

Populism and Discontent: A Spatial Analysis of the 2023 Czech Presidential Election¹

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Abstract

While populism has kept the attention of scholars for years, only a handful of elections have presented as clear-cut a distinction between populism and anti-populism as the face-off between Andrej Babiš and Petr Pavel in the 2023 Czech presidential elections. To investigate the factors behind the electoral support for the populist candidate Babiš, we first discuss populist and anti-populist approaches and connect them to the emerging literature on the geography of discontent. Then, we analyse census data at the municipality level using two regression models: the ordinary least squares and spatial error methods. The spatial error regression variant is helpful when analysing aggregate data as it evaluates the spatial clustering of residuals. Overall, we conclude that Babiš was most successful in regions marked by socio-economic deprivation and social capital deficiencies. Consequently, based on the overarching theoretical framework and empirical findings, we suggest several implications that could help mitigate political discontent in the future.

Keywords: Czechia; populism; anti-populism;
geography of discontent; spatial analysis

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1. Introduction

Populism has become a familiar feature of Europe's electoral processes, with populist parties firmly established in the politics of many countries (e.g., Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Bergman, 2019). Recent elections, such as the presidential run-offs in Austria and France, show how populism can influence majoritarian elections, even in systems designed to reduce radicalism and extremes by including two rounds of voting (see Gavenda & Umit, 2016; Startin, 2022). Consequently, the rise of populism has prompted an anti-populist response aimed at defending representative liberal democracy and traditional mediated politics (Moffitt, 2018; Hamdaoui, 2022; Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022).

Although the interplay between the rise of populism and its spatial dimensions has recently become the subject of debate (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Dijkstra et al., 2020; Pike et al., 2023), the strategies employed in direct electoral contests between populism and anti-populism are still sparsely studied, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (Suchánek & Hasman, 2024). We took for analysis the example of the previously successful populist Andrej Babiš and his unsuccessful showing in the 2023 Czech presidential election to illustrate the clash between populism and anti-populism and gain insights into the reasons for the persistence and fall of populism.

While much has been said and written about the electoral success of Babiš's party, ANO (e.g., Maškarinec, 2019; Voda & Havlík, 2021) and the resulting democratic backsliding (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018), to our knowledge, only the work of Bláha (2023) has yet covered Babiš's presidential run in 2023. Given the current lack of studies and the perceived importance of presidential elections in Czechia, with the war in Ukraine being a key topic of discussion between the two candidates, this study is important to many. We explore the relationships between the socio-economic, demographic and geographical attributes of the electorate and support for Babiš at the municipality level. This approach allows us to investigate how a populist candidate could be challenged through anti-populist strategies and how specific factors, in particular the spatial dimension, affected the result. Analysing and reporting on this latter relationship and thus contributing to the emerging literature on the geography of discontent and populism versus anti-populism cleavage was the main goal of the study.

In the following sections, we first examine the context of Babiš in Czech elections. Next, we explore connections between the populist and anti-populist cleavage and its potential spatial dimension, relating this to the geography of discontent. The 2023 Czech presidential election involved an unconventional application of an anti-populist strategy, distinct from the traditional political mainstream. This unusual perspective provides new insights into this type of electoral contest.

2. The populist and anti-populist clash in Czechia

Andrej Babiš has been the focus of both media and scholarly attention for over a decade, as he first entered Czech politics in 2013 with his ‘fresh-looking’ party ANO 2011 (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens; *ano* means ‘yes’ in Czech). Assessing the positions of ANO and Babiš on an imagined political compass is somewhat tricky, as both have undergone numerous changes and ideological shifts in a short period of time (Cirhan & Kopecký, 2020). While Babiš has repeatedly stated his intention to run ANO the same way he manages his commercial empire, i.e., on the business-firm party model (Just & Charvát, 2016), ANO can perhaps best be described as a technocratic or centrist populist party (see Havlík & Voda, 2018; Bušítková & Guasti, 2019; Bendl et al., 2020). Babiš’s strategies have changed over time between right-wing and left-wing, as have his tactics to maximise votes from different parts of the electorate. Thus, here the term ‘populism’ refers to ideological fuzziness and a call to prioritise the defence of the people against elites over traditional economic conflict. The rise of populism – especially in Central and Eastern Europe, though a similar phenomenon is to be found in the West – is linked with the failure of traditional left-wing politics (Snegovaya, 2024). A constant feature of Babiš’s speeches is to attack elites; for him, they are represented by corrupt ‘traditional’ politicians (Bušítková & Guasti, 2019), a ‘cartel’ of post-communist mainstream politicians and the media (Dębiec, 2023) or powers within the structures of the European Union (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). As set out in this conceptual framework, the type of populism represented by Babiš and his ANO party has gained an essential position in Czech politics, characterized by its evolving stance over time (Zulianello & Larsen, 2021).

