

Populist Voting and Well-being in the European Union

An analysis of the relation between well-being factors and the rise of populist parties in the context of the EU

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the correlation between the distribution of well-being indicators and populist support across regions in the European Union. The primary aim is to determine to what extent these well-being indicators are linked to populist movements within the EU. Despite previous studies examining these factors separately, this study uniquely focuses on the relationship between the two in an EU context. To achieve the research aim, the following research question was used: To what extent does the geographic distribution of well-being indicators correlate with support for populist movements in different regions of the European Union? While it is hypothesized that there is a correlation between well-being factors and populist support, the statistical analysis conducted in this research does not provide conclusive evidence to confirm or reject this hypothesis. The literature review however, shows that it is highly likely that such a relationship does exist, implying that policy makers in the EU should try their best to improve the subjective well-being as well as objective well-being and focus on the inequalities between regions and people.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

In recent years, the rise of populist movements has become a prominent feature of European politics, challenging traditional political landscapes and raising questions about the underlying factors driving their support. The phenomenon of populist ideas, has garnered significant attention from scholars, policymakers, and the general public alike. The European Union presents an ideal context for this investigation due to its socio-economic diversity, historical legacies, and complex political dynamics.

Within the European Union, considerable variations in well-being indicators such as income levels, education attainment, life satisfaction, and employment rates across different regions can be observed. Additionally, the continent has witnessed the emergence and consolidation of various populist movements, each with its distinct ideological underpinnings and bases of support. The rise of populist movements in Europe has really taken off ever since the Economic Recession of 2008. Examples of these movements are the Brexit referendum in 2016 or the PVV becoming the biggest party in the Netherlands in 2024. Polarization has shifted from the differences between the traditional left and right to the differences between mainstream political parties and populist parties (Noury & Roland, 2020).

Concurrently, discussions surrounding well-being, encompassing various socio-economic and quality-of-life indicators, have gained traction as crucial determinants of societal health and stability. Within the European Union, considerable variations in well-being indicators such as income levels, education attainment, life satisfaction, and employment rates across different regions can be observed (Thomson et al., 2017). Socio-economically, well-being in the European Union is increasing, however, the pace at which this increase is happening differs per region. This unequal rise in well-being has led to a divide between regions that are economically stronger and places with a weaker socio-economic situation. These regions that are lagging behind are commonly mentioned as ‘places that don’t matter’. These ‘places that don’t matter’ show different political behavior than their counterparts, showing a higher likelihood of voting for populist parties (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

It is evident that populism is rising in Europe, but is it necessarily a bad thing? Why is populism often portrayed as a negative political approach? Many scholars have pondered this question leading to several outcomes. First of all, the authoritarian aspect of populism poses a great threat to the rule of law. In countries like Hungary and Poland, populist parties led their countries into forms of government with many authoritarian characteristics. This led to them undermining the rule of law in a relatively easy manner (Bugaric & Kuhelj, 2018).

Populism has also shown that it can lead to exclusion of minorities, based on ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. This is caused by the fact that a driver of populism is a strong feeling of ‘us’, caused by a strong feeling of solidarity among people with similar beliefs. Once cracks will form in this feeling of solidarity, scapegoats for the demise will be looked for, leading to other ethnicities or genders getting large parts of the blame and in turn leading to a socially unequal situation (Mostov, 2021).

Lastly, populism poses a general threat to the constitutional democracy as a whole. While both populism and democracy claim to represent the will of the people, they do so in fundamentally different ways. While democracy emphasizes the constantly ongoing and mediated process of the construction of the will of the people, populism emphasizes the homogeneity of the people’s will, possibly leading to a situation where power is centralized and dissent is discouraged (Abts & Rummens, 2007).

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

This research aims to delve into the intricate relationship between populist support and well-being factors, focusing specifically on the European Union and its diverse regions. The central research question guiding this study is: To what extent does the geographic distribution of well-being indicators correlate with support for populist movements in different regions of the European Union? By examining this question, this research aims to shed light on the drivers of populist support and its relationship with the well-being conditions across European regions.

