GLOBAL GOVERNANCE UNDER POPULISM
The Challenge of Information Suppression

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ABSTRACT

Populists' ideological opposition to global governance is well recognized, yet whether and how these actors systematically undermine international organizations remain unclear. The authors argue that a key means by which populists warp global governance is by distorting scientific information, which is necessary for global responses to many public health and environmental issues. Populists are motivated to withhold or misreport scientific information due to their anti-elite, prostate sovereignty views. Using new data on the source and quality of information provided to international organizations (IOs), the authors find that populist leaders are significantly less likely to provide scientific information to IOs than are other types of leaders. When they do offer such data, they are less accurate than the information that other sources supply. The authors' findings suggest that populism may stymie international institutions' ability to govern in areas of pressing international concern.

I. Introduction

A burgeoning literature argues that populism poses a critical threat to global governance, yet the precise mechanisms through which populists undermine international organizations (IOs) remain unclear.[1] Although some scholars point to populists' harsh rhetoric toward IOs or their potential for exit from these bodies,[2] this article identifies information withholding and distortion as key means by which populist leaders challenge IOs. Recent history offers several examples of this process. Populist leaders have been unwilling to offer the World Health Organization (WHO) information on the origins and spread of COVID-19;[3] reticent to provide IOs, such as the United Nations (UN), with climate

[1] Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Voeten 2020.
[2] Voeten 2020.
[3] See Worsnop 2019.

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data;[4] and reluctant to supply the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with development-related information.[5]

Populists across the political spectrum exhibit two defining characteristics: anti-elitism and resistance to constraints on state sovereignty.[6] Providing information to IOs cuts against both of these features, particularly when the information is scientific—that is, pertaining to natural phenomena in which experts play a major part in collecting and analyzing data. Prominent types of scientific information that IOs use relate to public health and the environment, including data on greenhouse gas emissions, disease incidence, and energy use.[7] These data are collected by scientists and other experts who are castigated as elites by populists, and these data are destined for institutions that populists see as infringing on their countries' sovereignty. We theorize that populists fail to furnish IOs with accurate scientific data either as a byproduct of the erosion of domestic scientific capacity or to intentionally weaken IOs.

To test our theory, we use original, hand-coded data on the source of IOs' information—whether they are provided directly by member states or estimated by nonstate actors—as well as a new measure of IO data quality. We find that populists disclose significantly less scientific information to IOs, and when they do furnish it, it is of lower quality than information from nonpopulist leaders. This underreporting tends to rebound once populists leave office, however, suggesting that populists' actions are reversible.[8] We supplement these tests with interviews conducted with senior officials at leading health, environment, and energy IOs who play key data collection and dissemination roles.[9] We also test our mechanism, finding that this relationship holds most consistently for government-supplied scientific indicators as opposed to information estimated by nongovernmental sources.

This article makes several contributions. First, our theory advances the literature on the international ramifications of domestic populist movements.[10] Our argument implies that populist governments limit

[4] Bassett, Costa, and Cattaneo 2018. Plumer, Brad, and Coral Davenport. 2019. "Science under Attack: How Trump is Sidelining Researchers and Their Work." *New York Times*. At nyti.ms/3ttVSds, accessed July 18, 2024.

[5] See Jones, Hilbers, and Slack 2004.

[6] Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019; Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021.

[7] McGarity and Wagner 2010, 7.

[8] We follow Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland in measuring missingness in countries' World Development Indicator reports. See Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2019.

[9] Ethical considerations are discussed in Appendix P.

[10] Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Pevehouse 2020; Voeten 2020; Wehner and Thies 2021; Voeten 2021.

the amount of information that IOs have at their disposal, potentially distorting IOs' judgments and ability to fulfill their mandates.[11] Moreover, our findings suggest that populists may threaten international cooperation that rests on scientific information in particular, with implications for the governance of emerging threats, such as climate change and artificial intelligence.

Next, we extend the literature on government transparency and the transmission of information to IOs. Although scholars have pointed to factors such as democracy and state capacity as sources of government transparency,[12] we find that populism is an important predictor of whether and how a government discloses information. Moreover, unlike prior work that focuses on how states undercut IOs by reducing their participation in or exiting from these organizations,[13] we examine the essential role of information provision. These insights have applications to the study of power in global governance generally, highlighting the supply of information as an underappreciated source of influence.

Additionally, we extend the literature that examines how and when IOs promote cooperative outcomes among their members.[14] A large body of work explores how these organizations can remedy collective action problems by supplying information, minimizing transaction costs, and lengthening time horizons, but this scholarship often overlooks how hostile members can thwart such efforts. We demonstrate that populists in particular may damage international efforts to promote compliance with international laws and norms by interfering with information collection.

II. Information, IOs, and Populist Leaders

Scholars have long recognized that a core function of IOs is to disseminate information to the international community.[15] This information pertains to a wide range of activities, including compliance with international rules, environmental conditions, economic activities, health, security conditions, demographics, crime, trade patterns, education, and more. By collecting, analyzing, and sharing these data, IOs enable members to make informed decisions and thereby promote cooperative

[11] On questions of IO failure, see Gray 2018; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2018; Adler and Drieschova 2021; Pratt 2021.

[12] E.g., Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011.

[13] See, respectively, Gray 2018; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2018.

[14] Keohane 1984.

[15] Keohane 1984; Abbott and Snidal 1998.

outcomes. In many cases, information collection and provision are central to fulfilling IOs' formal mandates.[16]

However, supplying this information requires IOs to obtain specific data and documentation. For example, for the WHO to coordinate a global response to a disease outbreak, it must gather information on the disease's origin and incidence among members.[17] For the IMF to determine systemic economic risks and forecast economic conditions, it relies on states' economic data.[18] For the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ascertain members' adherence to international rules governing nuclear development, it must acquire information regarding countries' nuclear programs. The absence of such informational inputs can have disastrous effects, degrading the quality of trade flows, agreement enforcement, individual accountability for human rights violations, health outcomes, peacekeeping efforts, and economic decision-making.[19] Indeed, institutions such as the UN and the World Bank explicitly recognize the importance of data for their activities, convening forums and events dedicated to this purpose.[20]

IOs sometimes gather information on their own, using surveillance technologies, open-source information, and on-the-ground inspections. For instance, the IAEA sends inspectors to monitor members' nuclear facilities,[21] and the European Commission sends election monitors to determine whether elections are free and fair.[22] However, IOs typically cannot procure all of the information they need independently, as member states often refuse to empower them with these capabilities.[23] Members may worry that doing so will provide IOs with too much power, rendering IOs unaccountable and sacrificing members' sovereignty. States may also express concern that IOs will use these capacities to expand their missions or pursue their own bureaucratic objectives.[24] Moreover, open-source information may not be available to or seen as reliable by IOs.

