

RESILIENCE AND POPULISM: HOW ICELAND NAVIGATES CLIMATE MIGRATION AND DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGES

Cătălin-Gabriel Done, PhD

Expert in Nordic Security and Cooperation

Vice-president of Experts for Security
and Global Affairs Association (ESGA)

catalin.done.15@politice.ro

Abstract

The interplay between climate migration, populism, and democratic governance is an emerging issue that requires attention as environmental crises intensify. Iceland, known for its commitment to socio-sustainability, is now at the forefront of addressing climate-induced migration, a challenge that has the potential to reshape both its social fabric and political landscape. This paper explores Iceland's approach to managing climate migration while maintaining democratic integrity in the face of rising populist narratives, which often capitalise on fear and uncertainty surrounding migration.

Iceland's resilience-building efforts, which integrate sustainable development, community-driven initiatives, and inclusive governance, serve as a model for responding to climate change-induced pressures. However, the rising number of climate migrants and the associated socio-economic challenges present fertile ground for populist movements to gain traction. By examining Iceland's policies and initiatives, this paper assesses how the country mitigates the risks of populism while fostering a cohesive and inclusive society.

A key focus of this analysis is how Iceland's democratic institutions and traditions of participatory governance act as counterweights to the divisive rhetoric often

employed by populist movements. Through a combination of traditional community values and innovative policy responses, Iceland has managed to address climate migration in ways that reduce social tensions and promote social cohesion, even in the face of potential political polarisation. Furthermore, the paper delves into the potential threats that populism poses to human security and democracy in Iceland, particularly concerning the management of external climate migrants.

In examining Iceland's experience, the paper also considers the lessons other nations can draw from its approach, particularly in Europe and the Arctic. Iceland's successes and challenges offer valuable insights for countries dealing with similar pressures of environmental stress, migration, and rising populist sentiment.

Keywords: climate migration, populism, human security, democratic resilience, Iceland, sustainability

Introduction

Climate change represents one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century for the human species (Satgar 2018), having a direct impact on terrestrial, human, and natural ecosystems (Kumar and Khanduri 2024; Zarandi et al. 2024; Ren et al. 2024), as well as on our daily behaviour (Wallenberg et al. 2023; Cao 2025; Nakajima et al. 2021). Phenomena such as rising sea levels, intensifying droughts, and the increasing frequency of natural disasters force entire communities to abandon their homes, transforming climate migration from a future issue into a present reality that demands immediate solutions (Husain-Naviatti 2025).

Climate migration, by exacerbating social and economic insecurities, provides fertile ground for the rise of populist rhetoric. This process has global implications, not only in the most affected regions but also in areas becoming destinations for migrants. The competition for resources, integration/reintegration struggles, and concerns about cultural identity contribute to heightened social tensions – not only in host communities but also among migrant groups. However, Iceland's unique socio-political context allows for a different approach, offering insights into

how democratic institutions can mitigate these effects. In this context, populism insinuates itself as a political force that exploits these fears to gain electoral capital (Aasen and Sælen 2022; Ćetković and Hagemann 2020). Populism exacerbates social tensions by promoting a rhetoric that blames migrants for economic and social difficulties (Bugarcic 2008; Serdar, Öztürk, and Nygren 2023; Taggart and Pirro 2021; Țăranu 2016). This narrative creates a polarised environment in which host communities are encouraged to see migrants as a threat rather than an opportunity for collaboration and diversity. Such discourse can influence social behaviours, generating exclusionary attitudes, prejudices, and even acts of hostility against migrants (Nowicka and Wojnicka, 2023; Wehrle et al., 2024).

In many cases, climate migration and populist responses lead to an intensification of social violence. In communities where resources are already limited, the arrival of migrants may be perceived as a direct threat, triggering local conflicts (including cultural ones). These conflicts are often amplified by populist leaders, who exploit the population's frustration to legitimise repressive policies and mobilise electoral support, as well as by the anxiety and climate stress in the host society. The result is a spiral of social violence that erodes cohesion and trust between ethnic and social groups (Albarosa and Elsner 2023). Another aspect of this complex relationship is the effect of climate migration on collective psychology. Economic uncertainty and fear of change generate group behaviours favour self-isolation and self-exclusion. These behaviours are fuelled by populist narratives, which simplify complex issues and provide scapegoats for social difficulties. In this way, populism not only amplifies tensions but also creates a framework that normalises exclusion and even violence against those perceived as „foreign”.

Iceland provides a compelling case study due to its relatively low levels of populism compared to other European states, despite facing similar global challenges. By investigating how Iceland's political institutions and social policies respond to climate migration, this article contributes to broader discussions on mitigating populist influences in migration debates (with a focus on climatic migration).