Existing literature has explored the drivers of populist movements and the determinants of regional well-being separately and research about the relation between the two has been done in a context of the Netherlands (Burger & Eiselt, 2023). However, there remains a gap in understanding if and how these factors intersect in a context of the European Union and how they possibly influence each other. By employing a European Union-centric approach, this study seeks to address this gap and provide insights into the possible relationship between well-being and populist sentiments across European Union regions.

This research holds substantial societal relevance as it seeks to unravel the complex dynamics between well-being and populist movements in the European Union. The insights gained from this study can inform policy interventions aimed at enhancing socio-economic conditions, strengthening democratic governance, mitigating the factors driving populist mobilization, and promoting European integration, in turn keeping the dangers of populism contained. By contributing to a deeper understanding of these issues, this paper aims to support efforts to create a more equitable, stable, and unified Europe.

This research will outline the theoretical framework guiding our analysis and detail the methodology employed to examine the research question. This is done by way of a statistical analysis. Finally, we will present our findings following from the statistical analysis that has been performed, discuss their implications, and offer avenues for future research in this crucial area of inquiry.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the dynamics between well-being indicators—such as income, employment, education, health, and social cohesion—and political behavior is essential for comprehending the contemporary political landscape in Europe. Well-being indicators reflect the socioeconomic conditions and quality of life experienced by individuals in different regions. Disparities in these indicators can contribute to feelings of economic insecurity, social exclusion, and political discontent, which are often exploited by populist leaders who promise radical changes and a return to 'ordinary people' values against perceived corrupt elites (Mudde, 2004). This theoretical framework will help lay an academic basis and explore the underlying theories for the relationship between these indicators and populist voting.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over the years, scholars have thoroughly researched driving factors for populist support. As named earlier in this paper, Brexit was a clear example of a populist idea coming to fruition. In a paper published by Becker et al. (2017) researchers went back to people's causes to vote for leave in the Brexit referendum. This research found that it was not more exposure to the European Union through trade or immigration that lead people to vote for leave. Instead the British voted for Brexit because of an area's human capital characteristics, such as life satisfaction and education quality, but also because of an area's economic structure, such as income and employment rates, which can have a real impact on well-being (Becker et al., 2017).

Other scholars have opposed these findings, challenging the objective, socio-economic indicators of a region's well being, as these are only weakly related to an individual's perceived quality of life (Huppert et al., 2008). Research has shown that in regions which are economically developed, an increase in economic well-being could possibly lead to an increase in depression, divorce and even suicide rates (Heliwell, 2007). These disagreements in scholars' findings on which well-being factors are most accurate, show the need for a reliable and more complete measure of subjective aspects of well-being.

An attempt to create such a measure was made by Veenhoven (2009) who used it to describe an individual's overall satisfaction with their life and experiences. Called subject well-being, it encompasses several important factors, such as happiness and a sense of fulfillment, as perceived by the relevant individual themselves. As said before it is based on personal observations and experiences rather than measurable, objective criteria. According to Veenhoven, people evaluate their subjective well-being based on two sources: their thoughts and their emotions. People can sense their emotions at any given moment, but are also able to comprehend a better or worse life they could lead. Burger & Eiselt (2023) used this concept in their research relating subjective well-being to the rise of Dutch populism and found a way to make it accurately measurable. They did this by posing three questions and asking respondents to answer with a score on an 11-point scale. These questions were about life satisfaction, happiness in life, and how close the respondents are to living the best possible life.

Similar to the disagreement among scholars in what factors are most useful in well-being analysis, there is also disagreement in how well-being variables relate to the support for populist parties. Research in the Netherlands has shown that there is a significant relationship between subjective well-being and populist voting behavior, even after adjusting for other factors such as distrust or economic factors (Burger & Eiselt, 2023). On the other hand, there have also been findings done by others researchers that tell a different story. Koeppen et al. (2020) have found that individuals vote for, as they call it, anti-political establishment parties, not because of their overall discontent with their life, but rather because of their social and political dissatisfaction. This means that people who experience a high subjective well-being could still vote for these anti-political establishment parties, as they feel dissatisfied with their political or social situation.

