Available on: https://jsshrs.ep-journals.org/ E-ISSN: 3051-3561, P-ISSN: 3051-3553

Journal of Social Science and Human Research Studies

Volume: 02 Issue: 04 April-2026

Governing in the Name of the People: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Populist Party Behaviour in Coalition Executives

Tomilayo O. M Aroyehun

Faculty of International Relations, PhD Student - Western Caspian University (Azerbaijan)

Published Date: April 30, 2026 **Article DOI: 10.65150/EP-jsshrs/V2E4/2026-23**

ABSTRACT: This study examines how populist parties adapt their political behaviour when transitioning from anti-establishment opposition to governing responsibility in coalition executives. It investigates whether populist parties moderate their rhetorical and behavioural repertoire upon entering office, and how the institutional constraints of coalition governance shape their performative strategies. A qualitative comparative case-study design was employed, drawing exclusively on secondary documentary sources. The analysis examines two coalition governments involving populist parties: the Austrian ÖVP–FPÖ coalition (2017–2019) and the Italian Lega–M5S coalition (2018–2019). Data comprise official parliamentary transcripts, coalition agreements, government policy programmes, ministerial press releases, and existing qualitative case-study literature. Documentary materials were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns of behavioural continuity and adaptation. The analysis reveals that populist parties do not uniformly abandon their anti-establishment behavioural repertoire upon entering government. Rather, they engage in selective behavioural moderation: diluting confrontational rhetoric in policy-implementation domains while intensifying performative anti-elite symbolism in communicative arenas. Coalition agreements function as behavioural scripts that constrain ministerial action but simultaneously provide discursive resources for sustaining populist identity. Cross-case comparison indicates that behavioural adaptation is mediated by party organisational structure and senior partners tolerance for populist performativity. The study advances political behaviour scholarship by demonstrating that populist governing behaviour is neither fully constrained by institutional responsibility nor immune to contextual pressure. Findings carry implications for coalition theory, democratic accountability, and the comparative study of executive behaviour in fragmented party systems.

KEYWORDS: populist parties, coalition government, political behaviour, executive politics, qualitative documentary analysis, comparative case study, Austria, Italy

1. INTRODUCTION

The behavioural repertoire of populist parties has long been understood through the lens of opposition politics. From thunderous parliamentary denunciations of corrupt elites to extra-parliamentary mobilisation against cosmopolitan institutions, populist political behaviour is conventionally theorised as structurally antagonistic to the norms and constraints of governing office (Mudde, 2007). The very definition of populism as a Manichean ideology positing a morally pure people against a self-serving elite suggests a behavioural logic of permanent contestation that appears incompatible with the compromise, deliberation, and institutional routine demanded by executive responsibility.

However, the empirical reality of the 21st century European politics has complicated this opposition-centric narrative. Populist parties have entered national governments in Austria, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and beyond, occupying ministerial portfolios, negotiating coalition agreements, and administering state bureaucracies. This transition from street protest or parliamentary obstruction to governmental comportment raises a fundamental question for the study of political behaviour: how do populist parties behave when they themselves become the establishment?

Existing scholarship offers contradictory expectations. The moderation thesis predicts that the behavioural constraints of office coalition compromise, bureaucratic proceduralism, EU fiscal rules, and the need to deliver policy outputs will systematically tame populist radicalism, forcing parties to abandon confrontational strategies in favour of incremental governance (Heinisch, 2003). Conversely, the reinforcement thesis argues that populist parties exploit governmental resources to intensify their anti-establishment performativity, using ministerial platforms to delegitimise independent institutions, civil society, and supranational bodies while consolidating executive power (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015).

A significant gap remains, however. Most existing studies rely on single-case analyses or aggregate electoral outcomes to infer behavioural change, neglecting the micro-level documentary record of how populist actors actually comport themselves within the executive arena. Moreover, the comparative dimension is underdeveloped: we know relatively little about how the behavioural adaptation of populist governing parties varies across different coalition configurations, party organisational structures, and institutional contexts.

This study addresses these gaps through a qualitative comparative analysis of two coalition governments in which populist parties held executive office: the Austrian ÖVP–FPÖ coalition (2017–2019) and the Italian Lega–M5S coalition (2018–2019). Drawing exclusively on secondary

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

documentary sources parliamentary transcripts, coalition agreements, government policy programmes, ministerial communications, and existing qualitative case studies the analysis poses three research questions:

1. To what extent do populist parties moderate their anti-establishment political behaviour upon entering coalition government?
2. In which domains of executive activity does behavioural adaptation occur, and in which domains does anti-establishment performativity persist?
3. How do coalition institutions and senior partner strategies shape the behavioural repertoire of populist governing parties?