Babiš first entered the cabinet after a successful national election in 2013 and this generated an early anti-populist response (see, e.g., Cirhan & Kopecký, 2020). The first reaction opposed each of the typical characteristics of populism by defending liberal democracy and ‘traditional politics’ (Kim, 2020), and rejecting chaotic governance which promised rash solutions (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). Between 2013 and 2021, these opposing parties considered that the threat of populism came from Andrej Babiš and his allies: Tomio Okamura the leader of the radical populist right SPD, and Miloš Zeman the pro-Russian president. After a series of protests against Babiš and Zeman, the pressure for anti-populist collaboration increased and resulted in two party alliances which set about defeating populism, particularly as represented by Babiš: first was Spolu (‘Together’), comprising the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the conservative TOP 09 and the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL), and second was PirStan (‘Pirates and Mayors’), an amalgam of the Pirate Party and the regionalist Mayors and Independents (STAN). Gradually, as the campaign leading up to the parliamentary elections unfolded (mainly with personal attacks on Babiš), the confrontation be-

tween ANO and its allies and the two new coalitions came down to a clash between populist and anti-populist approaches, fulfilling perceptions of this cleavage as discursive (Stavrakakis, 2018) or performative (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022) and emphasising the departure from the traditional characterisation of politics as a struggle between left and right. This trend corresponded with shifts in the structure of cleavage in the CEE region – for example, the diminishing relevance of the left-right scale (e.g., Snegovaya, 2024), and, at the same time, mirrors the latest dynamics in European politics, where populist rhetoric against elites is growing (e.g., Hartikainen, 2021; Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). In Czechia, these shifts are observable in the continuing reconfiguration of the party system, initially based on strong left-wing and right-wing parties, but now transformed into new shapes.

In 2021, Babiš failed to repeat the decisive victories he had achieved in previous elections. Winning only 27.12% of the vote forced him to leave his prime ministerial position to the SPOLU coalition. At the same election, traditional left-wing parties were pushed out of the Chamber of Deputies (e.g., Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022), as crucial parts of the left-wing agenda had been assumed by populists. After the election decline, Babiš transformed ANO into a strong opposition party that would heavily criticise the new government coalition. The conditions for this opposition were provided by a series of crises that hit the country – the Russian attack on Ukraine, economic and energy crises and a rash of protests (Michal & Guasti, 2023). Babiš repeatedly stated that he was unhappy being in opposition, and it was generally expected that he would use the opportunity as a springboard for a return to power (*‘Než být v opozici’*, 2021).

2.1 Andrej Babiš and the 2023 Czech presidential elections

The direct presidential election in 2023 came when Babiš had spent more than a year in opposition. During the campaign for the election, in which nine candidates participated, the political legacy of Miloš Zeman, considered a pro-Russian populist (e.g., Kopeček, 2022) became the main topic. Petr Pavel, a former NATO general and the eventual winner, notably cited Babiš, the embodiment of populism, as his foremost motivation to run, calling Babiš’s candidacy ‘a threat to the Czech Republic due to the populism he personifies’ (*‘Konec dohadům’*, 2022). Pavel styled himself as the defender of liberal democratic rules; his campaign rallying cry, ‘order and peace’, showed the contrast with the populist approach to governance, which he portrayed as chaotic and unstable. For instance, Pavel repeatedly called out Babiš for his chaotic management of the Covid-19 pandemic, which contradicted his claim to be a politician with experience (*‘Konec dohadům’*, 2022). Pavel’s slogan was an attempt to leverage his own attributes (as is common in personality voting) and underscore stability. Through the politicisation of

the careers of Zeman and Babiš, Pavel's fight against populism became the most significant element of the campaign, overshadowing other cleavages. While right-wing economist candidate Danuše Nerudová did raise economic policy issues, the absence of any left-wing candidates and the under-representation of left-wing politicians participating in the campaign generally pushed the left-right conflict to the background. Campaigning from opposition, Babiš presented himself as the defender of under-represented voter segments, recruiting mainly from the left wing but also from the radical right extra-parliamentary current (Michal & Guasti, 2023) that superseded the traditional cleavage and emphasised the newly emerged one. In the first round, Petr Pavel gained 35.4% of the vote, closely trailed by Andrej Babiš with 34.9%, thus propelling these two candidates into a run-off. Most of the seven defeated candidates called on their voters to support Petr Pavel, even providing financial aid and volunteers, and participating in Pavel's rallies. The ruling coalition parties also supported Pavel, an independent 'citizen candidate'. Conversely, the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition, including populist and anti-system protest social movements, supported Babiš. Ultimately, Petr Pavel defeated Andrej Babiš by a large margin of 58.3% to 41.7%.

Although the run-off signified a clash between populism and anti-populism, certain nuances emerged that current conceptualisations might not have fully anticipated. Babiš, taking a populist stance, was nominated by a political party and structured his campaign on the experience he had gained in previous government roles. He portrayed himself as an opposition figure, emphasising his ability to find effective solutions. In contrast, Pavel's approach involved embodying the role of an anti-populist fighter. He ran as a citizen candidate detached from political parties' nomination and his political support included a broad scope of parties: from ruling actors to extra-parliamentary Social Democrats, whereas anti-populism is strongly associated with the defence of traditional politics (Wolff, 2023). It should be noted that non-partisan candidates have historically had greater success in Czech presidential elections (Kopeček 2010; 2022), which might shed light on the strategic choices made by both candidates as they sought to maximise their support.

