Is History Repeating Itself?
Populism in the Weimar Republic and Modern Germany

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Abstract

The recent rise of far-right populist parties is often compared to the rise of Fascism in the 20th century which ended up destroying democratic institutions. This paper analyzes the abolition of the Weimar Republic by the Nazis from the perspective of populism and compares it to the rise of modern populism. We measure populism by analyzing the parliamentary speeches of parties from the Weimar Republic and modern Germany using an established dictionary method. Our main finding is that modern Germany follows a similar trajectory as the Weimar Republic. While the general level of populism was stable over time, both states saw a reversal in which parties were populist. In their early years, left-wing parties were the most populist while right-wing parties became the most populist later.

Keywords: Populism, Nazi, Weimar, Radical, Democracy, Right-wing, Far-right

1 Introduction

The last decades have witnessed a sharp rise of populist political parties in Western democracies (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022). Recent research has increasingly investigated the consequences of this trend (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012; Kaltwasser, 2018; Rodrik, 2018; Gherghina and Silagadze, 2020; Sasso and Morelli, 2021; Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata, 2023; Pan, 2023). Possibly the most frequently raised concern is that populist parties, once in power, will turn democracies into dictatorships (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012; Bauer and Becker, 2020; Sasso and Morelli, 2021; Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch, 2023; Bellodi, Morelli, and Vannoni, 2024). However, thus far most analyses of populism are based on countries that are still characterized by foundational democratic institutions.

This focus limits our knowledge of the role of populism in the complete collapse of a democracy. Possibly the starkest historical example of this scenario is the decline of the first German Democracy — the Weimar Republic— which was abolished by a party that had gained power through democratic processes – "the Nazi party." Since the Nazi party was right-wing and the rise of populism is mostly driven by right-wing populists (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022) a common fear is that modern European countries are following the same trajectory as the Weimar Republic. At the same time, there is little quantitative evidence regarding the decline of democracies from the perspective of populism. Did the general level of populism increase during the final years of the Weimar Republic? Were the Nazis even populist in the modern sense of the term? Maybe most importantly, how similar are the distribution and time-trend of populism of the Weimar Republic to those of modern Germany?

To answer these questions we use the fact that populism is usually defined based on the *rhetoric* of politicians (Mudde and Kaltwasser, Cristobal Rovira, 2017; Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022). Populists are classified as those who *say* that the "pure and homogeneous" people are being suppressed by the "corrupt and homogeneous" elite. Consequently, we analyze recently compiled parliamentary speeches of both German states with text-analysis tools. Specifically, we use validated dictionaries developed by Gründl (2022) and Rooduijn, Lange, and Brug (2014) to measure the relative frequency of populist terms in speeches held in the parliaments of the Weimar Republic and modern Germany.

We find two main similarities: first, the overall frequency of populist rhetoric did not change notably, either during the Weimar Republic or in modern-day Germany. Populist rhetoric does not increase strongly after historical events like the Great Depression and in the long run, populist rhetoric became *less* frequent over time in either state.

Second, however, this apparent stability masks large changes regarding what parties employ populist rhetoric. In either state, populism was initially the domain of left-wing parties as both states contained one populist party with a socialist/communist ideology. As time progressed, this party used less populist rhetoric while a second populist party appeared that was ideologically nationalist. In the second half of the Weimar Republic, and in modern Germany since 2017, these changes made populism most strongly pronounced

among right-wing parties. In the Weimar Republic, the right-wing populist party that drove this development was the Nazi party. In modern Germany, this role is filled by the AfD.

We consider two additional findings noteworthy: first, populist rhetoric was more common overall in the Weimar Republic. We do not only show that one would classify the Nazi party and the Communists as populist according to the modern definition by Mudde and Kaltwasser, Cristobal Rovira (2017) but also that the Weimar mainstream parties used populist rhetoric more frequently than their modern counterparts. Second, the Nazi party made heavy use of populist rhetoric only when it tried to win elections. It did not employ populist language intensely when it was a quasi-paramilitary force that did not participate in elections or when it was in power. This indicates that the Nazis used populism strategically to win votes.

2 Data and Method

The most frequently used definition of populism classifies politicians as populist based on their *rhetoric* (Mudde and Kaltwasser, Cristobal Rovira, 2017; Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022). Populists are identified as those who *say* that the "pure and homogeneous" people are being suppressed by the "corrupt and homogeneous" elite, asserting that populists aim to enforce the will of the people.

