



Historical Border Instability and the Rise of Populism

David B. Carter, PhD

Luwei Ying, PhD

Sadaf Vafa

UCLA Luskin Center for
History and Policy

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary 3

The History of Border Instability: Disruptions to
State-Building 5

Contemporary Manifestations: Populism as a
Legacy of Border Disruptions 7

Research Design & Methods 8

Findings 11

Policy Recommendations 14

Research Outputs & Future Work 19

Bibliography 20

Executive Summary

Project goal: Investigate the historical roots of today's spatial variation in support for populist parties across Europe, beyond contemporary economic or cultural grievances.



Over the past decade, populist parties have surged across Europe. Conventional explanations—trade shocks, immigration, and cultural backlash—leave important variation unexplained. Drawing on five centuries of spatial data and post-1945 election returns, our study shows that localities with a legacy of frequent historical border changes are systematically more likely to vote for populist parties today. Repeated redrawing of borders delayed state-building, weakened

public administration, and bred a deep-seated perception of government ineffectiveness that modern populists exploit.

Key take-aways:

- Localities with one standard-deviation more historical border changes grant populist parties ≈ 1.3 percentage-points additional vote share.
- Sequential g-estimation demonstrates that this effect is not driven by contemporary economic conditions.
- Survey evidence confirms that citizens in historically unstable areas value democratic principles but are dissatisfied with their implementation, pointing to a trust deficit rather than democratic rejection.

Policy Relevance. Strengthening local governance capacity, investing in place-based economic upgrading, and launching curriculum and community initiatives that confront the historical roots of distrust can blunt the appeal of anti-system rhetoric. Our accompanying policy memos distill five actionable recommendations.

The rise of populist parties and the backlash against globalization in developed democracies are frequently attributed to recent economic grievances or cultural anxieties (Ansell et al. 2022; Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Milner 2021). While these explanations are well-supported, they overlook a key historical driver: the frequency of historical border changes and their disruptive effects on state-building. This study argues that repeated territorial shifts undermined local state-building, creating enduring legacies of weak governance that fuel contemporary populist support.

Using newly compiled data on post-World War II election outcomes at the NUTS 3 level in Europe and detailed records of border changes spanning five centuries, we show that regions with greater historical border instability consistently exhibit higher populist vote shares. These patterns persist even when we account for modern economic conditions. Moreover, survey evidence indicates that residents in these regions remain committed to democratic principles but express deep dissatisfaction with how democracy functions in practice. These findings highlight how the legacies of international politics continue to shape democratic resilience today.

The History of Border Instability: Disruptions to State-Building

Borders as Foundations of State Power

The creation and consolidation of modern European states between the 15th and 19th centuries depended heavily on the ability of central authorities to impose stable, predictable rule over defined territories (Tilly 1992). Stable borders enabled rulers to develop administrative systems capable of extracting resources, enforcing laws, and providing basic public goods. Over time, these systems fostered a sense of shared identity and trust between the state and its subjects (Levi 1996; Muldrew 2016).

When borders were stable, states could invest in long-term institution-building. Officials established tax systems, judicial hierarchies, and military obligations that created predictability for both rulers and ruled (Becker et al. 2014). Infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and fortifications reinforced central authority, facilitating both economic development and political integration.

The Costs of Border Volatility

By contrast, regions that experienced frequent border changes faced repeated disruptions to these state-building efforts. Each change in jurisdiction brought new rulers, new laws, and often new administrative systems. Populations in these regions had to repeatedly adapt to unfamiliar legal codes, tax obligations, and official languages. This undermined continuity in governance and impeded the development of trust in state institutions (Abramson 2022).

Historical examples abound. The eastern territories of the Habsburg Empire—such as Transylvania, Croatia, and Galicia—shifted hands multiple times between empires, kingdoms, and principalities. These regions suffered from administrative fragmentation and weak bureaucratic control, as competing rulers struggled to impose coherent systems of governance (Kann 2017). As a result, residents often relied on alternative forms of authority, such as local notables, kinship networks, or religious institutions, to provide basic security and services.

