

Does populism affect government transparency? A transnational analysis

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Abstract: Government transparency is intrinsically linked to governance and accountability and is an essential element for democracy. However, the increasing use of populism by political leaders has raised questions about its impact on transparency. Political leaders often deploy populism as a strategy that can compromise the dissemination of information and weaken the institutions responsible for government oversight. Given this scenario, this study aims to analyze the effects of populist governance on government transparency at the transnational level, in addition to investigating the influence of factors such as economic development, corruption, press freedom, and human development. Employing an explanatory and quantitative research design, the study uses regression analysis on panel data from 27 countries between 2013 and 2021, encompassing 243 observations. The results indicate that Latin America exhibits distinct political, cultural, and economic characteristics compared to other regions, which affects the effectiveness of transparency strategies. Moreover, the study observes that in countries outside Latin America where populists govern, transparency tends to decline. Thus, the main contribution of this study is to emphasize the need to adapt transparency policies to regional differences, considering the effects of populism on governance. Awareness of these dynamics can be decisive for voters' decision-making and the formulation of more effective public policies.

Keywords: government transparency; populist governance; political accountability; Latin America politics; public policy

1. Introduction

Currently, one of the most important debates in politics concerns government transparency—a topic that has spurred a considerable amount of academic work aimed at explaining the various factors that constitute it [1]. The concept refers to measures that public administrations adopt to promote information disclosure to stakeholders [2].

Government transparency has become increasingly relevant as access to information has expanded, influencing governance, accountability, corruption, and democracy [3].

However, the relationship between government transparency and another political phenomenon—populism—remains underexplored. Although populism is not a recent phenomenon, its presence has grown in recent years, making it a central element in political debates [4] According to Hawkins [5], the number of political leaders worldwide classified as populists has more than doubled since 1998, an occurrence that has attracted scholarly attention.

With this growing interest, studies examining the impact of populism on modern Western democracies have intensified the debate over its true nature. Some scholars

emphasize the harmful effects of populism on democracy [6], while others argue that it plays a corrective, questioning, and even positive role in democratic contexts [7]. South America can be fertile ground for populism and also draws considerable interest regarding government transparency, as governments in the region have historically performed poorly in terms of transparency and combating corruption [8].

The connection between these two concepts sets the stage for a series of important analyses. For instance, populist leaders often use government transparency as a tool to discredit opponents by accusing them of lacking transparency in their actions and excluding the public from the decision-making process [9]. Political actors employing populist tactics frequently stress the value of transparency and express distrust toward obscure government procedures and technicalities [10].

Therefore, it is important to explore these concepts to help consolidate a theoretical framework that fully encompasses the complexities of the phenomenon. In addition to addressing citizens' fundamental rights to information, transparency serves as an essential tool for improving governance and reducing corruption [11]. Furthermore, few studies explore the relationship between populism and transparency. This study aims to bridge that gap.

Given the complexity of these concepts, our research seeks to answer the following question: What is the relationship between populism and government transparency? The objective of this study is to analyze the effects of populist leaders on government transparency at a transnational level. Additionally, we examine the influence of economic development, corruption, press freedom, and human development on countries' levels of transparency.

This article contributes to the analysis of the relationship between populism and transparency at a transnational level. This research is valuable for deepening our theoretical understanding of how political strategies influence information disclosure, thereby informing efforts to strengthen democratic resilience. We review existing approaches to understanding populism and its characteristics that affect government transparency. In addition, we conduct a longitudinal study tracking transparency levels over time in countries with varying populist experiences, allowing us to assess trends and changes under populist governments and their consequences for transparency. To strengthen our analysis, we also incorporate additional indicators, such as the corruption index, the press freedom index, and the human and economic development indices.

Furthermore, this study underscores the pivotal role of government transparency in economic operations. Transparent decision-making not only enhances the investment environment and market confidence but also contributes significantly to the efficient allocation of resources, thereby fostering sustainable economic development.

As a practical contribution, this research offers valuable insights into the specific policies that populist governments adopt regarding government transparency. This includes analyses of laws, institutional reforms, accountability mechanisms, and information disclosure.

Based on the available data, we defined the period as between 2013 and 2021. To achieve our objectives, we first investigated the theoretical elements underpinning the relationship between government transparency and populism. Then, we collected data,

analyzed the results, and presented our conclusions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Government transparency

Despite varying definitions, transparency is generally defined as the set of factors or measures that promote or enable the wide dissemination of information about public entities' activities to all relevant stakeholders [12]. This explanation outlines several factors that warrant further elaboration. For example, the information provided must be relevant, timely, and reliable [13].

These transparent measures are fundamental in creating and fostering accountability in the public sphere. When citizens and independent media are aware of government actions, particularly those related to financial decisions, accountability becomes more likely [13]. In this regard, a transparent government also supports a strong judicial system and a free press. Furthermore, effective transparency enables citizens to make wiser and more informed decisions, including their electoral choices, by providing relevant information about the performance of government actors [14].