3. Populism, anti-populism and the geography of discontent

3.1 Populism and anti-populism

Populism, a political approach that divides society into a pure people and a corrupt elite (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Abts & Rummens, 2007), puts itself in the role of the real defender of the people's interests. On behalf of 'the people', populist actors

attack contemporary political representatives (Urbinati, 2014), portraying them as an embodiment of arrogance (Curini, 2020) or even evil (Eberl et al., 2023), and call to replace them by the rule of the people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). The populist strategy for sharing power involves joining the electoral process and targeting the current establishment (Gherghina & Soare, 2021; Hartikainen, 2021), underscoring the value of direct democracy (Caramani, 2017) and unmoderated communication with their supporters (Weyland, 2001).

Populist election campaigns portray the people as homogeneous and united (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019) and prioritise communication about 'low policies' (Ostiguy, 2017) that are widely attractive to the masses. Populist appeal occasionally draws from local history (Mouffe, 2018; Bušítková & Guasti, 2019), but underlying commonalities can also be discerned, explaining why populism has become a global zeitgeist (Mudde, 2004). Based on the history of a particular region, populism takes on diverse forms shaped by unique economic and social experiences. In Central and Eastern Europe, a radical right variant has become established, mirroring trends in Western Europe (e.g., Hanley & Vachudova, 2018). The unique post-Communist experiences of the region have given rise to technocratic (Bušítková & Guasti, 2019) and valence (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021) strands of populism that reflect in their policies local characteristics such as corruption and a lack of transparency. Generally, the triumph of populism is linked to discontent (Urso et al., 2023) and a sense of under-representation (Koch et al., 2023), stemming from people's perception that their interests are not adequately addressed in the 'distant' political sphere (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Fiedler et al., 2021). As such, these emotions often resonate in elections in marginalised peripheries.

Peripheral challenges wield distinct political ramifications in populist voting across regions. For instance, the asymmetrically strong electoral support for Germany's radical right populist party AfD in the eastern part of the country can be assigned to the character of the transformation that took place there in the 1990s (Arzheimer, 2009). In Italy, the ascent of the Italian League can be attributed to the enduring political sway of the North/South divide (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021), while in the United Kingdom, the popularity of nationalist parties is grounded in regional aspirations to independence (Masseti, 2018). Recent political developments indicate a steady increase in the influence of parties like AfD, Salvini's Lega, RN in France, and UK nationalist parties on the national stage. Yet, despite the comprehensive exploration of local, societal and economic characteristics, uncertainties persist around certain aspects and their precise impact. For instance, the political implications of the distribution of immigrants across different localities, as evidenced by the populists' electoral gains, show an incoherent picture. While a correlation between immigrant numbers and populist success has been found in Austria (Essletzbichler et al., 2021), in Germany no parallel has been detected (Hansen & Olsen, 2019). Consequently, what may be

an apparent connection between *peripheral* voting and populist success warrants reconsideration in different contexts.

As opposition to populism emerged, a political reaction took shape around a collection of more or less coherent strategies and forms that characterised populism as dangerous, yet was otherwise seen as an idea without a clear ideology (Moffitt, 2018). While the spatial dynamics of anti-populism have not received the same level of scrutiny as populism, as it develops, its operational strategies are gradually becoming more evident. Initially, the core was recruited from civil society grassroots appeals (Hamdaoui, 2022; Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022), mirroring the populist approach by entering the political realm. Further political activities depend mainly on the nature of electoral systems. In proportional elections in multiparty systems, mainstream political parties often need to downplay their ideological disparities and form coalitions to combat populism, as seen in Czechia and Hungary (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022; Scheppele, 2022). This process may involve establishing new political parties ('Minář: Chceme znovu zbláznit společnost', 2020) or absorbing anti-populist candidates into existing parties (Caruso & De Blasio, 2021). The trend leans towards campaigns targeted at populist parties or their leaders, as exemplified in Hungary against Viktor Orbán (Scheppele, 2022), or generally as efforts to safeguard liberal democracy from the threat of populism (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022).

Following the traditional terminology suggested by Lipset & Rokkan (1967), which describes the requisites of political stability and integration, the dualist logic between populism and anti-populism generates a new cleavage (see Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2019; Kitzberger, 2023). One electoral process that potentially sets the stage for a direct clash between the two poles of this cleavage is the two-round majority system, where the presence of a favoured populist candidate makes the cleavage significant in the first round and the run-off phase can trigger a showdown between populist and anti-populist candidates. It can be argued that the dynamics of the run-off battle introduce novel imperatives for them. This type of election system is automatically polarised and necessitates the pursuit of maximum votes, constructing electoral coalitions of voters based on various voting groups or localities that traditionally align with the opposing political demand. An example of such a populist-anti-populist battle was the clash between Jacques Chirac and Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002 in France. Although Le Pen's bid for president fell short at 17.79% in the run-off due to an extensive mobilisation for democracy and against political extremism (Cole, 2002), this election shows the importance of provoking the spatial and regional affiliations of populist and anti-populist voters.