These historical experiences produced what scholars of institutional development call “path dependency”: early disruptions to state-building created patterns of weak governance that proved difficult to overcome, even after borders stabilized (Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales 2016). Over generations, distrust of distant authorities became embedded in local political cultures, passed down through family narratives, community memory, and institutional inertia (Tabellini 2008).

Contemporary Manifestations: Populism as a Legacy of Border Disruptions

The legacy of historical border instability continues to influence political behavior in Europe, particularly in shaping the conditions that make populist appeals so potent. In regions where borders shifted repeatedly over centuries, residents have inherited institutional weaknesses that manifest as persistent skepticism toward the capacity of the state to govern effectively. Such skepticism is not merely a matter of transient dissatisfaction but reflects deeply embedded perceptions that the state is structurally incapable of addressing local needs. This historical inheritance means that contemporary grievances—whether economic dislocation, perceived cultural threats, or frustrations with globalization—are interpreted through a lens of longstanding distrust in political elites and formal institutions. When government institutions have repeatedly failed to provide consistent and responsive governance over generations, it is unsurprising that citizens in these regions find populist narratives, which position elites as self-serving and out of touch, particularly compelling (Tabellini 2008; Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales 2016).

Populist leaders, by framing politics in stark “us-versus-them” terms, tap into and reinforce these perceptions of chronic elite failure. They claim to represent the authentic will of the people against a corrupt, indifferent, or incompetent establishment. This narrative resonates powerfully in regions marked by a history of fragmented rule, where citizens have seen local concerns neglected or mismanaged time and again. Importantly, the appeal of populism in these regions is not limited to economic grievances alone. While economic hardship, such as job losses due to deindustrialization or global competition, provides fertile ground for populist mobilization (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Ansell and Adler 2022; Milner 2021), it is the combination of these material conditions with deep-seated institutional distrust that amplifies populist support. Historical border volatility primes individuals to interpret contemporary challenges—whether from economic shocks, immigration, or cultural change—as further

confirmation that the state remains unresponsive or ineffective (Noury and Roland 2020).

Moreover, in regions shaped by historical border disruptions, the population often views modern supranational institutions—such as the European Union—with a similar skepticism that they direct toward domestic elites. While European integration has brought economic benefits and opportunities for many regions, citizens in historically unstable areas may be less inclined to trust EU institutions to protect their interests. This extends the logic of fragmented authority to the international level: just as the state failed them historically, supranational bodies are seen as remote and inattentive to local needs (Ikenberry 2018; Vachudova 2021). Such skepticism opens space for populist actors to denounce not only domestic elites but also transnational institutions, framing both as complicit in perpetuating local decline and marginalization. In this way, historical legacies of border instability feed into contemporary Euroskepticism and broader opposition to global governance arrangements.

