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**From Weimar to Today: Mapping Populism
Across German Parliaments**

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From Weimar to Today: Mapping Populism Across German Parliaments

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Abstract

While the recent rise of populism has led many scholars to study populism in the modern era, its long-run evolution remains underexplored. This paper analyzes German parliamentary speeches to study populism over the long run, covering the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) and the united Federal Republic (1991–today). We employ a tailored and validated machine learning model to measure populism and dissect it into anti-elitism and people-centrism. We find that in both republics, populism is similarly common, similarly distributed across the ideological spectrum, and increases over time. Moreover, in both states, left-wing parties were initially the most populist group but were eventually overtaken by right-wing parties. However, we find a difference in the form of populism: in the Weimar Republic, the increase in populism is driven by a surge in the anti-elitism of right-wing parties, while in the Federal Republic, it is due to a general rise in people-centrism.

Keywords: Populism, Germany, Weimar Republic, Nazi, Text analysis, BERT

JEL Classification: P16; N40; C89

Contact: Paul C. Behler, University of Bonn, paul.behler@uni-bonn.de. Laurenz Guenther, Toulouse School of Economics, laurenz.guenther@tse-fr.eu. **Acknowledgments:** We are grateful to Thomas Dohmen, Salvatore Nunnari and Vincent Verger for helpful comments. We thank John Levi Martin for generous data sharing. **Funding:** Guenther acknowledges financial support from the European Research Council (POPULIZATION Grant No. 852526) and the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (under the Investissement d’Avenir programme, ANR-17-EURE-0010). Behler acknowledges funding by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany’s Excellence Strategy – EXC 2126/1-390838866.

1 Introduction

Populism has emerged as a widely discussed phenomenon in contemporary politics. Scholars have extensively examined its causes, manifestations, and consequences, often with a strong focus on recent episodes (Berman, 2021; de Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

However, qualitative evidence suggests that populism is not a purely modern phenomenon (Taggart, 2000). The core narrative of a “pure people” opposing a “corrupt elite” has deep historical roots, ranging from the “populares” of ancient Rome (Canovan, 1999) to 19th-century American agrarian populists (Kazin, 2014; Postel, 2007). In the German context, the first democratic republic — the Weimar Republic — was even turned into a dictatorship by the rise of the National Socialist Party, which has been described as right-wing populist (Funke et al., 2023).

Many commentators have compared the current rise of populism to such historical episodes (Snyder, 2017). However, there do not exist rigorous quantitative analyses of how populism developed during such episodes and how these developments compare to the modern rise of populism. We aim to fill this gap by analyzing parliamentary speeches in Germany across two political regimes: the Weimar Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany. We measure populist rhetoric using a tailored machine learning model and distinguish between its core dimensions: anti-elitism and people-centrism. This methodology enables us to measure populism as a continuous, multidimensional phenomenon (Meijers and Zaslove, 2021; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

Aggregating the two dimensions into one populism index, we find major parallels between both German republics. First, the overall frequency of populist rhetoric is similar in both parliaments. This provides evidence that populism is not merely a contemporary development, but rather a persistent feature of political discourse in Germany.

Second, the ideological distribution of populist rhetoric also reveals striking similarities. In both parliaments, populism followed a U-shaped distribution across the ideological spectrum: the most extreme parties on both the left and right exhibited the highest levels of populist rhetoric. This pattern persists even when controlling for opposition status and indicates that populism may be an inherent feature of political extremism.

Third, we find similarities regarding the temporal evolution of populism. Both republics experienced a modest increase in populist language over time. Further, in both parliaments, left-wing parties were initially the primary users of populist rhetoric. However, over time, right-wing parties increased their usage and eventually became the most populist group. This indicates that the current coupling of populism with a right-wing host ideology is rare in German politics, with the only comparable instance being the final years of the Weimar Republic.

However, despite these many similarities, by dissecting populism into anti-elitism and people-centrism, we also reveal a difference between the rise of populism in the two German republics. While in both parliaments, anti-elitist rhetoric was more common than people-centrism, the temporal evolutions differ: In the Weimar Republic, the increase in populism was mainly driven by an increase in anti-elitism among right-wing parties. In contrast, in the Federal Republic, anti-elitist rhetoric has remained constant while people-centrism has recently risen. This modern rise of people-centrism started around 2009 and is common across all major parties. Therefore, our findings suggest some caution when equating the rise of populism in the Weimar Republic and modern Germany. While the rise of populism in the Weimar era was due to a rise in anti-elitist rhetoric, the modern rise of populism in Germany is a rise of people-centrism.

Taken together, our results suggest that (i) populism in Germany is not only a reaction to contemporary crises but a deeply embedded and enduring feature of its political landscape, (ii) populism seems to be inherently tied to political extremism and (iii) the rise of populism in the Weimar Republic differs from the modern rise of populism, with the former being driven by a rise in anti-elitism and the latter being driven by a rise in people-centrism.

2 Methods

2.1 Data

A frequently used definition of populism classifies politicians as populist or non-populist based on their *rhetoric*. This definition describes populism as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013, 2017). Accordingly, it gives rise

to (at least) two sub-dimensions of populism: *people-centrism* and *anti-elitism*. People-centrism refers to the elevation of “the people” as the central, morally superior actor in politics. The collective will, identity, or interests of “the people” (however defined) should dominate political decision-making, overriding competing claims from elites or institutions. Anti-elitism, by contrast, is the rejection of “the elite” as corrupt, self-serving, or detached from the people’s will. This elite can include political leaders, economic elites, or intellectuals.

Since this definition is based on rhetoric, many studies use text analysis to estimate the extent of populism (Hawkins, 2009; Hawkins and Silva, 2018; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011). We follow this literature and measure populist rhetoric from parliamentary speeches. Our data stems from two sources: (i) speeches from the parliament of the Weimar Republic between 1919 and 1933, digitized by Fuhse et al. (2020), and (ii) speeches from the parliament of the Federal German Republic between 1991 and 2018, taken from the ParlSpeech data set (Rauh and Schwalbach, 2020). An observation in our data is an individual speech. We exclude speeches held by chairs of a parliamentary session. As a result, we analyze 39,625 unique speeches held in the parliament of the Weimar Republic and 201,102 speeches held in the parliament of the Federal Republic.

2.2 Measuring Populism

The most frequently used methods for analyzing text data are manual coding, dictionary-based approaches, and machine learning (Hawkins and Silva, 2018). Manual coding is cost-intensive and suffers from subjectivity (Pauwels, 2017). Dictionary approaches also suffer from various problems, for instance, the fact that they do not consider the context in which a word is used (Erhard et al., 2025). These problems are mitigated by the use of more advanced machine learning approaches, in particular *transformer*-models (Vaswani et al., 2017), which are therefore becoming increasingly common (Bonikowski et al., 2022; Di Cocco and Monechi, 2022; Dai and Kustov, 2022; Klamm et al., 2023; Licht et al., 2025). Such models — introduced by Vaswani et al. (2017) — use the concept of self-attention to attend to different components of the input according to their relative importance. This enables them to capture the broader context in which a word is used within a sentence.