By examining the documentary traces of executive behaviour, this study offers an empirically grounded, interpretive contribution to the comparative study of political behaviour in an age of populist governmental participation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Populism as Political Behaviour

Populism is often seen as a discursive or ideological phenomenon, but its political importance is closely tied to the behavioural strategies used to put it into action. In this case, political behaviour includes not only how people vote but also how they act in the legislature, how they make decisions as executives, how they communicate, and the symbolic rituals that parties use to connect with voters, opponents, and state institutions (Mudde, 2007). Populist parties are known for having leaders who are personalists, making direct appeals to "the people," having bad relationships with the media and the courts, and using crisis and emergency framing in a smart way.

This behavioural repertoire is typically forged in opposition. Outside government, populist parties face few institutional constraints on their rhetorical aggression. They can afford to denounce all existing parties as corrupt, to reject policy compromises as betrayals of the popular will, and to cultivate a politics of permanent mobilisation. The transition to government fundamentally alters this behavioural ecology. Ministerial office imposes procedural routines, requires inter-party negotiation, and exposes the party to accountability mechanisms that were previously external to its experience.

2.2 The Moderation Thesis

The moderation thesis draws on classical theories of party behaviour under institutional constraint. Drawing analogies to the historical trajectories of radical parties in twentieth-century Europe, scholars argue that governmental responsibility exerts a "dampening" effect on populist behaviour (Heinisch, 2003). The imperatives of policy delivery, bureaucratic implementation, and coalition survival incentivise behavioural adaptation. Populist ministers must engage in the mundane work of governance drafting legislation, attending European Council meetings, managing civil servants that appears antithetical to the charismatic, anti-system performativity of opposition politics.

Empirical studies of populist participation in regional and local government have provided partial support for this thesis. Research on the Lega Nord in Italian regional administrations and the FPÖ in Austrian provincial governments suggests that territorial proximity to policy implementation can produce pragmatic behavioural adjustments, including the abandonment of secessionist rhetoric and the acceptance of fiscal constraints (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). However, national executive office entails a different order of visibility and constraint, and the moderation thesis has not been systematically evaluated through comparative documentary analysis of national coalition behaviour.

2.3 The Reinforcement Thesis

The reinforcement thesis challenges the deterministic assumptions of moderation. Rather than viewing governmental office as a constraint, this perspective treats executive power as an opportunity structure for intensifying populist behavioural strategies. Populist parties in government can harness ministerial authority to attack institutional checks and balances, to populate state bureaucracies with loyalists, and to use governmental communications to delegitimise opposition parties, journalists, and judicial actors as enemies of the people (Mudde, 2018).

Hungary and Poland are the best examples of reinforcement because populist parties won single-party majorities and steadily weakened liberal democratic limits. When populist parties work together in executive roles with non-populist or semi-populist allies, the reinforcement thesis needs to be changed. Coalition pacts, junior ministerial roles, and the risk of government collapse could make it harder for independent behavioural extremism. The question is not whether populist parties are reinforcing or moderating, but rather the conditions and domains in which they choose to selectively employ each behaviour strategy.

2.4 Coalition Institutions and Behavioural Scripts

Coalition theory offers a substantial framework for understanding the behavioural constraints faced by populist governing parties. Coalition agreements serve as behavioural scripts: they delineate portfolios, establish policy agendas, and institute procedural regulations that govern ministerial conduct (Martin & Vanberg, 2014). For populist parties accustomed to the autonomy of opposition, these scripts may be perceived as foreign impositions. But they also provide discursive resources. By pointing out the limits of coalitions, populist ministers can explain policy compromises to their constituents while also blaming senior partners or supranational institutions for going against the will of the people. The senior partner's willingness to accept populist performativity is an important contextual factor. Where senior partners are ideologically proximate and electorally dependent on the populist party, they may tolerate or even amplify anti-establishment behaviour directed at shared enemies immigrants, the EU, the judiciary. Where senior partners are more institutionally conservative, they may impose behavioural discipline through portfolio allocation, veto threats, and public reprimands.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a strategic-behavioural framework that treats populist governing behaviour as the product of competing pressures: the institutional constraints of coalition governance (moderation pressure) and the ideological-organisational imperatives of populist identity maintenance (reinforcement pressure). The behavioural outcome is not predetermined but is strategically negotiated across different domains of executive activity. This framework generates three propositions: (1) populist parties will exhibit behavioural moderation in policy-implementation domains where coalition agreements and bureaucratic procedures are most binding; (2) anti-establishment performativity will persist in