Moreover, Iceland represents a relevant case study in analysing the relationship between climate crises, migration, and populism due to its unique characteristics and innovative approach. On one hand, its geographical position and vulnerability to

the effects of climate change place it at the heart of debates about climate migration. On the other hand, its democratic traditions and commitment to sustainability provide an ideal framework for studying how a small and well-organised society can address the complex challenges of migration and social polarisation.

Firstly, Iceland stands out for its sustainability and natural resource management commitment. This aspect makes the country an example of socio-ecological resilience. Its policies on renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, and community involvement in decision-making demonstrate that an integrated approach can help manage climate pressures. These practices are relevant to other nations seeking similar solutions in the face of climate crises and migration.

Secondly, Iceland has a strong democratic tradition and a participatory governance system that facilitates citizen involvement in decision-making processes. This characteristic makes it a social laboratory for studying how democratic institutions can counter the rise of populism and reduce social tensions. By involving citizens in the creation of policies for migrant integration and resource management, Iceland has managed to maintain a high level of social cohesion. Furthermore, the small population size of Iceland and the closely-knit nature of its communities allow for a detailed understanding of social interactions in the face of external pressures. Studying Iceland's experiences offers valuable insights into how climate migration and populism can be managed through proactive policies and civic engagement. The lessons learned from this context can be adapted and applied to other countries, especially those facing similar issues, such as the Nordic states or Arctic countries. Thus, Iceland is an example of success and a source of inspiration for the international community.

Despite its strong democratic traditions and commitment to sustainability, Iceland is not immune to the socio-political tensions associated with climate migration. While the country has so far maintained a relatively stable and inclusive political environment, the growing global discourse on migration—particularly in the context of climate change—has the potential to influence public attitudes and political narratives. As migration-related debates intensify across Europe, it is crucial to examine whether Iceland's institutions and political actors are resilient enough to prevent the rise of exclusionary populist rhetoric. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how climate migration is framed within

Icelandic political discourse and whether populist narratives have found traction in public and electoral debates.

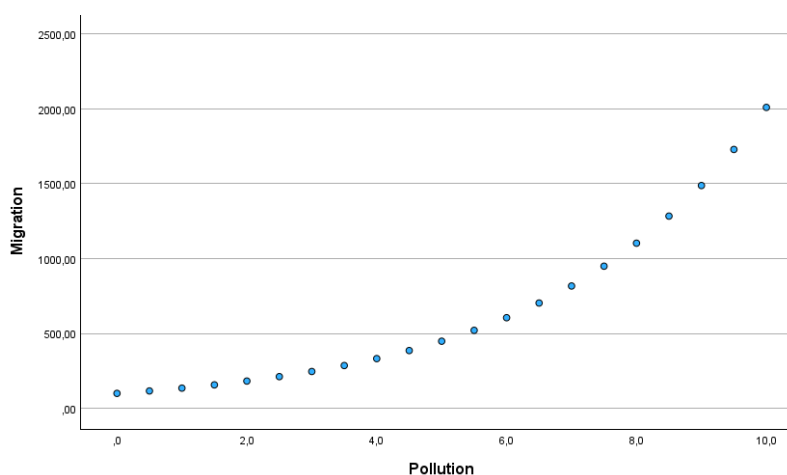
At the same time, Iceland provides a valuable counterpoint to many European countries where populist movements have gained significant political influence. By analysing Iceland's political and social responses to climate migration, this study aims to identify factors that may contribute to the containment of populist rhetoric and the promotion of inclusive policy frameworks. Understanding how Iceland navigates these challenges can offer insights into broader strategies for mitigating the socio-political tensions that arise in migration contexts. In doing so, the research contributes to the wider discussion on the interplay between climate migration, populism, and democratic resilience in contemporary Europe.

Climate Migration, Populist Rhetoric, and Democratic Integrity: A Critical Review of Current Trends

Climate migration has become an extremely important topic in the current academic debates precisely because it represents a branch of migration in which individuals and communities are forced to leave their territories of origin due to the devastating effects of climate change (Ari and Gökpınar 2020, p. 42). The effects of climate change, largely driven by human activities, significantly accelerate this type of migration. If effective measures are not implemented to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to new climate conditions, an exponential increase in the number of climate migrants on a global scale is anticipated. Mihaela Răileanu (2013, p. 297) noted that „within the environmental issues, a separate chapter is represented by climate change, regardless of whether the phenomenon is driven by natural factors or induced by human activity.“ However, in recent years, researchers have observed that despite the perception that environment-related migration is rather a subphenomenon of economic migration, with little attention given to the ecological context, the role of climate change in determining migration has grown. This makes ecological crises and persecution a distinct category requiring adapted management policies.