Accordingly, IOs often depend on the information that member states provide, which may pertain to the state providing the information or to

[16] Interviews by authors with a senior official at a prominent health IO (January 22, 2021) and senior officials at two leading environmental and energy IOs (January 25, 2021 and February 2, 2021).

[17] Ge 2022; Carnegie and Carson 2023.

[18] Clark and Zucker 2023.

[19] Carnegie and Carson 2020.

[20] United Nations World Data Forum. n.d. "About." At https://bit.ly/422v3z1. World Bank. 2021. "Stronger Data Systems Needed to Fight Poverty." March 24. Press Release. Washington, D.C.: World Bank. At https://bit.ly/40Zi003.

[21] Thorne 1992.

[22] Kelley 2009.

[23] Pollack 1997.

[24] Barnett and Finnemore 1999.

other states. However, IOs often experience difficulty in obtaining this information. An emerging body of scholarship recognizes that sharing information with IOs is governed in part by leaders' self-interest;[25] for example, proclivities to share information may vary by regime type.[26] Yet considerable variation exists in information-sharing even among democracies.

We theorize that populist leadership helps to explain variation in whether accurate information is provided to IOs due to populists' characteristic anti-elitism and sovereignty concerns. Further, we argue that their anti-elite and anti-expert inclinations often manifest as a specific resistance to scientific information, which is unique in how it "empowers technocrats and legitimizes experts."[27] Multiple studies show that populists "are skeptical of experts and the research they produce."[28] Populists often denigrate experts as out of touch, greedy, or corrupt,[29] and seek to "ditch the expert for the man on the street."[30] They frequently believe that scientists use their knowledge to exploit others,[31] consistent with studies showing that populists are susceptible to conspiracy theories and other falsehoods.[32] Populists prefer simple language to complex-sounding, scientific rhetoric[33] and are often convinced that their ordinary ingroup members are victims of outgroup experts' findings and assessments.[34]

This anti-elitism can push populists to withhold scientific information from IOs, both directly and indirectly as a result of domestic processes. Domestically, scientific data are costly to produce, requiring the employment of trained experts, large research budgets, and adequate time for collection and analysis. As a result, all leaders have incentives to shirk;[35] however, while populists' constituents see limited value in scientific information, nonpopulists' constituents often trust experts and

[25] Terman and Voeten 2018.

[26] Kono 2006; Schuessler 2010; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015.

[27] Eichengreen 2018, 7.

[28] Motta 2018, 466; Gauchat 2012. Such anti-expert framing is common in many regions, both recently and historically; see Rigney 1991; Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Oliver and Rahn 2016.

[29] Castanho Silva, Vegetti, and Littvay 2017; van Kessel, Sajuria, and Van Hauwaert 2020.

[30] Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 108. For example, a leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom claimed regarding the Paris Agreement that "the elite are laughing here while rubbing their hands"; Schaller and Carius 2019, 91. Similarly, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of France's National Front Party, decried environmentalism as the "new religion of the [bourgeois]"; see Domenach, Hugo. 2019. "Écologie: les contradictions de Marine Le Pen." March 15. *Le Point*. At bit.ly/2NES7mq.

[31] Brewer 2016; Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019.

[32] Oliver and Rahn 2016; Norris, Cameron, and Wynter 2018.

[33] Bischof and Senninger 2018.

[34] Noury and Roland 2020. See also Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Bischof and Senninger 2018; Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019.

[35] McGarity and Wagner 2010.

disapprove of attempts to discredit them. Statements signaling expert consensus on scientific issues prompt greater acceptance and behavioral change among nonpopulist supporters, but not among populist backers.[36] Nonpopulist constituents demand expert-produced information more than do populist supporters, increasing incentives to provide information for nonpopulist leaders. Such enticements are reflected in polling; for example, while large majorities of US Democrats and left-leaning independents think that scientists "should have an active role in science policy matters" (73 percent) and that "scientists' policy decisions are usually better than those of other people" (54 percent), minorities of populist supporters agree (43 percent and 34 percent, respectively).[37] High levels of trust in science are found among nonpopulist groups in other regions of the world as well.[38]

As a result of the anti-expert orientation of their constituents, populist leaders often degrade domestic expert bureaucracies, particularly those engaged in scientific data collection.[39] Populist leaders may dismiss experts in favor of loyal political appointees, who may struggle or be unwilling to collect complex scientific data and who may also lack strong relationships with officials in IOs.[40] Populists can also reduce funding for scientific endeavors, disrupt scientific operations, or otherwise interfere with scientific information collection, resulting in a lack of data or low-quality data.

Populists thus often erode domestic scientific capacity without explicitly intending to damage IOs; their intent to degrade domestic bureaucracies distorts the information that IOs receive. Consider several examples of populists across the ideological spectrum degrading their domestic scientific capacities: On the political left, populist president Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico cut funding to scientific institutes as part of a campaign against the country's "golden bureaucracy,"[41] as did the former president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, who viewed science as a tool to be "modified and deployed to meet national ends."[42] On the right, Donald Trump fired scientists from key domestic positions and spread

[36] Merkley 2020.

[37] Funk 2020. Populist supporters in the United States are particularly skeptical of scientific findings on climate and vaccine efficacy. See Funk and Hefferon 2019.

[38] Qureshi, Fatima. 2019. "Global Survey Reveals What People around the World Think about Science." Princeton, NJ.: Editage Insights. At bit.ly/2Vmt0Is.