Because this definition is based on rhetoric, many studies have used text analysis to estimate populism from various documents such as party manifestos or parliamentary speeches. We follow this literature and use an automated dictionary-based method that classifies texts as populist if they contain words that are indicative of populism. (Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Borbáth and Gessler, 2023; Breyer, 2023)

We view the dictionary approach as the most suitable in our case for three reasons. First, it eliminates the subjectivity associated with manual coding. Second, it is more transparent and offers greater control compared to other automated methods, such as machine learning (Hawkins and Castanho Silva, 2018; Breyer, 2023). Third, there already exist German populism-dictionaries that have been validated and successfully applied to parliamentary speeches (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Gründl, 2022).

Our main analysis relies on the most recent and extensive German populism-dictionary developed by Gründl (2022) and applied to parliamentary speeches in Germany and Austria by Breyer (2023). This dictionary contains 238 expressions that are indicative of populism. Importantly, the dictionary does not only include single words but also multi-word expressions. This mitigates the concern that single words might have different meanings depending on the context. Reassuringly, Gründl (2022) successfully validates the dictionary in various exercises and Breyer (2023) shows that it yields very similar results as a manual classification of speeches. To assess the robustness of our results to the use of other dictionaries we use a dictionary developed by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011). The appendix shows that our main results are robust to the use of the dictionary by Gründl (2022).

To apply these dictionaries we compile data on parliamentary speeches. For the Weimar Republic, we employ speeches from the parliament between 1919 and 1933 digitized by Fuhse et al. (2020).[1] For modern Germany, we use data of speeches from the German Bundestag between 1991 and 2018 from the ParlSpeech data set (Rauh and Schwalbach, 2020). Given a dictionary, we measure the level of populism in a speech by calculating the share of expressions in the speech that are contained in the dictionary. For the dictionary by Gründl (2022) we use the R package provided by the author, for the dictionary by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) we use our own code.

An observation in our data is an individual speech. We exclude speeches held by chairs of a parliamentary session. In total, our data contains 39,625 unique speeches held in the parliament of the Weimar Republic and 201,102 speeches held in the parliament of modern Germany. Both datasets provide us for each speech s with the text and the party of the person holding the speech $p(s)$. To measure the populism of a party p ($populism_p$) we calculate

$$populism_p = \sum_{s|p(s)=p} \frac{\#\text{populist expressions in } s}{\#\text{sentences in } s} \cdot \frac{\#\text{sentences in } s}{\sum_{s|p(s)=p} \#\text{sentences in } s}. \qquad (1)$$

Intuitively, we calculate the share of populist expressions contained in each speech and then calculate the mean across speeches weighted with their length. Hence, $populism_p$ measures the relative frequency of populist expressions in speeches held by members of party p.

3 Results — Populism in the Weimar Republic and Modern Germany

3.1 The General Level of Populism Stayed Constant

Figure 1 depicts $populism_p$ for p equal to the set of all parties in parliament. Hence, it shows the general level of populism contained in parliamentary speeches over time. The vertical axis measures the percentage of terms in the average speech that are populist.

As can be seen from panel (a), the general level of populism in the Weimar Republic did not follow a pronounced long-run trend. This might be surprising, given that this period featured several decisive events. In 1923, Germany experienced hyperinflation and in the same year, Hitler was arrested after a failed coup d'état. These events are followed by increases in populist rhetoric which are however very small. Similarly, populist rhetoric did not become notably more frequent during the Great Depression and populism was not especially high just before its abolition by Hitler in 1933. A binary speech-level regression of the form

$$populism_s = \alpha + \beta \cdot year_s + \varepsilon_s \qquad (2)$$

fails to reveal a statistically significant linear trend ($\beta^{Weimar} \approx -0.009\%, p-value \approx 0.2$). The full results of all regression models are reported in Section A.2.