Although some argue that transparency fails to deliver the promised results [15] or that evidence of its positive impact on accountability is overstated [16], no evidence indicates any benefits from reduced transparency in the political sphere. Beyond upholding citizens' basic right to information, transparency serves as a robust tool for improving governance [11] and reducing both endemic and individual corruption [17]. Transparency is also associated with improved socioeconomic and human development indicators [13] and with the full realization of an effectively participatory democracy [11].

2.2. Populism

Because populism is an extremely complex and multifaceted phenomenon, its precise definition remains contested. However, three conceptual frameworks provide a more systematic understanding of populism. Gidron and Bonikowski [18] conceptualize populism as ideology, discursive style, and political strategy. For the purposes of this study, we focus on the first two conceptualizations, as they are more suitable for empirical research [17].

The Ideological Approach, recognized as the most widely cited definition of populism [19], is mainly influenced by the work of Mudde and Kaltwasser [20], who define populism as a "thin-centered" ideology. According to Freedon [21], a thin-centered ideology does not offer a complete set of concepts and notions found in more fully developed ideologies. Consequently, populism must align itself with other, more developed ideologies (such as liberalism, socialism, and fascism) to gain greater robustness and comprehensiveness [22].

Within this approach, every populist manifestation or leadership shares a common element, namely, the assertion of a division between society and politics into two antagonistic and opposing forces: the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite" [22]. In this regard, it is crucial for the populist leader to consistently portray the people as disadvantaged relative to the incumbent elite [22].

The Discursive Approach defines populism as a discursive style characterized by rhetoric that frequently highlights a moral and ethical conflict between the people and the elite [23]. Although it shares clear similarities with the ideological definition, the discursive approach regards populism as a form of political expression rather than as a set of ideological concepts (even if poorly defined) [24]. In this regard, this approach seeks to understand populism in degrees or levels, focusing more on the populist discourse itself than on the populist leader.

Despite these conceptual differences, the similarities with the ideological approach cause the two views to overlap. For instance, the elements that constitute the “us versus them” dichotomy depend on the context, assuming a more symbolic than material nature [25]. Moreover, as a discursive element, populism is fundamentally anti-status quo [18]. In line with the ideological approach, the discursive approach acknowledges that populism can manifest in various forms while still emphasizing the importance of its defining characteristics.

Populist leaders increasingly leverage social media to bypass traditional media, directly shaping public perception of transparency. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook enable leaders to disseminate curated narratives, often conflating rhetorical transparency (e.g., daily livestreams) with substantive institutional openness. For example, López Obrador’s *mañaneras* (morning press conferences) in Mexico emphasize direct communication but have been criticized for replacing data-driven accountability with anecdotal claims. Conversely, social media can amplify citizen-led transparency initiatives, such as crowdsourced corruption reporting, such as the “Serenata de Amor” operation in Brazil. However, misinformation campaigns and ‘fake news’ complicate this dynamic, as populist rhetoric may weaponize transparency discourse to delegitimize opponents while obscuring factual accountability.”

2.3. Economic factors and government transparency

Economic factors play a crucial role in shaping government behavior and enhancing the overall efficiency of public administration. More than mere quantitative measures, these factors reflect complex dynamics that influence the investment climate, reinforce market confidence, and optimize resource allocation. In this light, government transparency is fundamental for creating conditions that promote sustainable economic growth.

In this context, classical economic theories, such as information asymmetry theory and principal-agent theory, offer a robust framework for interpreting these interactions. Information asymmetry theory [26] posits that unequal access to information can lead to inefficiencies and market distortions, hindering optimal economic outcomes. Similarly, principal-agent theory [27] elucidates the conflicts that arise when the interests of government officials diverge from those of citizens.

Together, these theoretical frameworks, along with other related factors, show how economic dynamics affect overall economic development and, in turn, influence the decisions of government agents regarding the transparency of information. For instance, these theories suggest that increased transparency can mitigate the adverse effects of information gaps and misaligned incentives, thereby fostering more efficient economic interactions and reducing agency problems.

Beyond general economic factors, specific indicators such as the Human

Development Index (HDI) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) capture key aspects of development. GDP reflects economic production and living standards, whereas the HDI encompasses income, education, and overall quality of life. These indicators correlate with greater government transparency, as higher economic and human development support the institutional strength necessary for open governance.

Furthermore, corruption represents a significant obstacle to effective governance. Elevated corruption levels erode institutional integrity, distort resource allocation, and undermine public trust in governmental decision-making. In contexts where corruption is associated with diminished press freedom, influential groups may attempt to control or suppress media outlets that report on unethical practices, thereby reducing public scrutiny and accountability and further impairing transparency. Thus, the interplay between corruption and press freedom is pivotal in shaping overall government transparency, emphasizing the need for robust institutional safeguards to protect both economic performance and informational integrity.