These aspects provide critical insights for our research. Before we formulate our hypotheses as the foundation for the empirical model, in the following section we elaborate on the spatial aspects of populist voting.

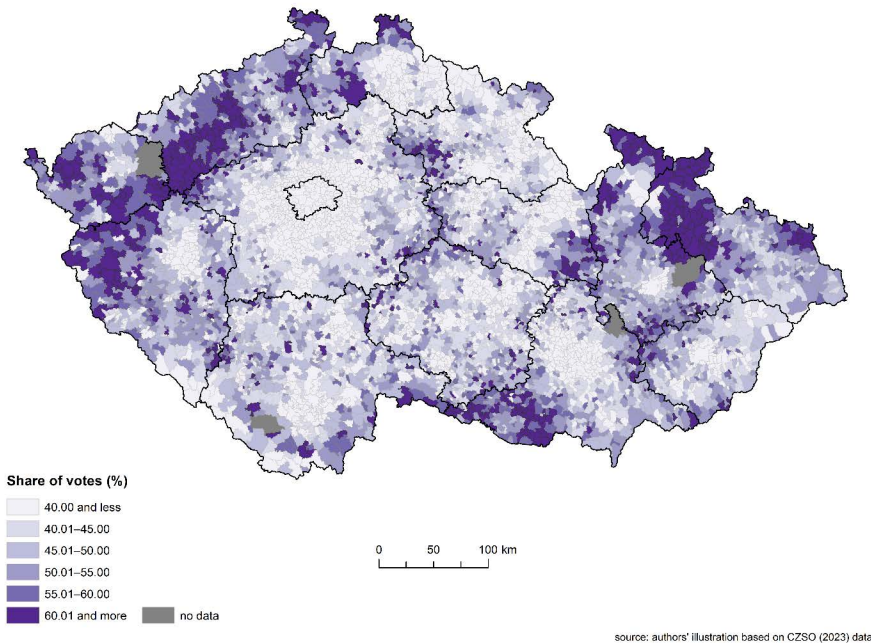
3.2 Populism and the geography of discontent

Elections are inherently tied to the places in which they are held (Agnew, 1987); electoral support for populist candidates often shows significant geographical heterogeneity (e.g., Agnew & Shin, 2017; Maškarinec, 2019). Therefore, analysing connections between census data and electoral outcomes by region has been essential in investigating voter behaviour (e.g., Bernard et al., 2014; Lysek & Macků, 2022). Having characterised Babiš as a populist candidate, we connect the spatial aspects of his support to the geography of discontent which has been repeatedly identified as playing a key role in the rise of populism in areas with socio-economic difficulties (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Koeppen et al., 2021; Bourdin & Torre, 2023; Urso et al., 2023).

The 'geography of discontent' refers to people's feelings of unhappiness living in places associated with socio-economic stagnation, lack of opportunities and high levels of inequality (Dijkstra et al., 2020, p. 744). It is not concerned only with conditions of 'relational' *peripherality*, but also with the spatial concentration of political responses to voters feeling 'left out' (Urso et al., 2023). Many scholars have recently argued that such feelings of discontent and political resentment (a sort of simmering anger based on a perception of not getting their fair share in an unfair system; see Cramer 2016) stemming from regional inequalities lead to a rise in anti-establishment and populist sentiment (e.g., Cerqua et al., 2022; MacKinnon et al., 2022; Pike et al., 2023). Rodríguez-Pose (2018) stresses the importance of the territorial dimension by describing the rise of populism as the 'revenge of places that do not matter'; in this sense, the leaning of relatively socio-economically deprived regions towards populism can be viewed as an act of revolt against their perceived unfavourable status, realised through the ballot box.

While populist parties have been successful at capturing the votes of people who feel hostile towards the mainstream political parties, the establishment and institutions (Broz et al., 2021), political discontent is not limited to populist responses. Disaffected voters may turn to radical right-wing parties (Arzheimer & Bernemann, 2023; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023) or be discouraged from voting altogether (Bourdin & Tai, 2023; Kevický & Suchánek, 2023). In Czechia, traditionally left-wing parties have also found success in the economic and geographic periphery (Voda & Pink, 2015; Lysek & Macků, 2022). We set out to study the geographical and contextual characteristics of places to account for spatially concentrated discontent and examine both its roots and consequences (see Koeppen et al., 2021). In this report, we use the term 'discontent' mainly in its 'relative' and contextual sense; we assess peripherality and any connection to the rise of populism by analysing the main socio-economic, demographic and geographical attributes of electoral areas.

