PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

A Multi-level Analysis

DATA BRIEF

How does perceived bureaucratic performance shape democratic legitimacy? Drawing on the 2024 EQI survey of 135,000+ respondents in 210 EU regions, we study the link between evaluations of local administration (quality, impartiality, corruption) and two outcomes: vote intention for populist parties and abstention, using multi level logit models. Across all specifications, higher perceived quality of government is associated with lower support for populist parties. At the same time, improvements in perceived quality are linked to a modest rise in abstention. The findings underscore the importance of high quality subnational governance for democratic attitudes and behaviour but also point to a trade-off: improving administration quality may lower demand for anti systemic/populist parties but can also slightly depress participation. However, to the degree that this small reduction in turnout also implies decreasing demand for populist or anti-establishment options this is not necessarily a finding that is concerning from a democratic legitimacy perspective.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"One could say that the public administration is the political system—as citizens concretely encounter and experience it. The character of the administration, therefore, is decisive for the way in which the political system is viewed." (Rothstein, 2009:325).

What is currently the picture regarding the effects of individual perceptions of public administration on democratic legitimacy in the EU? A large comparative literature maintains that perceptions of public administration as effective, impartial and corruption free, strengthen democratic legitimacy while low quality institutions erode trust, lower participation and stoke anti system sentiments (Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Dahlberg et al., 2015; Agerberg, 2017; Sundström and Stockemer, 2015). Building on these insights, this brief reviews how individual evaluations of public administration relate to two important indicators of system support: voting for populist parties and abstention.

For our analysis we employ individual level data from the latest round of the 2024 European Quality of Government Index - EQI (Charron et al., 2024). The 2024 EQI is currently the most extensive survey that is conducted in order to measure citizens' perceptions of governance in the European Union. The dataset includes more than 135,000 respondents across 210 regions (either at the NUTS 1 or NUTS 2 levels in the all member states). We construct a respondent-level index that combines evaluations of quality, impartiality, and levels of corruption across

three types of services: education, health care, and policing. We then include this index in multilevel models for populist voting and turnout.

Two are the main findings. First, better perceived bureaucratic performance is associated with lower support for populist parties. Substantively, moving from poorer to better evaluations of local QoG we observe declines in the predicted probability of a populist vote. This effect remains robust to the inclusion of a large number of control variables and fixed effects. Second, improvements in perceived quality are linked to a small rise in abstention—a pattern consistent with previous research on the mobilizing effects of dissatisfaction (possibly to the benefit of populist parties) and the potential complacency of citizens during good times (Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2016).

The remainder of the brief proceeds as follows. We first provide a short of overview of the literature and theory relating to our questions. We then introduce the EQI 2024 survey data and our measures, detailing the construction of the respondent-level EQI index and the coding of the variables. We then outline the empirical strategy and present the main results, first for populist support and then for abstention. A concluding section discusses the findings in light of the existing literature, the limitations of this study and suggests some avenues for future research.

2. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

A large comparative literature shows that citizens perception of governance quality, in the form of an impartial, corruption free and effective public administration is directly related to system legitimacy, as expressed in measures of satisfaction with democracy or social and political trust, and by now exceeds the role of input side institutions that are designed to ensure equality in political representation (Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Dahlberg et al., 2014; Rothstein, 2011;Holmberg and Rothstein, 2012; Giley, 2009; Magalhaes, 2014). Recent evidence further reinforce this view showing how institutional quality affects public trust (Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2022), political polarisation (Apergis and Pinar, 2023) and populist voting (Agerberg, 2017).

The micro mechanisms via which institutional quality translates into political legitimacy focus on societal outcomes, citizens experiences (and hence perceptions) with the public administration and the role of political elites. First, high bureaucratic quality correlates strongly

with higher overall well being: income levels, employment opportunities, health outcomes, educational attainment environmental quality, overall happiness and a host of other similar measures (Reginato et al, 2023; Shiroka-Pula, Bartlett, and Krasniqi 2023; Lapuente & Rönnerstrand 2017). Innovation capacity (Nistoskaya and Cingolani 2016) and effective management of economic resources (Charron, 2016) are equally positively affected while important societal outcomes such as gender equality (Sundström and Wängnerud 2016) or high social capital (Cortinovis et al., 2017) are directly related to quality of government. In this context citizens are expected to express very little discontent with the system that delivers important public goods.