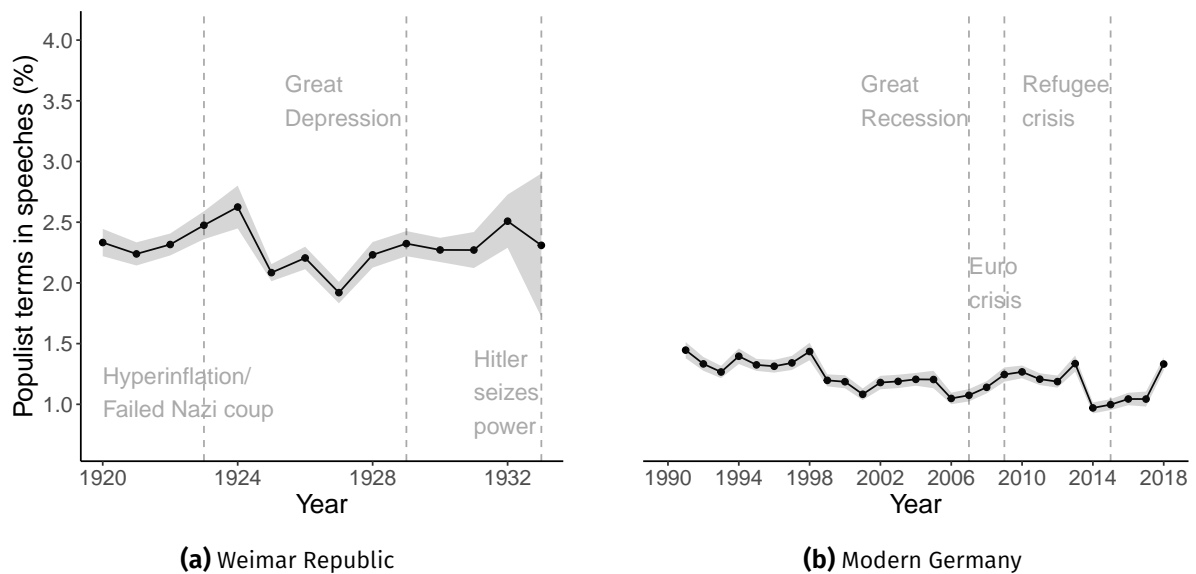1. We thank the authors for generously sharing their data.

Figure 1. Populism in the German Parliament over Time
Note: Estimates are based on Equation 1. Shaded areas visualize 95% confidence bands.

Fasting forward nearly 60 years, panel (b) shows that the early united Germany featured much lower levels of populism than the Weimar Republic. However, both states have in common that the level of populism is roughly constant over time. A binary regression of the form of Equation 2 estimates a very similar year coefficient as for the Weimar Republic. However, it reaches statistical significance due to the larger sample of speeches for modern Germany ($\beta^{Modern} \approx -0.009\%, p-value < 0.0001$). Again, our period of observation includes major events, neither of which seems to be followed by large changes in the overall usage of populist rhetoric in parliament.

3.2 But it Changed Which Parties Were Populist

Lumping speeches by all parties together might mask important heterogeneity. To uncover cross-party differences we distinguish between the three broad political positions "Left," "Center," and "Right." For classification, we follow Fuhse et al. (2020) in the case of the Weimar Republic. They classify the Christian/center party Zentrum as well as the market-oriented DDP and DVP as "Center" the nationalist DNVP, and NSDAP as "Right" and the socialist/communist SDP and KPD as "Left." For modern Germany, we try to classify parties similarly by sorting the Christian/center CDU/CSU and the market-oriented FDP as "Center," the nationalist AfD as "Right," and the social-democratic/communist/green SPD, Linke, and Greens as "Left."