Figure 1:
Electoral support for Andrej Babiš in the 2023 Czech presidential election (second round)



Source: the authors

Figure 1 shows that voting for Babiš in his bid to become president in 2023 was spatially heterogeneous. The highest levels of support were primarily in peripheral regions, many of which can be referred to as the 'left behind' places of Czechia. Populist, far-right and communist candidates have been successful in the past in many of these constituencies (Lysek & Macků, 2022; Bláha, 2023; Suchánek & Hasman, 2023). The presidential election result is not surprising, given the populist nature of ANO and Babiš, whose electoral appeal is not built on the conventional left-right axis but rather on capturing the interest of people experiencing forms of political discontent (see Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Bušítková & Guasti, 2019). Along the same lines, Lysek and Macků (2022, p. 271) argue that an electoral shift between traditionally leftist parties and contemporary populist parties might be occurring.

Generally, the regions that voted in the greatest numbers for Babiš were the former Sudetenland (west Bohemia and parts of south and north Moravia), sections of Silesia and the border areas between central Bohemia and the Hradec Králové, Pardubice and Vysočina regions. In contrast, socio-economically prosperous cities, such as Prague, Brno and Pilsen, and their surrounding constituencies gave most support to the anti-populist candidate, Petr Pavel. This voting pattern is generally

in line with the results of presidential elections in 2013 and 2018 (see Maškařinec, 2013; Šedo et al., 2018, respectively). Given the characteristics of places that rallied behind Zeman in previous presidential elections (he proved more popular in regions with lower rates of tertiary education and higher unemployment; see Maškařinec, 2013), it is logical to assume the existence of a long-term accumulation of discontent in certain regions. Our theoretic expectation is that the observed voting patterns in 2023 at least partially reflect the geography of discontent in Czechia.

When identifying spatial patterns, it is important to comprehend the underlying causes of any disparities. Based on previous research and considering the geographical spread of electoral support for Babiš, in the next section we set out the theoretical expectations to be tested by our empirical model. This approach aims to provide a deeper understanding of the reasons behind Babiš's defeat in the populist versus anti-populist contest.

4. Data, operationalisation and methods

The inputs for our analysis were 2021 census (CZSO, 2021a) and unemployment data (MoLSA, 2021), and the results of the 2021 parliamentary (CZSO, 2021b) and the 2023 presidential elections (CZSO, 2023). Our analysis was at the municipality level, allowing for a very detailed view. Although there was a two-year gap between the census and the presidential election, the census data are highly accurate and most of the variables included in the model are not susceptible to sudden change. However, given the nature of aggregated census data, we took account of the ecological fallacy problem (Robinson, 1950) to avoid making extensive individual-level deductions based on them. To examine the share of votes for Babiš in the second round, we calibrated a model with the variables set out in Table 1.¹

The proportion of people with tertiary education (Tertiary education) is a widely studied factor in political science, as areas with higher levels of education tend to shun populism (Gordon, 2018; Dijkstra et al., 2020). Accordingly, we anticipated that Babiš would be shown to have had less support in municipalities with a higher proportion of individuals with tertiary education. Another variable commonly used to indicate socio-economic conditions is unemployment (Unemployment). Long-term and structural unemployment² have previously been associated with the rise of populist parties and discontent among voters (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; van Leeuwen & Vega, 2021). Accordingly, we expected a positive relationship between unemployment and support for Babiš.

To account for two possibly mutually relevant factors, we included the share of people who lived in the municipality in which they were born (Municipal natives) and the share of immigrants. Both of these factors were also used in

a study analysing the 2013 presidential elections (Maškarinec, 2013). The effect of a higher proportion of municipal natives on voting was difficult to predict. While it may indicate a satisfactory living environment in terms of social stability and community cohesion, it might also indicate that people are constrained from relocating and that the population is suffering mobility stagnation (see Wirth et al., 2016; Korčák & Netrdová, 2022). The share of immigrants was categorised into two groups (Immigrants EU and Immigrants non-EU) based on their country of origin. This was to test whether there was a relationship between the two groups, especially as migration has recently become a politically salient topic in Czechia and anti-immigrant attitudes have been mainstreamed (Wondreys, 2021). The majority of EU immigrants were Slovak, whereas non-EU immigrants were predominantly Ukrainian, Vietnamese or from Russian minority groups. While international immigrants are commonly attracted to core areas and gateway cities where they are more likely to find socio-economic prosperity (such as Prague and surrounding regions, as observed by Janská, Čermák & Wright, 2014), immigration rates in a particular area may also significantly impact the nativist and populist behaviour of voters living there as predicted by group-threat theory (Otto & Steinhardt, 2014; Dustmann et al., 2019). Given the nuanced nature of these variables, we kept an open mind about any impact we might find of the share of municipal natives and immigrants on support for Babiš.

Several studies demonstrate the impact of age on electoral behaviour (e.g., Maškarinec, 2017; Gordon, 2018). We investigated the relationship between voting for Babiš and having a greater proportion of people in the oldest age group (Age 65+), a group more inclined towards populism than younger voters (Hobolt, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Dvořák and Zouhar (2022) identified a correlation between ageing districts and support for ANO and we expected this relationship would also hold at the municipal level for Babiš.