[39] Bellodi, Morelli, and Vannoni 2023; Eichengreen 2018; Sasso and Morelli 2021, 2.

[40] Interview with a senior official at an environment and energy IO, February 2, 2021.

[41] Wade, Lizzie. 2019. "Mexico's New President Shocks Scientists with Budget Cuts and Disparaging Remarks." July 23. *Science*. At bit.ly/3lCH2z0.

[42] Centellas 2010.

misinformation contrary to scientific findings,[43] while Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil purged environmental agencies of scientists cataloging Amazon deforestation.[44]

Scientific information is not only withheld from IOs due to these knock-on effects; populists also intentionally keep this information from IOs. They do so for two reasons. First, populists' disdain for the scientific experts that staff IOs leads populists to reduce their engagement with them. Experts in IOs are often highly trained individuals who analyze and interpret scientific information. Populists may try to disempower international elites by keeping scientific information from them or they may simply decline to interact with them. Sovereignty concerns, meanwhile, also lead populist leaders to intentionally withhold truthful scientific information from IOs since IOs are designed to "prescribe, proscribe, and/or authorize behavior" by states.[45] Data help IOs to fulfill their mandates, which often include monitoring and regulating state behavior and necessitates some ceding of sovereignty.[46] Populists loathe transferring authority from the people to unelected elite bureaucrats abroad.[47] As a result, a senior official at an energy and environment IO described the process of collecting data from such states as "pulling teeth."[48]

Recent history is rife with instances of this behavior. For example, populists have suppressed data on pesticides and other pollutants from international bodies,[49] and many leaders sought to withhold internal data on COVID-19 from the WHO, which populists argued restricted their sovereignty.[50] Senior IO officials have also expressed concern over "a high potential [for] strategic nondisclosure for emissions and climate-relevant statistics."[51]

In sum, as a byproduct of the domestic erosion of scientific capacity and as part of an intentional effort to resist IO expertise and oversight, we theorize that populists report less scientific information and less accurate scientific information than do nonpopulists. Populists' anti-elitism

[43] See the Silencing Science Tracker (bit.ly/2RDvhx5) for US examples in which budgets for scientific agencies were slashed and appointments increasingly politicized.

[44] Anderson, Jon Lee. 2019. "At the UN, Jair Bolsonaro Presents a Surreal Defense of His Amazon Policies." September 24. *New Yorker*. At bit.ly/3f0zHq6.

[45] Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001, 762.

[46] Pollack 1997.

[47] Pevehouse 2020.

[48] Interview with a senior official at an environment and energy IO, February 2, 2021.

[49] Leaders often distorted HIV/AIDS data in analogous ways. Interview conducted by the authors with a senior official at a public health IO, January 22, 2021.

[50] Worsnop 2019; Ge 2022.

[51] Interview conducted by authors with a senior official at an environmental and energy IO, January 25, 2021.

should lead them to degrade domestic capacities, while both their anti-elitism and prostate sovereignty stances lead them to withhold or misrepresent the information they do have. Populist leaders' hostility to scientific information may emanate from both genuinely held political values and performative interest in donning "populist garb" to win support from anti-establishment constituents.[52] Leaders are typically motivated by a mix of ideological and domestic incentives, and we expect similar behavior regardless of leaders' specific incentives.[53] Moreover, our theory expects that populist practices of nonreporting and inaccurate reporting coincide, with both contributing to their broad strategy of suppressing scientific information.[54] We thus hypothesize the following:

> —Hypothesis 1 (H1): Populist governments report less scientific data to international organizations than do nonpopulist governments.
>
> —Hypothesis 2 (H2): When information is reported, populist governments report less accurate scientific data to international organizations than do nonpopulist governments.

III. Empirics

We test the first hypothesis by examining whether a state's scientific data—information relating to the environment or public health—that should be provided to the World Bank is missing more often when a populist is in power. As a more precise test, we further examine whether this relationship holds consistently for data that are provided directly by states rather than subject to imputation or estimation by third parties. We then evaluate the second hypothesis in the context of greenhouse gas emissions, examining whether populist governments report lower-quality data.

Data Missingness

We examine rates of data missingness using World Bank data, both for comparability with previous work in this area[55] and because of the substantive importance of the Bank in many scientific domains, including those pertaining to the environment and health-related issues. Environmental

[52] Pierson 2017, S106.

[53] Pierson 2017.

[54] To further explore this point, we also investigated potential heterogeneous treatment effects statistically, examining possible differences in our results depending on domestic characteristics or the issue area under consideration. We did not detect any such systematic effects, though we view further investigation into this area as a direction for future research.

[55] E.g., Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011.

and health information lies at the heart of the Bank's formal mandate. The Bank often conditions its assistance on environmental criteria, evaluates the environmental impacts of its projects, and provides the international community with data on environmental conditions worldwide.[56] Further, the Bank is active in the public health arena, in which key functions include identifying disease outbreaks, measuring disease incidence, and communicating effective medical practices.[57] In this space, the data contained in the World Development Indicators (WDI)—the primary World Bank collection of development data—are often initially collected by other IOs that explicitly engage in monitoring. For example, some health data initially come from the WHO and UNAIDS, two institutions that monitor disease incidence and outbreaks.

As part of these activities, the Bank also collects a substantial amount of information from member states that require scientific expertise to collect and analyze.[58] Health data, for example, often involve scientific assessments of health risks, vaccine development, disease origins and spread, and new treatments. Information related to the environment often requires detailed scientific models and projections, measurements of pollutants and energy use, and estimation of the impact of environmental factors on health and well-being.

To test whether populism is associated with the nonreporting of scientific data, we calculate the rate of missingness in countries' WDI. This focus follows other work on information suppression.[59] Since governments typically provide these data, higher levels of missingness likely indicate that a government withheld certain data points.[60]

This dependent variable thus captures the share of scientific variables in the WDI database recorded as missing for a given country in a given year. To construct the variable, we extract the list of development indicators that fall into two categories—energy/environment and public health—and calculate the share that is missing for each country-year.[61]

[56] Nielson and Tierney 2003; Buntaine 2016; Clark and Dolan 2021.