Figure 2 visualizes the temporal evolution of populism by policy position. Points refer to the means with equal weights of all parties belonging to a position. Panel (a) reveals stark and permanent changes in the distribution of populism across the policy space. During the early Weimar Republic, left-wing parties were the most populist while right-wing parties were the least populist. A weighted t-test with bootstrapped standard errors reveals the
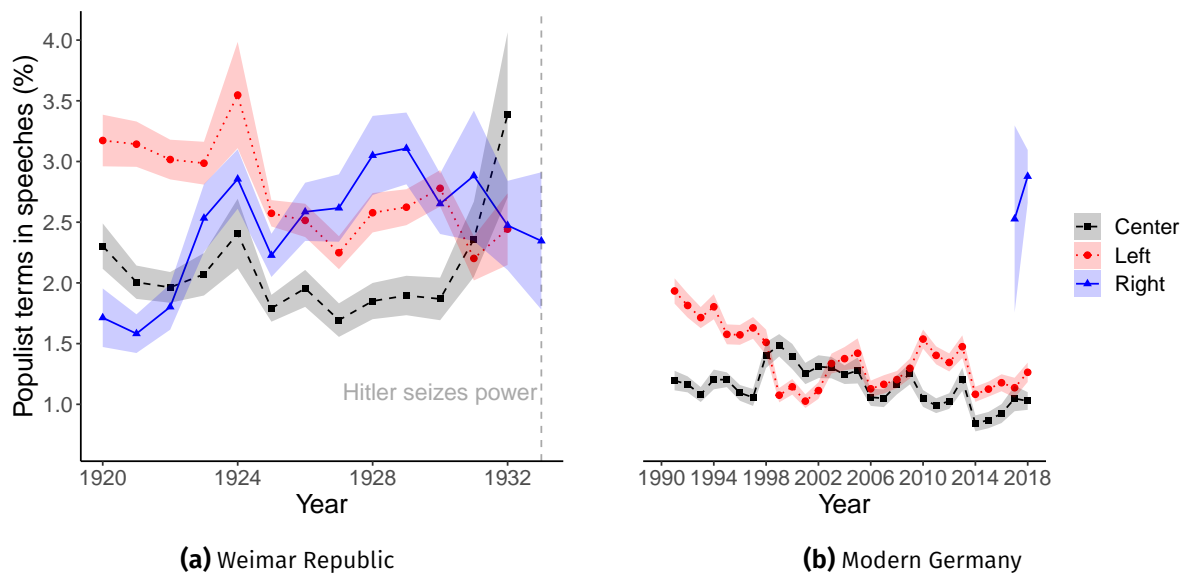
Figure 2. Populism over Time by Party Group

Note: Estimates are based on Equation 1. For the Weimar Republic, Center parties include Zentrum, DDP, and DVP, Left parties include SPD and KPD and Right parties include DNVP and NSDAP. For Modern Germany, Center parties include CDU/CSU and FDP, Left parties include SPD, Greens, and Linke and Right parties include AfD. All parties within groups receive equal weight. Shaded areas visualize 95% confidence bands.

significance of this result. In the first half of the Weimar Republic left-wing parties used much more populist rhetoric than their right-wing counterparts (3% vs. 2.2%, p-value<0.0001). However, regressions with robust standard errors resembling 2 reveal a highly significant increase in populist rhetoric for right-wing parties ($\beta_{Right}^{Weimar} \approx 0.09\%$, p-value≈0.005) and a highly significant decrease in the populism of left-wing parties over time ($\beta_{Left}^{Weimar} \approx 0.07\%$, p-value<0.0001). The linear time-trend for center parties is estimated to be insignificant, which remains to be the case after excluding 1932 from the sample ($\beta_{Center}^{Weimar} \approx 0.03\%$, p-value≈0.19). As a result, the political right was the most populist party group from 1926 onward until the collapse of democracy. A weighted t-test shows that the difference to left-wing parties is highly significant (2.5% vs. 2.8%, p-value<0.0001). Center parties used relatively little populist rhetoric throughout, except for 1932, the year of the last democratic elections in Weimar Germany. This result is however driven by a few outliers and the fact that few speeches were held in 1932.

Panel (b) reveals a similar picture regarding modern Germany. Until the entry of the AfD, modern Germany did not feature a fully right-wing nationalist party comparable to the nationalists of the Weimar Republic. Hence, the early united Germany was dominated by left-wing and center parties. Like in the early Weimar Republic, the political left was more populist than center parties for most of the time. The distribution of populism strongly changed due to the entry of the nationalist AfD into the parliament in 2017. Like others (e.g., Rooduijn, Lange, and Brug (2014) and Rooduijn et al. (2023)) we find the AfD to be much more populist than any other modern German party, making the political right in modern Germany the most populist party family. Consequently, the distribution of populism

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in modern Germany now, for the first time in its history, resembles that of the late Weimar Republic.

One other notable finding concerns the populism displayed by left and center parties in modern Germany. While the left was more populist than the political center for most years, there were four exceptional years from 1999 to 2002. In the period we look at there was only one government in which none of the center parties took part —a coalition between the SPD and Greens from late 1998 to 2005. As panel (b) shows, center parties became more populist than the left in 1999, the first year they were in opposition since 1990. All other exceptional years where the center was the most populist also fell into the period of the purely left government.