This dissatisfaction is influenced by multiple factors. Research into political parties opposing integration in the European Union and parties encouraging integration has shown that dissatisfaction in the European Union was caused by mainly inequalities in education and employment (Dijkstra et al., 2019). This relates back to the 'places that don't matter', the regions which are lagging behind and often vote for populist parties (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Koeppen et al. (2020) argue that is not necessarily 'places left behind', which show a high dissatisfaction, but also 'people left behind', as individuals in regions with relatively good welfare can still experience a feeling of feeling left out.

2.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the theoretical framework that was laid out, several concepts relevant to this research can be selected. The first concept that is useful and included in the conceptual framework for this study is the concept of dissatisfaction in the European Union. The research paper by Dijkstra et al. (2019), analyzes the rise of political party with an anti European Union agenda and its relation to dissatisfaction. In this paper the dissatisfaction in the EU is explained as a product of several factors such as, differences in wealth, education or economic and demographic trajectories. These are all measurable factors that are of use during the rest of this research.

A second concept that should be explored in this paper is the concept of populism. It is important to give a clear definition of this concept as it is a term that gets thrown around a lot without a clear meaning.

The definition that will be used in this research, is one given by Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde (2004): “Populist parties are parties that endorse the set of ideas that society is ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.” (Mudde, C. 2004) Another definition of populist sentiments that is similar to Mudde’s, is described by De Cleen et al. (2018) as the sentiment of the common, ordinary man versus the ‘the establishment’ or the regime. Important to note is that both of these definitions talk about a clear divide between two population groups. This concept is named votes for populist parties and will be important for the statistical analysis following in this paper.

A third and final concept that lies at the basis of the conceptual framework are the well-being factors themselves. In the case of this research, these well-being factors are as follows: GDP per capita, employment rate, life satisfaction rating and education index. These well-being factors were selected based on the findings of the theoretical framework. Scholars themselves can not agree on the most important well-being factors contributing to populist support, thus a combination of objective and measurable criteria and subjective well-being is used. Life satisfaction rating being the subjective well-being factor and the other variables being the objective factors.

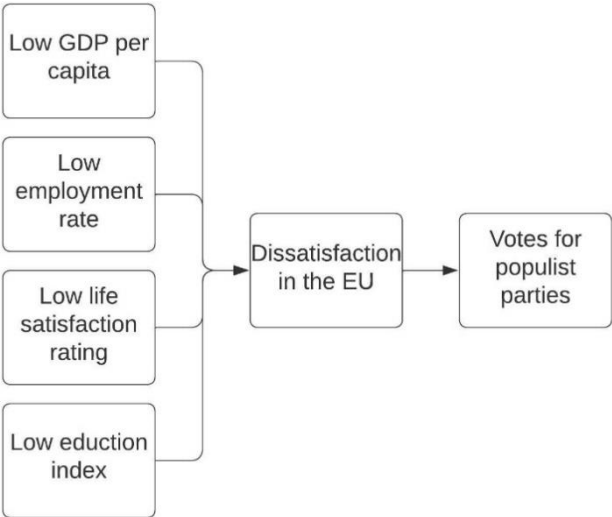


FIGURE 1 - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As seen in the Figure 1, the well-being factors, GDP per capita, employment rate, life satisfaction rating and education index all have an influence on the dissatisfaction in the European Union. This is explainable by the research paper by Dijkstra et al. (2019) where he describes dissatisfaction as a product of several well-being factors. Based on the findings of Koeppen et al. (2019) the dissatisfaction in the EU in turn could influence people their populist voting behavior.

2.4 HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis that this research paper will be testing for the research question—To what extent does the geographic distribution of well-being indicators correlate with support for populist movements in different regions of the European Union?—is that it is likely that there is a correlation between the geographic distribution of well-being factors and support for populist movements in different regions of the European Union. Specifically, regions with lower levels of economic, social, and political well-being

are more likely to exhibit higher support for populist movements compared to regions with higher levels of well-being.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper has tried to answer the main research question: To what extent does the geographic distribution of well-being indicators correlate with support for anti-establishment movements in different regions of the European Union? The central question that guided the statistical analysis is as follows: Is there a noticeable relationship between anti-establishment voting and well-being factors? Secondary questions that follow from this question are questions such as: How strong is the relationship that shows? And which of the well-being factors has the strongest relationship with anti-establishment voting?