[57] See, e.g., the World Bank's response to COVID-19 at bit.ly/2Vmu5A0.

[58] See Table A6 in the appendices.

[59] Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011.

[60] Rates of missingness for scientific data fluctuate over time, but generally, around 62 percent of the data are missing. Shares of missing scientific data are similar for populists (54 percent) and nonpopulists (59 percent) descriptively, which we find unsurprising given that many populists in the data are in wealthier countries with lower baseline rates of missingness. Further, as populism has increased around the world, the share of missing data attributable to populists has also increased, so that it is around 6 percent in 2018 (the last year in our data set).

[61] Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2019. We calculate this measure ourselves rather than utilize their replication files to maximize temporal coverage. Our reconstructed transparency measure runs through 2018.

We include 252 WDI variables[62] from 1990 to 2018, the full time period during which comprehensive data on populism are available. We standardize this outcome variable to ease interpretation.

To measure populism, we draw on data from Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, and Christoph Trebesch.[63] This data set analyzes the contents of 770 books, chapters, and academic articles on populism from the social sciences to code 1,500 leaders as populist or not. Populists are executives who claim to represent true, common people against dishonest elites in line with our theoretical framework. Appendix A reports the populist leaders, countries, and years in our sample.

In fully specified models, we control for a country's level of democracy using Polity2 scores, as scholars have demonstrated a strong link between democracy and transparency.[64] We also add a binary variable indicating whether a given country's leader has a right-wing ideology, drawing on the Database of Political Institutions; this variable helps to ensure that our results are driven by populism rather than ideology.[65] We further control for GDP per capita, which provides an approximate measure of a country's capacity and technical ability to collect and disseminate data, as well as its participation in ongoing IMF programs, as the IMF often mandates transparency as well as ongoing improvements to reporting and data collection agencies. All models additionally include country and year fixed effects to account for other country- and time-specific factors. We note that while fixed effects help to mitigate some potential concerns with this test by allowing us to account for country- and time-invariant factors, our analysis remains observational. Robust standard errors are clustered at the country level. All independent variables are lagged by one year, and we estimate these models by ordinary least squares. Appendix A reports summary statistics.

Our topline results are presented in Table 1. Column 1 includes the populism measure from Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch alone;[66] column 2 adds Polity2 democracy scores; and column 3 incorporates additional covariates. The results accord with our theoretical expectations.

[62] In identifying the scientific variables, we eliminated derivatives of the same data point. For example, the WDI data set includes kilotons of CO_2 emissions for each country-year, along with CO_2 emissions in proportion to various measures of GDP; we include only the indicator of kilotons of CO_2 emissions. Importantly, states have no sway over derivatives; not all states report them. They are instead calculated by the World Bank based on one or a couple of reported indicators (e.g., GDP per capita based on GDP and population).

[63] Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2023.

[64] Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011.

[65] Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019.

[66] Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2023.

Table 1
Baseline Results[a]

	Missingness of Scientific Variables		
	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*
Populism	0.111***	0.074***	0.071***
	(0.024)	(0.017)	(0.020)
Polity2		−0.011***	−0.010***
		(0.002)	(0.002)
Right-wing			0.007
			(0.009)
GDP per capita (ln)			0.007
			(0.031)
IMF program			0.007
			(0.012)
Observations	7656	4614	3940

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

[a] Regressions of the proportion of scientific WDI indicators missing in a given year (standardized) on populism. All models include country and year fixed effects and standard errors clustered by country. Independent variables are lagged by one year. Estimated via OLS.

Populism achieves statistical significance in the anticipated direction regardless of the model specification. Notably, the core result from James Hollyer, B. Peter Rosendorff, and James Vreeland replicates[67]—as countries become more democratic, they exhibit less missingness in the WDI; though the magnitude is somewhat smaller for democracy than that for populism in these models. A one-point increase in a country's Polity2 score is associated with a decline in suppression of roughly 1 percent of a standard deviation. In contrast, when a populist assumes office in a given country, the suppression of scientific information increases by approximately 7 percent of a standard deviation; roughly the equivalent of a seven-point decline in a country's Polity score. This translates to a 1.75 percent increase in missingness across all scientific indicators in a given year, or missingness in three to four additional indicators overall.

As a more precise test of our mechanism than the WDI missingness alone, we disaggregate the source of the scientific data provided to the Bank to check whether our results are more consistent for information supplied directly by states. While some indicators are calculated from information shared directly by member states with the World Bank, many of the variables instead come from other IOs, NGOs, or academic

[67] Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011.

institutions, which are not wholly reliant on state-provided data. Per our interviews with relevant officials,[68] as well as information reported in the WDI's metadata, many IOs depend on estimation and imputation methodologies to resolve missingness in their data sets, while others report unmodified data furnished by member states. Accordingly, we hand-coded the source of each WDI variable from the WDI's metadata.[69] In cases in which other IOs furnish WDI data, we analyzed those IOs' data collection methodologies. For each scientific variable under consideration, we determined whether the data presented in the WDI are raw, state-provided, or subject to possible estimation or imputation by an IO or other information provider. Data in the latter camp can be imputed or provided directly by third parties such as NGOs and IOs. Missingness often remains even in such imputed and estimated data—some prior data are needed for imputation to occur, and many countries, especially autocracies, neglect to report over a number of years.[70] Of the scientific variables in our data, 48.7 percent of them rely on unmodified data provided directly by states, while the remaining 51.3 percent of variables involve estimation or imputation by a nonstate or intergovernmental data provider. Our model specifications remain the same.

The results of these tests are listed in Table 2. The strongest results in the table, both in terms of magnitude and statistical significance, are for the variables reliant on raw, state-provided scientific data.[71] The entry into office of a populist government is associated with an increase in missingness of 6 to 8 percent of a standard deviation in variables using raw state data. We observe no significant relationship between populism and variables that are estimated or imputed by nonstate information providers.[72] Importantly, we do not observe clear subject-matter distinctions between these two sets of variables, nor obvious differences

[68] Interviews with a senior official at a prominent health IO, January 22, 2021, and senior officials at two leading environmental and energy IOs, January 25, 2021; February 2, 2021.