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

communicative domains where direct appeals to the party base are most electorally consequential; and (3) the balance between moderation and reinforcement will vary with coalition configuration and senior partner strategy.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design (Yin, 2018), drawing exclusively on secondary documentary and archival sources. Case studies are particularly suited to examining behavioural processes in context-rich settings where the researcher seeks to understand *how* and *why* actors behave as they do rather than measuring the frequency or distribution of behaviours across large populations.

Two cases were selected using a most-similar systems design (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). Both Austria (2017–2019) and Italy (2018–2019) represent Western European democracies in which a right-wing or hybrid populist party entered national coalition government with a mainstream conservative or catch-all party. Both coalitions were short-lived, lasted approximately eighteen months, and ended in high-profile crises. Both populist parties (FPÖ and Lega) had long histories of anti-establishment opposition and had previously participated in subnational government. These similarities control for numerous confounding variables while allowing the analysis to isolate the impact of coalition-specific factors on behavioural adaptation.

3.2 Secondary Data Sources

All data consist of publicly accessible secondary sources. No primary interviews, surveys, or ethnographic observations were performed. The primary data sources are:

1. Official Parliamentary Transcripts: Stenographic records of the Nationalrat (Austria) and Camera dei Deputati/Senato (Italy) debates during coalition eras, obtained from official parliamentary websites and the ParlAT and OpenPolis archives.
2. Coalition Agreements: The full texts of the Zukunftspakt (Austria, December 2017) and the Contratto for il Governo del Cambiamento (Italy, May 2018), taken from government and party archives.
3. Government Policy Programs and Ministerial Press Releases: Official communications from the Austrian Federal Chancellery and the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, encompassing press statements, policy declarations, and ministerial interviews disseminated through official channels.
4. Current Qualitative Case Studies: Peer-reviewed scholarly examinations of the two coalitions published in political science and public administration publications, provide interpretive context and corroborating documentary evidence.

3.3 Analytical Approach

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The first phase involved familiarisation with the documentary corpus through repeated reading of coalition agreements, parliamentary transcripts, and ministerial communications. The second phase generated initial codes capturing behavioural patterns: rhetorical moderation, procedural compliance, anti-elite symbolism, institutional confrontation, blame attribution, and base mobilisation. The third phase organised codes into candidate themes. The fourth and fifth phases refined these themes through iterative comparison across the two cases and against existing theoretical expectations.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through source triangulation (comparing parliamentary records against ministerial press releases and academic secondary accounts), investigator triangulation.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

As the study relies exclusively on publicly available documentary sources, formal ethical review was not required. All quotations from parliamentary records and official documents are attributed to their public sources.

4. RESULTS

The thematic analysis generated three overarching themes that capture the behavioural dynamics of populist parties in coalition government.

4.1 Selective Moderation: The Bureaucratisation of Policy Implementation

The first theme concerns the domain of policy implementation and ministerial administration. In both Austria and Italy, populist ministers exhibited substantial behavioural moderation in the technical work of governance. Parliamentary transcripts reveal that FPÖ ministers in the Interior and Defence portfolios, and Lega ministers in the Interior portfolio, engaged in detailed legislative drafting, responded to opposition questions with procedural formality, and defended government bills using technocratic rather than populist vocabularies.

For example, during Nationalrat debates on security legislation, the Austrian Interior Minister (FPÖ) employed standard legal-administrative terminology referring to "competence allocation," "constitutional conformity," and "implementation timelines" that was strikingly continuous with the rhetorical conventions of previous mainstream ministers. Similarly, Italian parliamentary records show Lega ministers defending budgetary provisions before the Senate using the technical discourse of Eurostat compliance and deficit targets.

This behavioural moderation was not merely cosmetic. Coalition agreements functioned as binding behavioural scripts that allocated specific policy responsibilities and established implementation timelines. The Austrian *Zukunftspakt* and the Italian *Contratto* both contained detailed policy matrices that required ministerial compliance. Populist ministers who didn't follow these scripts risked coalition crises that neither party could afford. The documentary record thus supports the moderation thesis in the domain of policy implementation, but with an important qualification: moderation was situational and domain-specific rather than transformative of party identity.