To examine what drives the trends in left-wing and right-wing populism we disaggregate these party families into individual parties and display the results in Figure 3. Two Weimar parties stand out due to their comparatively high usage of populist rhetoric: the communist KPD and the "Nazi party" (NSDAP). For comparison, we depict the average usage of populist rhetoric by the modern AfD in 2017 and 2018, which is commonly classified as populist (Rooduijn, Lange, and Brug, 2014; Rooduijn et al., 2023). For most years, the KPD and the NSDAP used a language that was even more populist than those of the AfD. Hence, the KPD and NSDAP can be classified as populist according to modern standards and definitions. In contrast, none of the other parties comes close to that level for most years.
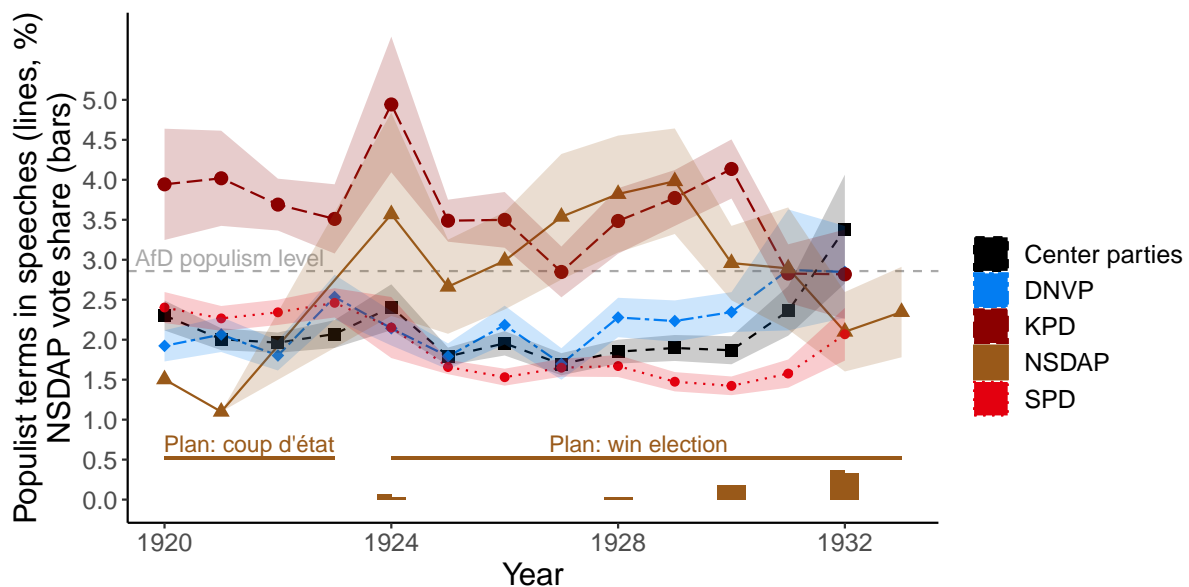

Figure 3. Populism over Time and NSDAP Vote Share
Note: Estimates for the points are based on Equation 1. Shaded areas visualize 95% confidence bands. We omit early NSDAP confidence intervals because they are very large due to the low number of speeches there.

Binary regression based on 2 show that KPD and SPD decreased their populist rhetoric over time ($\beta_{KPD}^{Weimar} \approx -0.08\%$, p-value$\approx$0.017; $\beta_{SPD}^{Weimar} \approx -0.08\%$, p-value$<$0.0001). In contrast, similar regressions reveal insignificant linear time-trends for the NSDAP and the DNVP ($\beta_{NSDAP}^{Weimar} \approx -0.01\%$, p-value$\approx$0.86; $\beta_{DNVP}^{Weimar} \approx 0.03\%$, p-value$\approx$0.1). Notably, the NSDAP time trend appears rather quadratic than linear. Adding $year^2$ to 2 results in a sig-

