



The Populist Bloc(k):

A Study of Croatians, Slovenians, and the
Institutional Roadblocks to Populism

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The Question

How do institutional and electoral frameworks encourage or discourage the proliferation and staying-power of populist parties?

Literature on populism often emphasizes corruption, economics, and current events, but little attention is actively given to how the institutional and electoral rules of states influence the prevalence of populist parties. Given the disruptive nature of populism (as shown in Slovenia and, to a lesser degree, Croatia), it's crucial we recognize every contributing factor to its development.

This paper focuses on Croatia and Slovenia for their:

- *Similar historical context* as the richest and most politically liberal of the former Yugoslav states
- *Similar geographical context* as the only EU member states in the West Balkans
- *Strong contrast in present party systems*
 - Croatia – primarily two-party state with marginalized populist parties
 - Slovenia – fragmented multi-party state dominated by populists

Methodology

- Research divided in two parts:
 - Descriptive and empirical coverage of the prevalence of populist parties and attitudes in both countries
 - Analysis of institutional and election frameworks for their impact to populist parties
 - Institutional factors observed:
 - *Non-traditional representation* – the use of guaranteed seats for special population groups in parliament
 - *Thresholds* – electoral minimums parties must surpass in votes to be considered for winning seats
 - *Election laws* – the collection of laws governing campaigns and elections outside of those placed by constitutions or rulings by the Constitutional Court
 - Those discussed in the paper: media campaign regulations, preferential voting, gender quotas
- *Chosen based on attention received in media and reports, not an exhaustive list of potential factors*