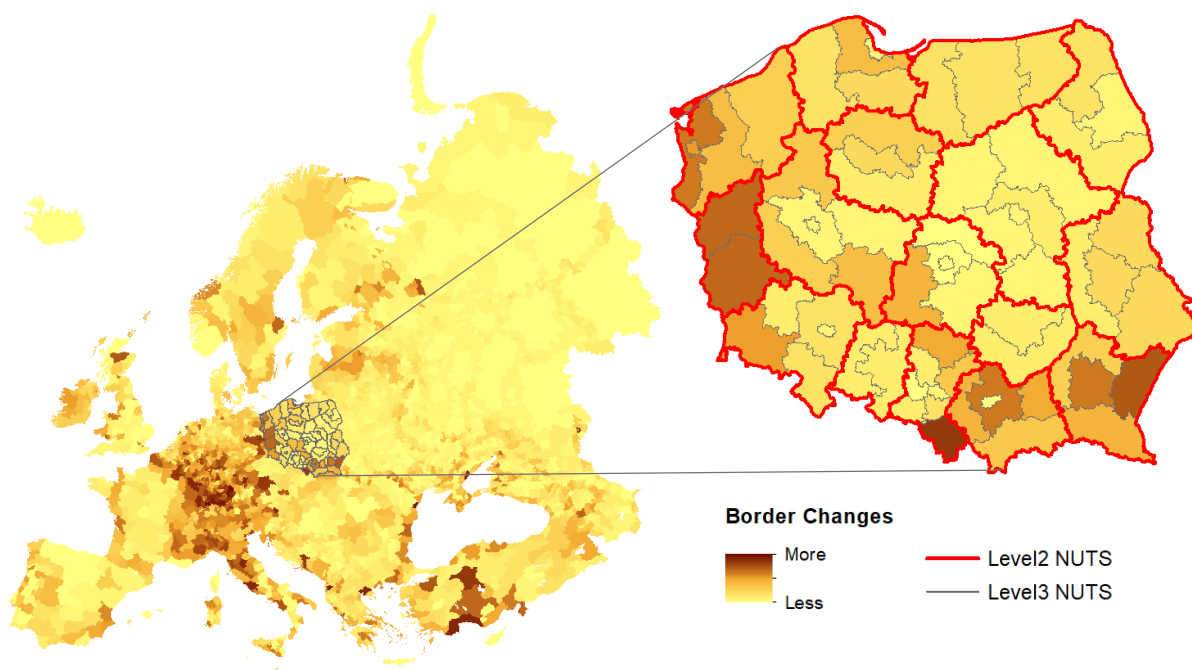
Finally, the interaction between historical legacies and contemporary triggers creates a dynamic in which populism becomes self-reinforcing. As populist leaders gain power in these regions, they often exacerbate institutional weaknesses rather than address them, further undermining public trust. Their tendency to personalize rule, attack independent institutions, and erode checks and balances compounds the very governance deficits that gave rise to their support (Mounk 2019; Urbinati 2019). In historically border-unstable regions, this dynamic is especially pronounced, as the absence of deep-rooted administrative capacity or strong civil society organizations makes it harder to resist institutional degradation. Thus, the long shadow of historical border disruptions not only helps explain the rise of populism but also sheds light on the difficulties of reversing its advance once established.

Research Design and Methods

Data on Historical Borders

Our primary independent variable is **historical border instability**, measured as the number of times a NUTS 3 region experienced a border change between 1490 and 1991. We compiled this measure using digitized historical maps coded at five-year intervals, capturing jurisdictional changes over five centuries of European state-building. This period covers key moments in the formation of modern states, including the Peace of Westphalia, the Napoleonic Wars, and the reshaping of Europe after both World Wars.

FIGURE 1. Historical Border Changes in Europe



Populist Vote Shares

To operationalize support for populism, we use the **Global Party Survey (GPS)** (Norris 2020), which scores political parties on dimensions of populist rhetoric and salience. We classify a party as populist if it exceeds the median populist rhetoric score (above 5 on a 0–10 scale) and aggregate populist vote shares for each NUTS 3 region using data from the **European Election Database**.

Controls and Confounders

We control for several historical and geographic factors that could confound the relationship between border instability and populist support:

- Historical battles (Dincecco and Onorato 2016)
- Iron production as a proxy for early industrialization (Sprandel 1968)
- Urban population density in 1600 (Bairoch and Pierre 1988)
- Presence of universities
- Terrain ruggedness
- Number of ethnic groups
- River density

We also account for contemporary economic variables—GDP per capita and employment rates—using sequential g-estimation to address post-treatment bias (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2016).

Statistical Approach

Our analysis proceeds in three stages:

1. **Regression models:** We estimate the effect of historical border instability on populist vote shares, using OLS and Poisson regressions with country-year fixed effects.
2. **Sequential g-estimation:** We assess whether the relationship persists after accounting for contemporary economic mediators.
3. **Survey analysis:** We examine individual-level data from the Life in Transition Survey (LiTS) to explore perceptions of democratic ideals and their fulfillment, using principal component indices for attitudes toward democracy's importance and performance.