[69] Further details on coding procedures can be found in Appendix B.

[70] Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011.

[71] In some robustness checks in the appendix, we identify a positive and statistically significant relationship between populism and missingness in estimated/imputed variables. This relationship is likely because estimated or imputed data still require some information from states—if data are too poor or not reported for long periods, they cannot be reliably imputed or backfilled. The raw state-reported data offer a more precise measure of state information provision, while the imputed or estimated data are much noisier; the relatively large size of the confidence intervals on the latter reflects this.

[72] Some missingness in these variables still exists, despite their nonstate provision. Across our data set, 56 percent of such data points are missing, because not all variables estimated by third parties are imputed.

Table 2
Results by Data Source[a]

	Missingness of Scientific Variables			
		Raw State-Reported		*Estimated or Imputed*
	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)*
Populism	0.084***	0.065***	0.057***	0.046
	(0.020)	(0.016)	(0.018)	(0.028)
Polity2		−0.008***	−0.005***	−0.009***
		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Right-wing			−0.001	0.018
			(0.007)	(0.015)
GDP per capita (ln)			−0.002	0.001
			(0.023)	(0.048)
IMF program			−0.0003	0.010
			(0.008)	(0.014)
Observations	7656	4614	3940	3940

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

[a] Regressions of the proportion of WDI indicators missing in a given year by source on populism. All models include country and year fixed effects and standard errors clustered by country. Independent variables are lagged by one year. Estimated via OLS.

in their political sensitivity, suggesting that the primary difference between these variables is in their origin.[73]

We also conduct several additional tests to verify the robustness of our results to different measures and model specifications. First, we follow Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland[74] and use a Bayesian item response model to construct a measure of latent transparency with respect to scientific information. This approach has several advantages, as it accounts for the fact that some variables may be more difficult than others to collect and the reporting of some variables may be more important than others. We utilize the resulting scientific missingness index

[73] To illustrate this, we draw a random sample of five variables from each set. Randomly drawn state-provided variables include "mortality rate attributed to unintentional poisoning, male (per 100,000 male population)"; "people practicing open defecation, rural (% of rural population)"; "hospital beds (per 1,000 people)"; "GHG net emissions/removals by LUCF (Mt of CO_2 equivalent)"; "people with basic handwashing facilities including soap and water, urban (% of urban population)." Randomly drawn third party–provided variables include "arable land (% of land area)"; "methane emissions (kt of CO_2 equivalent)"; "rural population living in areas where elevation is below 5 meters (% of total population)"; "access to electricity (% of population)"; "prevalence of underweight, weight for age, female (% of children under 5)."

[74] Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2014.

as the dependent variable and follow Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland by utilizing Markov Chain Monte Carlo linear regression, including the same set of covariates as above. Appendix C contains the posterior distribution for each variable from these tests; results remain robust.[75]

Next, we examine the timing and stickiness of the relationship between populism and information suppression. These tests help to allay concerns that slower-moving, omitted variables are driving our results, or that some omitted variable is associated with both the entry of populist governments and a decrease in scientific information-sharing. We first compare data disclosures two years before and two years after a populist takes office. We identify a positive and statistically significant relationship between populist entry into office and missingness of scientific variables, and we show that the results are driven primarily by state-reported indicators.[76]

We test whether populist exit from office drives improved reporting, by examining missingness two years prior to and two year post a populist's exit from office. We identify a negative correlation between the two, but the relationship fails to achieve statistical significance at conventional levels. However, we perform the exit tests with only thirty-three observations, which contributes to imprecision in our estimates. We thus conduct additional tests to explore whether nonreporting under populists persists beyond populists' tenures, perhaps owing to an erosion of bureaucratic capacity. The results show that reporting tends to rebound relatively quickly—within three years—once a populist exits office. After populists exit office, their successors appear to rebuild domestic bureaucracies and more freely disclose data. However, we note that populists are elected to office more frequently and their tenures in office often last for long stretches of time, during which data nonreporting may erode IOs' functioning.

We then confirm that these results are unique to scientific data. The results in Appendix Table G12 indicate that populism has a substantively and statistically insignificant relationship with missingness in nonscientific WDI variables, most of which are economic in nature, as we anticipate theoretically. Scientific data are difficult to obtain elsewhere, crucial for development IOs to fulfill their mandates, and produced by elites, making it a particularly attractive category of data for populists to distort.

[75] We perform an additional test that weights WDI variables by average difficulty in reporting; see Appendix D.

[76] These results, along with those discussed in the following paragraph, appear in Appendix E.

In addition, we drop outliers from the dependent variable by excluding all observations with outcomes further than two standard deviations from the mean.[77] We then drop the United States from our sample to ensure that the Trump years are not driving our results.[78] Additionally, we eliminate data after 2015, as there is often a lag of a few years in the reporting of key variables as information providers collect, aggregate, and analyze relevant inputs.[79] Next, we swap our primary populism measure for the one from the Blair Institute for Global Change.[80] We also include additional covariates intended to capture the size of a country's fossil fuel and agricultural industries, as well as its reliance on international development assistance and a series of other potential confounders, including years in office, the onset of an economic crisis, unemployment rates, and economic growth.[81] In each case, results remain robust.

We next control for nationalism, which represents a potential alternative explanation for our results. Specifically, we condition on V-DEM's measure of the extent to which a given government espouses a nationalist ideology. Although nationalism and populism often coincide, especially when populists are right-leaning,[82] we find that the positive relationship between populism and information suppression remains.[83] For similar reasons, we control for World Bank conditionality. World Bank conditions often mandate transparency, which usually pertain to scientific areas such as the environment.[84] The core results are consistent.[85]

In additional tests, we investigate which types of countries drive our results. To do so, we interact populism with both democracy, as measured by Polity2 scores, and GDP per capita due to the high correlation among these variables.[86] Our core results hold for both democracies and autocracies; they are not driven by low-capacity or autocratic states, as might be expected given existing literature.[87] Rather, populism corresponds to information suppression across much of the political and economic spectrum.

