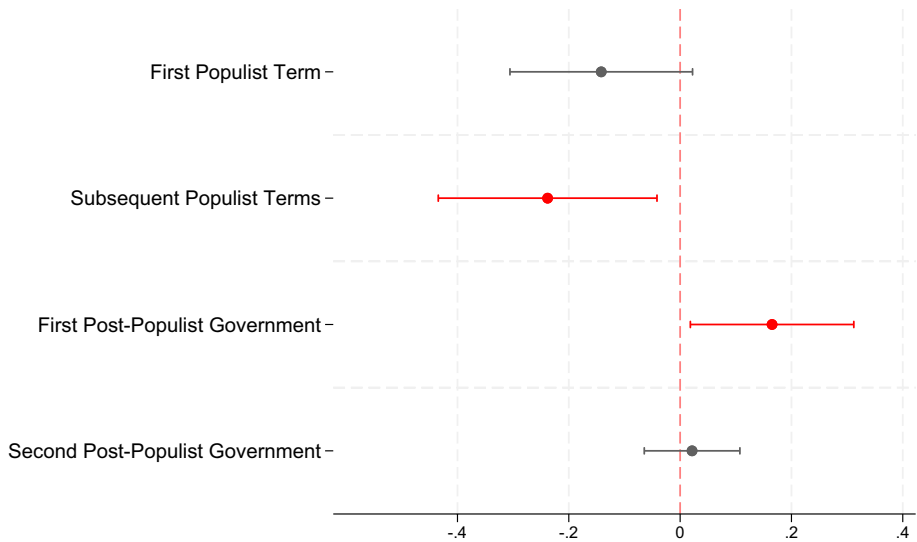


Fig. 5 Academic Freedom during and after populist tenures. Estimation results in Table C6

5.3 Broader domain: freedom of expression

Considering the theoretical framework in Sect. 2, we can treat the willingness of a populist government to restrict academic freedom, among other things, as a case of conditioning scholars and teachers' ability to influence and drive public discourse and debate. In that sense, it is reasonable to expect a similar antagonism against the ability of ordinary people to discuss politics (captured by the Freedom of Expression Index), as well as media freedom, impartiality, and pluralism, and thus, how representative and critical the media of a country's politics is (captured by the Alternative Sources of Information Index). In line with the context characterizing academic freedom, we also observe that populist governments contribute to a decline of each of these freedoms (Table 2).

More broadly, these results are consistent with some of the conclusions in Kenny (2020), who notes that populists seek to restrict media coverage of opposition parties and platforms, control the potential dissemination of views critical of the government, and limit a wide spectrum of political perspectives, weakening, in the process, the checks and balances on executive power. Taken together, the overall decline of these freedoms points to a broader strategy to control the substance of speech and flow of information in society. This strategy is further enabled by the instrumental nature of freedom of speech among voters with strong populist attitudes (Stefanelli et al. 2024), who often express support for the protection of freedom of speech mostly as a normative ideal, but are willing to accept restrictions when ideological motives dictate such.

5.4 Heterogeneity and extensions

When we disentangle the effects by host ideology, as depicted in Fig. 6, we find that, while the decline of academic freedom appears to be more severe when radical-right populists are in power, the same is also observed, albeit to a lower extent, during the tenures of both right

and left-wing populists. In that sense, while nativist and authoritarian lines may aggravate the erosion of academic freedom, populism, as a whole, appears to be incompatible with this freedom, and thus, a core value in a democracy.

At the same time, as illustrated in Table C5, across different components and types of academic freedom, the negative consequences are heterogeneous but extend to distinct ideological stances, especially among radical-right governments, except for valence populists.¹³ The latter result is particularly relevant since those parties campaign on valence issues, such as corruption or political integrity, and their platform is frequently established on both liberal and conservative issues and views. As such, attacks on academic freedom have the potential to alienate a segment of their supporters and be, in itself, incompatible with their valence status. Finally, we note that all the different components of academic freedom are eroded by radical-right populists, which are primarily represented by Fidesz and PiS tenures, and that, as noted in Bos and Kneuer (2026), is part of a broader strategy to weaken democratic institutions. At the same time, together with the FdI in Italy, their conservative and authoritarian positions are at odds with the freedom to design academic curricula, choose which issues to research, and more generally, the freedom required by universities to determine their course provision and manage their human resources.

Finally, both Mudde and Kaltwasser (2011) and Bichay (2024) argue that populist parties are unlikely to capture and weaken institutions without holding office, and thus, without having enough political power. This argument extends to their inability, in such cases, to restrict academic freedom. As depicted in Table C6, we do not, in fact, observe a significant decline in academic freedom in instances when populist parties integrate a governing coalition as a junior partner or when their seat share in the parliament increases. We even note that, in the latter case, the estimated fall in academic freedom is comparable to our baseline estimates when considering populist-led governments. However, that result is driven by whether a populist holds office, in which case, among other things, proposals by other populist parties are more likely to be accepted. When holding constant who leads the government, the resulting estimates become negligible.