Ultimately, these specific indicators and their associated challenges demonstrate how broader economic factors, including institutional strength, market confidence, and efficient resource allocation, fundamentally shape transparency. A robust economic environment not only drives development but also reinforces the mechanisms necessary for transparent, accountable governance.

Despite growing scholarly interest in the intersection of populism and governance, existing literature often faces methodological challenges that limit comprehensive understanding. Many studies tend to rely on single-case analyses or regional comparisons with specific contextual variables, which, while providing rich insights, can hinder the generalizability of findings across diverse political systems. Furthermore, a common limitation involves the reliance on proxy indicators for complex phenomena like ‘populism’ or ‘transparency,’ which may not fully capture their multifaceted nature or specific nuances in different cultural or institutional settings. Our study aims to contribute to addressing these limitations by employing a broader, transnational dataset and rigorous quantitative analysis to offer a comparative and empirically robust perspective on these dynamics.

2.4. Hypothesis development

Fenster [9] investigated the nuances that differentiate what populist discourse claims as transparency from what transparency actually is. According to his analysis, populist agents adopt an overly simplistic and demagogic approach to transparency, neglecting the technical aspects that truly foster its effectiveness. The author also supports Canovan’s [28] assertion that populists use transparency as an electoral tool. Kossow [29] found that, in general, populist leaders favor and promote corruption—a finding also corroborated by Hawkins et al. [30]. In another study, Kenny [31] observed a relationship between populism and declining levels of press freedom.

Literature reveals that populist leaders often adopt strategies that undermine institutional transparency. These strategies include suppressing critical information, weakening oversight bodies, and manipulating the media to disseminate misinformation [10].

In addition to undermining transparency institutions, populism tends to erode the

foundations of the Rule of Law, essential for ensuring accountability and effective democratic functioning. This creates an environment where accountability and transparency are compromised, making it difficult for the public to monitor government actions and identify potential abuses of power [1,32].

Furthermore, the consequences of populism can extend to the erosion of democratic norms and the weakening of institutions that traditionally safeguard the integrity of the governmental process. This raises concerns about the long-term impact on democratic governance and public trust in state institutions [33].

Therefore, the evidence suggests that populist policies often harm government transparency and accountability, posing significant challenges for sustaining efficient and responsible democratic governance. Consequently, the first hypothesis is:

H1: Populism negatively affects government transparency.

The literature also highlights the favoring of political competitiveness for government transparency [13,34], specifically related to the approval of Freedom of Information Laws (FOIs) [35]. Thus, transparency is influenced by the presence of a parliamentary system of government rather than a presidential one, the age of FOIs (in developing countries), and the maturity of democracy (in developed countries) [36]. Therefore, a relevant factor for promoting transparency is the reduction of corruption levels [13].

Researchers have extensively documented the relationship between corruption and government transparency in the literature, highlighting significant impacts in various contexts. Studies reveal that higher levels of corruption are associated with lower levels of transparency in public administrations, evidencing an inverse relationship between these two phenomena [37,38]. A comprehensive analysis involving 116 countries over a decade highlights that fiscal transparency is negatively correlated with corruption indices. This finding underscores the crucial role of transparency in mitigating corrupt practices and promoting administrative efficiency and public trust [39].

In addition to these studies, research indicates that a robust institutional commitment to public transparency can not only reduce corruption but also improve government performance, emphasizing the effectiveness of freedom of information laws in promoting responsible governance [40].

Collectively, these evidences reinforce the negative influence of corruption on government transparency, thus the hypothesis is:

H2: Corruption negatively affects government transparency.

Press freedom plays a crucial role in promoting government transparency by ensuring that the public has access to information and can hold public bodies accountable. Research indicates that press freedom, in conjunction with legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act, enhances transparency by enabling journalists to seek, obtain, and disseminate information, thereby contributing to a more open and accountable governance system [41,42]. Moreover, a free and independent press is essential for holding government agents accountable and preventing the spread of misinformation and propaganda [43].

Furthermore, transparency enabled by freedom of information laws is vital for maintaining trust between citizens and the state, strengthening democracy by challenging government decision-making processes and promoting the informed

participation of civil society [44,45]. Consequently, the hypothesis is:

H3: Press freedom positively affects government transparency.

Among the factors that promote government transparency are levels of socioeconomic and human development [13]. In developed countries, government transparency tends to be higher.

Studies on the relationship between the Human Development Index (HDI) and government transparency reveal a complex and multifaceted dynamic. While some researchers report a positive influence of HDI on government transparency [46,47], others emphasize the importance of budget transparency for governance quality, demonstrating a significant relationship between these factors [48–50]. These studies illustrate how budget transparency shapes political processes and government performance, thereby promoting effective governance practices and enhancing overall governance quality.