The research has made use of quantitative research. The desk research entails an analysis of relevant literature that was found on academic search engines such as Google Scholar, Web of Science and Smartcat. Relevant news articles have also been analyzed. After the literature review a statistical analysis has been performed on the basis of data provided by trustworthy sources such as Eurostat and the World Population Review. This data has been analyzed with the relevant statistical tests at hand. As this research has tested the relationship between one dependent variable and four independent variables, this research made use of a regression analysis. The statistical testing has been performed using the software IBM SPSS Statistics 27, and was based on the conceptual framework that was laid out.

The null hypothesis this research has tested is as follows: H0: In the European Union, there is no significant linear relationship between the geographic distribution of wellbeing indicators and support for populist movements in different regions of the European Union. H1 would thus be: In the European Union, there is a significant linear relationship between the geographic distribution of wellbeing indicators and support for populist movements in different regions.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION

This research paper has made use of secondary data collection. For this data collection process four well-being variables have been tested, GDP per capita, employment rate, life satisfaction rating and education index. These are all independent variables which all have accessible data sets on Eurostat and the World Population Review. For the dependent variable: The anti-establishment voting, the PopuList 3.0 will be used (Rooduijn et al., 2023). This is a dataset that provides an overview of all populist parties in Europe from 1989 until 2022 and has been used in numerous publications. The PopuList 3.0 defines several political parties as borderline populist parties. These parties were excluded from the research and the focus will be on parties which are clearly populist in nature.

3.3 OPERATIONALIZATION OF VARIABLES

3.3.1 DEPENDENT VARIABLE

To gather information on the amount of populist seats in all of the parliaments of the European Union, a dataset was created which includes data on the percentage of seats in parliament given to populist parties for every relevant country. This data was collected by going over every parliament in the European Union and dividing the number of populist seats, by the total number of seats. It is important to note that for countries with a bicameral parliamentary system, the focus was on the seating in the lower house, as generally speaking, the lower house possesses more power than the upper house. This created dataset also includes information on all countries and their GDP per capita, employment rate,

life satisfaction rating and education index (see appendix A) in the same row as the relevant country at hand. The political parties noted as populist by the PopuList 3.0 are also included in the dataset. In the dataset this variable is called %ofseatsforpopulistparties.

3.3.2 INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

One of the well-being factors tested in this paper is the education index. The education index is a factor that is included in the Human Development Index. It is measured by the mean years of schooling for adults aged 25 and older and for children of school entering age, it is measured as expected years of schooling (Human Development Reports, 2022). This score is then aggregated and given a score between 0 and 1. This variable helps to understand the differences in education quality between countries in the European Union. In the dataset this variable is called EducationIndex(2021).

Another variable for the well-being factors in this research is the overall life satisfaction rating. This is a variable which focuses on an individual's overall experience of life and is one of nine dimensions used by the European Commission as a quality of life indicator. This rating is self-assessed on a scale of 1 to 10 and according to the European Commission is possibly the only way in which experiences, priorities, choices and values and the diversity of it is measurable for an individual (European Commission, 2023). This variable is used to express an individual's life satisfaction in this dataset and is called LifeSatisfactionRating(2022). This variable was selected to include an aspect of subjective well-being in the analysis, as research in the Netherlands has shown that this is a significant driver of populism (Burger & Eiselt, 2023).

The other two variables, GDP per capita and employment rate are quite self-explanatory. GDP per capita is a measure of economic output per person in a country and is expressed in the total GDP of a country divided by population, in the dataset this has been divided by 1000. GDP per capita is a variable that is used in this dataset to depict the economic well-being of EU countries, in the dataset this variable is called GDPperCapita(2022). Employment rate is expressed as the percentage of people in the working-age population who are actively employed. Once again this variable helps in understanding the economic well-being in EU countries, it is called EmploymentRate(2023) in the dataset. None of the variables used are categorical and thus a regression can be applied.