nificantly positive coefficient on the linear term and a significantly negative coefficient on the quadratic one ($\beta_{NSDAP}^{Weimar} \approx 1.4\%$, p-value$\approx$0.0015; $\theta_{NSDAP}^{Weimar} \approx -0.04\%$, p-value$\approx$0.0015). Hence, the rhetoric of the NSDAP, after being not notably populist initially, became much more populist for several years, before returning to lower levels after their rise to power. This development lines up with the goals of the Nazi party. Initially, the NSDAP was a quasi-paramilitary organization that tried to seize power through a coup d'état (**stachura1980political**). Our analysis reveals that during this time, the party used little populist rhetoric. However, the party changed its strategy radically after a failed coup attempt in 1923. From there on, Hitler sought to win power "legally" by winning elections (**stachura1980political**). It is throughout this period that the NSDAP makes heavy use of populist rhetoric, comparable to the communists and modern populists. However, after becoming the strongest party in parliament in 1932, and seizing power in 1933 populist rhetoric decreased sharply to levels displayed by other parties. This is consistent with the idea that the Nazis used populism only as a rhetorical strategy to attract voters.
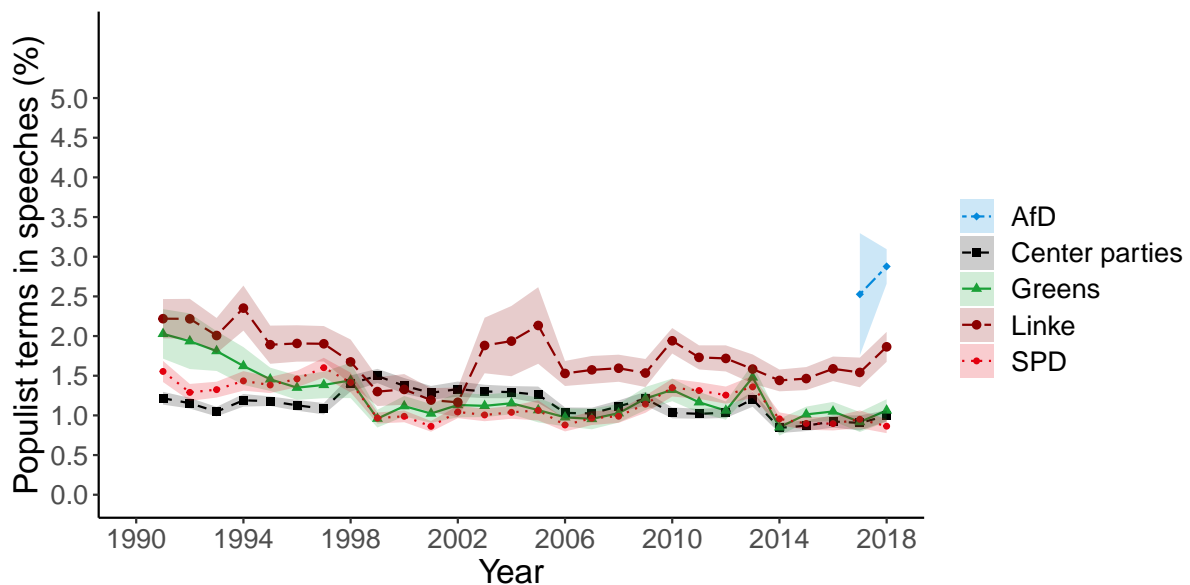

Figure 4. Populism over Time in Modern Germany by Party
Note: Estimates are based on Equation 1. "Center parties" include the CDU/CSU and the FDP. Shaded areas visualize 95% confidence bands.

For comparison, Figure 4 shows populism by party in modern Germany. Again, two parties on opposite ends of the political spectrum make particularly much use of populist language —the socialist Linke and the nationalist AfD.[2] Again, we find a very slow but significant linear downward trend regarding populism for all left-wing parties ($\beta_{Linke}^{Modern} \approx 0.013\%$, p-value$<$0.0001; $\beta_{SPD}^{Modern} \approx 0.015\%$, p-value$<$0.0001; $\beta_{Greens}^{Modern} \approx 0.018\%$, p-value$<$0.0001). Notably, the Green party was nearly as populist as the Socialists

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2. Similarly, Rooduijn and Akkerman (2017) and Meijers and Zaslove (2021) find that ideologically extreme parties tend to be particularly populist in many modern democracies.

in the early 1990s. For the AfD, an upward trend is visible but it is far from being significant at conventional levels due to the short time span.

In sum, we find many similarities between the Weimar Republic and modern Germany regarding populism. In both states 1) the general level of populist rhetoric decreased very slowly over time, 2) populism was initially used mainly by one socialist/communist party, 3) later a single right-wing populist party emerged while left-wing parties decreased their use of populist rhetoric and 4) this led to a situation with two populist parties, a socialist/communist one and a nationalist one. The most notable difference is that the general level of populism was higher in the Weimar Republic than in modern Germany.