We use a transformer-based model (PopBERT), recently built by [Erhard et al. \(2025\)](#), to analyze speeches. This model has been trained on a carefully annotated dataset from the parliament of the Federal German Republic and is, therefore, ideally suited to our context. PopBERT takes *sentences* of a speech as its input and produces scores for people-centrism and anti-elitism of this sentence as its output. These scores range between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating a stronger degree of people-centrism and anti-elitism, respectively. Following the procedure by [Erhard et al. \(2025\)](#), we binarize all sentences to be either anti-elitist/people-centric (1) or not (0).¹ Then, we aggregate sentences back to the speech level by taking the average. Hence, for each speech, we measure what percentage of its sentences are anti-elite or people-centric, respectively. We interpret these measures as the extent of either populist sub-dimension. [Appendix A](#) provides example speeches with a particularly high and low extent of anti-elitism and people-centrism, respectively. In addition to these two sub-dimensions, we calculate an aggregate populism index by taking, for each speech, the product of its people-centrism and anti-elitism scores ([Erhard et al., 2025](#); [Wuttke et al., 2020](#)).

2.3 Validation

Does this procedure yield valid estimates? [Erhard et al. \(2025\)](#) validated the model extensively, but only for the period they analyzed: the Federal Republic from 2013 to 2021. Hence, while PopBERT offers a scalable and reliable tool for modern German political discourse, its optimization for the Federal Republic post-2013 raises concerns about its applicability to earlier periods, particularly the Weimar era. Further validation is therefore warranted.

Traditional validation approaches typically employ trained research assistants manually coding textual data ([Hawkins and Silva, 2018](#); [Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011](#)). However, this approach suffers from the subjectivity and inconsistency of human coders. Recent research suggests that large language models like ChatGPT outperform human annotators in objectivity and efficiency, especially when prompted for specific tasks ([Gilardi et al., 2023](#); [Törnberg, 2023](#)). Therefore, to test whether PopBERT also provides valid measurements for earlier periods, particularly for the Weimar Republic, we classify a subset of speeches using ChatGPT and compare

¹The threshold for binarizing was determined by [Erhard et al. \(2025\)](#). We take the same threshold.

it to the classification by PopBERT.

Given the cost constraints associated with validation, we analyzed a subset of 2,200 speeches – 1,100 from the Weimar Republic and 1,100 from the Federal Republic. Due to the skewed distribution of the measure (see [Figure C.3](#)), simple random sampling of speeches would have yielded a majority of speeches with zero populism scores. To avoid this, we used a stratified sampling procedure: For each period and measure (anti-elitism and people-centrism), we first selected the 1,000 speeches with the highest PopBERT scores. This leads to a large range of scores but does not include very low ones. To assess PopBERT’s validity in identifying low-populism content, we then added the 100 speeches with the lowest scores for each measure. We evaluated the speeches using the GPT-4 model via the Python API for ChatGPT. The model was prompted to assess each speech according to Mudde’s definition of populism and produce probability scores ranging from 0 to 1 for both anti-elitism and people-centrism. This format facilitated direct comparison with PopBERT outputs. To ensure reproducibility, we set the temperature parameter to zero. To enhance the quality of the output, we set reasoning effort to “high” and verbosity to “low”. The original prompt (in German) and an English translation can be found in [Appendix B](#).

If PopBERT’s classification is valid, there should be a positive association between PopBERT Scores and ChatGPT scores. [Figure 1](#) shows the binned scatterplots between PopBERT and ChatGPT scores. We find a clear positive association. The correlations for the Federal Republic are 0.48 (Anti-elitism) and 0.51 (People-centrism). For the Weimar Republic, they amount to 0.66 (Anti-elitism) and 0.65 (People-centrism). Hence, the two models largely agree on which speeches are anti-elitist and people-centric, for the Weimar and Federal Republic, respectively. Importantly, this agreement is even stronger for the Weimar Republic. This finding validates PopBERT’s applicability beyond its training context, supporting its use for our comparative analysis.

However, [Figure 1](#) also reveals that the association between PopBERT and ChatGPT scores is weak at high PopBERT scores, specifically at values above 0.6 (for people-centrism, PopBERT did not assign such high scores). This could indicate that PopBERT can distinguish low-level populist speeches from mid-to-high-level populist speeches well, while it is more challeng-

ing for it to differentiate high from very high levels of populist rhetoric. Hence, we test whether our results are robust to the exclusion of speeches that PopBERT assigns very high levels of populism (above 0.6). To this end, we reproduce our main figures after excluding such speeches, and display them in [Appendix C](#) ([Figure C.2](#), [Figure C.4](#), and [Figure C.5](#)). Our results are not meaningfully affected by this exclusion. Only the levels of populism decrease somewhat, which is a direct result of eliminating the most populist speeches. Finally, also excluding the top 1% of anti-elitist and people-centric speeches, respectively, yields very similar findings (the corresponding results can be obtained upon request).

We, therefore, conclude that the results of our validation exercise confirm the validity of PopBERT for speeches from both republics.

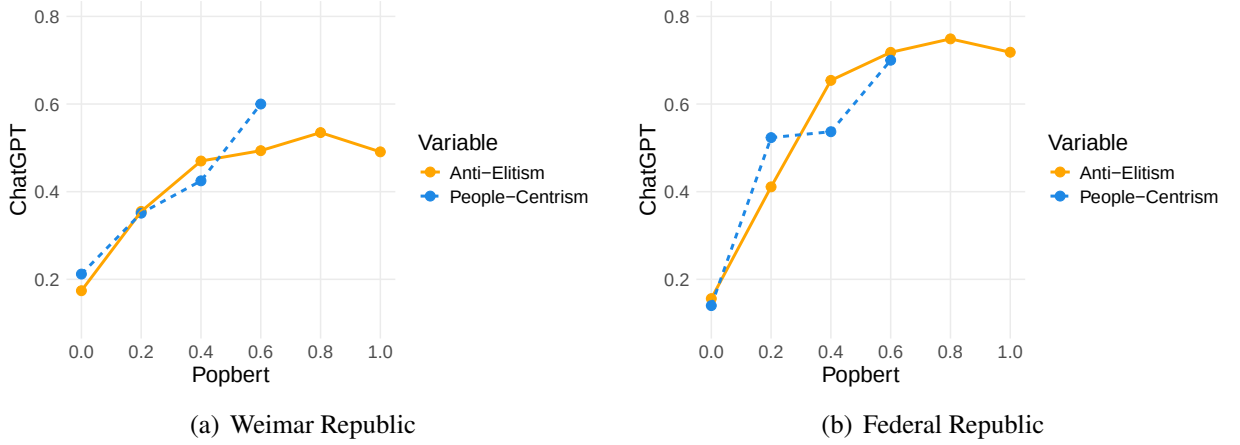


Figure 1: Comparing Populism Scores of PopBERT and ChatGPT

Note: The figures show binned scatterplots. For People-Centrism, PopBERT did not assign high values. Correlations for the Federal Republic: Anti-elitism ≈ 0.48 ; People-centrism ≈ 0.51 . Correlations for the Weimar Republic: Anti-elitism ≈ 0.66 ; People-centrism ≈ 0.65 . All are highly significant.