In this direction, research has increasingly focused on identifying the complex relationship between climate change and global migration (Lilleør and Van Den Broeck 2011; Piguet, Pecoud, and De Guchteneire 2011). Experts in migration and climate change argue that as climate phenomena become more frequent and severe, it is inevitable that migration will increase in direct proportion to them (Han, Kumar, and Kumar 2024). They also emphasise that environment-related migration is not limited to migration from affected regions but has broader implications for destination countries, which must adapt their integration and migration management policies (Hauer, Jacobs, and Kulp 2024). However, this becomes increasingly complicated and difficult to achieve in a context where the democratic integrity of states is threatened by the rise of populist radicalisation in political parties and society as a whole

Fig. 1 The Correlation Between Pollution Levels and Climate Migration: Hypothetical Model of the Impact of Climate Change on Global Migration ¹



¹ In the absence of a unique, comprehensive, and updated dataset that specifically describes the relationship between pollution levels and the number of climate migrants, we have constructed a hypothetical model inspired by trends reported by sources such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF).

To visualise the relationship between rising pollution and the intensification of climate migration, we used an exponential function of the form $\text{Migration} = 100 \times \exp(0.3 \times \text{Pollution})$. This function reflects the hypothesis that the number of climate migrants increases exponentially as environmental conditions worsen, a trend also highlighted in various IPCC scenarios. For example, the IPCC AR6 report suggests that in high-emission scenarios, the number of climate migrants will increase significantly by 2050.

With the exponential rise in climate migration driven by climate hazards, an emerging theme in global political discourse is the populist reaction to the migratory phenomenon. The increasing number of climate migrants, coming from regions most affected by climate change, has become fertile ground for populist movements. These movements, particularly emerging and developing in developed states, tend to exploit local fears and uncertainties regarding the capacity to integrate an ever-growing number of migrants. As such, populism manifests itself through the rejection of these migrants, based on the idea that massive migration, regardless of its causes, threatens national identity, social security, and the economic integrity of host states. In this context, anti-globalist populism views climate migration as a danger that must be controlled (Pellegrini 2023; Zulianello 2020), with populist authorities calling for drastic measures to limit the access of climate migrants.

At the same time, the phenomenon of environment-related migration has given rise to another type of populism: ecological populism. A marginal movement, almost unknown at first, it began to assert itself as its demands were integrated into the discussions of the Alternative COP 26 and COP 27 summits (Escobar Fernández and Hart 2023). This type of populism is fueled by the narrative that the natural environment must be protected against uncontrolled economic and social development, with climate migration perceived as an additional threat (Stone 2022; Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019). Ecological populism often presents itself as a reaction against globalisation and its environmental impact, and by rejecting migrants, it seeks to protect limited natural resources. Thus, instead of seeking collective solutions to the challenges posed by climate change, ecological populism amplifies social divisions and promotes policies that focus on protecting the community against a perceived external enemy, in this case, climate migration (Nordensvard and Ketola 2022).

Ecological populism and classic populism tend to merge through a common discourse based on protectionism, nationalism, and opposition to global elites. In essence, both classic populism and ecological populism are rooted in the idea that there is a conflict between the authentic people and external forces that threaten their stability and identity (Bossetta 2017; Paczeński 2024; Gianfreda 2018; Scurati 2023). In the case of climate migration, these external forces

are represented by migrants, who are perceived as a burden on the economic and social resources of the host state. Populist leaders, whether conservative or ecological nationalists, use this narrative to mobilise local support, arguing that liberal governments and international institutions prioritise migrants over national citizens. This blending of classic populism with ecological populism leads to an increase in anti-immigration policies, justified both by economic arguments and by the rhetoric of environmental protection.

A common element in populist discourse regarding climate migrants is the construction of an image of them as factors of economic and cultural destabilisation. Classic populists argue that migrants, regardless of their reasons, compete with locals for jobs, housing, and social resources, which fuels fears about a decline in living standards (Newth 2024), thus promoting nativism and nationalism. In turn, ecological populism asserts that a large number of climate migrants contribute to urban overcrowding, deforestation, or the overexploitation of natural resources, thereby exacerbating environmental problems. In this case Both types of populism use these arguments to justify restrictive policies, such as closing borders or limiting migrants' rights, under the pretext of protecting citizens and national ecosystems.

Another common trait between classic and ecological populism is the tendency to use the climate migration crisis to delegitimise international institutions and liberal governments. International organisations, such as the UN or the EU, are often accused by populists of promoting migration at the expense of national interests. At the same time, global climate change policies are portrayed either as insufficient or as part of a conspiracy in which elites are attempting to force nation-states to accept climate migrants. Thus, both classic and ecological populism capitalise on the population's frustration with traditional institutions, channelling this discontent into policies of isolation and rejection of climate migrants.

Thus, we observe that populism, by its antagonistic nature, poses a direct challenge to democratic integrity, especially when used to justify the exclusion of certain social groups and as a promoter of the preservation of native social and cultural values. Populist rhetoric transforms social, political, and climate crises into a pretext for social polarisation, a strategy that leads to a gradual erosion of

democratic norms, as it promotes restrictive and discriminatory policies, limiting fundamental rights and undermining the principles of equality and social justice (Zarkov 2017).