[77] See Appendix F.
[8] See Appendix H.
[79] See Appendix I.
[80] The description of the measure and corresponding results appear in Appendix J.
[81] See Appendix K.
[82] Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019.
[83] See Appendix L.
[84] Clark and Dolan 2021.
[85] See Appendix M.
[86] Interaction plots and regression tables illustrating the marginal effect of populism at various levels of democracy and GDP per capita can be found in Appendix N.
[87] Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011.

Data Quality

We further theorize that populist governments report lower quality, less accurate data to IOs than do nonpopulist governments. To test this assumption, we consider greenhouse gas emissions, which are the subject of significant international governance. Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), developed countries (Annex I Parties) are mandated to provide annual data on national greenhouse gas emissions according to a standardized set of reporting guidelines.[88] Emissions reduction targets form the core of the 2015 Paris Agreement;[89] reviews of country progress toward these targets require accurate accounting of emissions. We anticipate that Annex I Parties will report less accurate emissions data when under populist rule.[90]

Populists may distort data by intentionally withholding or misrepresenting data, or by undermining state capacity to produce accurate scientific information. In the case of the UNFCCC, we expect the latter mechanism to primarily hold due to the UNFCCC's use of a stringent verification mechanism, which complicates deliberate underreporting of emissions.[91] Independent experts associated with the UNFCCC evaluate the completeness of government-provided information and evaluate statistical methods to ensure that proper calculations were conducted.[92] To the extent that we observe emissions misreporting, it is likely then due to a general erosion of institutional capacity resulting from funding cuts, staff dismissals, and changes in leadership. Lower capacity should add random noise to state-reported emissions data, not biasing them in a particular direction.[93]

To measure the quality of state-provided emissions data, we compute the absolute difference between emissions data reported directly to the UNFCCC and the emissions data contained within the WDI.[94] Emissions data within the WDI are based on independent estimates from the Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research (EDGAR), a project of the European Commission's Joint Research Centre and the

[88] Annex I Parties encompass OECD countries and post-Soviet countries.

[89] Falkner 2016.

[90] Developing countries (non–Annex I Parties) are subject to looser reporting requirements. We accordingly focus our analysis on Annex I Parties.

[91] Interview by the authors with a senior official at an environmental IO, January 25, 2021.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Such random deviations may be difficult to detect because verification of countries' emissions inventories remains imperfect (e.g., Ogle et al. 2015), allowing parties some space for inaccurate reporting.

[94] From the UNFCCC, we collected data on total greenhouse gas emissions in CO_2 equivalent, including LULUCF (land use, land-use change, and forestry). From the WDI, we collected data on total greenhouse gas emissions in CO_2 equivalent.

Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency. Although we do not expect EDGAR estimates to be perfect descriptions of emissions levels, the accuracy of these estimates should not vary with populists' entry into office.[95]

We regress the natural logarithm of the gap in emissions data on the populism indicator and our primary set of covariates. This analysis covers the years 1990–2018. We include two other covariates that capture the sizes of a country's fossil fuel and agricultural industries, which are intended to measure the pressure governments may feel to reduce domestic capacity to generate accurate data. Additional specifications, including the country and year fixed effects, hold. As is the case for the above tests, our analysis is observational; we are unable to fully rule out potential omitted variables or selection issues.

Results in Table 3 show that populism is associated with a substantively and statistically significant erosion in the quality of state-reported emissions data.[96] The accession of a populist government is associated with approximately a 25-percent increase in the gap between state-reported UNFCCC data and externally estimated EDGAR data, suggesting that in addition to withholding scientific data, populists also undermine their domestic capacity to produce such data, which results in less accurate data provided to IOs. Our findings are robust to the applicable additional specifications discussed in our test of the first hypothesis, including dropping outliers, the United States, and recent years, as well as utilizing the Blair Institute populism measure.[97]

These results may underestimate the true effect of populism on data quality. To approximate true emissions levels, we use data that were independently collected by EDGAR and then published as part of the WDI by the World Bank. Yet the Bank may hesitate to publish data that are significantly different from those reported by member states for fear of alienating them. If the Bank is disinclined to publish such data, we would expect small differences between these third-party emissions estimates and state-reported emissions, thus attenuating the results.

Our final analysis compares this variation in data quality to the previously discussed variation in data missingness. Theoretically, we anticipate that populist anti-elitism and prostate sovereignty lead to both an

[95] The accuracy of these estimates may be eroded if the IEA and FAO, which provide data to EDGAR, acquire less or lower-quality data from populist governments. Our results would then represent an underestimate of the true effect.

[96] We do not detect an association with over- or underreporting of emissions; reporting errors do not consistently point in one direction.

[97] These results are reported in appendices F–J.

TABLE 3
EMISSIONS RESULTS[a]

	Emissions Data Gap (ln)		
	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*
Populism	0.277**	0.268**	0.233**
	(0.118)	(0.121)	(0.113)
Polity2		−0.007	0.010
		(0.025)	(0.024)
Right-wing			0.121
			(0.137)
GDP per capita (ln)			−0.293
			(0.421)
IMF program			−0.067
			(0.135)
Fossil fuel (% energy consumption)			0.032*
			(0.017)
Value added by agriculture, forestry, and fishing (% GDP)			0.024
			(0.035)
Observations	936	871	764

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

[a] Regressions of the absolute difference (ln) between the total emissions estimate provided by Annex I Parties to the UNFCCC in a given year and the total emissions figure estimated by EDGAR (as reported in the WDI) in that same year on populism. All models include country and year fixed effects and standard errors clustered by country. Independent variables are lagged by one year. Estimated via OLS.

erosion in data quality and an increase in data nonreporting. We do not expect populists to consistently strategically opt for one form of information suppression over the other. To evaluate this expectation, we first plot variation in emissions data quality against differences in WDI missingness. Figure 1 reveals no consistent correlation between these two forms of suppression either among populists or nonpopulists. Regressions of the emissions data gap on WDI missingness similarly suggest that populists do not systematically select between the two options.[98] Rather, these results are consistent with our theoretical expectation that populists suppress scientific data by simultaneously degrading bureaucratic capacity and intentionally failing to report the data they do have.