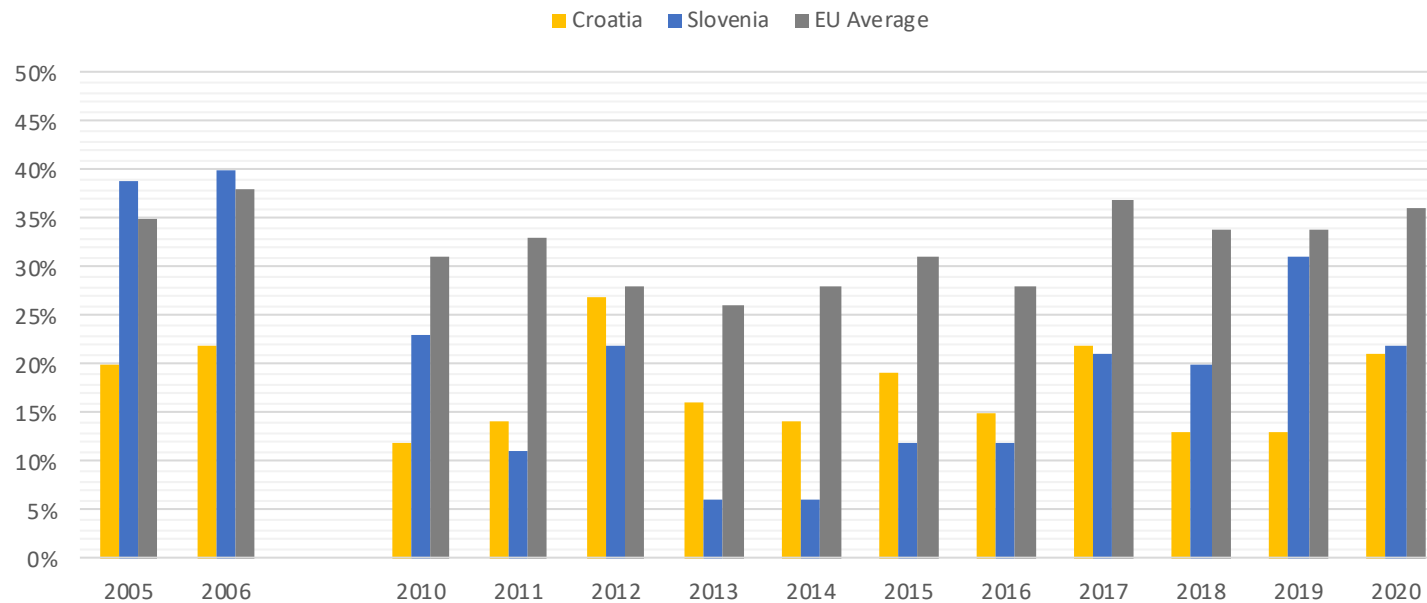
Key Findings

- Populist attitudes equally high in both states; populist parties, less so:
 - Slovenian populist parties far more successful than Croatian counterparts
 - Slovenian populist parties regularly control the government
 - Croatian populist parties receive fewer votes and seats, relegated to the opposition
 - Regional Croatian populists (HDSSB, Možemo) advantaged over nationally competitive populist parties
- Institutional impact varied:
 - Heavy non-traditional representation and a complicated threshold system both contributed to party system consolidation and a marginalization of populist parties in Croatia
 - Limited non-traditional representation and a low threshold enabled populist party proliferation in Slovenia
 - Election laws in both states ultimately had limited impact on populist parties relative to the degree of attention and criticism they received

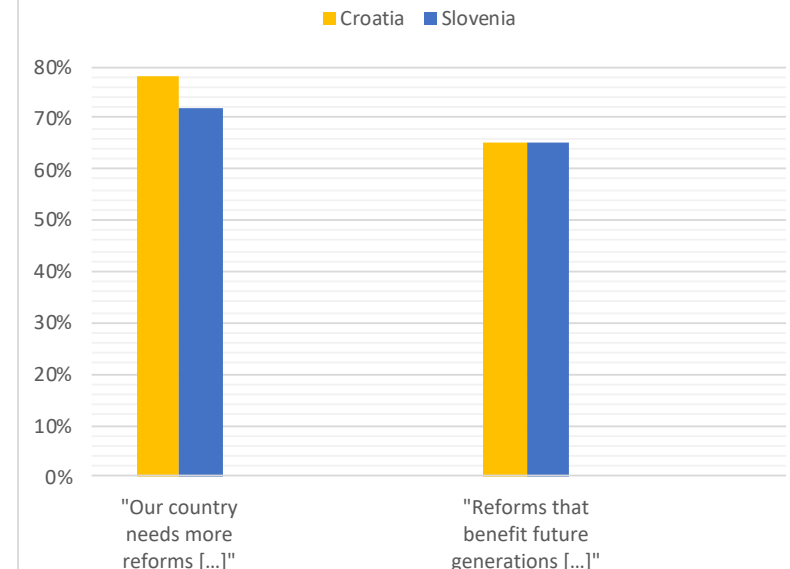
Populist Parties and Attitudes in Data

- Left: % of respondents to Eurobarometer's annual spring surveys who answered "tend to trust" when asked about trust in their country's parliament.
- Right: % of respondents to Eurobarometer's Spring 2010 Survey who responded "agree" to the statements "Our country needs more reforms to face the future," and "Reforms that benefit future generations should be pursued even if that means some sacrifices for the present generation."

Trust in Parliament (% "Tend to Trust", Eurobarometer Annual Spring Survey)