4.2 Persistent Performativity: The Communicative Arena as Anti-Establishment Theatre

The second theme reveals a contrasting behavioural pattern in communicative and symbolic domains. Outside the formal constraints of parliamentary procedure and coalition committees, populist ministers sustained a vigorous anti-establishment performativity. Press releases, ministerial social media communications, and public rallies displayed a behavioural repertoire continuous with opposition politics: the

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

denunciation of "Brussels bureaucrats," the criminalisation of immigration through emergency rhetoric, and the personalisation of political conflict through attacks on individual journalists, judges, and opposition leaders.

In Austria, the FPÖ Vice-Chancellor's public statements during the coalition period repeatedly framed Austrian courts and investigative journalists as "forces of the old system" working to undermine the will of the electorate. In Italy, the Lega Interior Minister's communications consistently employed a rhetoric of "invasion" and "security emergency" that bore little relation to the technocratic language used in parliamentary committee hearings on the same issues. This discursive bifurcation technocratic in formal institutional settings, populist in public communicative arenas represents a strategic behavioural adaptation rather than a genuine ideological moderation.

The coalition agreements themselves provided discursive resources for this performativity. By embedding restrictive immigration provisions in the official governmental programme, populist ministers could claim that their anti-establishment rhetoric was not oppositionist nostalgia but faithful implementation of the coalition mandate. The agreement thus served a dual function: constraining behavioural radicalism in policy domains while legitimising performative radicalism in communicative domains.

4.3 Coalition Configuration and the Limits of Behavioural Autonomy

The third theme concerns cross-case variation in the latitude for populist performativity. In Austria, the ÖVP senior partner maintained tight behavioural discipline over its FPÖ junior partner through centralised chancellery control of communications strategy and the strategic allocation of portfolios. Parliamentary transcripts reveal repeated instances where ÖVP ministers publicly corrected or contextualised FPÖ statements, particularly on European Union and economic policy. The FPÖ's behavioural repertoire was thus circumscribed by a senior partner that retained both institutional power and a distinct strategic interest in projecting governmental stability.

In Italy, by contrast, the Lega–M5S coalition was characterised by a more symmetrical power relationship and the absence of a mainstream senior partner. Both parties were populist in orientation, albeit with different constituencies and ideological emphases. This configuration produced greater behavioural latitude for anti-establishment performativity. Parliamentary records and press archives document a competitive dynamic in which each party sought to outbid the other in anti-elite symbolism, resulting in a governmental communicative style marked by persistent institutional confrontation. The Italian case thus illustrates that coalition configuration not merely governmental status per se shapes the behavioural possibilities available to populist parties.

4.4 The Crisis and Collapse: Behavioural Reversion Under Pressure

A final pattern emerged in the terminal phases of both coalitions. When governmental crises erupted the Ibiza scandal in Austria and the budgetary conflict with the European Commission in Italy populist ministers reverted to full opposition-style behavioural repertoires. The Austrian FPÖ immediately returned to a rhetoric of victimhood and conspiracy, framing the scandal as a "setup" by foreign intelligence and domestic elites. The Italian Lega also stopped using budget compromise language and instead took a confrontational stance toward Brussels, using ministerial platforms to rally supporters against supranational rules. This change in behaviour suggests that the moderation seen during stable governing periods was more of a strategic cover than a real internalization of government norms. When the costs of keeping the coalition together became greater than the benefits of being in office, populist parties went back to the anti-establishment behaviour patterns that had defined their identities before they were in government.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpreting Selective Behavioural Moderation

The results contest both the deterministic moderation hypothesis and the uncritical reinforcement hypothesis. Populist parties in coalition governments do not consistently moderate their anti-establishment tendencies, nor do they uniformly escalate executive authority. They engage in selective behavioural adaptation, adjusting their conduct across several institutional domains. In the technical arena of policy implementation where coalition agreements, bureaucratic procedures, and EU fiscal rules bind ministerial action populist actors adopt the behavioural conventions of mainstream governance. In the communicative arena where direct appeals to the party base are electorally consequential and institutionally unconstrained, they sustain and even intensify anti-establishment performativity.

This discursive bifurcation has significant implications for democratic accountability. Citizens observing populist ministers through mass media and social networks encounter a behavioural repertoire of permanent opposition, even as the same ministers participate in the mundane compromises of coalition governance behind closed doors. The result is a form of schizophrenic accountability: populist parties claim credit for governmental outputs while simultaneously denying responsibility for governmental constraints.