However, the direct influence of human development on this relationship appears to be limited, indicating the need for further research to fully understand how HDI affects government transparency and, consequently, governance. Ultimately, strengthening a nation's HDI can contribute not only to enhancing human well-being but also to improving the mechanisms that promote transparency and accountability in public management—both of which are fundamental for democratic and efficient governance. Thus, the hypothesis is

H4: The Human Development Index positively affects government transparency.

In less developed contexts, where economic and political challenges are more pressing, a positive correlation exists between economic growth and improvements in transparency. This is because more developed countries tend to have institutions that are more robust and a better-structured administrative capacity for addressing public governance issues, including transparency [51,52].

In Brazil, for example, studies show that states that effectively manage their public budgets and are more economically developed tend to have more advanced transparency practices, resulting in greater disclosure of financial and administrative information [44]. Moreover, cities with higher per capita income and better educational infrastructure tend to demand higher levels of transparency from their governments, reflecting a greater expectation among the population for efficient and responsible public management [53,54].

Therefore, it is evident that socioeconomic development not only facilitates the implementation of transparency policies but also creates an environment conducive to their effectiveness. Consequently, the hypothesis is:

H5: Socioeconomic development positively affects government transparency.

3. Materials and methods

This study is explanatory, as it seeks to analyze the factors that contribute to government transparency. Regarding its methodology, this research is quantitative, as it aims to test the hypotheses and examine the cause-and-effect relationships among the studied variables using panel data regression analysis [55].

3.1. Population and sample

The initial study population consisted of 36 countries; however, 9 were excluded due to the lack of available data for the analyzed period. Thus, the final sample consists of 27 countries per year. The period (2013–2021) was selected based on the availability of complete data for all analyzed countries. This resulted in 243 observations for the dependent variable. The countries included in the analysis were Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, the Czech Republic, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Italy, Mexico, Nicaragua, Norway, Peru, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States of America (USA), and Venezuela.

3.2. Data collection

Regarding the dependent variable, we used the Open Budget Survey by the International Budget Partnership to assess government transparency performance. This index is divided into three evaluation dimensions: transparency, participation, and oversight. Published every two years since 2006, with the most recent report released in 2021, the index ranks countries based on their budget transparency, on a scale from 0 to 100—the more transparent a country is, the higher its score.

Table 1 presents the independent variables, their respective data collection sources, and a brief description of each.

Table 1. Study variables.

Variable	Collection source	Description	Expected relationship	Theoretical basis
Populism (POP)	Global Populism Database	The project is an initiative of authors and researchers who created a database classifying populist leaders globally. Using the holistic grading discursive analysis technique [30], they evaluated four speeches of each leader: campaign, inauguration, international, and famous. Each leader received an average score from 0 to 2, indicating their level of populism. The higher the score, the more populist the leader.	Negative	Michener [10]; Ortiz-Millán [1]; Veljanovska [33]
Corruption (COR)	Transparency International	The presence or absence of corruption in the public sector is directly linked to transparency. To assess this variable, the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International was used, produced annually since 1995. This index ranks countries based on at least three of the thirteen global sources on corruption, generating an average score from 0 to 100. The higher the score, the lower the perception of corruption in the country.	Negative	Fadda et al. [37]; Hanoon, Tuwaya YA, AL-Behadily [38]; Leroy & Ávila [36].
Freedom of the press (FRE)	World Press Freedom Index	Measured by Reporters Without Borders, it has been produced annually since 2002. It ranks countries based on press freedom, using an 87-question questionnaire applied to experts and data on violence against journalists. Each country receives a score between 0 and 100. From 2005 to 2012, a lower score indicated greater respect for press freedom; from 2013 onwards, this approach was reversed.	Positive	Abreu & Tardin [44]; Fredricks & Phillips [43]; Mabillard & Keuffer [42].

Table 2. (Continued).

Variable	Collection source	Description	Expected relationship	Theoretical basis
GDP per capita (GDP)	World Development Indicators	GDP per capita, collected from the World Bank's database, is an economic indicator that represents the total value of goods and services produced by a country in a year, divided by its population. It is used to measure the economic prosperity of a country and the standard of living of its citizens.	Positive	Baldissera et al. [51]; Dutta & Mukherjee [53]; Liuta & Mershchii [54].
Human Development Index (HDI)	World Development Indicators	The HDI, collected from the World Bank database, is an indicator that evaluates the human development of a country. It is composed of three dimensions: life expectancy, education (years of schooling) and standard of living. The HDI ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater human development.	Positive	Albassam [46]; Mikhailova, Klimanov, Rabadanova [48]; Samanta & Sanyal [49].

Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

3.3. Data analysis

Based on the established variables and the study's objective of verifying which variables influence government transparency, we decided to use panel data regression using STATA 13®. Equation (1) shows the expected relationship between the variables:

$$\text{TRANSP}_{it} = \alpha - \beta_1(\text{POP}_{it}) - \beta_2(\text{COR}_{it}) + \beta_3(\text{FRE}_{it}) + \beta_4(\text{HDI}_{it}) + \beta_5(\text{GDP}_{it}) + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

In the equation, the acronym TRANSP stands for transparency; COR denotes corruption; FRE stands for freedom of the press; GDP represents Gross Domestic Product per capita; POP stands for populism; and HDI refers to the Human Development Index.

To investigate potential multicollinearity issues, we constructed a correlation matrix, as shown in **Table 2**:

Table 2. Correlation matrix.

	TRANSP	COR	FRE	GDP	POP	HDI
TRANSP	1.0000					
COR	0.5172	1.0000				
FRE	0.3370	0.7418	1.0000			
GDP	0.5491	0.8339	0.6373	1.0000		
POP	-0.6273	-0.4398	-0.4051	-0.3316	1.0000	
HDI	0.5221	0.8347	0.5697	0.8927	-0.3677	1.0000

Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

Note: Where: TRANSP: transparency; COR: corruption; FRE: freedom of the press; GDP: GDP per capita; POP: populism; HDI: human development index.

All correlations were statistically significant at the 5% level, and we observed that some exhibited coefficients above 0.70, which may be interpreted as either high (0.7 to 0.9) or very high (0.9 to 1) [56]. Consequently, we excluded the variables associated with corruption and HDI from the analysis to avoid multicollinearity issues, as its inclusion would have inflated standard errors and potentially biased coefficient estimates. This approach allowed us to maintain statistical efficiency while ensuring

that the retained variables offered distinct and independent contributions to the model’s explanatory power.

Based on this criterion, we developed three models: the fixed effects model, the random effects model, and the pooled model. To determine the best-fitting model, we performed the Breusch-Pagan and Hausman tests.

In addition to the model including all the countries studied, we conducted analyses by grouping countries. We also employed descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the data and to identify trends and patterns.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of the transparency variable over the study period in the sampled countries.

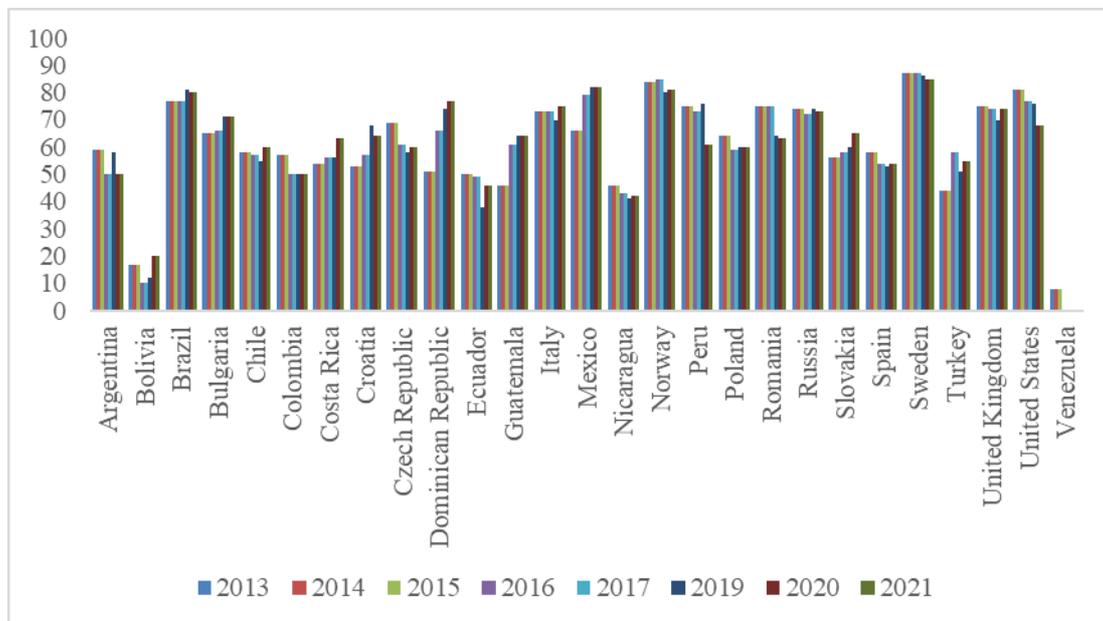


Figure 1. Evolution of transparency by country.

Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

Countries such as Sweden and Norway exhibit the highest transparency rates; however, Brazil, the USA, and Mexico also demonstrate substantial transparency levels. Regarding temporal changes, the Dominican Republic experienced the greatest increase in transparency. Conversely, Venezuela, which previously maintained a high transparency index, underwent a substantial decline, reaching the lowest score in recent years.

It is important to note that, over the study period, the average transparency levels in the sampled countries exhibited only minor variations. Nevertheless, the standard deviation is relatively high compared to the mean, with values of approximately 18.73 and 60.34, respectively.