As populism gains ground, democratic institutions are often weakened by policies that favour social and political exclusion and marginalisation. In the name of national protection or sovereignty, populist movements impose harsh restrictions on migration and undermine the rights of refugees, justifying their actions with distorted ecological rhetoric. This phenomenon affects not only climate migrants but also citizens of democratic states, as it leads to the limitation of freedom of speech, the rise of censorship, and the concentration of political power in the hands of a narrow group. In this context, democratic integrity becomes vulnerable, and mechanisms of checks and balances are eroded under the pressure of a discourse that places national security and protection above fundamental human rights. Ultimately, the confrontation between populism and democracy prompts a reassessment of how societies manage both ecological and political crises. A functional democracy should provide inclusive and equitable solutions to climate migration, based on principles of solidarity and social justice. However, when populist rhetoric dominates the public discourse, democratic measures are replaced by reactive and discriminatory policies.

We should mention that in Iceland, climate change is recognised as a serious issue, and the majority of political parties and social movements in the country are concerned about its impact on the environment. However, as in other countries, there are various groups that, to a greater or lesser extent, may express concerns about the severity of climate change or the policies needed to address it. Right-wing political parties in Iceland have not officially adopted a position of climate change denial. However, they have been more hesitant to implement rapid or radical measures to combat the climate crisis, particularly regarding reducing carbon emissions or transitioning to renewable energy sources. Rather than denying climate change, these groups tend to focus on supporting the economy and maintaining policies more favourable to industry, which can sometimes be interpreted as downplaying the severity of the impact of climate change. At the same time, social movements supporting ecological justice and indigenous movements are more active in drawing attention to the inequalities

generated by climate change. Overall, movements in Iceland focus on protecting the environment and reducing the impact of climate change, and denial of it does not appear to be a significant issue.

Both left-wing and right-wing populists in Iceland recognise the effects of climate change, but they advocate for different paths of action (Kulin and Johansson Sevä 2024). Rightwing populist parties and their supporters frequently deny the realities of climate change and oppose climate policies. Meanwhile, public opinion research has tied ideological orientations associated with rightwing populism to climate change denial/skepticism and climate policy opposition. Yet, comprehensive studies assessing the relative importance of various rightwing populist orientations across national contexts are lacking. Using European Social Survey data (Round 8), Right-wing populists tend to prioritise economic stability and may favour gradual, industry-friendly approaches to tackling climate issues, often resisting drastic measures that could disrupt the economy. On the other hand, left-wing populists are generally more willing to embrace radical policies aimed at addressing the climate crisis, focusing on social justice and sustainability, advocating for immediate actions to mitigate climate change. Despite recognising the problem, the two sides diverge sharply in their proposed solutions, reflecting broader ideological differences in terms of economic priorities and social equity.

A direct effect of this approach is the creation of policies and codifications of International Law that fail to recognise the legal status of climate migrants, placing them in a legislative void. While democratic states promote their image as leaders in sustainability, the reality is that their asylum and immigration laws are not adapted to integrate people displaced by natural disasters and climate change (Kälin 2022). For example, in the Western world, many asylum requests from refugees fleeing climate-affected states are rejected (Tidey 2020; Schutte et al. 2021), citing the lack of a clear legal framework to include climate migrants within the scope of international protection. This failure to recognise climate migration as a humanitarian issue (Singal 2025) undermines the democratic integrity of our states, as it disregards fundamental principles of human rights and global solidarity². Moreover, the populist rhetoric that links environmental

² The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018) acknowledges the impact of climate change on migration and proposes measures for protecting cli-

protection with restrictions on immigration contributes to a climate of insecurity, xenophobia, and racism (Rensmann and Miller 2010). In places where national identity is strongly tied to a sustainable ecological model, the idea that natural resources are too fragile to support a migrant influx fuels anti-immigration sentiment. This phenomenon underscores how populism, combined with the absence of clear policies for protecting climate migrants, can jeopardise both human rights and fundamental democratic principles. The intersection of these factors creates a dangerous narrative, further marginalising vulnerable populations and eroding the values of inclusivity and solidarity in society.