3 Results

3.1 Levels and Distribution of Populist Rhetoric

In a first step, we pool all speech-level values to measure the relative frequency of anti-elitist and people-centric rhetoric. We find that speeches held in the Weimar parliament were much more anti-elitist (average score $\approx 7\%$) than people-centric ($\approx 1\%$). For the Bundestag (Federal Republic Parliament), we observe slightly less anti-elitism but a similar share of people-centric

language (6% vs 1%).

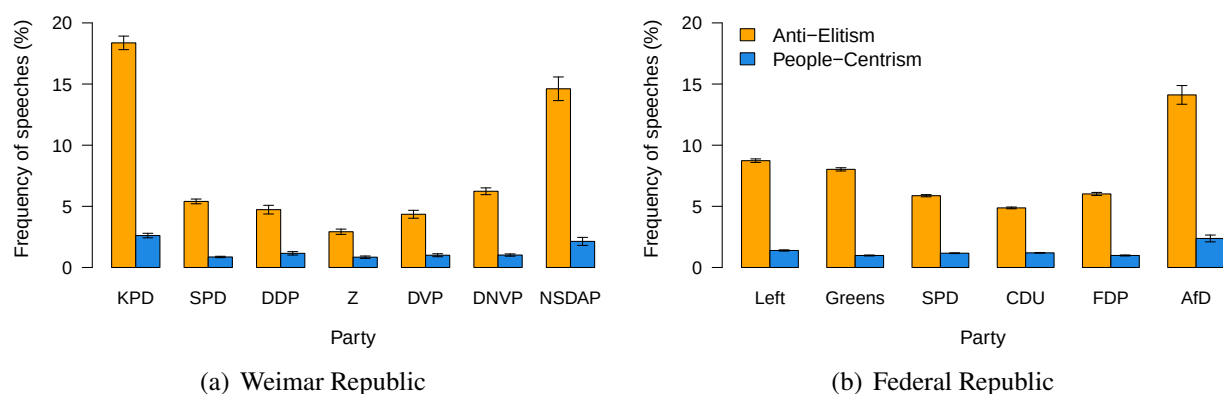


Figure 2: Anti-elitism and People-centrism in Germany Pooled Over Time

Note: Weimar (1919–1932) and Federal Republic (1991–2018) parliamentary speeches analyzed via PopBERT; bars show the average PopBERT score for speeches held by a parliamentarian of each party for anti-elitism and people-centrism, respectively. Data is pooled over time. Weimar Republic parties: KPD=Communists, SPD=Socialists, DDP=Liberals, Z=Center, DVP=Conservatives, DNVP=Nationalists, NSDAP=Nazis. Federal Republic parties: Left=Communists, Greens=Ecologists, SPD=Socialists, CDU=Conservatives (includes CSU), FDP=Liberals, AfD=Nationalists.

Figure 2 displays average values by party, for anti-elitism and people-centrism, respectively. We order parties according to their ideological left-right position, with the most extreme left-wing parties on the left, the most radical right-wing parties on the right, and moderate parties in the center. The relationship between ideological extremism and anti-elitism is monotonous in both Republics: the further one moves from the traditional center party (Center Party in Weimar and CDU/CSU in the Federal Republic) toward the left or right, the more frequent anti-elitism becomes. In the Weimar Republic, the highest levels of anti-elitist rhetoric are found among the Communists (KPD) and the National Socialists (NSDAP). Similarly, in the Federal Republic, it is the far-left (Die Linke) and far-right (AfD) parties that exhibit the strongest anti-elitist tendencies. People-centrism is also most strongly pronounced among the two most extreme parties in both Republics, but the relationship between ideological extremism and people-centrism is not monotonous.

Notably, the National Socialists and Weimar Communists are more anti-elitist than, and similarly people-centric as, the modern AfD. Since the AfD is generally classified as a populist party (March, 2012), one might conclude that, in the Weimar Republic, the NSDAP and the Communists were populists in the modern sense of the term. Another noteworthy observation is that the distribution of populism across the political spectrum is asymmetric in both

Republics, but in opposite directions. In the Weimar Republic, the most left-wing party is most anti-elite, while in modern Germany, the most right-wing party is clearly the most anti-elite and people-centric. As a result, the main difference in the cross-party distributions between the two Republics is that the modern Left party is much less anti-elite than the Weimar Communists.

3.2 Accounting for Opposition Status

A potential explanation for the higher usage of populist rhetoric by extreme parties is their lower frequency of government participation. To test this hypothesis, we estimate regressions of the form:

$$\text{Populism}_i = \alpha + \beta \cdot \text{Party}_i + \sum \gamma_t \cdot \text{Year}_t + \varepsilon_i, \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Populism}_i = \alpha + \beta \cdot \text{Party}_i + \sum \gamma_t \cdot \text{Year}_t + \theta \cdot \mathbb{1}[\text{In government}]_i + \varepsilon_i, \quad (2)$$

where Populism_i indicates either standardized anti-elitism or people-centrism ($SD=1$), Party_i is a categorical variable for party identity, $\mathbb{1}[\text{In government}]_i$ is a binary indicator for government participation, and Year_t denotes year fixed effects.

Table 1 reports the results. For anti-elitism, the coefficient on $\mathbb{1}[\text{In government}]_i$ is highly significant ($p < 0.01$) and negative in both Republics, indicating that opposition parties are substantially more anti-elitist after controlling for year fixed effects. The association between opposition status and anti-elitism is much stronger in the Federal Republic, consistent with the visual impression from **Figure 4** in the main text. Controlling for opposition status also has a greater impact on party coefficients in the Federal Republic, particularly for the SPD and FDP. This indicates that these parties make much more use of anti-elitist language when in opposition.

Figure C.1 illustrates visually how anti-elitism and people-centrism change over time, depending on which parties are in government. Consistent with the regression results, there has been a strong tendency of parties in the Federal Republic to tone down their anti-elitist rhetoric once they are part of the government coalition. However, the regression results reveal that extreme parties still have much higher anti-elitism coefficients after controlling for opposition status, and neither the ordering nor the relative magnitudes of party effects change strongly. For people-centrism, the association with being part of the government is weaker and less consis-

tent. Including the government indicator as a control has a small impact on party rankings and effect sizes. In sum, this evidence suggests that opposition status does not fully account for the frequent use of populist language by ideologically extreme parties.