Referring to the correlation matrix presented in **Table 2**, we observed that all variable coefficients, except that for populism, were positive. This preliminary analysis reveals relationships among the variables that are largely consistent with the

hypotheses outlined in the theoretical framework, with the exception of corruption, for which we expected a negative coefficient. However, we can only confirm this inference by performing the panel data regression analysis that we discuss in the following section.

4.2. Multivariate analysis

Based on these considerations, we performed panel data analysis, and **Table 3** displays the results. As is typical in applied social sciences, the statistical models provide an analytical approximation of multifaceted processes. While they allow for the identification of patterns and associations, they inevitably abstract from the full complexity of institutional, social, and political dynamics involved. Thus, the results should be viewed as one interpretative lens among others, rather than a definitive account of the phenomena under investigation.

Table 3. Regression models with panel data.

Variable	Polled	Fixed	Aleat
FRE	0.1107	0.0579	0.1107
GDP	0.4389***	0.1034	0.4389***
POP	0.0024	0.0406	0.0024
Constant	40.7983***	52.6758***	40.7983***

Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

Note: significant *** at 1%. Where: TRANSP: transparency; COR: corruption; FRE: freedom of the press; GDP: GDP per capita; POP: populism; HDI: human development index.

The Breusch-Pagan and Hausman tests indicate that the fixed effects model fits best. In this model, none of the variables reached statistical significance, which suggests that we must reject the aforementioned hypotheses for the countries and period studied. However, we note that GDP achieved significance in the other models.

To address potential reverse causality – whether transparency influences populism rather than vice versa – we conducted additional analyses. First, we inverted the original model by regressing populism on transparency. The results indicated no statistically significant association. Next, employing a fixed-effects model with lagged variables, we regressed populism on one- and two-year lags of transparency, while controlling for lagged values of populism. These models also yielded no statistically significant relationships, indicating that prior levels of transparency do not explain subsequent levels of populism. Overall, these findings suggest that, at the global level, transparency does not cause populism. However, this aggregate result may obscure regional or country-specific dynamics; thus, we proceed with a more detailed analysis to explore potential heterogeneities across contexts.

To deepen our analysis, we also grouped countries to examine whether regional peculiarities influence the relationships between the variables. **Table 4** displays the results for Latin American countries—an area relatively understudied in administration literature, and for the remaining countries

Table 4. Regression models with panel data in Latin America and other countries.

Variable	Latin America	Other countries
FRE	-0.3658*	-0.1138
GDP	1.3911***	-0.6337***
POP	0.1005***	-0.0941**
Constant	53.0107***	100.8942***

Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

Note: * significant to 10%; ** significant to 5%; *** significant to 1%.

With this grouping, we observe that several variables reached statistical significance. In Latin America, freedom of the press negatively influenced transparency, meaning that an increase in this variable corresponded with a reduction in transparency. In contrast, we found that freedom of the press did not significantly affect transparency in other countries. These findings contradict our research hypothesis, prompting us to reject it.

In Latin America, we observed that GDP behaved as expected by positively influencing transparency. Conversely, in other countries, GDP negatively influenced transparency. Consequently, we conclude that the research hypothesis holds only for Latin America. We extend this interpretation to the HDI, which we omitted from the model because it exhibited a high positive correlation. Regarding corruption—also omitted due to high correlation—we reject the hypothesis of a negative influence for Latin American countries, although we do not reject it for other countries.

Regarding populism, we observed a positive relationship with transparency in Latin America, whereas in other countries, the relationship was negative, which aligns with our research hypothesis.

Table 5 summarizes the research hypotheses and the results obtained for each group of countries.

Table 5. Analysis of the rejection of the hypotheses by group of countries.

Hypothesis	Expected behavior	Result in Latin America (LA)	Reject hypothesis in LA	Result in other countries (OC)	Reject hypothesis in OC
Populism	Negative	Positive	Yes	Negative	No
Corruption	Negative	Positive	Yes	Negative	No
Freedom of the Press	Positive	Negative	Yes	Does not influence	Yes
GDP	Positive	Positive	No	Negative	Yes
HDI	Positive	Positive	No	Negative	Yes

Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

These results indicate that the theoretical basis we used for the populism variable [1,10,33] does not align with the outcomes observed in Latin American countries, yet it corresponds with the relationships identified in other countries. Regarding the corruption variable, we observed that the theoretical basis presented in this research [36–38] also does not align with the relationships observed in Latin America, whereas in other regions its influence on transparency meets expectations.

Regarding freedom of the press, we observed that its behavior deviated from

theoretical expectations [42–44], as it negatively affected transparency in Latin America and showed no statistical significance in other countries. This pattern suggests that freedom of the press may interact with populism in a context-dependent manner, potentially moderating its effects on transparency in ways that reflect regional institutional and political dynamics.