Icelandic populism presents a somewhat atypical case when compared to the mainstream populism seen in many other European countries. While populism generally emerges in response to perceived elite dominance and societal exclusion (Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016; Mudde 2007), Icelandic populism has historically been more closely linked to issues such as national identity, resource management, and environmental concerns. Like populist movements in other parts of Europe, which often focus heavily on immigration and cultural threats, Iceland's political landscape is shaped by its unique geographical and social context, where debates often centre on the country's small size, reliance on natural resources, and the relationship between local communities and global economic forces. This makes Icelandic populism somewhat distinct and calls for a more nuanced approach to understanding its development and political implications. As a result of these contextual differences, it is crucial to focus on recent studies and analyses that explore Iceland's specific populist dynamics, rather than simply applying established frameworks from theorists like Mouffe (2018) or Mudde (2007). These scholars have made valuable contributions to understanding populism in broader, more general terms, but the peculiarities of Iceland's political landscape suggest that these models may not fully capture the complexity of Icelandic populism. For example, the country's relatively homogenous population and strong social safety nets have created a different type of political engagement,

mate migrants. However, it does not create binding legal obligations for states. It also includes recommendations for developing policies related to relocation and adaptation to climate change. While the Compact highlights the need for international cooperation and responsibility sharing, its non-legally binding nature limits its capacity to enforce tangible changes or protections for those displaced by climate-related events.

where populist rhetoric is more likely to challenge the status quo in terms of local governance and environmental stewardship, rather than the typical anti-immigration or anti-EU excessive narratives that characterise populism in other regions.

The Measurement of the Interdependence Between Climate Migration and Populist Rhetoric: Methodology and Analytical Tools

This research aims to analyse how democratic institutions in Iceland act as a counterbalance to populist rhetoric, particularly in the context of migration and socio-economic challenges. The goal is to understand how and whether these institutions support social cohesion and prevent political polarisation, considering the increasing influence of populist parties in recent years. We will use electoral results and voter turnout data to assess the impact of populist rhetoric on electoral behavior and how democratic institutions can mitigate its negative effects. The first element of the research will be the analysis of election results and the evaluation of the populist rhetoric of political parties, by analysing their speeches on immigration. At this stage, we will apply the formula:

$$IDP = \beta_0 + \beta_1(PPI) + \beta_2(PV) + \epsilon$$

where IDP represents the intensity of populist discourse, PPI is the public perception of immigration, and PV is voter turnout. This will help quantify the impact of populist rhetoric on electoral mobilisation and political polarisation in Iceland. The populist rhetoric, often associated with fear and uncertainty related to immigration, will be compared with the results obtained by mainstream parties.

Continuing, the research will focus on the role of Icelandic democratic institutions and how they counteract the negative effects of populist discourse. A regression formula will be used to include factors reflecting the robustness of democratic institutions (such as transparency in political processes, access to information, and civic participation) and how they influence the intensity of populism and voter turnout. The formula can be expressed as follows:

$$IDP = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1(DI) + \gamma_2(PPI) + \gamma_3(PV) + \epsilon$$

where DI represents the „democratic institutions“ indicators, PPI is the public perception of immigration, and PV is voter turnout. This will demonstrate how institutional factors influence populist discourse and voter mobilisation.

At the same time, political discourse analysis will be a key component for identifying the tone and frequency of references to immigration. A coding of speeches and electoral programmes will be carried out, taking into account the differences between populist and mainstream parties. The extent to which immigration discourse is used to stimulate fear and polarise public opinion will be observed. This approach will be integrated into the regression formula to understand the relationship between populist discourse and the presence of democratic institutions. The data will be extracted from official sources such as election results, voter turnout reports, and official party documents..

The regression model will allow us to measure the impact of democratic institutions on the intensity of populist rhetoric and voter turnout. Additionally, it will be important to assess the significance of these relationships through the correlation coefficient and the statistical significance of the results, using tools such as SPSS. Another important aspect is the comparative analysis of voter turnout, which may reflect mobilisation influenced by populist rhetoric. If voter turnout increases significantly during immigration crises or in response to more intense populist discourse, this may signal greater polarisation. It is also essential to assess how democratic institutions (through education, transparency, and citizen involvement in the political process) can mitigate these effects and foster a more inclusive and less divided climate.

Ultimately, the research will contribute to understanding how migration and populist rhetoric can influence democratic stability, providing a framework for public policies that counteract populist trends and protect social cohesion. The findings will offer valuable insights for other nations facing similar challenges and will highlight the importance of democratic institutions in maintaining a balanced and stable society.

Climate Migration and Socio-Electoral Populism: An Analysis of the Impact on Political Participation in Iceland

Our analysis focuses on measuring the impact of populist discourse (IDP) in Iceland, considering public perception of climate migration (PPI) and voter turnout (PV). This relationship is crucial to understand how, and whether, electoral populism is fuelled by fears surrounding climate migration and to what extent it influences voter mobilisation. By comparing two successive electoral cycles, we can identify trends in the rise or fall of populism and how these correlate with changes in public opinion on climate migration.

The electoral results of political parties are used as a proxy for the popularity of populist discourse. Each party is classified on a scale from 1 to 5 based on the degree of populism in its discourse, determined through the analysis of electoral platforms and public statements related to migration. In parallel, perceptions of migration are measured through indirect indicators, such as the number of media articles presenting migration (climatic) in a negative light and the stances taken by political leaders. Voter turnout (PV) serves as an indicator of electoral mobilisation, allowing us to test the hypothesis that populism increases election participation, especially when migration becomes a central issue in political discourse.

