

Press release

Universität Basel

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06/12/2025

<http://idw-online.de/en/news853729>

Research results, Scientific Publications
Politics
transregional, national



Increased risk: why coalitions with populists fail sooner

Populism is a political reality in many European countries – both on the right and on the left. A study now shows that coalition governments that include populist parties are often unstable. But it isn't the radicalism of the party that counts, rather it's the political style.

Populist parties have long ceased to be a marginal phenomenon. They are now an established political force in many European countries and are fundamentally challenging the democratic system. These parties use harsh rhetoric against the "elite" and present themselves as the sole representatives of the "true will of the people." To enforce this supposed will, they often reject established institutions and demand profound political upheaval. They usually offer relatively simple solutions to complex societal problems. In recent years, we have seen an increase in governments that include populist forces in Europe – either governing alone or as coalition partners.

Political scientist Sophie Suda from the University of Basel has been looking into the stability of populist governments. Working with her research team, she investigated whether and how populist parties influence governments. The aim of the study was to isolate the impact of populism on the duration of a government, regardless of its political orientation, region or other known influencing factors.

Analysis of three decades

The empirical study covered changes of government in 368 cabinets in 26 Western, Central and Eastern European countries. For each premature dissolution of government, the researchers determined the reason, comparing the different regions. The researchers focused their analysis on the period 1990 to 2021, which allowed them to include more countries. "In the 1990s, a number of new democracies were established in Europe. Their political systems were still in the making," explains Sophie Suda. Where a government's term of office ended prematurely, the researchers took this as a sign of instability.

The study focused on cases in which populist parties governed alone or as part of an alliance of parties, and compared them to governments with no populist element. The research team took into account coalitions in which populists were the dominant force as well as those in which they acted as junior partners.

Problematic political style

The comparison shows that cabinets with populist parties break up more often and sooner – regardless of the type of coalition. This means they are a risk factor for the durability of a coalition. The probability of early government dissolution is about 60% to 65% higher for alliances involving populist parties than for those without.

One particular aspect of the results surprised the researchers: it is not the ideological radicalism of the parties that makes the difference, but how populists function. "We originally assumed that extreme political demands of the parties

were the problem,” says Suda. But instead, difficulties arise because populist parties are structurally and stylistically different from others.

Populist parties usually have a low degree of internal democracy and a centralized structure. Strategic decisions are made by a small leadership group, which increases the likelihood of radical strategic demands. This factor, along with their uncompromising positions, their opposition to diversity, and their fundamental desire to overturn entire systems, makes collaboration difficult and contributes significantly to the instability of the government, explains Sophie Suda. “The fact that populists are part of the cabinet is often enough to cause them to fail prematurely,” says Suda.

Populism proved to be a constant indicator of government breakdown throughout the study period, irrespective of other influencing factors such as economic crises. “Populism is therefore a key explanation for the premature end of a government,” says Suda.

No significant regional differences

This phenomenon is seen with similar effects in Western, Central and Eastern Europe. What differentiates Western and Eastern Europe, however, is the perception of this instability. Political conditions are generally more stable in Western European countries, because they have established party systems. This also makes the tensions caused by populism more noticeable.

“In Eastern Europe, coalitions involving populists are more common,” explains Sophie Suda. But in these countries, governments tend to end prematurely, partly because the political system in many Eastern European countries is more fragmented. “In these contexts, despite – or perhaps because of – volatile conditions, populists are more accepted as legitimate coalition partners than in the West,” says Suda.

This means it is not uncommon for smaller parties to form alliances with populist forces with the aim of being allowed to participate politically. This, in turn, facilitates their rise from the political fringes to the center of power – a strategy that populists have long used to gain influence.

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Original publication:

Maximilian Andorff-Woller, Lisa Klagges, Marcel Lewandowsky, Sophie Suda
Friendly foes or enemies within? Assessing the (in)stability of coalition governments with populists in Europe
Parliamentary Affairs, (2025), doi: [10.1093/pa/gsafo18](https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsafo18)
<https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsafo18>