The flip side of this argument points to the implications of citizens', potentially, low quality experiences with public bureaucracy. Rothstein (2009;2011) makes two important points in this regard. The first is that citizens come into contact with the output side of the political system (i.e with the public administration) far more frequently than with institutions from the input side (e.g political parties or parliaments). For them, public administration is a vivid depiction of the political system (Rothstein, 2009: 325). Second, in those day to day encounters with public servants citizens expectations are driven by strong norms of fairness but also material considerations: "if the police do not protect you because you are an X-type citizen; if the fire brigade does not come to your house because you are a Z-type citizen; if your children are systematically discriminated against in the schools because they are Y-type children; and if the doctors at the hospital ignore you because you are a P-type person, then you are in real trouble…..,what the sate does or does not do on the output side maybe life threatening" (Rothstein, 2011:92). Faced with such realities citizens are unlikely to ascribe increased political legitimacy to the political system.

In this context, some political elites will seek to represent the brewing discontent and in doing so make it even more salient in the political arena. Politicization of corruption (Bågenholm, 2013), along with immigration, is a central topic in populist parties' rhetoric (Mudde, 2004) and one of their main strategies is to increase the menu of political alternatives specifically for dissatisfied voters (Agerberg, 2017). Their rhetoric and electoral success may galvanize demand for anti establishment representation and potentially creates a feedback loop that further re-enforces anti-systemic or illiberal democratic attitudes.

With these considerations in mind, in this brief, we seek to engage with previous research and inform our own, using the most recent effort to track the quality of public administration in the European regions. What is *currently* the picture regarding the effect of perceptions of bureaucratic quality on democratic legitimacy as expressed in the voting behaviour of EU

citizens? We focus on two important measures behaviour: Vote for populist parties and political participation in the form of turnout.

3. DATA AND METHOD

We make use of the latest round (2024) of the EQI survey (Charron et al., 2024) in order to assess the effect of evaluations of public administration on democratic attitudes. The 2024 EQI is currently the most extensive survey that is conducted in order to measure citizens' perceptions of governance in the European Union. The dataset includes more than 135,000 geocoded respondents across 210 regions in the 27 member states (either at the NUTS 1 or NUTS 2 levels). As in previous iterations, national-level governance information from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) serves as a reference point for anchoring regional estimates.

The EU-wide regional survey was administered by Efficience 3 (E3), a French public-opinion research firm that conducts survey work across Europe for academic institutions, policymakers, and private-sector clients. Participants aged 18 and older were randomly selected and contacted by telephone in the predominant local language. Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) was conducted using both landline and mobile numbers, with the specific balance between the two determined by the contextual knowledge of market-research specialists in each country. As in the previous round, Computer-Assisted Web Interviews (CAWI) complemented the CATI approach, enabling wider coverage of certain demographic groups—particularly younger respondents—and substantially increasing the total number of interviews compared to the CATI-only rounds. This mixed-mode strategy yielded the largest sample to date, with a minimum of 600 respondents in every NUTS region and an overall sample of 135,227 individuals across 210 NUTS 1 and NUTS 2 regions.

For the second consecutive round, all EU-27 member states, including the smallest ones, were represented in the survey. To ensure accurate regional assignment, respondents were asked to provide their postal code, which was especially important for those reached via mobile phone or completing the questionnaire online. Recruitment procedures and sampling strategies for both CATI and CAWI modes were fully aligned with those used in earlier EQI rounds.[1]

[1] For an extensive visual mapping of the results, theoretical rational for the measurement of the EQI and other details, please consult deliverable D1.3

3.1 Dependent Variables

In the EQI survey respondents are asked the following question about their voting intentions: *What party would you vote for if the national parliamentary election was held today?* This question is used to construct the two variables used in the populism and abstention models below. For the populism voting variable we use PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2023) to identify populist parties of the left and right. Popu-List is currently the largest resource for the identification of populist parties currently covering 31 countries and using Mudde's (2017) ideational approach in the classification of parties that have won at least one seat or 2+% of the vote in parliamentary elections since 1989 (Rooduijn et al., 2023). Table 1 details the parties that have been coded as populist in each country.[2] This dependent variable is therefore coded as 1 for those respondents who express and intention to vote for a populist party and 0 if otherwise.

The intention to vote question does not specifically ask whether the respondent plans to vote in the next election or not. We therefore consider those that refuse to answer the question or those that answer 'Don't Know' as potential abstainers. The abstention variable is also a dummy coded 1 for abstainers and 0 if other wise.