Findings

Historical Border Changes and Populist Voting

Our results show that regions with more frequent historical border changes consistently exhibit higher support for populist parties. A one standard deviation increase in historical border instability is associated with a 1–1.5 percentage point increase in the populist vote share, a sizable effect given typical electoral margins in Europe. This pattern holds across model specifications and estimation methods.

TABLE 1. Local Historical Border Variability and Populist Party Vote

	Populist Party Vote Share			
	Model V	Model VI	Model VII	Model VIII
Historical Border Changes	0.010** (0.004)	0.003** (0.001)		
Log Historical Border Changes			0.130* (0.060)	0.033* (0.016)
Historical Universities	-0.115 (3.530)	-0.040 (0.303)	0.155 (3.508)	0.006 (0.296)
Number of Ethnic Groups	-0.185 (0.098)	-0.028 (0.017)	-0.189 (0.099)	-0.030 (0.017)
Log Rivers	-0.054 (0.119)	-0.011 (0.032)	-0.053 (0.120)	-0.014 (0.032)
Historical Battles	0.720*** (0.171)	0.091*** (0.018)	0.725*** (0.171)	0.093*** (0.018)
Iron Production	0.373 (0.261)	0.029 (0.019)	0.372 (0.259)	0.027 (0.019)
Urban Population (1600)	-0.013* (0.005)	-0.001** (0.000)	-0.013* (0.005)	-0.001** (0.000)
Terrain Ruggedness	0.163 (0.109)	0.015 (0.010)	0.168 (0.108)	0.015 (0.010)
Constant	3.471*** (0.215)	2.832*** (0.048)	3.324*** (0.248)	2.805*** (0.056)
Observations	3213	858	3213	858
Country/Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Model	OLS	Poisson	OLS	Poisson

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The Role of Contemporary Economic Conditions

Sequential g-estimation reveals that the effect of historical border instability on populist support is not simply a proxy for contemporary economic disadvantage. Even after adjusting for GDP per capita and employment rates, historical border instability retains a robust, independent association with populist voting.

**TABLE 2. Controlled Direct Effect of Historical Border Changes
on Voting for Populism**

	Populist Party Vote Share					
	(1) Model I	(2) Model II	(3) Model III	(4) Model IV	(5) Model V	(6) Model VI
Log Historical Border Changes	0.135* (0.058)	0.135* (0.058)				
Historical Border Changes				0.010** (0.004)	0.010** (0.004)	
Historical Universities	0.031 (0.037)	0.031 (0.033)		0.028 (0.037)	0.028 (0.033)	
Number of Ethnic Groups	-0.177 (0.100)	-0.177 (0.100)		-0.172 (0.099)	-0.172 (0.099)	
Employment	-0.016 (0.100)			-0.012 (0.100)		
Log Rivers	-0.040 (0.122)	-0.040 (0.121)		-0.040 (0.122)	-0.040 (0.120)	
Historical Battles	0.720*** (0.174)	0.720*** (0.168)		0.714*** (0.173)	0.714*** (0.168)	
Iron Production	0.379 (0.259)	0.379 (0.259)		0.381 (0.261)	0.381 (0.261)	
Urban Population, 1600	-0.011* (0.005)	-0.011* (0.005)		-0.010* (0.005)	-0.010* (0.005)	
Terrain Ruggedness	0.156 (0.109)	0.156 (0.109)		0.151 (0.110)	0.151 (0.109)	
GDP	-0.001 (0.001)			-0.001 (0.001)		
Bootstrap			0.135* (0.061)			0.010* (0.004)
Constant	3.286*** (0.247)	3.286*** (0.243)		3.447*** (0.216)	3.447*** (0.211)	
Observations	3166	3166	3166	3166	3166	3166

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Mechanism: Perceptions of Democracy

LiTS data indicate that citizens in historically unstable regions continue to value democratic principles—such as free elections and freedom of speech—but rate their implementation poorly. This suggests that populist support in these regions stems not from a rejection of democracy per se, but from deep frustration with its practice.