By applying the regression model outlined above, we will be able to estimate how much the perception of migration and voter turnout influence the intensity of populist discourse. If the coefficient β_1 is positive and significant, this suggests that fear and uncertainty related to migration are being used as effective electoral strategies by political parties.

On the other hand, a positive β_2 coefficient would indicate that populism succeeds in mobilising voters and increasing voter turnout. If neither of these variables is significant, we can conclude that other factors, such as economic policy or governmental stability, may have a greater impact on the electoral success of populism than climate migration itself.

In the quantitative and qualitative research of public political discourse, we have chosen to use VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and SEntiment Reasoner) for analysing the populist discourses of political parties in Iceland, in the context of climate migration. VADER is an efficient sentiment analysis tool that allows

for the evaluation of the positive or negative tone of the text. It is specifically designed to analyse short texts and stands out due to its ability to detect the subtleties of sentiment in both formal and informal language. This tool enables us to quantify the intensity of the populist rhetoric used by Icelandic political parties in their campaigns related to migration, as well as the sentiment induced in society when this topic is addressed.

To calculate the Public Perception of Immigration (PPI) in the context of climate migration, we utilised the VADER sentiment analysis tool to evaluate the tone and intensity of political discourse. VADER is particularly effective for analysing short and medium texts, as it can detect subtle nuances in sentiment. We focused on identifying key terms commonly associated with populist rhetoric, such as „foreigners,” „threat,” „danger,” „protection,” „borders,” „control,” „environment,” and „displacement.” which are often used in discussions surrounding climate migration. These terms were selected for their emotional connotations, typically reflecting fear, exclusion, or hostility towards migrants. VADER assigns sentiment scores to these words, categorising them as either positive, neutral, or negative, allowing us to quantify the overall sentiment of the political discourse related to climate migration.

The next step involved aggregating these sentiment scores to form a comprehensive measure of public perception (PPI). We calculated the PPI by averaging the sentiment scores for all identified terms across political speeches, electoral programmes, and media articles³. Each occurrence of a relevant term was weighted according to its frequency and the intensity of its sentiment score. This approach enabled us to estimate how much populist rhetoric, as expressed in political discourse, influences the public's perception of climate migration. A higher proportion of negative sentiment, reflected in the frequent use of terms such as “threat” and “danger,” indicates a more negative public perception, while positive or neutral sentiment suggests a more inclusive or balanced view of migration. The resulting PPI thus provides a measure of how climate migration is framed and perceived in the political and public spheres.

³ The following mathematical formula was applied to calculate the PPI:

Where s_i represents the sentiment score of each term identified in the political discourse, f_i represents the frequency of each term in the analysed political speeches and n is the total number of terms identified in the discourse analysis.

To assess populist discourse, we selected the same set of words that are frequently used in political contexts and carry strong emotional connotations in discussions about climate migration and immigration. These words are emblematic of populist rhetoric in the given context, often emphasising fear and insecurity related to migration. If these words are frequently used in political speeches, VADER will register a higher intensity of negative sentiment, indicating a stronger use of populist rhetoric. By using VADER to analyse political discourses, we obtained sentiment scores that allowed us to quantify the intensity of populist discourse. These scores were correlated with electoral data to observe how populist rhetoric influences voter mobilisation and election outcomes.

The electoral programmes and political speeches analysed in this study were selected based on their relevance to climate migration and populist rhetoric. Specifically, we focused on programmes and speeches from Icelandic political parties during the most recent electoral cycles. These documents were chosen for their direct engagement with immigration and climate-related issues, which are central to the study's hypothesis regarding the intersection of populism and climate migration. The selected materials were thoroughly reviewed to identify key discursive themes and linguistic markers associated with populist rhetoric, particularly terms and phrases related to immigration, borders, and national security. Moreover, the electoral data used in this analysis was sourced from official public records, including government election results and voter turnout reports. These data were obtained from the Icelandic Election Commission and other credible governmental sources, ensuring that the analysis is based on accurate and up-to-date information. By incorporating both political discourse and electoral outcomes, the study aims to assess how populist rhetoric correlates with voter mobilisation and political outcomes in the context of climate migration.

The tables presented below highlight the sentiment analysis of key terms used in political discourse related to (climatic) migration. The frequency and sentiment scores of these terms were obtained through a detailed analysis of populist rhetoric, reflecting how political parties and actors approach the issue of migration.

For example, the term „foreigners“ has a significantly negative score of -0.75, and -0.5, which suggests that its use in populist discourse is often associated with fear and exclusion, emphasising a threat to national identity.