Intention to vote survey instruments are not without limitations. First, and this is a limitation of both vote intention or previous vote survey instruments, citizens tend to overreport civically desirable behaviours as is evident from research on political participation and specifically turnout (Ansolabehere and Hersch, 2012, Jackman and Spahn, 2019; Achen and Blais, 2015). The flip side of this problem is respondents being reluctant to express their true actual or intended vote, a reticence that can vary by partishanship or the overall 'opinion climate' (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), phenomena that bedevil forecasting models and were debated after the surprising (according to pollsters) outcome of the 2016 US presidential election, especially as regards the 'shy Trump voter' hypothesis (Enns et al., 2017, cf Coppock, 2017; AAPOR, 2017). Overall, an interaction between voters' individual level characteristics and the political context can lead to social desirability biases that increase measurement error in these types of questions (Camatarri et al., 2023). Finally, even if the voters are not reticent in expressing their 'true' intentions on the day of the survey these can be driven by recent events that ultimately might be inconsequential on the actual election day (Gelman and King, 1993). Some of these limitations are possibly of particular concern in the case of reported inttions to vote for populist parties (especially on the right side of the spectrum). However, availability, coverage and cross

[2] There are no parties that are coded as populist in Malta and therefore the country is excluded from the analysis.

country comparability make the use of these types of measures a sine qua non for the purposes of this study. Moreover, features of the EQI survey in 2024, like the partially on line mode of data collection, help to somewhat alleviate those concerns.

Table 1. List of populist parties by country

Country	Populist parties
Germany	Die Linke (LINKE), Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)
Romania	Partidul Social-Democrat (PSD), Partidul Miscarea Populara (PMP), Alianta pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR)
Italy	Fratelli d Italia (FdI), Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), Lega Nord (LN), Forza Italia (FI)
Austria	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)
Poland	Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc (PiS), Kukiz 15
Spain	Sumar/ Unidas Podemos, Vox (V)
Sweden	Sverigedemokraterna (SD)
Finland	Perussuomalaiset (PS), Liike Nyt (LN)
Denmark	Dansk Folkeparti (DF), Nye Borgerlige (NB)
Ireland	Sinn Féin (SF)
Belgium	Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), Vlaams Belang (VB)
Netherlands	Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB), Juiste Antwoord 21, Forum voor Democratie
Hugary	FIDESZ - Magyar Polgári Szövetség, Jobbik - Konzervatívok
Slovakia	Smer - sociálna demokracia (SMER – SD), Sme rodina (SR), Slovenská národná strana (SNS)
Croatia	Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, Most, Domovinski pokret, Hrvatski suverenisti, Možemo! – Politicka platforma
Bulgaria	Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Balgariya (GERB), Vazrazdane (V), Ima Takav Narod (ITN)
France	Rassemblement national (RN), Reconquête
Czech Republic	ANO 2011 (ANO), Svoboda a Prímá Demokracie (SPD), Prísaha
Portugal	Chega
Greece	Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras (SYRIZA), Ellinikí Lýsi (EL), Metopo Evropaikis Realistikis Anipakois (MERA)
Luxemburg	Die Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei (ADR)
Estonia	Eesti Keskerakond, Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond
Latvia	Latvija pirmaja vieta (LPV)
Lithuania	Darbo Partija (DP)
Slovenia	Slovenska Demokratska Stranka (SDS), Nova Slovenija – Krscanski demokrati (NSi), Povezimo Slovenijo (PoS), Levica (L), Lista Marjana Sarca (LMS), Slovenska nacionalna stranka (SNS)
Cyprus	Progressive Party of Working People, National Popular Front, Solidarity Movement

3.2 Independent Variable

The main independent variable in this paper is a combined QoG index based on the three dimensions of performance, impartiality and corruption in public administration. Here we use the 10 point scale questions on evaluations of the education system, health care system and the police force. The index is based on the following questions:

1.How would you rate the quality of public education/health care system/police force in your area (From very poor (1) to Excellent (10)).

2. Certain people are given special advantages in the public education system/health care system/police force in my area (Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (10)).

3. Corruption is prevalent in my area's public school system/health care system/police force (Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (10)).

We first take the average of quality, impartiality and corruption score for each respondent across all administration areas and then combine these scores in one additive index. For comparability across the different regions and ease of interpretation of the coefficients the index is then standardised.