[98] See Appendix O.

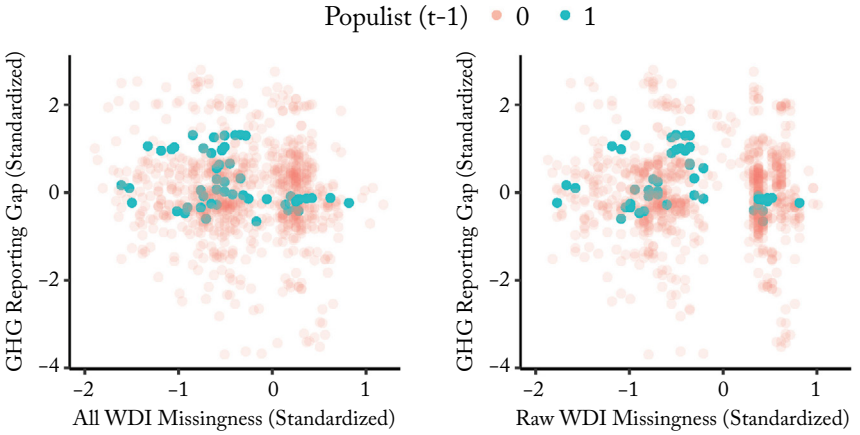

FIGURE 1
DATA QUALITY AND DATA MISSINGNESS[a]

[a] Relationship between the gap in third-party- and state-reported emissions (*y* axis) and the rate of WDI missingness (*x* axis; all variables in left panel, state-reported variables only in right panel) by country-year. Populist governments distinguished from nonpopulist government.

BACKFILLING AND IMPUTATION

We consider the possibility that the World Bank backfills or imputes some of its data. For example, the World Bank may backfill missing data points for the years for which countries initially fail to report them. Such backfilling may increase measurement error in our outcome variable. If rates of backfilling are randomly distributed, backfilling would reduce the precision of the coefficient estimates—that is, increase standard errors.

If backfilling is more common following populist spells, as we theorize, this measure may understate true levels of missingness under populist governments. In other words, if populists have disdain for the scientific community, and thus information does not get reported to the Bank but the Bank backfills some of that information, more conservative estimates of the relationship between populism and WDI nonreporting would be produced. However, we note that rather than populist governments having disdain for the scientific community as we theorize, the scientific community may also have disdain for populists. Or the Bank could be less willing to help out populist governments by backfilling or imputing their data. Either of these possibilities could create bias in the other direction, such that our results could be spurious.

Qualitatively, we do not find evidence that mutual bias—that is, mutual distaste between populists and IOs—results in the loss of data. We include the illustrative example of domestic data generation under the Trump administration in the appendix.[99] We chart numerous channels through which the administration disrupted scientific data production, and we did not find evidence of mutual bias at work. We also interviewed relevant officials at IOs to learn more about the processes of backfilling and imputation. In our discussions, we discovered that backfilling and imputation do occur, and when they do, the Bank typically uses basic procedures of linear interpolation or simply carrying forward the last value.[100] Our interviewees did not note any bias or discrimination on the part of the Bank; however, they could be unaware of such biases or not wish to disclose them. We therefore also investigate the possibility of mutual bias empirically. To do so, we downloaded the archived, pre-imputed versions of the WDI data post-2005, all years for which such data are available. These data allowed us to test for a link between populism and contemporaneous measures of missingness.

We first note that we observe high rates of backfilling overall. Figure 2 depicts the mean missingness rates of all variables recorded for 2004–2017 across subsequent versions of the WDI ("years since variable year" being the difference between a WDI version year and the year recorded for a given datapoint). We observe a 97 percent missingness rate in the WDI version that immediately follows a particular variable year (for example, data recorded for 2004 are missing at high rates in the 2005 WDI version). This missingness rate dwindles rapidly, falling to 47 percent two years after a given variable year before plateauing at roughly 30 percent four years after.

We next compare backfilling rates across populist versus nonpopulist governments. We limit this analysis to variables that were missing two years after a variable year, which is when the World Bank broadly began backfilling as indicated in Figure 2. Figure 3 illustrates that variables previously missing under a populist government are backfilled to a notably greater extent than those missing under a nonpopulist government. This difference in backfilling is statistically significant.[101] This trend, apparent specifically for scientific variables, suggests that our results are conservative. Put differently, we are likely underestimating the true

[99] See Appendix A17.

[100] Interview with a senior official at an energy and environment IO, February 2, 2021.

[101] Regression by OLS of missingness by "years since variable year" on our binary populism indicator, with "years since variable year" fixed effects and standard errors clustered at that level. $\beta = -0.15 (p < 0.001)$.

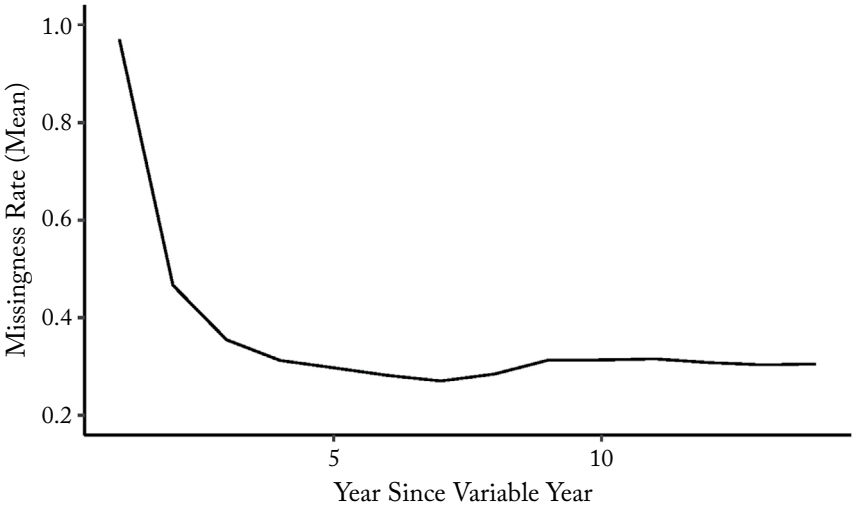

FIGURE 2
MISSINGNESS RATES OVER TIME[a]

[a] Mean WDI missingness in variables recorded for year t in WDI versions $t + x$ (e.g., missingness rates in variables recorded for 2004 in the 2005 WDI version). "Years since variable year" describes the difference x between a WDI version year and the year recorded for a given data point (e.g., in the 2010 WDI, it would have been 5 years since the data were recorded for 2005). Calculated for variable years 2004–2017 across the 2005–2018 versions of WDI.