TABLE 2. Local Historical Border Variability and Views of Democratic Practice

	Democratic Practices Present in Country?				Democratic Practices Important for Country?			
	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
Historical Border Change	-0.206* (0.089)	-0.190* (0.081)	-0.177* (0.082)	-0.155* (0.078)	-0.044 (0.089)	0.109 (0.107)	0.014 (0.078)	0.036 (0.079)
Historical Battle		0.106 (0.124)	0.108 (0.125)	0.076 (0.110)		0.017 (0.135)	0.063 (0.142)	-0.040 (0.132)
Iron Production		0.004 (0.148)	-0.025 (0.149)	-0.054 (0.151)		-0.077 (0.159)	-0.143 (0.179)	-0.121 (0.176)
Urban Population, 1600		-0.000 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.003)		-0.000 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.003)
Terrain Ruggedness		-0.004 (0.103)	0.015 (0.107)	0.035 (0.110)		0.033 (0.126)	0.071 (0.132)	0.058 (0.131)
Log of Rivers		-0.111 (0.131)	-0.114 (0.132)	-0.095 (0.122)		-0.251* (0.127)	-0.316* (0.140)	-0.245 (0.137)
Female		-0.166** (0.061)	-0.169** (0.059)	-0.180** (0.059)		0.022 (0.059)	0.011 (0.059)	-0.000 (0.060)
Age		0.002 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)		0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)
Married		-0.012 (0.062)	-0.011 (0.062)	0.006 (0.060)		0.044 (0.057)	0.041 (0.058)	-0.000 (0.046)
Education		-0.014 (0.020)	-0.015 (0.020)	-0.018 (0.019)		0.051** (0.018)	0.052** (0.018)	0.046* (0.018)
Poverty		-0.195*** (0.047)	-0.195*** (0.047)	-0.175*** (0.043)		-0.145** (0.051)	-0.145** (0.051)	-0.161*** (0.043)
Ethnic Minority		-0.094 (0.111)	-0.095 (0.111)	-0.093 (0.112)		-0.307** (0.114)	-0.293* (0.115)	-0.280* (0.116)
GDP			0.000 (0.000)				0.000* (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Employment				0.000 (0.000)				0.001* (0.001)
Constant	0.780** (0.242)	0.989** (0.298)	0.916** (0.303)	0.798** (0.289)	0.374 (0.228)	0.501 (0.264)	0.221 (0.275)	0.031 (0.273)
Observations	54919	54735	54735	53200	59811	59614	59614	58074
Country/Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Policy Recommendations

Our findings highlight the importance of addressing not only the immediate economic and cultural grievances that fuel populism, but also the long-term institutional legacies left by historical border instability. These recommendations aim to rebuild local trust in governance and improve the responsiveness of democratic institutions in historically marginalized regions. The policies outlined below are concrete, actionable, and informed by successful practices across Europe and beyond.

1. Strengthen Local Governance

National governments, in partnership with regional authorities and international organizations (such as the European Union and OECD), should prioritize investments that enhance the capacity of local governments in historically border-volatile regions. This includes:

- **Expanding local administrative authority** to allow municipalities greater control over public service delivery, urban planning, and local economic development, following the example of Poland's post-1989 decentralization reforms that empowered gminas to tailor solutions to local needs.
- **Targeted infrastructure development** that reflects local economic strengths. For instance, in regions with a legacy of trade disruption, investments could focus on modernizing logistics infrastructure, supporting regional supply chains, and improving transport connectivity to integrate these areas more fully into national and EU markets.
- **Long-term funding mechanisms** that provide stability and predictability for local budgets, reducing dependence on politically contingent transfers from central governments.

These strategies mirror the EU's experience in strengthening local governance through structural and cohesion funds, demonstrating that sustained support can enhance both administrative capacity and democratic legitimacy (European Commission 2018).