3.3 Control Variables

Our models below control for a wide range of individual level confounders based on previous research on Quality of Government and support for populist parties (see Ageberg, 2017; Kessel, 2015 for a review) but also research on turnout. The populist models mainly combine socio economic characteristics (gender, age, education, income, place of residence, employment) with left right ideology and evaluations of the economy. To guard against potential unobservable differences, across countries and regions, driving these results in our modeling strategy we include regional and country fixed effects in alternative specification of the models reported below. The control variables are coded as follows:

- Gender: A dummy variable scored 1 for women and 0 otherwise.
- Age: Measured in years.
- Education: A three category variable ranging from Low (those with Primary or Non Graduate Secondary education), Medium (Secondary education Graduate) and High (Studying in University, University Degree and above).
- Income: A three category variable that takes into account the within country variation of income. It is coded Low (bottom tercile) Middle (middle tercile) and High (top tercile). Non response is coded as missing and excluded from tercile assignment and therefore the analysis. This results to a significant reduction in observations as non response rates range between 12% (in Romania) to 43% (in Malta) and have an average rate across countries of 28%. All models presented below have been run without omitting respondents that refused to answer the question (but rather set those as the reference category). Reported results remain largely unchanged. We believe including

the three category variable provides a more meaningful interpretation of the results hence we report these estimates.

- Place of residence: A four category variable based on the population size of the area the interview was conducted (filled by the interviewer). It takes values 1 – Less than 10,000 (for rural areas), 2 – between 10,000-100,000 (for small town or cities) , 3 - 100,000 to a million (for large cities and urban areas) and 4 – More than a million (for very large cities or urban areas).
- Evaluations of the economy: This is a four category variable and comes from the question: *How would you judge the current state of the economy in the area where you live?* 1 – Very good, 2 – Somewhat good, 3 - Somewhat bad and 4 – Very Bad.
- Ideology: There is no standard left right ideology variable in the EQI survey. Ideological position was determined by a combined index based on responses on four questions scored on 1-10. The questions are:

1.*Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in [COUNTRY]. 1 - Strongly disagree, 10-Strongly agree*

2. On the whole, (COUNTRY) is worse-off by people coming to live here from other countries. 1 - Strongly disagree, 10-Strongly agree

3. Gays and lesbians should be allowed to marry legally. 1 - Strongly disagree, 10-Strongly agree

4.. The government in (COUNTRY) should reduce differences in peoples' incomes by taxing wealthier people and then providing welfare to the poor. 1 - Strongly disagree, 10-Strongly agree

Item scales were first aligned so that lower values indicate more left-leaning preferences and higher values indicate more right-leaning preferences (some items were reverse-coded). Each item was then standardized and for each respondent we computed the average of the available z-scores to form a single left–right ideology index (higher values = more right).

All the above variables are also included in the abstention models reported below. Sociodemographic characteristics such as the ones described above have been considered important determinants of turnout since they reflect the available resources, such as time, money and civic skills necessary for participation (see Brady et al, 1995; Blais, 2006). Sociotropic and egocentric evaluations of the economy (here reflected in evaluations of the state of the local economy) have also been show to be relevant for models of turnout (Kilian et

al, 2008) as have ideological orientations (Heath et al,2022). In addition to these variables that serve as control for the populist models we include two further control variables for the models of abstention. The first is a measure of political trust from the question: '*On a 1 to 10 scale, with '1' being 'no confidence at all', and '10' being 'complete confidence' to do the right thing, how much confidence do you personally have in (COUNTRY's) parliament?'* Political attitudes that reflect the level of legitimacy of the democratic system, such as satisfaction with democracy or trust in institutions are important determinants of political participation as various previous studies have shown even though the direction and strength of the relationship with turnout might be contested (Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2016; Smets and Van Ham, 2013). To further control for the role of civic skills, which along with the workplace and various other organizations, are acquired also in church (Brady et a., 1995) we use a measure of attendance of religious services from the question*: 'Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, which of the following best describes how often do you attend religious services nowadays? 1 – At least once a week, 2 – At least once a month, 3 – Only on special holidays, 4 – Hardly Ever'*[3]

Unfortunately, at this stage, regional data on party support are unavailable for the years just prior to the EQI survey (latest data go until, 2019 and almost all European countries had a more recent national election) . So the analysis presented here is based solely on individual level data. We hope to be able to supplement this analysis as more data become available.