4   Potential Biases and Robustness

The Gründl (2022) dictionary was designed to measure populism nowadays and therefore uses modern language. Hence, it might be less suitable to detect populist rhetoric in the Weimar Republic. While we cannot rule out that our measure is less suitable to detect populism in speech from Weimar Republic parties than for parties of modern Germany, we think this would not invalidate but strengthen our conclusions. If language had changed so much that the dictionary was completely uninformative, it would not be possible to detect significant differences between the parties of the Weimar Republic. Intuitively, the change in the order of which party groups are most populist cannot be explained by the hypothesis that the populism measure we use is random noise. Following this logic, language change would likely attenuate estimates for Weimar parties, thereby making our estimates for time trends and differences between parties lower bounds for the true differences.

5   Concluding Discussion

We document many similarities between populism in the Weimar Republic and modern Germany. In particular, modern Germany seems to follow the same trend in terms of populism as its predecessor democracy. Moreover, as we show, the party that destroyed the Weimar Republic differed from all her competitors by combining a right-wing ideology with heavy use of populist rhetoric. A century later, the modern German Republic again features a party with these characteristics for the first time.

While we find these similarities intellectually fascinating, we think they need not imply that modern Germany will necessarily go down the same road as the Weimar Republic. Neither does our evidence imply that the AfD is the modern equivalent of the NSDAP. This paper compares both states purely through the prism of populism, which seems to be an interesting perspective, given the interest that the concept of populism has attracted recently. However, this focus on only one of many aspects also means that our comparison ignores many other factors that differ between modern Germany and the Weimar Republic —factors that may have been crucial for the demise of the latter.

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Appendix A Appendix

A.1 Robustness to the Use of Another Dictionary

Table A.1 lists all German terms and their English translation used in the (core) Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) dictionary. None of the 18 terms are specifically related to the Federal German Republic and only one term appears particularly modern —"unfair." Thus, we remove this term from the original dictionary and calculate the level of populism of a speech as the share of words in the speech that are contained in the resulting subset, listed in Table A.1. We obtain a measure that, conditioning on positive populism values, correlates strongly and positively with our main measure. The correlation between the two measures is about 0.62 for modern Germany and 0.68 for the Weimar Republic.

Table A.1. German questionnaire terms and English translations

German term	English translation
elit*	elite*
konsens*	consensus*
undemokratisch*	undemocratic*
referend*	referendum*
korrupt*	corrupt*
propagand*	propaganda*
politiker*	politician*
täusch*	deceive*
betrüg*	cheat*
betrug*	fraud*
verrat	*betrayal*
scham*	shame*
schäm*	ashamed*
skandal*	scandal*
wahrheit*	truth*
unehrlich*	dishonest*
establishm*	establishment*

Figure A.1 depicts a version of our main figure —Figure 2— using the Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) dictionary. Reassuringly, the results corresponding to both dictionaries are similar. First, panel (a) of Figure A.1 shows that in the Weimar Republic, left-wing parties were the most populist party group until the late 1920s. Thereafter, right-wing parties used permanently more populist rhetoric than right-wing parties and the populism of center parties surged in the final year of the Weimar Republic, making left-wing parties the least populist group just before democracy was abolished. The fact that these results are obtained using two very different dictionaries increases our confidence in their robustness.