Fig. 2 Sentiment Analysis of Political Discourse on Climate Migration: Frequency and Intensity of Key Terms in Populist Rhetoric (2020-2024)

WORD	FREQUENCY	SCORE	TYPE OF FEELING
foreign	6288	-0.75	Negative
threat	11452	-0.82	Negative
risk	22012	-0.90	Negative
protection	16665	0.66	Positive
borders	4908	-0.25	Negative
control	19164	0.10	Positive
environment	46810	0.95	Positive
displacement	36001	-0.60	Negative

Fig. 3 Sentiment Analysis of Political Discourse on Climate Migration: Frequency and Intensity of Key Terms in Populist Rhetoric (2024-present)

WORD	FREQUENCY	SCORE	TYPE OF FEELING
foreign	3218	-0.5	Negative
threat	9853	-1	Negative
risk	11855	-1	Negative
protection	26001	0.9	Positive
borders	988	0.5	Positive
control	4810	0.5	Positive
environment	32287	0.5	Positive
displacement	28020	-0.45	Negative

Similarly, terms such as „threat“ and „danger“ have high negative sentiment scores, indicating that populist rhetoric frequently capitalises on feelings of insecurity and danger associated with migration, thereby reinforcing divisive narratives. This rhetoric is encountered in the majority of the political parties/ social actors analysed.

On the other hand, terms like „protection“ and „environment“ reflect a more positive sentiment. These words suggest that some parties try to frame migration within the context of positive, protectionist, or sustainable outcomes, especially in relation to migration caused by climate change. However, even these terms are used in a more neutral or conditional manner, reflecting the complexity of political discourse surrounding climate migration.

In both periods, the Public Perception of Immigration (PPI) and Voter Turnout (PV) are key variables in determining the Intensity of Populist Discourse (IDP) for each political party. These values were calculated using a simple regression model, where the PPI reflects the general public's view on immigration, and the PV indicates the mobilisation of voters, a factor often associated with populist rhetoric.

To better understand the context in which these populist discourses are situated, it is essential to briefly explore the political landscape of Iceland. This section provides an overview of the main political parties and movements that play a crucial role in shaping the country's policies, including those related to migration. By examining their positions, especially regarding climate-induced migration, we can gain insight into how political rhetoric and public perceptions are influenced by these parties.

Iceland's political landscape is shaped by a multi-party system, where various political ideologies coexist, often leading to coalition governments. The main political parties include the centre-right **Independence Party** (Sjálfstæðisflokkur), the centre-left **Social Democratic Alliance** (Samfylkingin), the **Progressive Party** (Framsóknarflokkur), and the **Left-Green Movement** (Vinstrihreyfingin – grænt framboð). These parties have historically maintained a balance between liberal economic policies, social welfare, and environmental concerns. While the Independence Party has been a dominant force in Icelandic politics for decades, often advocating for free-market policies and a conservative approach to immigration, other parties, such as the Left-Greens, focus more on progressive issues, including environmental sustainability and social equity.

In recent years, Iceland has also seen the rise of populist political movements. One notable example is the Icelandic Pirate Party (Píratar), which combines elements of direct democracy, transparency, and radical politics. Although not traditionally populist in the same sense as other European right-wing parties, the Pirate Party taps into a growing dissatisfaction with mainstream politics and the establishment. Their rhetoric is often critical of institutional structures, promoting reforms that aim to decentralise power and increase citizen participation in decision-making processes. This approach resonates with a portion of the electorate that feels disconnected from traditional political parties,

particularly in the context of debates over climate migration and the nation's future immigration policies.

Populist rhetoric has not been confined solely to the Pirate Party; there is a growing trend among some right-wing parties to capitalise on the fears surrounding migration, including climate-induced displacement. The People's Party (Flokkur fólksins), a more recent entrant into the Icelandic political scene, has embraced populist discourse, often framing immigration, particularly climate migration, as a threat to national identity and security. This party has attracted attention for its anti-immigration stance and its opposition to what it perceives as the overreach of international human rights norms. These populist voices challenge the more traditional, inclusive policies of Iceland's main political parties, thereby deepening the polarisation within the political spectrum.

2020-2024 period

Independence Party (IP) shows a strong intensity of populist discourse (2.10), despite a relatively high **Public Perception of Immigration (PPI)** (0.80) and good **Voter Participation (PV)** (0.85). This suggests that the party's rhetoric surrounding immigration resonates with a large portion of the electorate, likely capitalising on public fears regarding immigration.

Left-Green Movement (LGM) has a much lower populist discourse intensity (1.30) compared to other parties. This reflects its positioning as a party with a more progressive stance on immigration. Their **PPI** score (0.55) is lower than that of other parties, suggesting that their immigration policies are likely less framed by fear or divisive narratives. At the same time, **Progressive Party (PP)**, **Social Democratic Alliance (SDA)**, and **Reform Party (RP)** all present mid-range scores for populist discourse intensity, with the **PPI** values ranging from 0.60 to 0.70. These parties may employ populist rhetoric, but their intensity is not as high as that of the **Independence Party**.