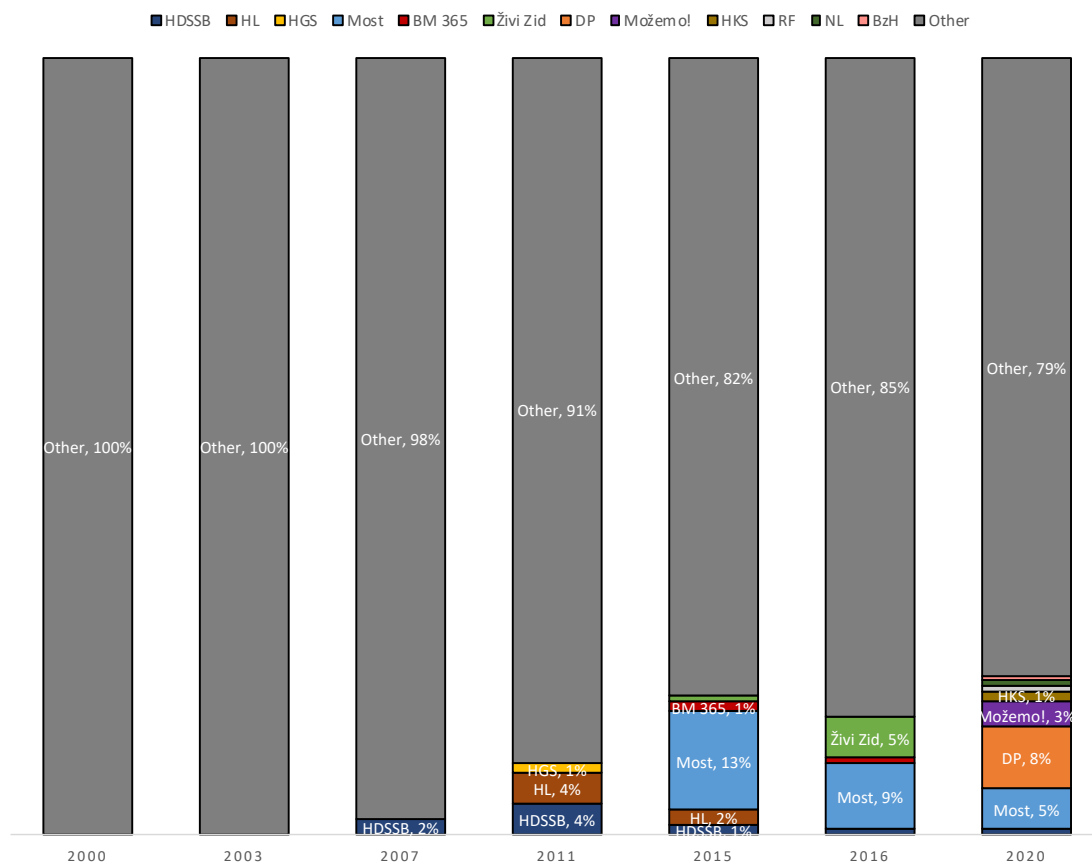
Support for Country Reforms (% "Agree", Eurobarometer Spring 2010 Survey)



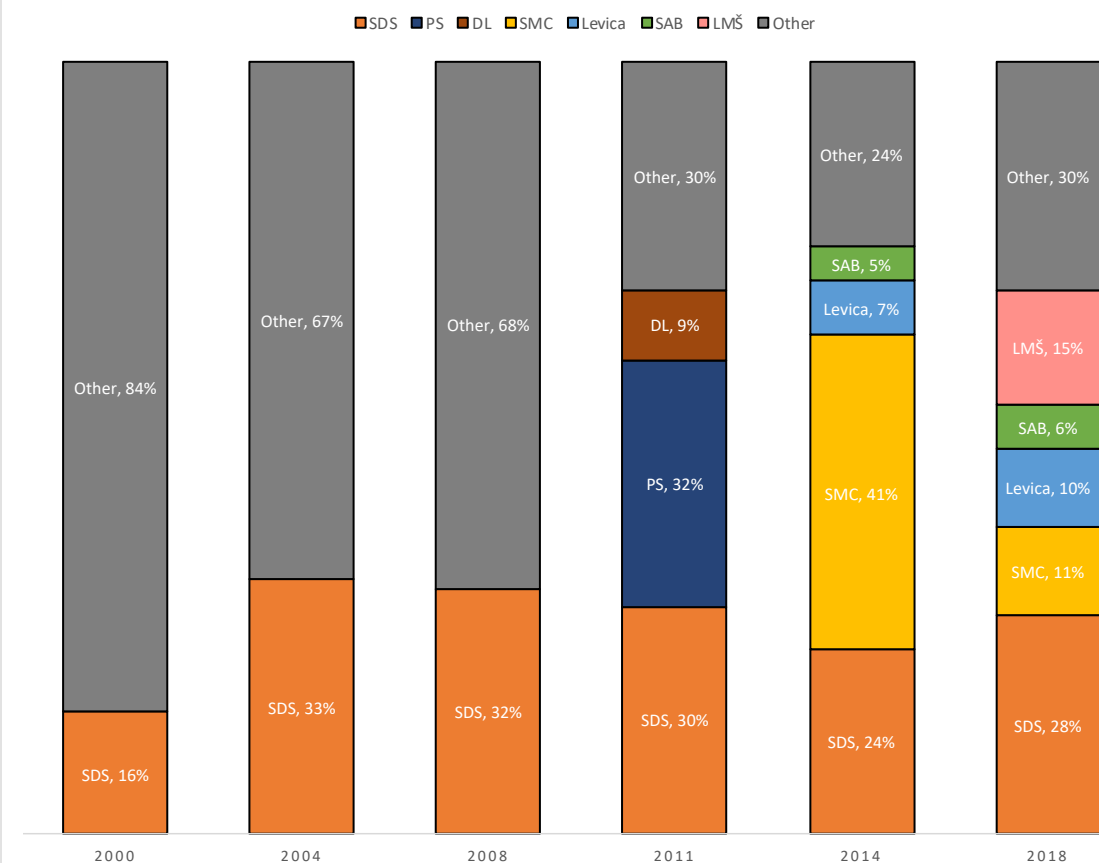
Populist Parties and Attitudes in Data (Cont.)