Religiosity, which in the Czech context we operationalised as the share of Roman Catholics (Catholics), can have varying effects on electoral outcomes (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009). Previous research in Czechia has identified both a positive effect of the Catholic share on voting for the Christian Democrats (Bernard et al., 2014) and a negative effect of religiosity on support for the populist radical right (Suchánek & Hasman, 2024). While anticipating a clear relationship between the share of Catholics in predominantly atheist Czechia and voting for Babiš for president is not easy, given the likelihood of potential Christian Democrat voters (i.e., SPOLU voters) leaning towards Pavel in the election, we expected a negative relationship between the share of Catholics and support for Babiš. Moreover, religion also plays an important role in civil society and can serve as a partial indicator of social capital levels (see Putnam, 2000).

Finally, we incorporated the electoral turnout of the last major general election (Voter turnout (parliament)) into our model. Abstention from voting is related to a number of factors, as demonstrated by several studies (e.g., Linek,

2015; Kevický & Suchánek, 2023). Electoral turnout is often associated with social capital and the overall level of civic society as it demonstrates the extent of public interest and engagement in matters of common concern (Šimon, 2015, p. 143). Therefore, we set out to explore the hypothetical relationship between the contextual characteristic of previous voting disenchantment and subsequent support for populist actors. Considering previous findings that low voter turnout was connected with discontent and overall political disengagement (Pike et al., 2023), and that populist politicians were known to maximise their vote by mobilising dissatisfied non-voters (Agnew & Shin, 2017), we predicted a positive relationship between low voter turnout and support for Babiš (cf. Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2021).

Table 1:
Dependent and independent variables in the models

Variable (municipality level)	Description	Year
Babiš vote (dependent variable)	Share of votes for Andrej Babiš in the Czech 2023 presidential election (second round)	2023
Municipal natives	Share of people who live in the municipality in which they were born	2021
Immigrants (EU)	Share of non-Czech residents from the EU	2021
Immigrants (non-EU)	Share of non-Czech residents from outside the EU	2021
Age (65+)	Share of people above the age of 65	2021
Tertiary education	Share of people with a tertiary degree	2021
Catholics	Share of people declaring to be Roman Catholics	2021
Unemployment	Share of unemployed people	2018–2021
Voter turnout (parliament)	Share of voter turnout in the 2021 Czech parliamentary elections	2021

Source: the authors

First, we used the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model, which is a conventional global regression modelling technique commonly employed across various fields of study that generally offers a solid foundation for examining the mutual effects of the covariates under investigation. Our aggregated data (i.e., geographical units) included spatial attributes so, after calibrating the OLS model, we assessed the possibility of spatial clustering in the model's residuals.

Next, we evaluated the residuals' spatial clustering by determining their global Moran's I value (from -1 to +1), which showed the extent of spatial autocorrelation, with positive values indicating positive autocorrelation (Anselin, 1995) and suggesting that either low or high values (of residuals) were clustered in space. If this was indeed the case, it indicates that the OLS model may not adequately fit the input data, and other regression models should be considered.

Initially, we intended to employ either the spatial lag model (SLM) or the spatial error model (SEM) based on the results of the diagnostics for spatial dependence tests. Following the guidance of Luc Anselin (2005), we calibrated a SEM model, which gave a substantially better fit than the OLS model. Anselin (2005) and Matthews (2006) provide further detail on the spatial dependence tests presented in Table 2.

The formula for the spatial error model is as follows:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta X + \mu; \mu = \lambda W\mu + \varepsilon$$

Where Y is the dependent variable, α is the intercept and βX represents the coefficients of the independent variables. The term μ refers to the spatial autocorrelation error, which has two components. Firstly, λ represents the autoregressive coefficient of the spatial error term, capturing the average error of the neighbouring units based on the selected spatial weights matrix ($W\mu$) and reflecting the spatial dependence in the model. Secondly, ε represents the error term that accounts for the variation unexplained by the independent variables, analogous to the OLS residuals. The term λ is included in the regression output as a new coefficient. Put more simply, if the value of the λ regression coefficient is positive and statistically significant, it suggests the presence of missing data in the model. This indicates that there might be some process that either remains unmeasured in the model (not captured by the independent variables) or is potentially unmeasurable using aggregated data.

5. Results

We initially conducted an OLS regression to explore the relationships between support for Babiš and the selected variables (Table 2). In this model, multicollinearity was not a concern, as indicated by a low multicollinearity condition number of 3.09.³ Despite the larger number of units included in the analysis and their vast fragmentation, the adjusted R-square value of 0.442 is high (cf. Voda & Pink, 2015; Suchánek & Hasman, 2024).