Regarding GDP, the theoretical basis we consulted [50,53,54] aligns with the results observed in Latin America, but it did not exhibit the expected relationship in other countries. Similarly, the theoretical basis we used for the HDI variable [46,48,49] aligned with the relationships observed in Latin American countries while diverging from those found in other countries.

Our results reinforce that Latin American countries possess characteristics that differ from those of other regions. Thus, we must consider that successful strategies adopted in some countries may not yield the same effects in this group, which exhibits its own political, cultural, and economic traits. Therefore, our research underscores the need for transparency-enhancing approaches that account for regional peculiarities.

In addition, we emphasize the result obtained with the populism variable, which proved detrimental to transparency, as exemplified by the USA. Beginning in 2014, when we identified discourses with stronger populist traits in the USA, transparency declined and continued to decrease in subsequent years as populist discourse intensified.

This reality is even more complex in Latin American countries. In Mexico, for example, despite strong populist elements in the speeches of its leaders from 2019 onward, transparency maintained its highest levels throughout the historical series we studied. We interpret this phenomenon as an effort to improve the government’s communication with the public and to legitimize its positive actions. Such a strategy may counteract the press’s focus on negative events, which might also explain why freedom of the press does not influence transparency. **Figures 2 and 3** illustrate the behavior of the variables in the countries mentioned.

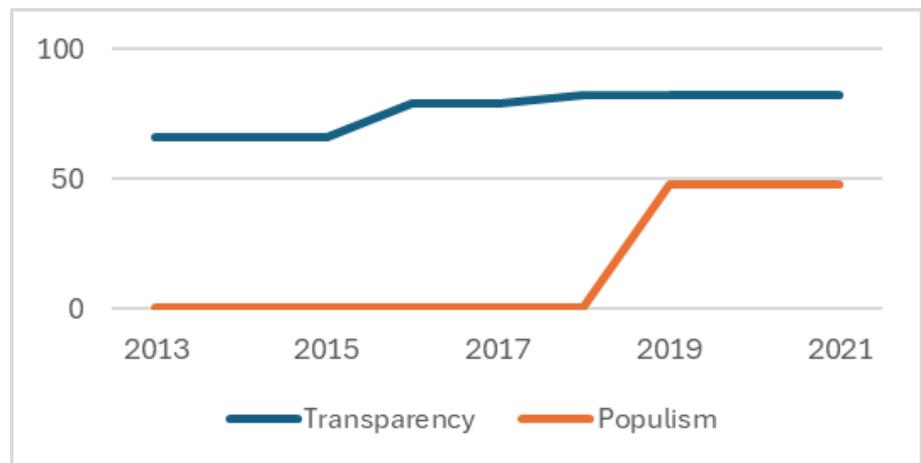


Figure 2. Transparency x Populism in Mexico.

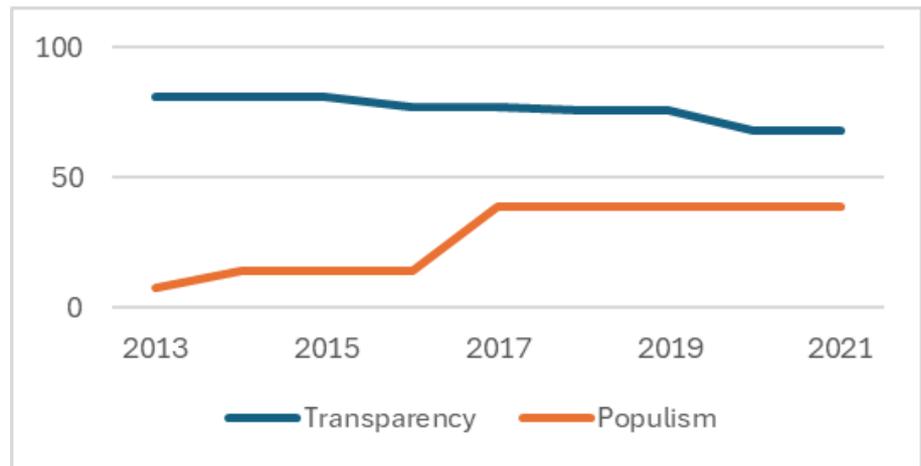


Figure 3. Transparency x Populism in the USA.

Therefore, our results suggest that in countries outside Latin America, transparency is likely to worsen under leadership characterized by populist rhetoric. Conversely, populist leadership in Latin American countries tends to foster increased transparency. When aware of these dynamics, voters can consider this factor in their decision-making process when selecting their representatives.

The analysis reveals regional disparities, but historical trajectories further contextualize these findings. In Latin America, colonial legacies of centralized power and weak institutional trust have fostered populism as a recurring political strategy. Populist leaders often exploit public skepticism toward elites by positioning themselves as champions of transparency, even as they co-opt institutions. For instance, Mexico's post-Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) democratization (2000) created fertile ground for transparency laws, which subsequent populist governments inherited but selectively enforced. In contrast, European populists like Italy's Five Star Movement emerged in high-trust contexts with strong civil societies, enabling transparency reforms despite anti-elite rhetoric. These historical pathways underscore that populism's impact on transparency is also mediated by pre-existing democratic norms and institutional legacies.