2. Promote Historical Education and Shared Identity

Understanding and addressing the legacy of historical border changes requires that citizens appreciate how these legacies shape current challenges. We recommend:

- **Integrating local history into school curricula**, ensuring students learn about the region's border changes, their impacts on governance, and the region's place in the broader national story. This can foster a sense of belonging and shared destiny.
- **Community-based initiatives** such as public exhibitions, digital archives, and oral history projects that capture local experiences of border change, helping communities process historical traumas and build cohesion. The Heritage Schools Programme in England provides a model, enabling schools to work with heritage organizations to bring local history into classrooms (Historic England 2024).



FIGURE 2. Students Participating in England's Heritage Schools Programme

3. Enhance Community Engagement

Effective governance depends on trust and citizen participation. To rebuild this in historically neglected regions:

- **Establish participatory budgeting initiatives** that give citizens a direct voice in how public funds are spent, strengthening both transparency and ownership.
- **Create local advisory councils** representing diverse community groups—including minorities, youth, and business leaders—to guide local policy and ensure it reflects community needs.
- **Support grassroots initiatives** that promote civic engagement and social cohesion, such as neighborhood improvement projects, cultural festivals, and volunteer networks.

FIGURE 3. Community Participatory Budgeting Meeting in Europe



These approaches align with best practices from urban community-building programs that emphasize inclusive governance and shared responsibility (Lansing et al. 2023).

4. Address Economic Inequality and Promote Inclusive Growth

Populism thrives where economic inequality is stark and job insecurity is widespread. Policymakers should:

- **Develop reskilling and upskilling programs** in partnership with local educational institutions and private firms, focusing on skills relevant to regional economies—such as digital logistics, green technologies, and advanced manufacturing. Germany's Industrie 4.0 initiative, with its emphasis on vocational training and digital literacy, provides a useful model (Li 2022).



FIGURE 4. Germany's Dual Vocational Training Program

- **Offer incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)** in historically marginalized areas, including tax breaks, grants, and low-interest loans to stimulate entrepreneurship and job creation.
- **Strengthen social safety nets** such as unemployment insurance, housing support, and healthcare access, ensuring that individuals facing economic hardship are not left behind.

5. Foster Social Cohesion and Inclusivity

Addressing the social fragmentation that populist movements exploit requires policies that build inclusive communities:

- **Train local officials** in inclusive governance practices, cultural sensitivity, and anti-discrimination measures to ensure public services are accessible and equitable.
- **Support intercultural dialogue programs** that bring together different community groups to build mutual understanding, reduce tensions, and promote shared goals.
- **Invest in community centers** that serve as hubs for educational programs, cultural activities, and recreational opportunities, creating spaces where diverse residents can connect.



FIGURE 5.
Community
Activities

Policy-Making Bodies for Implementation

These recommendations should be advanced through:

- **National ministries of interior, regional development, education, and labor**, which oversee governance, infrastructure, and workforce development.
- **European Union bodies**, such as the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), which provides funding and strategic guidance for regional development.
- **International organizations**, including the OECD, UNDP, and World Bank, which can provide technical assistance and promote best practices.
- **Local government associations** and municipal networks, which play a crucial role in tailoring and implementing these policies on the ground.

Research Outputs & Future Work

This study represents an initial but significant step in uncovering the long-term institutional roots of populism. We plan to present these findings at the American Political Science Association (APSA) Annual Conference 2025, where we aim to engage with leading scholars in comparative politics, political behavior, and historical political economy. We are also preparing the manuscript for submission to a top peer-reviewed journal to contribute to ongoing debates about the historical foundations of democratic resilience.

Looking ahead, our future research will extend this analysis beyond Europe to explore how patterns of historical border instability relate to populist support in non-Western contexts. Many regions outside Europe—including parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America—have experienced significant historical border volatility due to imperialism, colonization, and post-colonial state formation. By examining these cases, we hope to assess whether the relationships we document in Europe generalize across different historical and institutional settings, offering broader insights into the global rise of populism.



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