Starting with the most influential covariates, we can identify the dominant role of Tertiary education (-0.398), Voter turnout (parliament) in 2021 (-0.274) and Unemployment (0.138) in support for Babiš. Therefore, a higher proportion of tertiary-educated individuals and a higher voter turnout in previous elections in Czech municipalities are associated with less support for Babiš. On the contrary, higher levels of unemployment are linked to more support for Babiš. These results on the dynamic between the geography of discontent and populism are as theoretically expected (see Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Koeppen et al., 2021).

We found weaker effects for the share of non-EU immigrants (-0.077) and of an elderly population (0.050). These findings suggest that Babiš had some success in locations with lower levels of immigration – although only when migrants had a non-EU background – and in locations with more people aged 65 and above. While the inclination of the elderly towards populist voting is well documented (Hobolt, 2016), the effect of immigration on voting behaviour is more complex as both the intergroup contact (Allport, 1954) and group-threat theories (Quillian, 1995) potentially come into play (Green et al., 2016). We cautiously conclude that, overall, our data indicate support for the contact hypothesis in a contextual sense, although the regression coefficient is small, and further verification using individual-level data is necessary. Besides, the effect is not confirmed for immigrants from within the EU. The remaining variables (Immigrants (EU), Municipal natives and Catholics) have negligible coefficients, suggesting that the OLS model assumes no substantial relationship between these variables and support for Babiš.

Table 2:

Relationship between voting for Babiš and independent variables according to the ordinary least squares (OLS) and spatial error (SEM) regression models.

Independent variable	OLS	SEM
	Std. coefficient	Std. coefficient
Intercept	<0.000 (0.001)	-0.005 (0.047)
Municipal natives	-0.016 (0.012)	-0.002 (0.011)
Immigrants (EU)	-0.020 (0.010)	0.018 (0.001)
Immigrants (non-EU)	-0.077 (0.010)	-0.016 (0.009)
Age (65+)	0.050 (0.010)	0.049 (0.009)
Tertiary education	-0.398 (0.012)	-0.375 (0.012)
Catholics	-0.009 (0.012)	-0.110 (0.015)
Unemployment	0.138 (0.010)	0.063 (0.011)
Voter turnout (parliament)	-0.274 (0.012)	-0.153 (0.011)
Spatial error parameter (λ)	-	0.831 (0.015)
N	6,246	6,246
Log likelihood	-7,027.8	-6,073.4
AICc	14,073.7	12,165.6
Adjusted R ² / Pseudo R ²	0.442	0.609
Multicollinearity condition number	2.38	-
Global Moran's I (residuals)	0.270	-0.020

Note: standard errors in parenthesis; spatial weights matrix = 10 km. Statistical significance of regression coefficients is not reported due to the use of census data.

Source: the authors

As we were working with geographical units, it was essential to examine the possibility of spatial clustering in the residuals of the OLS model (as discussed in the previous section). We conducted several diagnostic tests for spatial dependence, and all of these confirmed the presence of significant spatial clustering in our data. We can conclude that the OLS model is generally inadequate for our analysis. Following the guidelines provided by Anselin (2005), we ran a spatial error model (SEM), which produced a much better fit than the OLS model, as indicated by higher values of log likelihood and lower values of AICc.⁴ The Moran's I value of -0.020 suggests no systematic spatial clustering of residuals, which contrasts with the previous model's Moran's I value of 0.270.

Likewise, the regression coefficients in the SEM can be interpreted as marginal effects, but now there is an additional spatial error parameter (λ) included in the table. While most relationships remain somewhat consistent in their nature, there are also some intriguing differences in the resulting coefficients. Tertiary education (-0.375) continues to be by far the most influential predictor of Babiš's support, while the strength of the effects of voter turnout (-0.153) and unemployment (0.063) diminishes slightly. While the coefficient for the 65+ age group remains largely unchanged, the potential effect of Immigration (non-EU) is no longer supported by the SEM. The relationships between Babiš's outcomes and immigrants from the EU and municipal natives remain unimportant in both models. However, the effect of Catholics (increasing its strength from -0.009 to -0.110) becomes fairly relevant. Given the use of aggregate data in regression analyses, it is difficult to pinpoint the specific cause of this substantial increase in the coefficient for the share of Catholics. Nevertheless, we can assume that this is caused by Christian Democrat strongholds giving their support to Pavel instead of Babiš.

Lastly, the λ variable shows a high and positive (and significant) value of 0.831, indicating an association between the error term and neighbouring observations. This suggests that in our models, despite the relatively high reported R-square value, there may be a key variable that has been omitted or other crucial processes occurring that influence the electoral support for Babiš.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The main contribution of this article is threefold. Firstly, we categorise Andrej Babiš and his unsuccessful run in the 2023 presidential election in light of the emerging populist versus anti-populist debate (Moffitt, 2018; Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). This helps us understand the election and anticipate essential factors and mechanisms behind the support for Babiš as a populist presidential candidate, as well as his defeat. More generally, our research adds to the conceptual understanding of the anti-populist political landscape. Despite the assumption that an anti-populist

candidate typically emerges from and defends mainstream traditional politics, in this case an independent candidate detached from the current establishment proved to be a strategically effective alternative in countering populist opponents.