3.4 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF DATA

The validity of the data that has been used is protected through the sources of the data, Eurostat and the World population review. The data is protected through the European Statistical System (ESS). This is a partnership formed by all national statistical authorities of the EU countries. The ESS follows a common quality framework which is based on the European Statistics Code of Practice (European Commission, 2017).

3.5 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
% of seats for populist parties	27	21,39	17,52	0,871	0,028
GDP per Capita (2022)	27	105,11	45,34	2,376	5,983
Employment rate (2023)	27	76,84	4,76	-0,815	-0,185
Life Satisfaction Rating (2022)	27	7,19	0,47	-1,448	3,819
Education Index (2021)	27	0,87	0,06	-0,098	-1,05

TABLE 1 – DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Before going to the results of the regression analysis, it's important to first look at the relevant descriptive statistics at hand. First of all, let's take a look at the descriptive statistics of the dependent variable; the percentage of seats for populist parties.

As seen in Table 1, the sample size of this variable is 27. This was to be expected as there are currently 27 member states of the European Union. The table also shows us that the mean, which is the most suitable measure of central tendency in this context is 21.4%. This means that across all parliaments in the European Union an average of 21.4% seats going to populist parties is to be expected.

Other statistics to look at are the standard deviation which is 17.5. A skewness of 0.87 and a kurtosis of 0.03. These values are considered acceptable for a normally distributed sample. (George & Mallery, 2019)

After checking all of the descriptive statistics for the dependent variable, it is now time to check the same statistics for the independent variables, which are GDP per capita, employment rate, life satisfaction rating and education index, for all of these variables the mean is the most suitable measure of centrality, similarly to the dependent variable. The sample size is the same as the dependent variable and is thus 27.

As seen in table 1, the mean of GDP per capita is 105.1. For employment rate the mean is calculated at 76.8%, meaning that approximately 76.8% of Europeans at a working age are active on the labor market. The mean of the average life satisfaction rating that is computed is a 7.2. Finally, the mean for the education index can be found as a score of 0.87.

Looking at the standard deviations of the variables one thing in specific is noticeable, which is the relatively high standard deviation for GDP per capita. This is caused by the fact that there are two countries which are outliers for this variable. Luxembourg has a GDP per capita of 256 and Ireland in turn has a GDP per capita of 235, thus it is logical that the standard deviation is so high, given the small sample size. For the other variables the standard deviation is nothing out of the ordinary.

The outliers for the GDP per capita also explain the high skewness and kurtosis scores computed in the descriptive statistics. The skewness is 2.38 and the kurtosis is 5.98. These values are considered too high for a normally distributed sample, however, a regression analysis does not require the independent variables to be normally distributed. Hence the high kurtosis of the life satisfaction rating of 3.82 also not being an issue.

4. RESULTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION OF RESULTS

As mentioned before in the methodology section, this research has made use of a regression analysis, as the relationship between populist voting and several well-being factors was researched. These variables are the following: GDP per capita, employment rate, life satisfaction rating and education index. The following hypotheses were used for this regression:

H0: In the European Union, there is no significant linear relationship between the geographic distribution of wellbeing indicators and support for populist movements in different regions.

H1: In the European Union there is a significant linear relationship between the geographic distribution of wellbeing indicators and support for populist movements in different regions.

Solely on the data set a couple of observations can already be made. One interesting observation is the fact that three countries in the European Union have zero populist seats in their parliament. These countries are the countries of Cyprus, Lithuania and Malta. In contrast, the countries with relatively the most populist seats in their parliament are Hungary with 62.3%, Italy with 59% and the Czech Republic at 45.5%.

4.2 MAIN FINDINGS

4.2.1 MULTIPLE LINEAR REGRESSION

As the dataset used has a continuous dependent variable, the percentage of seats for populist parties, and four continuous independent variables, GDP per capita, employment rate, life satisfaction rating and education index, the regression analysis is directly applicable. If one of the variables would have been categorical, it would have been useful to first run a ANOVA or run a logistic regression instead of a linear one.