Below: Share of seats held by populist parties in Croatia and Slovenia since 2000.

POPULIST SHARE OF SEATS WON IN ELECTIONS - CROATIA



POPULIST SHARE OF SEATS WON IN ELECTIONS - SLOVENIA



In-Depth: Non-Traditional Representation

Non-traditional seats solidify support behind leading parties, allowing for smaller coalitions and the marginalization of anti-establishment populist parties.

- Both Croatia and Slovenia hold guaranteed seats for certain minority groups
 - In Croatia: 8 seats, covering 22 groups, including 3 Serbs and 1 for other South Slavic ethnic groups
 - In Slovenia: 2 seats: 1 for Hungarians, 1 for Italians
 - Minority seats consistently support the leading party/coalition in both countries
 - Ensures minority interests are heard, even at the expense of differing ideologies (center-left Serb parties would back the center-right and previously Croat nationalist HDZ party)
 - Provides leading parties with *de facto* additional seats – this is felt more in Croatia than Slovenia, as Croatia's leading parties remain almost tied and minorities there hold 4x as many seats
- Croatia also provides 3 seats to the global Croatian diaspora – this group overwhelmingly backs HDZ

Value of Non-Traditional Representation, Demonstrated

Below: The evolving weight of the diaspora constituency since its introduction in Croatia in 1995. Even with its gradual reduction in size, the diaspora's seats can still make a consequential difference, as in 2015.

Croatian Diaspora Influence on Election Results (By Number of Seats in Parliament)										
Party/ Pre-Election Coalition		1992	1995	2000	2003	2007	2011	2015	2016	2020
HDZ	Croatia Proper	85	63	40	62	61	41	48	56	58
	Diaspora		12	6	4	5	3	3	2	3
	Total	85	75	46	66	66	44	51	58	61
HDZ-led Coalition		85	75	46	66	66	47	59	61	66
Leading Left Coalition		14	18	71	43	56	81	56	54	41
Other		39	34	34	43	31	23	36	36	44
Total		138	127	151	152	153	151	151	151	151