Table 1: Anti-elitism and People-centrism of Parties Controlling for Covariates

	Dependent Variable:							
	Anti-elitism (SD)				People-centrism (SD)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
KPD	0.326*** (0.049)	0.330*** (0.049)			0.127** (0.053)	0.128** (0.053)		
SPD (Weimar)	-0.781*** (0.043)	-0.757*** (0.044)			-0.363*** (0.047)	-0.358*** (0.048)		
DDP	-0.821*** (0.046)	-0.789*** (0.047)			-0.294*** (0.051)	-0.287*** (0.053)		
Z	-0.995*** (0.044)	-0.941*** (0.047)			-0.371*** (0.049)	-0.359*** (0.053)		
DVP	-0.878*** (0.045)	-0.833*** (0.047)			-0.331*** (0.050)	-0.321*** (0.053)		
DNVP	-0.719*** (0.045)	-0.701*** (0.045)			-0.323*** (0.049)	-0.319*** (0.050)		
Left			-0.569*** (0.044)	-0.584*** (0.044)			-0.172*** (0.049)	-0.171*** (0.049)
Greens			-0.656*** (0.044)	-0.573*** (0.044)			-0.299*** (0.049)	-0.304*** (0.049)
SPD (Federal)			-0.908*** (0.044)	-0.655*** (0.044)			-0.204*** (0.049)	-0.220*** (0.049)
CDU			-1.013*** (0.043)	-1.028*** (0.043)			-0.200*** (0.049)	-0.199*** (0.049)
FDP			-0.915*** (0.044)	-0.655*** (0.044)			-0.261*** (0.049)	-0.277*** (0.049)
1 [In government]		-0.050*** (0.015)		-0.442*** (0.008)		-0.011 (0.016)		0.027*** (0.007)
Constant	0.541*** (0.045)	0.543*** (0.045)	0.793*** (0.045)	0.761*** (0.045)	0.355*** (0.052)	0.355*** (0.052)	0.163*** (0.050)	0.165*** (0.050)
Republic	Weimar	Weimar	Federal	Federal	Weimar	Weimar	Federal	Federal
Year indicators	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	27,416	27,416	154,377	154,377	27,416	27,416	154,377	154,377
R ²	0.173	0.173	0.041	0.062	0.029	0.029	0.012	0.012

Note: Results of Equation 2. Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Overall, these similarities suggest that populism is a persistent trait of German parliamen-

tary discourse. In particular, the finding that populism exhibits the same U-shaped pattern across the political spectrum under both regimes suggests that populism is a stable and possibly inherent feature of political extremism in Germany.

3.3 The Temporal Evolution of Populist Rhetoric

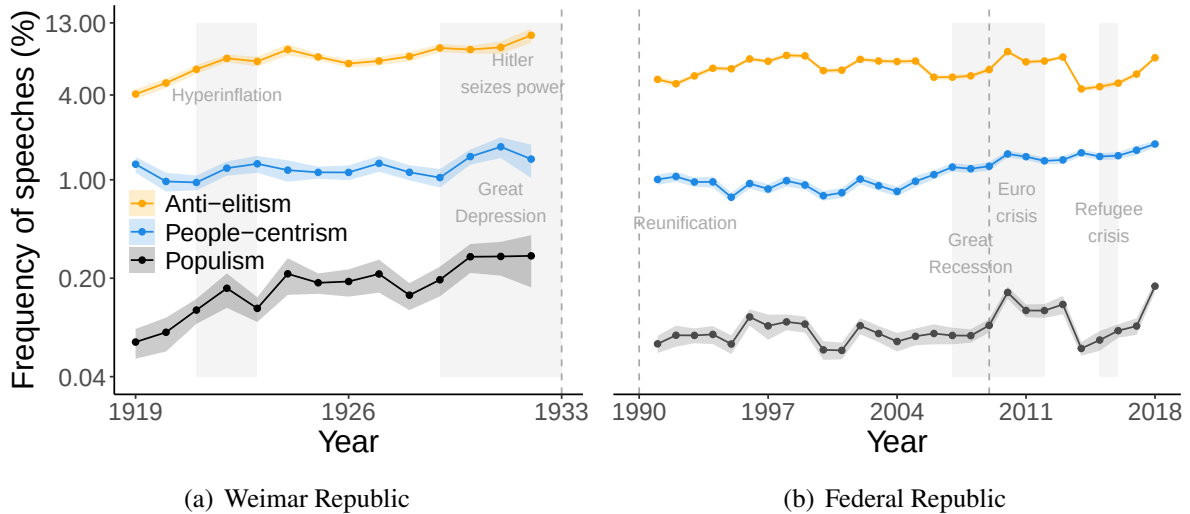


Figure 3: Temporal Trends in Populist Rhetoric (Log Scales)

Note: Weimar (1919–1933) and Federal Republic (1991–2018) speeches; lines track anti-elitism, people-centrism, and populism (their product). The vertical scale measures log values. Dashed gray lines mark major crises. Shaded areas around the lines visualize 95% confidence bands.

Given the Weimar Republic’s descent into instability and eventual dictatorship, we proceed with an examination of populism’s temporal dynamics. **Figure 3** tracks anti-elitism, people-centrism, and their product (populism), using log scales to account for the fact that anti-elitism values are much higher. Linear unconditional OLS regressions of the form $populism_i = \alpha + \beta \cdot year_i + \varepsilon_i$ reveal a slight overall upward trend in both republics (Weimar: $\beta \approx 0.015$, $p < 0.0001$; Federal Republic: $\beta \approx 0.002$, $p < 0.0001$), with the average yearly increase in populist language being an order of magnitude higher in the Weimar Republic compared to modern Germany. Notably, anti-elitism and people-centrism (and therefore also the populism index) spike in years after major crises (grey areas). However, these spikes are small compared to the base level of populist rhetoric.

The similarities between the two republics mask divergent components. In the Weimar Republic, anti-elitism and people-centrism both increased, but anti-elitism rose more strongly

(Anti-elitism: $\beta \approx 2.7, p < 0.0001$; people-centrism: $\beta \approx 0.6, p < 0.001$). In contrast, in the Federal Republic, anti-elitism follows no statistically significant linear trend ($\beta \approx 0.01, p \approx 0.73$), while people-centrism increases more strongly than in the Weimar Republic ($\beta \approx 1, p < 0.0001$). Notably, this increase in people-centrism is purely driven by the years after the Great Recession (pre-2007: $\beta \approx -0.05, p \approx 0.49$; since 2007: $\beta \approx 1.4, p < 0.0001$). In total, these findings underscore populism's adaptability and challenge the applicability of aggregate populism indices.