4. RESULTS

Since both our outcomes are binary we use multi-level logistic regression in various model specifications in order to estimate the EQI effect. Table 2 presents the results of the populism models. Models 1 and 2 are bivariate models with country and regional fixed effects respectively. Model 3 includes country fixed effects and clustered standard errors by region while model 4 includes regional fixed effects and robust standard errors. Reported coefficients are log-odds. The variable that measures evaluations of public administration, in terms of quality, impartiality and lack of corruption (henceforth EQI), shows a consistent negative effect across all models. When controlling for other variables the effect is reduced somewhat from about -0.195 to about -0.145. All coefficients are significant at high levels of statistical significance. Looking at the full models (models 3 and 4) and taking into account all the variables we see that results are robust to these two alternative specifications with few

[3] See appendix I for descriptives of dependent and independent variables

exceptions. As expected from previous research women seem to be less likely to support populist parties compared to men. The same is true for individuals of higher socio economic status as both the variables of education and income are negatively signed. Populist voting appears to be more likely in rural areas, again a result that supports previous research (Rodriguez-Pose, 2022). Higher satisfaction with the state economy also decreases support for populist while economic anxiety (as expressed by the unemployment variable) has the opposite effect. The sign for age is also negative, suggesting the populists' 'audience' has a younger profile, but only in model 4. Finally, left right orientations show a possitive effect suggesting that conservatism drives voting for populist parties. Considering the fact that most (but not all) populist parties in the EU are also radical right wing parties, this result is not unexpected.

Table 2. Populism and the Quality of Public Administration

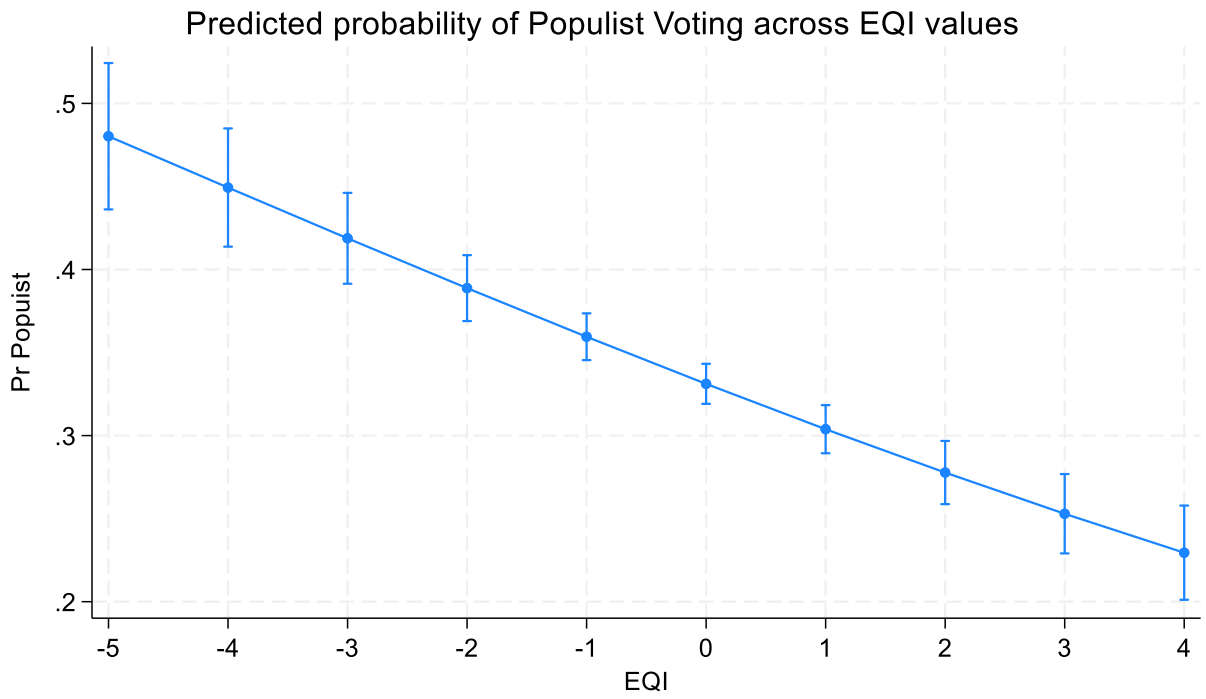
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	FE: Country (biv)	FE: Region (biv)	FE: Country + CSEs	FE: Region
EQI	-0.195***	-0.199***	-0.145***	-0.146***
	(0.026)	(0.009)	(0.021)	(0.010)
Female			-0.049*	-0.048*
			(0.024)	(0.019)
Age			-0.001	-0.002**
			(0.001)	(0.001)
Education (Base:Primary)				
Graduate Secondary			-0.064	-0.095***
			(0.035)	(0.026)
University/Postgrad			-0.385***	-0.417***
			(0.044)	(0.028)
Income (Base:Low)				
Middle			-0.111***	-0.107***
			(0.031)	(0.023)
High			-0.213***	-0.213***
			(0.038)	(0.025)
Residence (Base: up to 10,000)				
10,000-100,000			-0.162***	-0.162***
			(0.032)	(0.024)