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of the Estimate
1	0,317	0,1	-0,063	18,0694

TABLE 2 – OVERALL FIT OF THE MODEL

After running the multiple linear regression it is important to first look at the statistics for the overall fit for the model. The R-squared of this model is 0.1, as seen in table 2, which is a considerably low result. This means that the independent variables in this model do not accurately predict the percentage of seats for populist parties. Thus, the explanatory power of the model is weak.

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	801,75	4	200,438	0,614	0,657
Residual	7183,034	22	326,502		
Total	7984,785	26			

TABLE 3 – STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MODEL

In table 3 the F-test for this model is displayed. This test helps with evaluating whether the overall regression model is a good fit for this dataset. A significant test would indicate that a significant amount of variance of the populist voting would be explained by the predictor variables. Table 4 shows us a significance level of 0.657, which is insignificant judging by the 95% confidence interval used. Thus, the regression is statistically insignificant, meaning that no conclusions on the null hypothesis can be drawn at this point of the research. This means that it is still unclear whether or not one or more of the independent variables are correlated to populist voting.

	B	Beta	Sig.	VIF
GDP per Capita (2022)	-0,043	-0,112	0,609	1,129
Employment rate (2023)	0,232	0,063	0,774	1,152
Life Satisfaction Rating (2022)	-4,18	-0,112	0,618	1,203
Education Index (2021)	-65,773	-0,222	0,345	1,292

TABLE 4 – COEFFICIENTS AND COLLINEARITY STATISTICS

To check for the cause of this statistical insignificance it is important to look at the statistics for multicollinearity. These statistics will tell us if two or more of our independent variables have a correlation with each other, which would make it increasingly difficult to determine their individual effects on the dependent variable. Table 4 shows the VIF scores for each of the independent variables. A score higher than 10 is usually viewed as a high correlation and as an issue. All of the variables however have a score of around 1, meaning that no multicollinearity is taking place in this model. It is

also important to look at the possibility of one of the independent variables actually being significant with the dependent variable on an individual level. However, as seen in table 5 the P-values for all of the independent variables are insignificant. Stepwise regression analysis also did not show any significant results.

4.2.2 LOGISTIC REGRESSION

In order to check if these insignificant results were reproduceable an alternative regression model was ran as a form of a robustness check. This check made use of a logistic regression. A logistic regression is done by using a categorical dependent variable and continuous independent variables. Thus, in order to start working with this data, the dependent variable needed to be transformed. This was done by looking at the mean of this variable, which is 21.387 as seen in table 1 and splitting the cases into two groups. One of which with a lower score than 21.387 and one which with a higher one, and getting a score of 0 and 1 respectively. This variable was called PopulistLevel and the cases with a lower score were named low and the cases with a higher score were named high. This resulted in 15 cases being low and 12 cases being high. The resulting dataset can be found in appendix A. As a logistic regression does not test for a linear relationship, the null hypothesis for this regression is different from the first one. The hypothesis for the logistic regression is as follows: In the European Union, there is not a significant relationship between the geographic distribution of wellbeing indicators and support for populist movements in different regions.

Model	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
2	0,100	0,134

TABLE 5 – OVERALL FIT FOR LOGISTIC REGRESSION

After running the logistic regression, it is once more of high importance to check the statistics for the overall fit of the model. The Cox & Snell R-squared of this model is 0.1 and the Nagelkerke R-squared is 0.134, these scores are low and similar to the scores in the multiple linear regression. The low scores once again indicate that the independent variables do not accurately predict the dependent variable and the explanatory power has not increased by using a alternative regression analysis.

	B	Sig.	Exp(B)
GDP per Capita (2022)	0,000	0,983	1,000
Employment rate (2023)	0,071	0,466	1,074
Life Satisfaction Rating (2022)	-0,563	0,588	0,569
Education Index (2021)	-10,834	0,205	0,000

TABLE 6 – SIGNIFICANCE OF LOGISTIC REGRESSION

Table 6 shows the significance levels of the individual variables. Once again none of the P-values show a score of 0.05 or lower, meaning that the logistic regression did not lead to any significant results either at a confidence interval of 95%. Once again this means that the null hypothesis can not be rejected and thus it is still not possible to say whether or not the well-being factors have a correlation with the populist support in the European Union. The tests showed similar outcomes and thus passed the robustness check.