3.4 Party Dynamics and the Right-Wing Shift

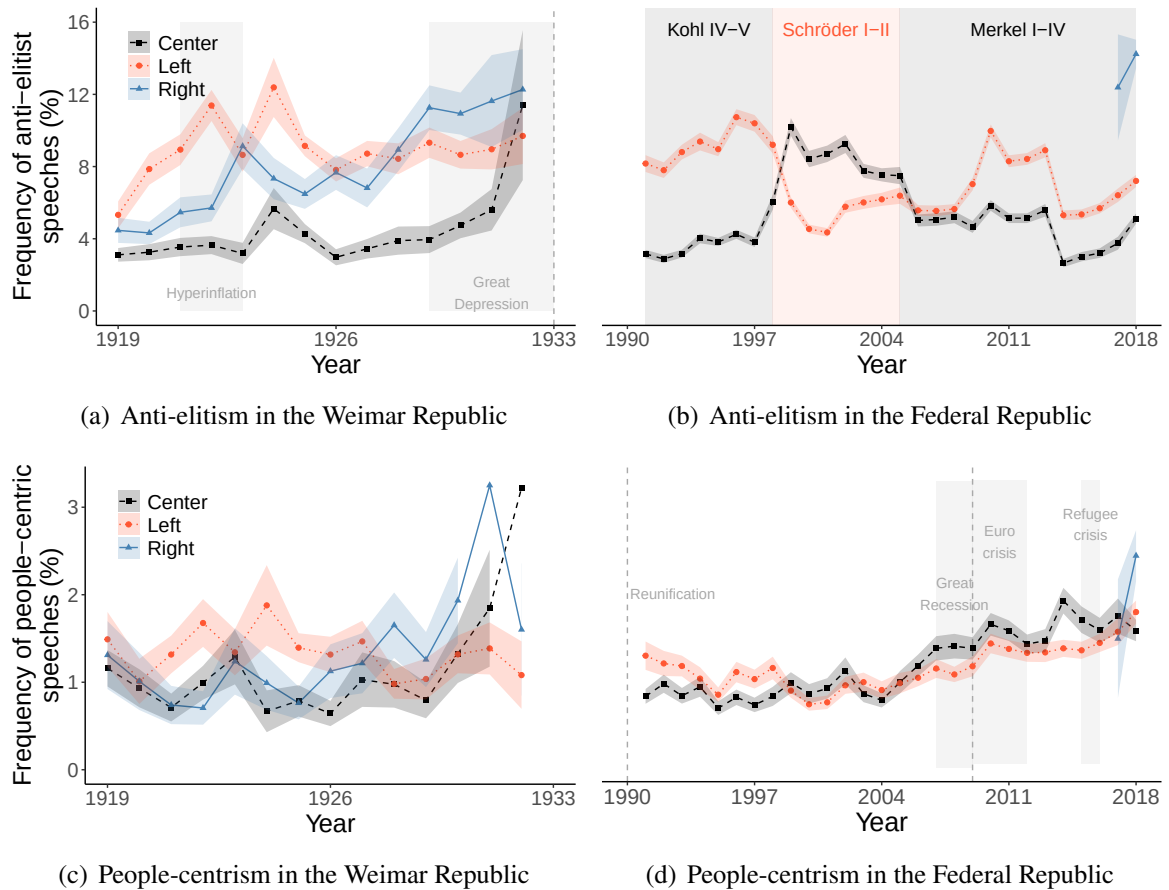


Figure 4: Party-Level Trends in Populist Rhetoric (Linear Scales)

Note: Weimar (1919–1933) and Federal Republic (1991–2018) speeches; plots show anti-elitism and people-centrism frequencies over time for party groups. 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 the Federal Republic, 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. Shading indicates government control by center (CDU-led) or left (SPD & Greens) coalitions. Shaded areas around the lines visualize 95% confidence bands. We omit some for clarity.

We explore party dynamics via [Figure 4](#), which shows the temporal evolution of anti-elitism and people-centrism in the Weimar Republic and the Federal Republic, respectively. To keep the illustration clear, we distinguish between three categories of parties: left, center, and right. [Figure C.1](#) in the online appendix shows that the pattern does not change notably when distinguishing individual parties. In the Weimar Republic, anti-elitism started highest among left parties, followed by right and center parties. Again, we use linear unconditional OLS regressions (explaining anti-elitism and people-centrism, respectively, by the year of the speech) to assess time trends. The anti-elite rhetoric of left-wing parties increased, if anything, only slightly ($\beta \approx 0.32, p \approx 0.25$), while right-wing parties (and to a lesser extent center parties) made increasing use of anti-elitist language (center: $\beta \approx 1, p < 0.0001$; right-wing: $\beta \approx 5, p < 0.0001$). As a result, right-wing parties were the most anti-elitist group just before the end of the Weimar Republic. In particular, this shows that the increase in anti-elitism in the Weimar Republic was driven mainly by right-wing parties.

We obtain similar results regarding people-centrism, even though differences across the political spectrum are less pronounced. Over time, left-wing parties slightly decreased their use of people-centric rhetoric ($\beta \approx -0.006, p \approx 0.026$), centrist parties show no significant trend ($\beta \approx 0.004, p \approx 0.19$), and right-wing parties became increasingly people-centric ($\beta \approx 0.02, p < 0.0001$). Hence, overall, populism in the Weimar Republic became increasingly the domain of right-wing parties.

In the Federal Republic, anti-elitism fluctuated strongly for left and center parties. As [Figure 3](#) shows, these fluctuations canceled out such that the overall level of anti-elite rhetoric in the parliament was stable over time. Even though a linear regression suggests that left-wing parties used less anti-elite language over time ($\beta \approx -0.73, p < 0.0001$), while center parties made increasing use of anti-elite rhetoric ($\beta \approx 0.22, p < 0.0001$), the most notable variation is related to whether parties were part of the government or opposition. Shaded areas indicate whether the government was led by a center party (CDU/CSU in both cases) or a left-wing coalition. As can be seen, anti-elitism was much more pronounced when parties were in opposition, as discussed in detail in [Subsection 3.2](#). In 2017, the AfD entered the parliament as its first pure right-wing party and has ever since used much more anti-elitism in its speeches than other party

groups. This led to a, as our results show, rare constellation in which right-wing parties are the most populist group. The only other point in time in our dataset with this constellation is the last years of the Weimar Republic.

As in the Weimar Republic, people-centrism in the Federal Republic did not differ notably across the ideological spectrum at any point in time. However, starting around the Great Recession, all parties (see also [Subsection 3.2](#)) made increasing use of people-centric rhetoric (left: $\beta \approx 0.7, p < 0.0001$; right-wing: $\beta \approx 1.3, p < 0.0001$). After entering the parliament, the right-wing AfD first matched and then surpassed this frequency of people-centric language.

4 Conclusion

This study reveals a striking continuity in the overall level and party distribution of populism across two distinct periods of German political history — the Weimar Republic and the Federal Republic — despite their vastly different contexts. Populism, it appears, is not an aberration but a persistent feature of German democracy. This finding challenges models that view populism as a transient response to specific crises. In contrast, we find populism in Germany to be an enduring undercurrent adaptable to diverse political environments. In particular, the finding that in both periods, populism exhibits a clear U-shaped pattern across the political spectrum, also after controlling for opposition status, suggests that populism might be an inherent feature of political extremism. A final striking similarity is that in both republics, left-wing parties started out as the most populist party group, while over time, right-wing parties took over this position.

The largest difference we identified is a sustained and mainstreamed increase of people-centrism in the Federal Republic that we do not find for the Weimar Republic. In the Weimar Republic, center and left-wing parties maintained or decreased their low levels of people-centrism, and only right-wing parties made increasing use of it. In the Federal Republic, all party groups increasingly employed people-centric rhetoric after the Great Recession. These divergent trends underscore that even when populism manifests at similar aggregate levels, its qualitative character can differ. This adaptability highlights the need for a nuanced approach to studying populism, one that disaggregates its components.

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Online Appendix

A Examples of Populist and Non-populist Speeches

This section provides examples of speeches with particularly low and high levels of anti-elitism and people-centrism, respectively. For each variable and German republic, we selected speeches with the highest and lowest values obtained, respectively. Among those, we chose and translated speeches that are short and require little knowledge about the political context for ease of reading.

A.1 Federal Republic

A.1.1 Anti-elitism

Speech with the highest obtained value of anti-elitism:

Ladies and gentlemen, this behavior may bring you short-term party political advantages. However, you are shirking your political responsibility. You are shirking this responsibility to the detriment of Germany. Make no mistake: the citizens will not fall for your tricks.