Secondly, considering the accumulation of electoral support for populist candidates in certain places and under specific circumstances, we further conceptualise our research by considering the geography of discontent (e.g., Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Dijkstra et al., 2020; Pike et al., 2023). Identifying crucial factors influencing voting behaviour in Czech municipalities in the 2023 presidential election. Considering our results, we conclude that tertiary education, unemployment, and previous voter turnout had most influence on Babiš's electoral support. Based on these results and the spatial distribution of electoral outcomes, we posit that regions that demonstrated a substantial preference for Babiš were primarily characterised by relatively deficient social and economic conditions.

Thirdly, we have shown the value of the spatial error model, which provided a better fit than the ordinary least squares model and indicates that the share of Catholics in municipalities also played a significant role in determining Babiš's share of the vote. While it is difficult to determine the cause of this distinction between the two regression models, the resulting relationship (along with the relevance of voter turnout) seems to confirm the potential role of social capital in voters turning away from populism (cf. Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2021). Given the geographical patterns of electoral outcomes and previous research on Czech politics (e.g., Šimon, 2015; Lysek & Macků, 2022), many of these characteristics can arguably be attributed to the historical legacy of Sudetenland and the neoliberal economic transition that began in the 1990s. Moreover, SEM indicates that potential missing data or information also influences the electoral support for Babiš. While we cannot determine the cause of this significant positive clustering beyond the covariates analysed in our model, we suggest that the unexplained spatial variance may be attributed at least partially to people's discontent in peripheral areas of Czechia.

The shortcomings of our research are typical of empirical studies relying on extensive quantitative analyses of aggregated data (see Fotheringham & Rogerson, 2008). As a result, it is not possible to confirm or reject conclusively whether the individuals experiencing the assumed discontent are the ones who voted for Babiš in the 2023 election, as this would lead to issues of ecological fallacy (Robinson, 1950). To address this matter, and further investigate the causal determinants and latent mechanisms behind the support for Babiš, additional individual-level data and/or qualitative research would be required; the data needed for this are, however, lacking. Another limitation stems from the absence of analysis of previous presidential elections (but see Maškarinec, 2013; Hejtmánek & Pink, 2014; Šedo et al., 2018). While patterns of voting for Miloš Zeman may prove to be important in the case of Babiš, a rigorous comparative analysis between these elections would require additional research, preferably also including individual-level data. Moreover, while our findings reflect certain specific aspects of

previously observed patterns in support of radical parties (both right and left), an in-depth assessment extends beyond the scope of our study. This limitation, among others, could serve as a starting point for further research.

Despite these drawbacks, our study offers numerous implications for both future research and for policymakers. By identifying the factors that play a key role in the populist versus anti-populist political clash, policymakers and proponents of the liberal democracy model should focus on addressing these factors, particularly in areas where Babiš was most successful. Accordingly, and in light of recent studies assessing the contemporary effects of long-term, geographically uneven development, we emphasise the need to mitigate regional inequalities. Core regions that accumulate wealth and benefit from high levels of tertiary education, social capital, and low unemployment should take a more proactive role in assisting the peripheries and marginalised areas, which often experience forms of discontent (e.g., by amplifying education and training, catalysing innovation and bolstering the quality of governance; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024, p. 30). Policy implementations and their assessment should transcend the limited conventional thinking primarily focused on economic growth to alleviate people's discontent and political resentment (see MacKinnon et al., 2022). We advocate a more nuanced and class-sensitive approach, as addressing inequalities among both people and their social environments appears to play a crucial role in countering populist ideologies.

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Appendix 1:

Relationship between voting for Babiš and Pavel and independent variables. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model.

Independent variable	Babiš (1 st round)	Pavel (1 st round)
	Std. coefficient	Std. coefficient
Municipal natives		
Immigrants (EU)	-0.026	-0.065
Immigrants (non-EU)	-0.030	0.049
	-0.048	0.086
Age (65+)	0.078	0.020
Tertiary education	-0.366	0.436
Catholics	-0.048	-0.198
Unemployment	0.143	-0.100
Voter turnout (parliament)	-0.277	0.162
N	6,246	6,246
Adjusted R ²	0.421	0.463

Note: statistical significance of regression coefficients is not reported due to the use of census data.
Source: the authors

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Endnote:

- 1 Due to the limited scope and focus on the second round of elections, where the regression results for Andrej Babiš are mirrored for Petr Pavel, we have chosen to include the regression model for the first round in the appendix only. For more details, please refer to the table in Appendix 1.
- 2 To control for potential short-term fluctuations in unemployment due to the detailed level, we instead use three-year averages for each municipality.
- 3 According to Anselin (1995), we should be alarmed if the multi-collinearity condition number is above 30. Moreover, all variables reported VIF values below 2.
- 4 The SEM pseudo-R-square value is different from the OLS adjusted R-square value and should not be compared directly with it.