Table 2 Populist tenures on the Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Indices

	Freedom of expression		Alternative sources of information	
	TWFE	IV	TWFE	IV
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Populist	-.334*** (.112)	-.416*** (.151)	-.284*** (.084)	-.261** (.114)
Country-level controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	870	840	870	840
Effective F-statistic	–	70.054	–	61.889
Durbin-Wu-Hausman (p-value)	–	.133	–	.431

Clustered standard errors at the country level in parentheses. The dependent variables are standardized with a mean of zero and a standard deviation equal to one. Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

¹³ We note that the fact that the effects are more pronounced across dimensions more directly linked to government intervention by radical-right populists provides some indirect support for a genuine institutional mechanism.

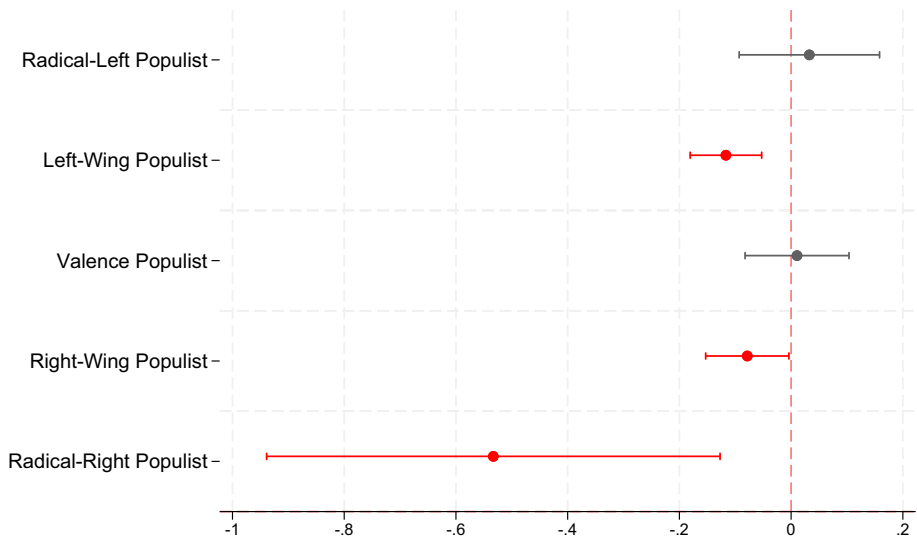


Fig. 6 Populist effect on academic freedom disaggregated by ideological positioning

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the implications of populism on academic freedom. Our results confirm our initial expectation that populist tenures harm academic freedom, resulting, on average, in a decline of 2.3 p.p. in the respective index. Those effects spread across different domains and types of academic freedom, but appear to be more substantial in categories related to the freedom to research and teach, the dissemination of findings and ideas to both academic and non-academic audiences, as well as political views. These are dimensions where a tension between academic scholarship and ideological values is more likely to emerge; where the *soft* check and balance on political processes, actions, and policies is more evident; and where the ability of academics to influence and guide public debate and discourse is more obvious. More importantly, the negative effects of populism span across both left- and right-wing ideologies, and increase the longer a populist party remains in power. In that sense, populism emerges as purely incompatible with unmonitored academic freedom, and thus, as noted in this emerging literature, with fundamental democratic guarantees.

We expect the conclusions from this paper to be similar (but more severe) in the Americas and Asia, both because of the recent trend in radical-right populism in those regions, but also, since left-wing populism, which is more specific in some parts of Latin America, appears to be equally incompatible with the implications of academic freedom. In fact, given that democratic institutions have been historically weaker in some parts of those regions, we would expect the effects of populism on academic freedom to be, potentially, even more pronounced. That is, in part, one of the reasons that makes the analysis of populism in Europe ideal, since we depart from a scenario where institutions are/were robust, and academic freedom is/was high, allowing us to more clearly identify any potential negative effects.

The results from this paper should also be seen as the starting point for a discussion on the role and limits of state influence on education, and the importance of other democratic institutions in ensuring the protection of academic freedom. In particular, as seen in the USA and Mexico, the dependence on public funding, and how the same can be “utilized” to enforce policies and dictate teaching and research practices, continues to represent a critical channel penalizing academic freedom, especially when more authoritarian leaders take office. At the same time, the introduction of laws and the use of legal action against academics highlight the importance of the rule of law and checks and balances on academic freedom. The issue, however, as noted in Kyriacou and Trivin (2024) and Zhang (2024), is that such institutions are also weakened during populist tenures. Therefore, any strategy that seeks to protect academic freedom will have to, invariably, also account simultaneously for the strengthening of different democratic institutions.

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Author contributions R.S. prepared and wrote the whole manuscript.

Data availability Data and replication package can be found at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CSMZOX>.

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