However, a notable difference between Figure A.1 and Figure 2 is the general level of populism. While our main analysis finds that the Weimar left-wing and center parties were much more populist than their modern counterparts, the robustness exercise suggests
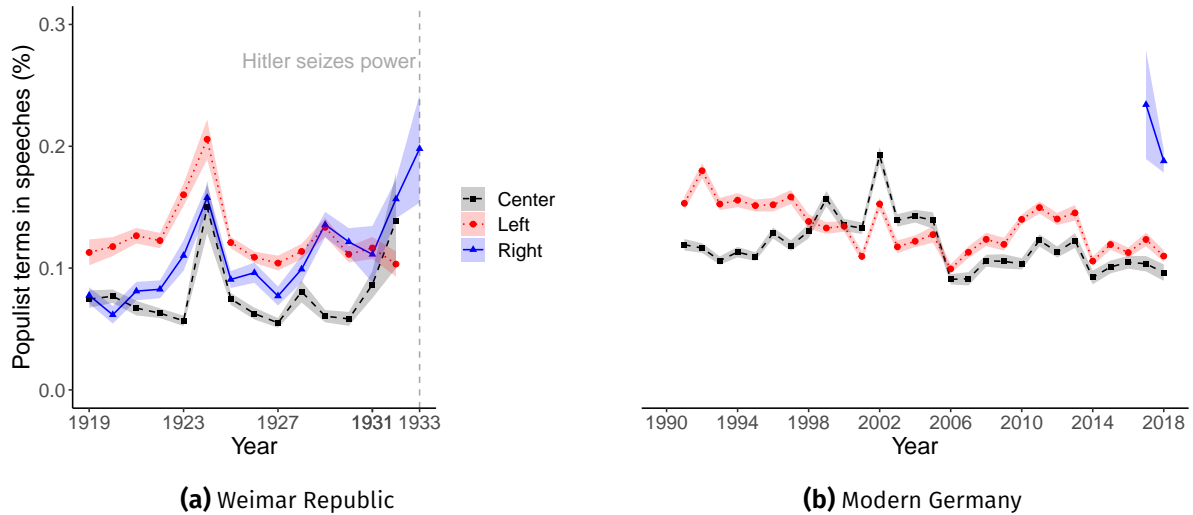
(a) Weimar Republic

(b) Modern Germany

Figure A.1. Populism over time by party group using the Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) dictionary
Note: Estimates are based on Equation 1 and the dictionary developed by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011). For the Weimar Republic, Center parties include Zentrum, DDP, and DVP, Left parties include SPD and KPD and Right parties include DNVP and NSDAP. For Modern Germany, Center parties include CDU/CSU and FDP, Left parties include SPD, Greens, and Linke and Right parties include AfD. Points refer to the averages with equal weights. Shaded areas visualize 95% confidence bands.

that they used populist rhetoric similarly often. However, this does not change our main conclusions which refer to the trends, not the levels.

A.2 Additional Tables

Table A.2. Populism Trend by State

	Dependent variable:	
	Share of populist terms (%)	
	(1)	(2)
Year	−0.009	−0.009***
	(0.007)	(0.001)
Constant	19.620	18.373***
	(13.598)	(1.520)
State	Weimar	BRD
Observations	37,171	201,741
R^2	0.0001	0.001

Note: Based on Equation 2.
Robust SE in parentheses.
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.3. Populism Trend by State and Party Group

	Dependent variable:					
	Share of populist terms (%)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Right	Left	Center	Right	Left	Center
Year	0.351	−0.019***	−0.009***	0.093***	−0.074***	0.034
	(0.518)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.033)	(0.017)	(0.025)
Constant	−705.069	40.290***	18.604***	−176.378***	144.383***	−62.897
	(1,045.416)	(2.851)	(3.198)	(64.111)	(33.217)	(49.062)
State	BRD	BRD	BRD	Weimar	Weimar	Weimar
Observations	1,492	107,588	92,020	7,266	19,093	10,753
R^2	0.002	0.004	0.001	0.012	0.007	0.002

Note: Based on Equation 2. Robust SE in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.4. Populism Trend by Party in the Weimar Republic

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
			Dependent variable:			
			Share of populist terms (%)			
	NSDAP	NSDAP	KPD	DNVP	SPD	Center
Year	−0.013	143.433***	−0.082**	0.028	−0.082***	−0.032**
	(0.075)	(44.461)	(0.034)	(0.017)	(0.010)	(0.014)
Year squared		−0.037***				
		(0.012)				
Constant	27.344	−138,248.300***	161.661**	−52.962	158.340***	62.699**
	(144.608)	(42,865.910)	(66.279)	(33.271)	(19.311)	(27.279)
Observations	1,147	1,207	4,293	6,119	14,800	10,753
R^2	0.00002	0.004	0.001	0.0004	0.005	0.001

Note: Based on Equation 2. Robust SE in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A.5. Populism Trend by Party in Modern Germany

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
			Dependent variable:		
			Share of populist terms (%)		
	Linke	AfD	Greens	SPD	Center
Year	−0.013***	0.351	−0.018***	−0.015***	−0.009***
	(0.003)	(0.518)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Constant	28.595***	−705.069	37.091***	31.094***	18.604***
	(5.577)	(1,045.417)	(4.410)	(2.857)	(3.198)
Observations	21,742	1,492	29,523	56,323	92,020
R^2	0.001	0.0004	0.003	0.003	0.001

Note: Based on Equation 2. Robust SE in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01