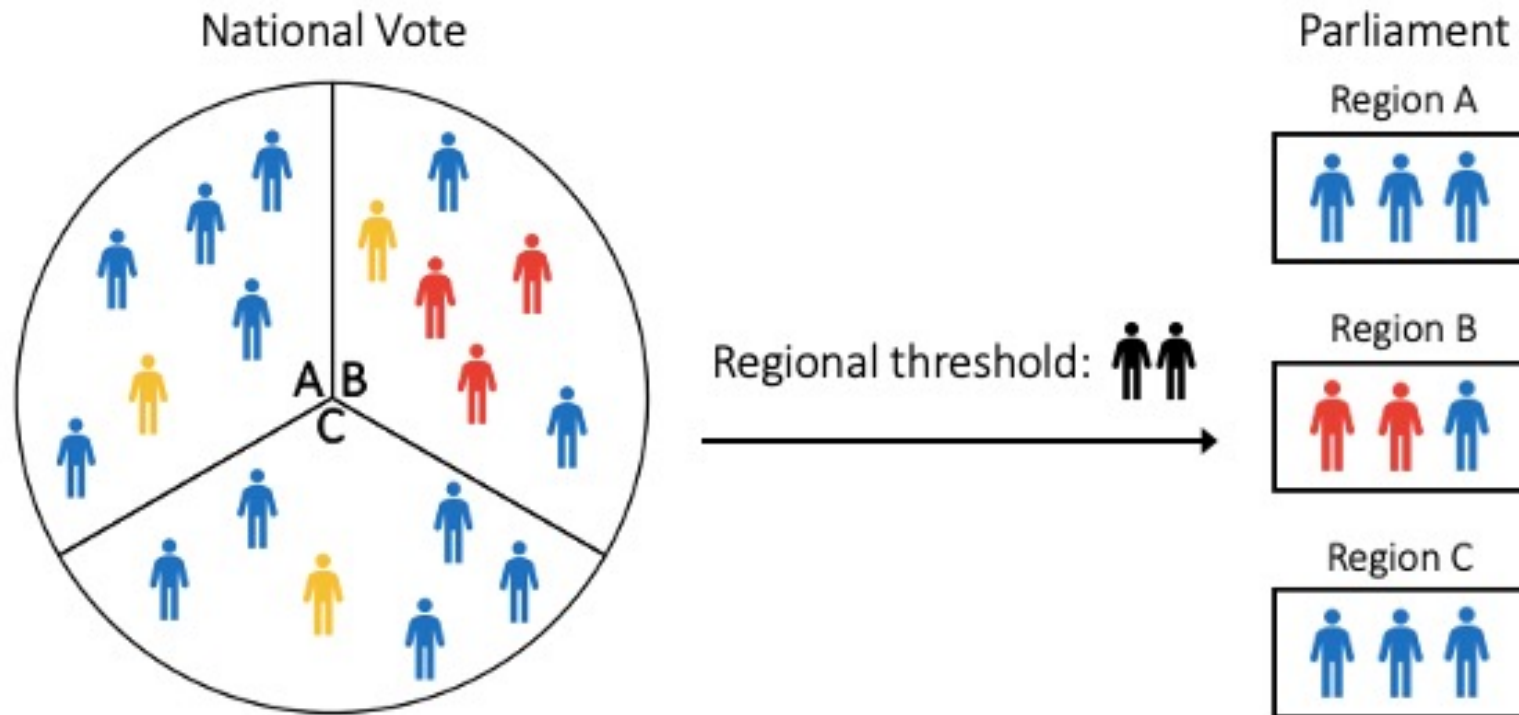
In-Depth: Thresholds

Regional thresholds in Croatia benefit leading establishment and regional parties, disadvantaging nationally competitive challengers and encouraging coalitions with its two main parties. These influences are not present in Slovenia.

- Both Croatia and Slovenia apply thresholds to their elections
 - Croatia's threshold system regional, not national
 - 5% support necessary in a given electoral district/region to win seats in that district
 - Disproportionately benefits small, regional parties and those with consolidated support – i.e., regionalist HDSSB and IDS; eco-socialist Možemo (Zagreb-based)
 - Disadvantages nationally competitive challengers to leading parties
 - Leading parties have far greater resources needed to campaign in every region
 - Smaller parties, especially populists, have fewer resources and compete with regional parties
 - Slovenia uses a low 4% national threshold, removing a barrier for more minor and populist parties

The Imbalances from Regional Thresholds, Demonstrated

Below: In this hypothetical scenario, three regions of a country (A, B, and C) vote for members of parliament with a regional threshold. Blue Party is a leading national party. Yellow Party is a nationally competitive minor party. Red Party is a regional party. Despite equal support, Red wins two seats, while Yellow wins none.





Conclusion

Non-traditional representation and the use of regional thresholds have significantly impacted the proliferation and staying-power of populist parties in Croatia by encouraging party consolidation and restricting nationally competitive populist party challengers. Both factors are muted or absent in Slovenia, where populists frequently gain power. They serve as prominent examples of, but likely not the only, institutional rules capable of constraining or encouraging the development of populist parties.

Further research with greater resources into the link between institutional and electoral rules and populist parties could draw attention to numerous other impactful components to institutional frameworks. Attention might also be given to the types of populist parties benefited or harmed by these rules and regulations – i.e., regionalism versus national campaigns.



Thank you!

Please submit any questions or comments you have. I will respond as quickly as possible for the duration of our virtual forum.