Speech with the lowest obtained value of anti-elitism:

I have a question about the housing construction program. Is it true that the cabinet rejected the housing minister's housing construction program today on the grounds that only a housing construction program that does not incur any additional costs can be considered? Is the minister considering resigning due to the failure of her program?

A.1.2 People-centrism

Speech with the highest obtained value of people-centrism:

Thank you, I appreciate the suggestion. In my opinion, new thinking is indeed necessary, including in the policies of the federal government, especially for the people of the Federal Republic of Germany. Let's put an end to whitewashing, let's embrace realism and truth, and let's never forget in politics, especially when it comes to the budget, that it's not about numbers and money, but ultimately about the fate of a large number of people!

Speech with the lowest obtained value of people-centrism:

It is easy to calculate and determine that the two undersecretaries have very different workloads because they only have to answer questions in Parliament on a monthly basis. For example, in the months of March to June before the summer recess, one has to answer questions in three weeks, while the other has to do so in five weeks of sessions. How does this fit in with the distribution of work in the ministry?

A.2 Weimar Republic

A.2.1 Anti-elitism

Speech with the highest obtained value of anti-elitism:

We expected the government to vigorously oppose this injustice, which is to be exacerbated once again by one of the governing parties, thereby worsening the exceptional legislation for wage and salary earners. However, a government that fails to do so must admit that it is merely pretending to oppose it, that in reality it agrees with the gentlemen who represent the interests of capitalist robbers. This shows once again—as we have repeatedly pointed out in connection with this law—the brutal nature of this legislation, of the ruling parties, and of the government.

Speech with the lowest obtained value of anti-elitism:

We have considerable technical and legal reservations about the present draft, but we are setting these reservations aside for political reasons. We want a legal authority to be established in Germany as soon as possible, and therefore, in view of the external and internal situation, we are refraining from making any motions. The current lawless conditions must be brought to an end as soon as possible. We hope that the law we are now passing will promote order and security and that everyone in Germany will respect the provisional constitution. We reserve our position on the final constitution in all respects. We will vote in favor of the present draft.

A.2.2 People-centrism

Speech with the highest obtained value of people-centrism:

The population now lives in grave fear of what may yet come, worrying not only about their property and possessions, but also about their lives and limb. The population is watching and

waiting and counting on us not to remove the last serious provision from the constitution and the law, the last thing that still restrains brutality—as it was called earlier—and, in my opinion, bestiality among the people and among human beings. That is why I believe that the motion does not have the support of the people, and I ask you to reject the motion in accordance with the sentiment of the people.

Speech with the lowest obtained value of people-centrism:

But no one can predict the future. And it is in the interest of the German Reich not to place itself at a disadvantage from the outset with regard to the publicity of negotiations compared to all other states by means of a constitutional restriction. The German Reich declares its willingness to comply with exactly the same conditions as the others, but it does not want to be subject to special provisions. That is the meaning of the reservation made in this paragraph. I would ask that it be retained in this form.

B Validation of PopBERT Scores — Prompt

The original prompt was written in German and read as:

Am Ende dieses Prompts findest du eine Rede. Bitte analysiere sie nach der Definition von Populismus von Cas Mudde und quantifiziere wie folgt:

- Anti-Elitismus: [Eine Zahl zwischen 0 und 1, wobei 1 für maximal anti-elite und 0 für minimal anti-elite steht]*
- People-Centrismus: [Eine Zahl zwischen 0 und 1, wobei 1 für maximal people-centric 0 für minimal people-centric steht]*

Bitte verwende folgende Definitionen:

Anti-Elitismus: die Wahrnehmung bestehender politischer oder wirtschaftlicher Eliten als eine böse Gruppe, die darauf aus ist, das einfache Volk zu unterdrücken

People-Centrismus: eine romantisierte Sichtweise auf das einfache Volk und die Überzeugung, dass die Umsetzung des Volkswillens das einzige Ziel demokratischer Politik ist

Bemühe dich bitte, die Analyse so valide wie möglich auszuführen. Denke intern Schritt für Schritt nach, aber gib nur das JSON zurück.

```
{ "anti_elitismus": float,  
  "people_centristus": float }
```

Rede: {SPEECH TEXT}

The English Translation reads as:

At the end of this prompt you will find a speech. Please analyze it according to Cas Mudde's definition of populism and quantify as follows:

- Anti-elitism: [A number between 0 and 1, where 1 indicates maximally anti-elite and 0 minimally anti-elite]*
- People-centrism: [A number between 0 and 1, where 1 indicates maximally people-centric and 0 minimally people-centric]*

Please use the following definitions:

Anti-elitism: the perception of existing political or economic elites as an evil group intent on oppressing the common people

People-centrism: a romanticized view of the common people and the belief that implementing the will of the people is the sole aim of democratic politics

Please make every effort to conduct the analysis as validly as possible. Think step by step internally, but return only the JSON.

```
{ "anti_elitismus": float,  
  "people_centristus": float }
```

Speech: {SPEECH TEXT}

Here, {SPEECH TEXT} is a placeholder for the text of the speech we analyzed.