100,000-1 million			-0.235***	-0.241***
			(0.038)	(0.028)
More that 1 million			-0.277***	-0.215***
			(0.067)	(0.050)
Economy (Base:Very Good)				
Somewhat Good			-0.066	-0.095*
			(0.060)	(0.040)
Somewhat Bad			0.054	0.041
			(0.084)	(0.042)
Very Bad			0.262*	0.278***
			(0.112)	(0.047)
Unemployed			0.124*	0.156**
			(0.050)	(0.052)
Ideology (Left-Right)			0.727***	0.756***
			(0.049)	(0.018)
Observations	62789	62789	62789	62789
Log likelihood	-3.69e+04	-3.62e+04	-3.55e+04	-3.48e+04
AIC	73850	72854	71043	69992
BIC	74058	74754	71378	72019

Standard errors in parentheses
FE coefficients (i.e region or country dummies) not shown.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

For a more substantial interpretation of the EQI effect we turn to Figure 1 (based on model 3). The figure plots the probability of a populist vote across the values of the EQI index. Moving across the whole range of EQI values the probability of populist voting changes from 48% (in regions with the lowest QoG) to 22% (in regions with the highest QoG) as an average across countries. Overall, one standard deviation change in local evaluations of the public administration drops support for populist parties by 2.7%.

Figure 1



We turn now to the abstention models. The model specification follows a similar approach like in the case of populism voting. That is models 1 and 2 are bivariate regressions with country and region fixed effects respectively. Models 3 and 4 add all the control variables with country fixed effects and clustered standard errors by region (model 3) and region fixed effects with robust standard errors (model 4). The dependent variable is coded 1 for abstainers so positive signs in the coefficients suggest a higher probability of abstention. Across the bivariate specifications, the QoG index shows a small negative association with the dependent variable and is only significant when using region fixed effects. Once the full set of covariates is included, the sign reverses and the QoG coefficient becomes positive and highly significant in both the country- and region-FE models. This indicates that the negative association in the bivariate models was confounded by compositional differences captured by the control variables and fixed effects. In the full models, higher QoG is associated with higher predicted probability of the abstention. Models 3 and 4 yield essentially identical QoG estimates, suggesting the result is robust to whether unobserved heterogeneity is absorbed at the country or region level.

Turning to the rest of the control variables confidence in parliament (z-standardised within country) shows one of the strongest associations in the model. A one-SD increase in confidence is linked to a sizeable decrease in the likelihood of the outcome (≈ -0.25 in log-odds), and this effect is consistent across specifications. Income and place size also display a statistically significant effect. Compared with the low-income baseline, middle- and high-income respondents have progressively lower likelihoods of abstention, with the high-income effect

notably larger. Likewise, moving from small towns to larger urban contexts the likelihood of abstention drops and this decrease is more notable in larger cities. These estimates remain stable across the two full model specifications. Unemployed respondents also show a higher likelihood for abstention, and the effect is statistically robust across fixed-effects choices. Ideology (higher values = more to the right) presents a statistically significant and modest association with the outcome suggesting that respondents who place themselves of the right side of the political spectrum are more likely to turnout to vote. The Gender coefficient suggests women are less likely to engage in conventional participation such as voting and so are younger respondents.

Religious attendance, economic evaluations and education do not display systematic differences relative to their baseline. In sum, beyond the headline EQI result, the most consistent explanatory variables are: Gender, with lower propensity among women; a small negative age effect; marked declines for respondents with higher income and those leaving in larger cities; a strong negative association with confidence in parliament; a positive association with unemployment; and a modest negative association with right-leaning ideology.