While the quantitative analysis identifies regional trends, the relationship between populism and transparency is further nuanced by institutional and legal contexts. For instance, Mexico's General Law on Transparency and Access to Public Information (2015) established robust mechanisms for accountability, including the National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information, and Personal Data Protection (INAI). This legal framework predates the populist administration (2019–2024) and has institutionalized transparency practices, creating momentum that persists despite political shifts. However, recent empirical evidence suggests contradictions: while Mexico's Open Budget Survey scores remain high, federal responsiveness to information requests has slowed, and restrictions on data related to public spending and health crises have increased. This divergence highlights the need to distinguish between institutional transparency (e.g., access to official records) and rhetorical transparency (e.g., frequent public addresses lacking verifiable data), as populist governments may prioritize the latter to legitimize actions while undermining the former.

Similarly, in Brazil, the Access to Information Law (2011) has driven transparency improvements, yet the Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022) weakened environmental and health data disclosure. Conversely, Venezuela’s transparency index collapsed under Chávez and Maduro due to systematic suppression of institutional oversight. These cases illustrate that populism’s impact depends on pre-existing legal frameworks and institutional resilience. Regional generalizations thus require caution: Latin America’s heterogeneity demands sub-regional analysis, while non-Latin cases like Italy’s Five Star Movement (which promoted transparency reforms) challenge assumptions of uniform populist effects.

5. Conclusion

We achieved our study’s objective by examining the relationship between government transparency and populism, which revealed significant regional variations. Our survey found that although populist leaders frequently mention transparency, its actual effects differ substantially by region.

In Latin America, we identified a positive relationship between transparency and populism. For example, populist governments in Mexico maintained or even increased their transparency levels. We attribute this to their communication efforts to legitimize positive actions and counter negative press coverage.

In contrast, outside Latin America, populism negatively affected transparency. For example, in the United States, the rise of populism correlated with a decline in government transparency.

In Latin America, populism’s positive correlation with transparency – exemplified by Mexico’s high Open Budget Survey scores – must be interpreted cautiously. While López Obrador’s administration maintained transparency metrics, this likely reflects the institutional inertia of Mexico’s 2015 transparency law and INAI’s autonomy rather than populist commitment. Recent restrictions on sensitive data and reliance on *mañaneras* (which prioritize narrative control over accountability) suggest a gap between perceived and actual transparency. Thus, populism in Latin America may sustain transparency scores in spite of, rather than because of, its rhetoric, whereas in institutionalized democracies (e.g., the USA), populist leadership directly erodes transparency safeguards.

Regarding the other variables, our findings indicate that GDP positively affected transparency in Latin America but negatively influenced it in other regions. In Latin America, press freedom negatively influenced transparency, whereas in other countries its effect was not statistically significant. Because of high correlations, we omitted HDI and corruption, although the results suggest that their influences also vary by region.

Therefore, strategies to increase transparency must account for each region’s unique political, cultural, and economic characteristics. Policies that succeed elsewhere may not work as effectively in Latin America. In countries outside Latin America led by populist leaders, we expect a decline in transparency. Therefore, we recommend that government officials inform voters about regional trends in transparency and populism, as such awareness can influence their electoral decisions.

Additionally, the findings of this study have significant implications for economic policy formulation, economic growth models, and sustainable development. The observed regional variations suggest that enhancing government transparency can contribute to a more efficient allocation of public resources, foster investor confidence, and stimulate economic innovation. Policymakers are thus provided with a clear reference for tailoring economic strategies that accommodate regional political, cultural, and economic contexts, ultimately promoting long-term sustainable development.

Our study contributes a detailed, regionally differentiated analysis of the relationship between populism and government transparency. The results indicate that governments must tailor approaches to increase transparency according to regional and contextual realities. Moreover, our findings underscore the need for public policies that account for each region's cultural, political, and economic peculiarities to promote more transparent and efficient governance.

By exploring these themes, our research offers valuable insights for academics, policymakers, and voters, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the complex relationship between populism and transparency across different contexts.

As a limitation of the study, given its focus on social variables, an inherent degree of subjectivity exists in their measurement and interpretation. Future research employing mixed-methods designs, longitudinal designs and a broader range of variables may further elucidate these dynamics.

Suggestions for future research include distinguishing between institutional and rhetorical transparency—using indicators such as response rates to information requests—to clarify whether outcomes reflect legal frameworks or political discourse. It is also recommended to explore variations across types of populism (e.g., left- vs. right-wing) and incorporate governance quality as a moderating factor. Finally, examining how citizens' use of social media amplifies or counters populist narratives could enhance understanding of perceived transparency in digital contexts.

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