4.4 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The null hypothesis for this research was as follows: In the European Union, there is no significant linear relationship between the geographic distribution of well-being indicators and support for populist movements in different regions. For the logistic regression this hypothesis this hypothesis was similar, except it was not linear. As both the multiple linear regression and the logistic regression came back with insignificant P-values at a 95% confidence interval, it is not possible to reject the null hypothesis,

meaning that it is not possible to say if there is a relationship between the geographic distribution of well-being indicators and support for populist movements in different regions.

This result can be traced back to the literature analysis in the theoretical framework. A feasible cause for the significance levels of the tests, is that it is possible that there were well-being factors more suitable for the regressions than the ones selected. The well-being factors used were selected based on Brexit voting results (Becker et al., 2017) and subjective well-being factors (Veenhoven, 2009), but it could be possible that in parliamentary voting other well-being factors are of higher importance. A possible explanation for this can be found by looking into the mediating variable in Figure 1, the conceptual framework, which is dissatisfaction in the European Union. The well-being factors that were selected in the methodology, do not have a direct impact on populist voting. Instead they influence dissatisfaction in the European Union which in turn influences populist voting patterns in the European Union (Koeppen et al., 2020), however, as mentioned earlier, the drivers of dissatisfactions is a topic of disagreement. Dijkstra et al. (2019) argue that education and employment are the most important drivers influencing populist support. And even though these two variables show the lowest significance levels in the logistic regression at relatively 0,205 and 0,466, they are still not significant.

Another possible cause for the insignificant results of the regression analysis is the fact that the sample size was relatively small. 27 cases is not much and makes it so that the statistical power of the analysis decreases. The small sample size did not cause problems with regards to how representative the sample is however, as the cause for the small number of cases is simply that there are only 27 countries in the European Union.

The insignificant results do not mean that a relationship between well-being factors and populist support does not exist. Instead, it simply means that the dataset does not provide evidence of this correlation. However, based on the literature that has been reviewed (Becker et al., 2017; Dijkstra et al., 2019; Koeppen et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), it is still highly likely that the relationship between well-being factors and populist voting does exist.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 RESEARCH AIM AND ANSWER TO RESEARCH QUESTION

This research explores the connection between populist support and well-being indicators in the European Union's diverse regions. It aims to answer how the distribution of well-being indicators correlates with populist support across EU regions. It does so by answering the main research question: To what extent does the geographic distribution of well-being indicators correlate with support for populist movements in different regions of the European Union? The hypothesis of the research is that it is likely that there is a correlation between the geographic distribution of well-being factors and support for populist movements in different regions of the European Union. While previous studies have looked into these factors separately, this research addresses the gap by focusing on the EU context.

Studies have shown that populism poses a danger to several aspects of society, such as the rule of law (Bugarcic & Kuhelj, 2018), equality (Mostov, 2021) and democracy as a whole (Abts & Rummens, 2007). It holds societal relevance by offering insights for policy interventions to enhance socio-economic conditions, democratic governance, and European integration. Overall, it aims to deepen the understanding of European politics and society to inform evidence-based policy responses to populist sentiments and regional well-being disparities.

The statistical analysis in this research shows that it is not possible to reject the null hypothesis. Thus, based on the regression analysis, it is not possible to make any conclusions on whether or not there is a correlation between the well-being factors and the support for populist movements. However several scholars have found that this correlation does exist (Becker et al., 2017; Dijkstra et al., 2019; Koeppen et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Hence why, the answer to the main research question of this paper is, following from the insignificant results from the statistical analysis, it is not possible to say whether there is a correlation between the geographic distribution of well-being factors and the support for populist movements in the European Union, but based on findings in literature, it is highly likely that such a correlation does exist. Judging from the literature, policy makers should try their best to improve the subjective well-being as well as objective well-being and focus on the inequalities between regions and people, so that places as well as people will not be left behind (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Koeppen et al., 2020). All to slow down populism and to mitigate it's dangers.

5.2 DISCUSSION

5.2.1 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The geographic boundaries that this research set is a limitation. Due to the fact that the research focused on the European Union in specific, the number of cases was just 27. This lead to a decrease in the statistical power of the regression, possibly causing the insignificant results.