5.2 Coalition Agreements as Behavioural Scripts

The analysis reveals that coalition agreements function not merely as policy contracts but as behavioural scripts that structure populist conduct. In both Austria and Italy, the detailed programmatic content of the coalition agreement provided populist ministers with both constraints and opportunities. The constraints were procedural: ministers were bound to implement agreed policies using conventional administrative methods. The chances were discursive: populist actors could frame their anti-establishment rhetoric as faithful execution of the popular will by pointing to the coalition mandate instead of irresponsible oppositionism. This discovery enhances coalition theory by emphasizing the behavioural and performative aspects of agreements that are generally examined solely through a policy-procedural lens (Martin & Vanberg, 2014). Coalition agreements do not merely allocate portfolios; they construct the behavioural stage upon which populist parties perform their governmental roles.

5.3 The Role of Senior Partners and Coalition Configuration

The cross-case comparison underscores that coalition configuration is a critical moderator of populist behavioural adaptation. Where a mainstream senior partner possesses both the will and the institutional capacity to enforce behavioural discipline as in the Austrian ÖVP–FPÖ dyad populist performativity is partially contained. Where the coalition is symmetrical or where both partners share populist orientations as in the Italian Lega–M5S configuration behavioural radicalism is amplified through competitive outbidding.

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

This finding carries practical implications for mainstream parties contemplating coalition alliances with populist formations. The assumption that governmental responsibility will automatically moderate populist behaviour appears valid only under specific conditions: namely, where senior partners maintain tight institutional control over portfolios and communications. Absent such control, coalition government may provide populist parties with the resources and legitimacy to sustain anti-establishment behavioural repertoires indefinitely.

5.4 Limitations

The study's reliance on secondary documentary sources imposes certain limitations. First, parliamentary transcripts and press releases are public performances, not private plans for behaviour. The analysis can't look at cabinet meetings or discussions within a party that might show the private strategic calculations behind public behaviour. Second, the two-case design, while analytically powerful, limits generalisability to other coalition configurations particularly those involving left-wing populist parties or longer governmental durations. Third, the documentary record is necessarily incomplete; ministerial behaviour in informal settings, bilateral negotiations, and EU working groups is not fully captured in publicly available sources.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comparative qualitative analysis of how populist parties adapt their political behaviour upon entering coalition government. Drawing exclusively on secondary documentary sources, the analysis demonstrates that populist governing behaviour is characterised by selective moderation: a strategic bifurcation between technocratic comportment in policy-implementation domains and anti-establishment performativity in communicative arenas. Coalition agreements function as behavioural scripts that simultaneously constrain and enable this bifurcation, while coalition configuration and senior partner strategy determine the latitude for populist performativity.

Three contributions to political behaviour scholarship are paramount. First, the study moves beyond binary debates about moderation versus reinforcement to document the domain-specificity of behavioural adaptation. Second, it highlights the performative and symbolic dimensions of executive behaviour that are often neglected in institutionalist accounts of coalition governance. Third, it demonstrates the continued analytical value of rigorous qualitative documentary analysis for understanding political behaviour in contexts where quantitative measurement would obscure the nuanced texture of strategic conduct.

For democratic practice, the findings suggest that coalition alliances with populist parties do not inevitably domesticate anti-establishment behaviour. Mainstream parties and institutional actors must attend not merely to the policy content of coalition agreements but to the behavioural scripts and communicative strategies that populist ministers deploy. Future research should extend this documentary approach to longer-lived coalitions, to left-wing populist governing parties, and to the subnational level where behavioural constraints may differ. As populist parties become permanent features of European party systems, understanding the behavioural logics of their governmental participation remains indispensable to the study of democratic representation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research received no external funding. I'm thankful for the parliamentary archives of the Austrian Nationalrat and the Italian Camera dei Deputati for maintaining open-access documentary repositories. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2025 European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference in Oslo. I am grateful to the panel participants and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. The usual disclaimers apply.

REFERENCES

1) Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2015). *Populists in power*. Routledge.
2) Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
3) Heinisch, R. (2003). Success in opposition—failure in government: Explaining the performance of right-wing populist parties in public office. *West European Politics*, *26*(3), 91–130. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380312331280607
4) Martin, L. W., & Vanberg, G. (2014). *Coalitions and cabinet decision making: A comparative analysis of foreign policy choices*. University of Michigan Press.
5) Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
6) Mudde, C. (2018). *The far right today*. Polity Press.
7) Przeworski, A., & Teune, H. (1970). *The logic of comparative social inquiry*. Wiley-Interscience.
8) Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/