C Additional Figures

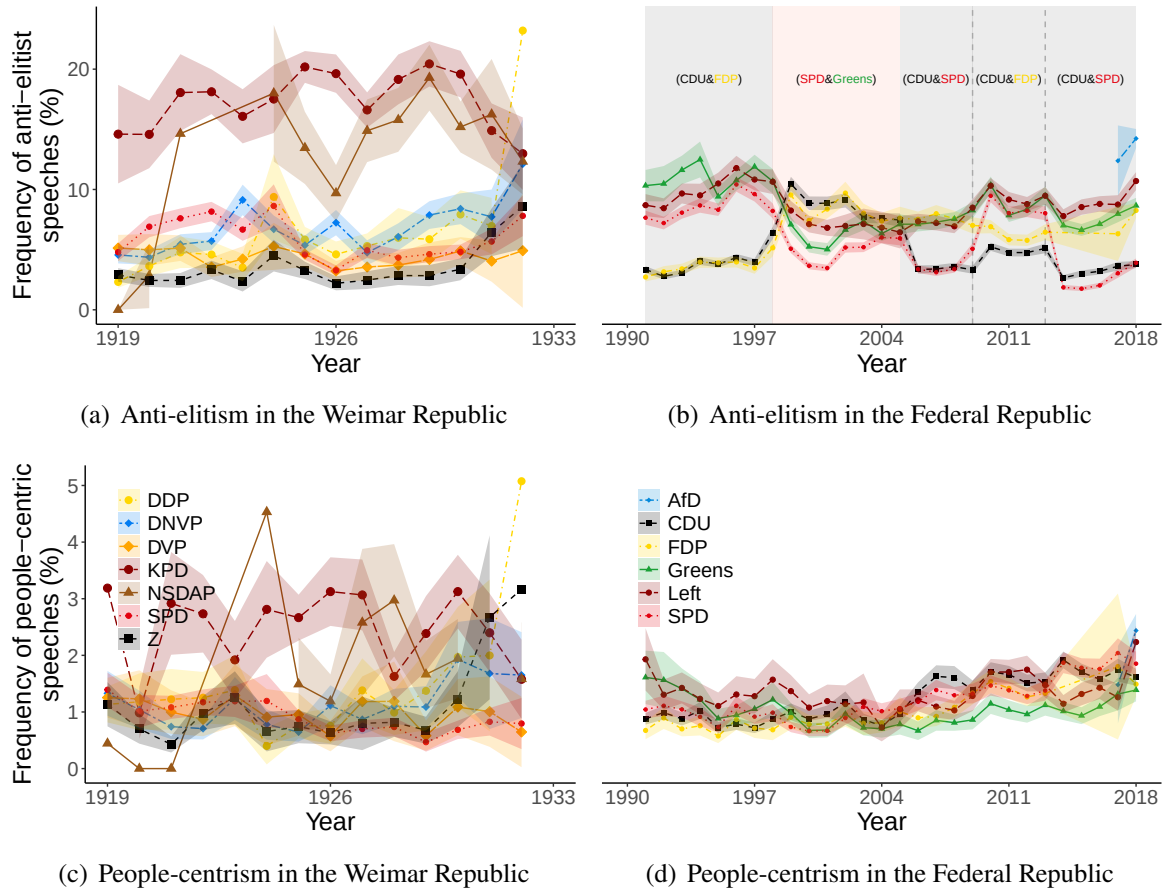


Figure C.1: Party-Level Trends in Populist Rhetoric (Linear Scales)

Note: Weimar (1919–1933) and BRD (1991–2018). All panels show anti-elitism and people-centrism frequencies over time for major parties. Weimar Republic parties: KPD=Communists, SPD=Socialists, DDP=Liberals, Z=Center, DVP=Conservatives, DNVP=Nationalists, NSDAP=Nazis. Federal Republic parties: Left=Communists, Greens=Ecologists, SPD=Socialists, CDU=Conservatives (includes CSU), FDP=Liberals, AfD=Nationalists. Shaded areas around the lines visualize 95% confidence bands. We omit some for clarity. The rectangular shaded areas in Panel (b) indicate ruling cabinets and corresponding coalition partners.

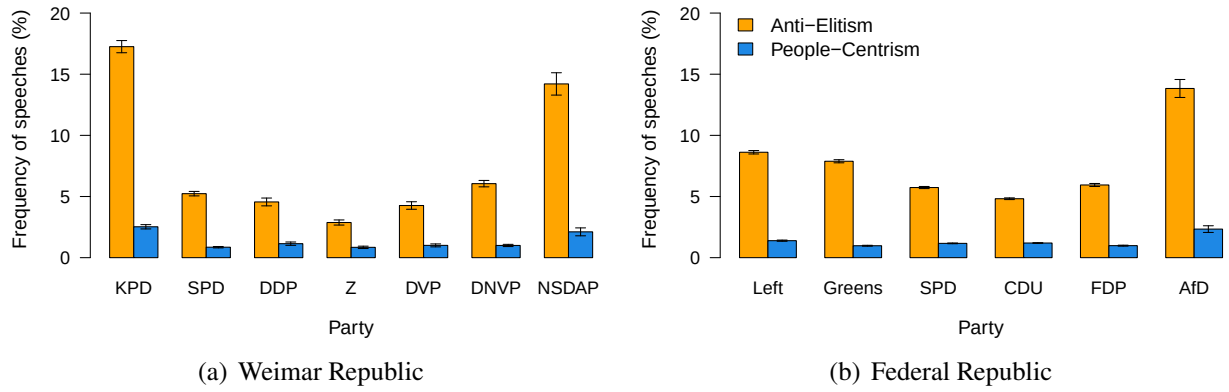
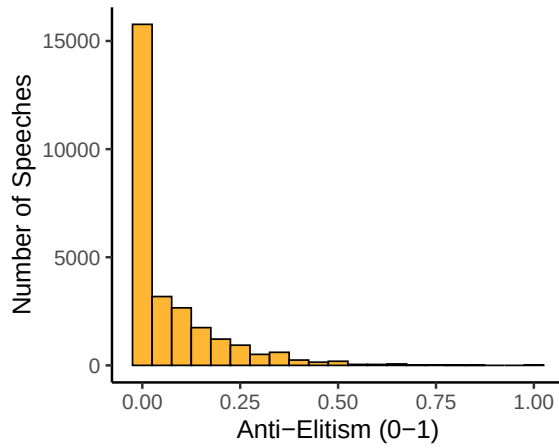
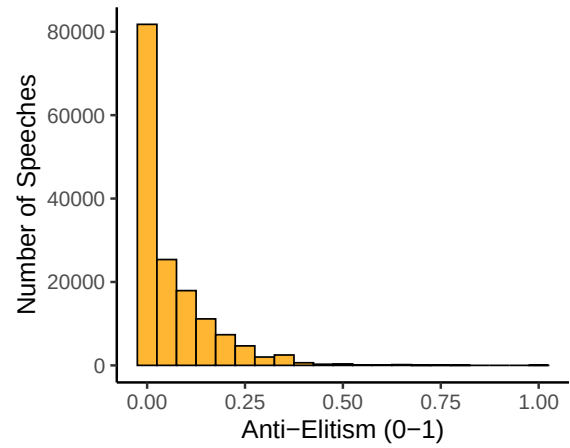


Figure C.2: Anti-elitism and People-centrism in Germany Pooled Over Time — Excluding Speeches with an Anti-elitism Score above 0.6

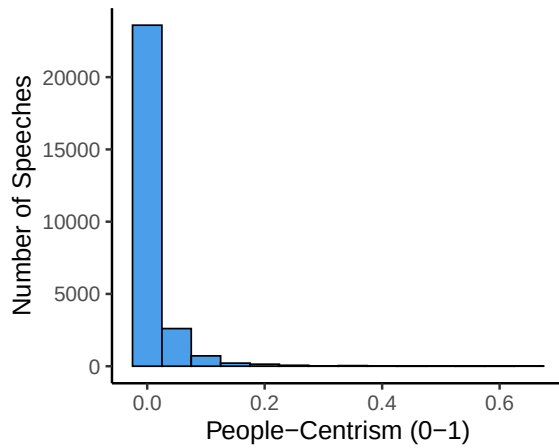
Note: Weimar (1919–1932) and Federal Republic (1991–2018) parliamentary speeches analyzed via PopBERT; bars show the average PopBERT score for speeches held by a parliamentarian of each party for anti-elitism and people-centrism, respectively. Data is pooled over time. Weimar Republic parties: KPD=Communists, SPD=Socialists, DDP=Liberals, Z=Center, DVP=Conservatives, DNVP=Nationalists, NSDAP=Nazis. Federal Republic parties: Left=Communists, Greens=Ecologists, SPD=Socialists, CDU=Conservatives (includes CSU), FDP=Liberals, AfD=Nationalists.