Table 3. Abstention and the Quality of Public Administration

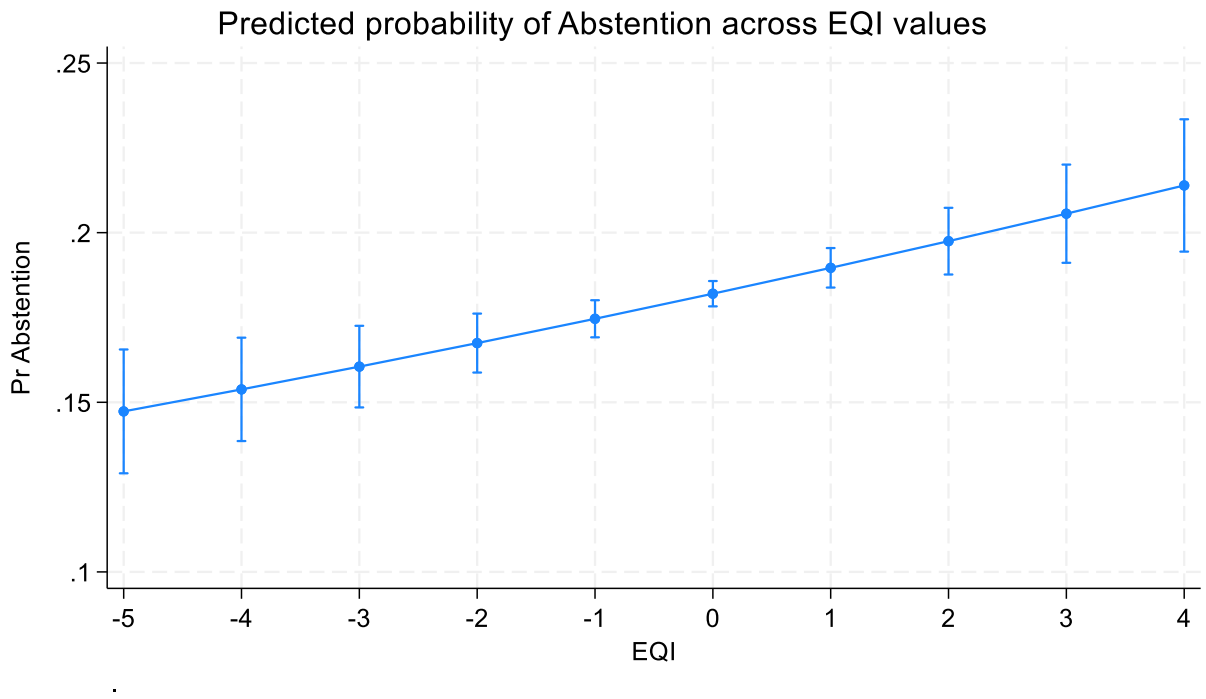
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	FE: Country (biv)	FE: Region (biv)	FE: Country + CSEs	FE: Region
EQI	-0.025	-0.023*	0.053***	0.054***
	(0.014)	(0.009)	(0.015)	(0.010)
Female			0.327***	0.328***
			(0.023)	(0.019)
Age			-0.004***	-0.005***
			(0.001)	(0.001)
Education (Base:Primary)				
Graduate Secondary			0.028	0.028
			(0.035)	(0.027)
University/Postgrad			-0.011	-0.012
			(0.038)	(0.028)
Income (Base:Low)				
Middle			-0.093***	-0.092***
			(0.027)	(0.023)
High			-0.165***	-0.169***
			(0.034)	(0.025)
Residence (Base: up to 10,000)				
10,000-100,000			-0.110***	-0.102***
			(0.027)	(0.023)

100,000-1 million			-0.227***	-0.228***
			(0.036)	(0.029)
More that 1 million			-0.225***	-0.205***
			(0.062)	(0.052)
Economy (Base:Very Good)				
Somewhat Good			-0.003	0.005
			(0.048)	(0.044)
Somewhat Bad			0.054	0.044
			(0.052)	(0.046)
Very Bad			-0.022	-0.034
			(0.058)	(0.051)
Confidence in Parliament			-0.251***	-0.250***
			(0.014)	(0.010)
Religion (Base:Hardly Ever)				
At least once a week			-0.001	0.002
			(0.050)	(0.042)
At least once a month			-0.002	-0.005
			(0.045)	(0.036)
Only on special holy days			-0.014	-0.008
			(0.043)	(0.034)
Unemployed			0.184***	0.177***
			(0.047)	(0.046)
Ideology (Left-Right)			-0.044	-0.045**
			(0.023)	(0.017)
Observations	81994	81994	81994	81994
Log likelihood	-3.80e+04	-3.77e+04	-3.73e+04	-3.71e+04
AIC	76014	75849	74700	74589
BIC	76228	77814	75082	76722