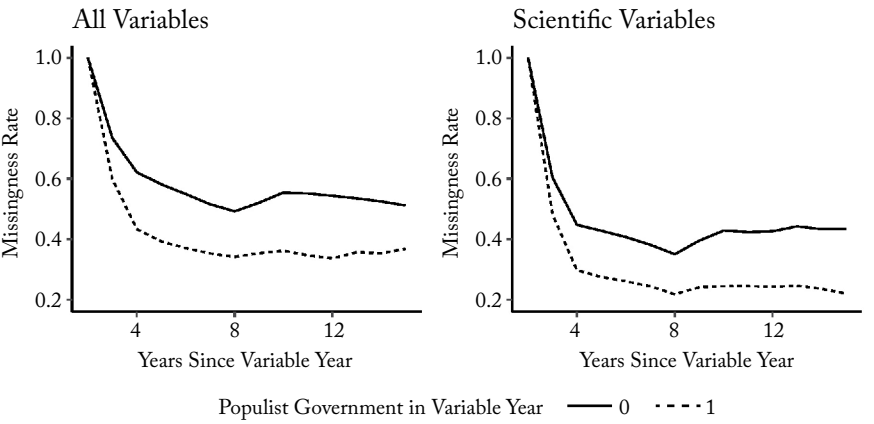

FIGURE 3
BACKFILLING AND POPULISM[a]

[a] Mean WDI missingness in variables recorded for year t (2003–2016) in WDI versions $t + x$ (2005–2018; $x \in [2,15]$), restricted to variables missing in year $t + 2$. Plots distinguish between missingness in variables recorded for years in which a populist was (dashed line) or was not (solid line) in power. The left-hand plot covers all WDI variables; the right-hand plot is limited to scientific variables.

level of missingness under populists, given post hoc backfilling. Thus, if we imagine a country moving from nonpopulist to populist leadership, the rate of backfilling should be higher for populists than for nonpopulists, which means subsequent missingness rates should be artificially suppressed for populists relative to nonpopulists within a given country. This pattern cuts against our findings, making them conservative.

We argue that this underestimation is likely occurring for two reasons. One is that populist spells tend to be short-lived, so after a populist leaves office, the new government may share the withheld data. The results in Appendix E provide evidence in support of this point. The other reason is that the Bank may impute or find other sources of the data at higher rates for populist leaders. Perhaps the Bank anticipates difficulties in data collection under populists and thus locates other data sources preemptively.

IV. Conclusion

We identify populism as a significant impediment to IOs' functions as repositories and providers of scientific data. Populists' anti-elitism and state sovereignty concerns incentivize populist leaders to tamper with domestic data collection capacities and withhold scientific data from IOs. In analyses of World Bank data, we find that populist governments are significantly less likely than other governments to supply scientific information. This result holds for indicators reliant on data provided directly by member states, but not for indicators using data that are estimated or imputed by nonstate information providers. By comparing state-reported and third-party-estimated greenhouse gas emissions data, we additionally find that populists supply less accurate information to IOs.

These findings are important for our understanding of how populism shapes global governance.[102] Although information distortion is a tactic that many leaders use as a means of hiding unfavorable information, populists possess both material and ideological incentives to withhold or distort such information. Understanding the relationship between populism and international cooperation is critical, especially on scientific issues with existential stakes, such as global health and climate change. Populist candidates continue to achieve electoral success, including in countries that have often supported and extensively utilized

[102] Carnegie, Clark, and Kaya 2023.

liberal IOs—Argentina's Javier Milei is the most recent example. Our findings thus show how populism drives hostile members to undercut IOs in a difficult-to-observe, yet highly consequential, manner.

Our study suggests several directions for future work. We uncover evidence that populists both withhold scientific information and report less accurate information than other leaders. A fruitful path for future research could describe the conditions under which nonreporting is more or less likely than misreporting. We speculate that misreporting may be less common in domains with stricter monitoring regimes since the detection and punishment of leaders' misreporting would be more likely.

Additionally, we show that distinct political logics may govern disclosures of different types of information. Scholars of other determinants of transparency, such as regime type, might reach new insights from the disaggregation of information by subject. Information disclosures could also vary depending on domestic characteristics. Although we did not detect heterogeneous treatment effects based on such characteristics, we view the investigation into this question as an interesting area for further work.

Moreover, scholars might explore how IOs react to populists' information distortion.[103] IOs know they are not receiving the information they need, so an interesting question for future work is how they go about trying to obtain such information. For example, IOs might act strategically to avoid reliance on populists who resist sharing information, perhaps by endeavoring to collect the information themselves or attempting to obtain it from other actors. Or IOs might increase sanctions for noncompliance with reporting requirements during populist waves.

Our findings also have policy implications. In shedding light on when IOs can best carry out their mandates, we point to potential ways in which policymakers may strengthen cooperative efforts. For example, if policymakers wish to better insulate IOs from the effects of populism, they may improve IOs' abilities to gather their own information by diversifying their sources of data and documentation, expanding access to open-source information, or equipping them with more sophisticated data collection tools. Moreover, if policymakers seek to broaden IOs' writ, our study suggests that the most productive time to do so is when populist waves recede within member states.

[103] Carnegie and Clark 2023.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article can be found at http://muse.jhu.edu/resolve/260.

Data

Replication files for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BP7JRA.

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Key Words

populism, global governance, transparency, information, science