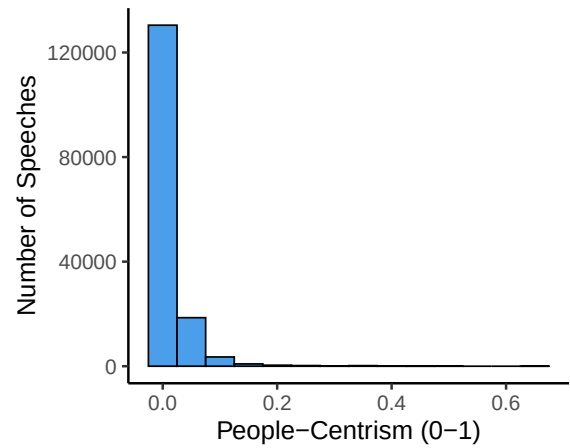
(a) Anti-elitism in the Weimar Republic



(b) Anti-elitism in the Federal Republic



(c) People-centrism in the Weimar Republic



(d) People-centrism in the Federal Republic

Figure C.3: Party-Level Trends in Populist Rhetoric (Linear Scales)

Note: Weimar (1919–1933) and Federal Republic (1991–2018) speeches. Plots show the distribution of anti-elitism and people-centrism among speeches in the parliament of the Weimar and Federal Republic, respectively.

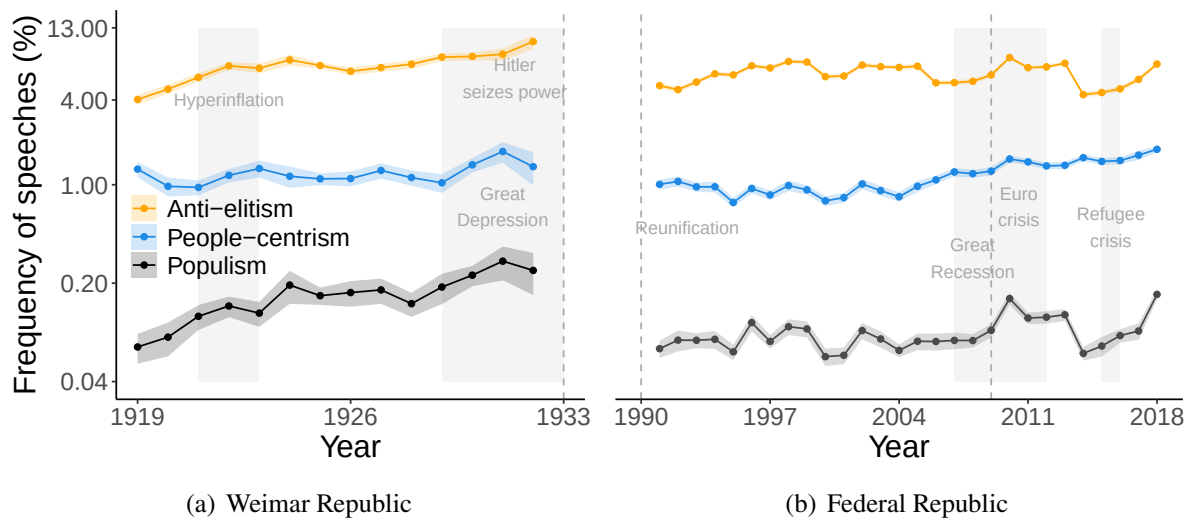
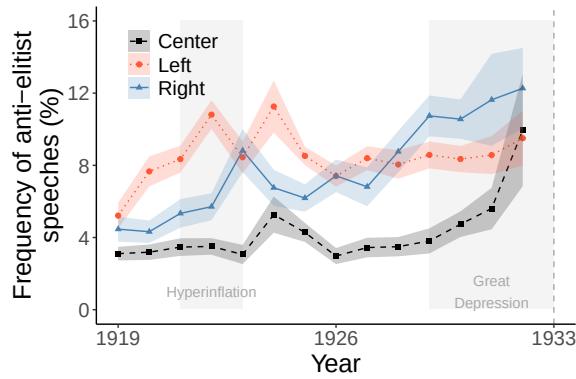
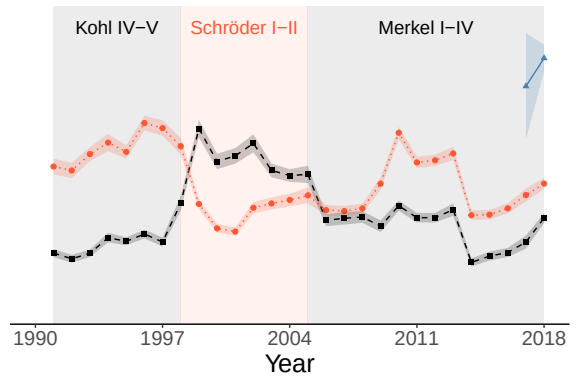


Figure C.4: Temporal Trends in Populist Rhetoric — Excluding Speeches with an Anti-elitism Score above 0.6 (Log Scales)

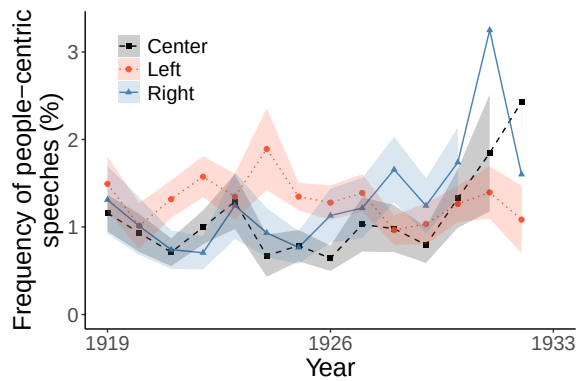
Note: Weimar (1919–1933) and Federal Republic (1991–2018) speeches; lines track anti-elitism, people-centrism, and populist index (their product). The vertical scale measures log values. Dashed gray lines mark major crises. Shaded areas around the lines visualize 95% confidence bands.



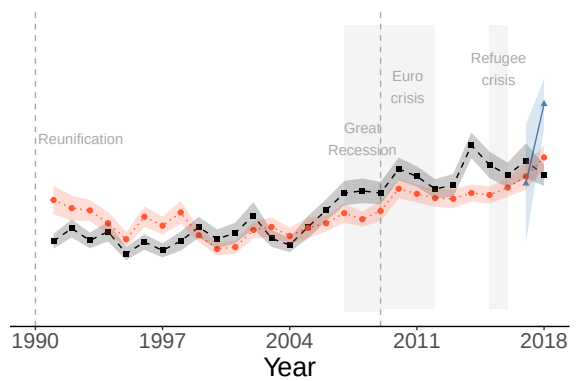
(a) Anti-elitism in the Weimar Republic



(b) Anti-elitism in the Federal Republic



(c) People-centrism in the Weimar Republic



(d) People-centrism in the Federal Republic

Figure C.5: Party-Level Trends in Populist Rhetoric — Excluding Speeches with an Anti-elitism Score above 0.6 (Linear Scales)

Note: Weimar (1919–1933) and Federal Republic (1991–2018) speeches; plots show anti-elitism and people-centrism frequencies over time for party groups. 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 the Federal Republic, 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. Shading indicates government control by center (CDU-led) or left (SPD & Greens) coalitions. Shaded areas around the lines visualize 95% confidence bands. We omit some for clarity.