Another limitation of this research is that the well-being factors selected, were possibly not the most relevant ones to research. The selection of these factors was based on articles by Veenhoven (2009) and Burger and Eiselt (2023). It is possible that the insignificant outcome of the test is caused by more suitable well-being factors not included in the regression analysis. The literature used to select the well-being factors may not have been the most relevant articles. The theoretical framework that was laid out may not have been optimal, leading to a conceptual framework which might not have been perfectly compatible with the regression analysis.

5.2.2 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research could go in many different directions, for one it would be interesting to investigate this relationship on a different scale or in a different context. There has already been research done in the context of the Netherlands (Burger & Eiselt, 2023), but perhaps looking more local could lead to interesting results. Another possible research direction could be to investigate other well-being factors and their relationship to populist support, as this was a limitation of this research.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: DATASET POPULIST PARTIES

	Members of European Union	Total number of seats in Lower House of government	Number of seats for populist parties	Percentage of seats for populist parties	Populist parties in country	GDP per Capita 2022	Employment rate 2023	Life Satisfaction Rating 2022	Education Index 2021	Populist Level
1	Cyprus	56	0	.0	None	94	78.9	7.2	.85	0
2	Lithuania	141	0	.0	None	89	78.5	7.1	.90	0
3	Malta	79	0	.0	None	104	81.7	7.4	.87	0
4	Denmark	179	7	3.9	DF	136	79.8	7.5	.95	0
5	Poland	459	21	4.6	K15, SP	79	77.9	7.7	.88	0
6	Latvia	100	8	8.0	LPV	73	77.5	6.8	.89	0
7	Luxembourg	60	5	8.3	ADR	256	74.8	7.2	.83	0
8	Romania	330	29	8.8	AUR	76	68.7	7.7	.77	0
9	Spain	350	33	9.4	Vox	86	70.5	7.1	.85	0
10	Germany	735	78	10.6	AfD	117	81.1	6.5	.94	0
11	Belgium	150	18	12.0	VB	120	72.1	7.6	.96	0
12	Estonia	101	16	15.8	EKRE	85	82.1	7.2	.89	0
13	Greece	300	48	16.0	EL, Syriza	67	67.4	6.7	.94	0
14	Austria	183	30	16.4	FPÖ	124	77.2	7.9	.85	0
15	Sweden	349	72	20.6	SD	119	82.6	7.4	.96	0
16	Portugal	230	50	21.7	Chega	79	78.2	7.0	.79	1
17	Ireland	160	36	22.5	SF	235	79.1	7.4	.91	1
18	Croatia	151	35	23.2	DP, Most, Mozemol	73	70.7	6.8	.83	1
19	Finland	200	47	23.5	Liik, PS	110	78.2	7.7	.96	1
20	France	577	164	28.4	DLF, RN, FI	100	74.4	7.0	.83	1
21	Netherlands	150	48	32.0	BBB, FvD, JA21, PVV	130	83.5	7.6	.94	1
22	Slovakia	150	58	38.7	OLaNO, Smer	71	77.5	7.0	.83	1
23	Bulgaria	240	100	41.7	GERB, Revival	62	76.2	5.6	.77	1
24	Slovenia	90	40	44.4	Levica, N.Si, SDS	90	77.5	7.5	.92	1
25	Czech Republic	200	91	45.5	ANO, SPD	90	81.7	7.4	.88	1
26	Italy	400	236	59.0	Fdl, Lega, M5S	97	66.3	7.2	.81	1
27	Hungary	199	124	62.3	Fidesz, Jobbik	76	80.7	6.9	.82	1

APPENDIX B: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research has been written from an outsider standpoint, in an attempt to have the most objective research outcome as possible. Social stereotypes have been ignored in this research paper and all the data used is anonymous. The data that has been used was also stored on a password protected computer and thus always protected. Given the diverse nature of populism and well-being factors across different cultures the research design was culturally sensitive, respecting the values and norms of different populations. By adhering to these ethical considerations, the research aimed to uphold the highest standards of ethical conduct.