Standard errors in parentheses
FE coefficients (i.e region or country dummies) not shown.
Stars: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001.
$^{*}\ p < 0.05$, $^{**}\ p < 0.01$, $^{***}\ p < 0.001$

As in the models for populist voting we plot the probability of abstention across values of the EQI index in order to get a more intuitive interpretation of the effect in figure 2 (the figure is based on model 3). Moving across the whole range of EQI values the probability of abstention changes from around 15% (in regions with the lowest QoG) to 21% (in regions with the highest QoG). Overall, one standard deviation reduction in local evaluations of the public administration drops the probability of abstention by about 1%.

Figure 2.



5. CONCLUSION

The results reveal two consistent patterns. First, higher perceived quality of government (EQI) is associated with lower propensity to support populist parties. This relationship is present in bivariate models and remains strong and significant once individual-level controls and fixed effects are included. Where citizens view core public services as more competent, fair, and free from corruption, they are less attracted to populist parties. Simulated probabilities indicate a decline in the likelihood of a populist vote across the range of the EQI index, with about a 2–3 percentage-point reduction for a one-standard-deviation of improvement. This results are consistent with the latest research on similar issues (Agerberg, 2017).

Second, in the abstention models we observe the opposite: higher EQI is associated with higher abstention, albeit with a small magnitude. Moving from lowest to highest EQI performers we observe an increase of roughly 6 percentage points in the probability of abstention, and about one percentage point per standard deviation. On the face of it this finding might be puzzling and goes again previous research, albeit at the aggregate regional level as opposed to the individual level as in our case (Sundström and Stockemer, 2015). However, there are theoretical reasons that justify it and it is consistent with related findings in previous research which demonstrate empirically that, for example, satisfaction with democracy is negatively related to turnout rates (Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2016). First, dissatisfaction with bureaucratic

quality expresses an implicit demand for accountability and improvement, and this is precisely where populist supply meets demand. As such, dissatisfied voters might be mobilized to express this dissatisfaction in the polls by 'punishing' established parties and rewarding anti systemic options when available. And those options have much increased in the EU in recent years (Rooduijn et al., 2023). Second, during 'good times', when routine state performance is satisfactory, voters may get complacent and the perceived urgency to participate may decline.

Taken together, the evidence imply a trade-off. Improving the perceived quality, impartiality, and integrity of public administration appears to dampen support for populist parties, but it may also be associated with a small increase in abstention. However, to the degree that this small reduction also signals decreasing demand for populist or anti-establishment options this is not necessarily a finding that is concerning from a democratic legitimacy perspective.

These findings underscore the value of a subnational perspective focused at the individual level. However, some limitations remain. First, both dependent variables rely on an imperfect measurement of voting intentions. The danger here is that we might be simultaneously overestimating turnout and underestimating populist support. This is an endemic problem in this electoral survey research. Second, by its nature this is an observational design that cannot easily settle questions about direction of causality and confounding variables. We can probe further some of these questions using an experimental design which is among the goals and future deliverables of the radar project. Nonetheless, the pattern documented here is robust across alternative fixed-effects specifications and a rich set of controls. Overall, our results underscore the importance of public administration reform and suggests that investments in competent, impartial, and clean administration are not just desirable from a service delivery perspective, but they might also carry tangible electoral consequences that are directly related to democratic legitimacy.

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7. APPENDIX I

TABLE A1. Summary statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Populist vote	95637	.329	0.470	0	1
Turnout	135242	.23	0.421	0	1
EQI	123054	0	1.000	-4.58	3.024
Gender	135242	1.519	0.500	1	2
Age	133673	49.298	16.834	18	99
Education	135242	2.176	0.735	1	3
Income	96731	1.951	0.784	1	3
Residence	129058	2.081	0.903	1	4
EConomy	131826	2.561	0.820	1	4
Unemployed	135242	.043	0.202	0	1
Religion	131832	3.258	0.996	1	4
Ideology	134819	.001	0.579	-1.363	1.955
Confidence in Parliament	133521	0	1.000	-2.34	2.726

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