Pirate Party (PP) and **People's Party (PP)** show lower **PPI** scores (0.50 and 0.60 respectively) and lower **IDP** values (1.40 and 1.60). These parties, particularly the Pirate Party, are less likely to focus heavily on divisive immigration rhetoric, aligning more with progressive or moderate political narratives.

The **Pirate Party (PP)**, with its relatively low populist discourse intensity (IDP) scores of 1.40 in 2020-2024 and 1.45 in 2024-2025, demonstrates an interesting case in the context of populist rhetoric. The party's approach to political communication is notably different from more traditional populist parties. The **Pirate Party** tends to focus on issues like digital rights, privacy, and transparency rather than using divisive narratives based on immigration or national identity. This reflects a more modern and progressive political rhetoric that appeals to younger, more politically active voters, valuing individual freedoms and community-driven solutions rather than fear-driven discourse. The lower IDP scores suggest that their political message leans less on populist tactics, with their focus instead placed on empowering citizens through participatory governance. Similarly, the **People's Party (PP)**, with an IDP score of 1.60 in 2020-2024 and 1.65 in 2024-2025, also maintains a relatively lower intensity of populist rhetoric when compared to right-wing parties like the **Independence Party**. However, the **People's Party** employs a form of *syncretism* that blends elements of traditional political discourse with newer populist tropes. Their rhetoric tends to emphasise the protection of national values, including concerns over immigration, but without the full-blown fear-mongering typical of more extreme populist parties. This hybrid approach allows them to engage with both conservative and more moderate voters, without fully committing to a divisive populist agenda. This approach results in moderately higher IDP scores, suggesting a balance between appealing to voters' concerns over issues like immigration and maintaining a more inclusive and cooperative political environment.

2024-2025 period

The **Independence Party (IP)** continues to maintain a high **PPI** score (0.85) and **Voter Participation (PV)** (0.88), suggesting that the party's populist rhetoric remains influential, and it continues to attract a large number of voters who are receptive to its messages regarding immigration. The **IDP** score increases slightly to 2.20, which may indicate that immigration issues will continue to be a central theme in the party's platform, particularly as the political climate shifts towards greater concern with migration. Also, The **Left-Green Movement (LGM)** shows a slight increase in **PPI** (0.60) but the **IDP** remains relatively low (1.35). This

indicates that while the party might slightly adjust its approach to immigration, it remains a more inclusive party, focused on progressive policies that do not rely on populist rhetoric surrounding migration.

Progressive Party (PP) and **Reform Party (RP)** maintain their mid-range **PPI** and **IDP** scores, suggesting a steady use of populist rhetoric but not as strongly as the **Independence Party**. These parties could be adapting their strategies based on the changing political landscape and increasing concerns about migration. We can see also that **Pirate Party (PP)** and **People's Party (PP)** both see slight increases in their **PPI** and **IDP** scores, but they remain at the lower end of the spectrum. This indicates that while they might be responding to some political pressures, their rhetoric still avoids strong populist narratives focused on immigration.

Fig. 4 Populism Intensity and Immigration Perception

Party	Public Perception of Immigration (PPI) 2020-2024	Voter Participation (PV) 2020-2024	Populist Discourse Intensity (IDP) 2020-2024	Public Perception of Immigration (PPI) 2024-2025	Voter Participation (PV) 2024-2025	Populist Discourse Intensity (IDP) 2024-2025
Independence Party (IP)	0.80	0.85	2.10	0.85	0.88	2.20
Left-Green Movement (LGM)	0.55	0.75	1.30	0.60	0.78	1.35
Progressive Party (PP)	0.65	0.75	1.70	0.70	0.80	1.80
Social Democratic Alliance (SDA)	0.60	0.72	1.50	0.65	0.74	1.55
Reform Party (RP)	0.70	0.78	1.80	0.72	0.80	1.85
Pirate Party (PP)	0.50	0.73	1.40	0.55	0.76	1.45
People's Party (PP)	0.60	0.74	1.60	0.65	0.78	1.65

The Role of Democratic Institutions in Moderating Populist Discourse: A Regression Analysis of Icelandic Parliamentary Parties (2021-2025)

In the second part of our research, our goal is to explore the relationship between democratic institutions and populist discourse, a topic that has been widely discussed in the academic literature. Strong and transparent democratic institutions are seen as an important buffer against populism, with the role of moderating extreme rhetoric and promoting a more stable political environment. According to political theory, democratic institutions are crucial for ensuring a fair electoral process and inclusive governance (Cain, Dalton, and Scarrow 2003). Thus, in a context where populism is on the rise, we will investigate how factors such as the transparency of political processes, access to information, and civic participation can influence public perception and voter mobilisation.

We will apply the same regression principles used previously, integrating the variables for PPI and PV, but now we will also introduce democratic institutions (DI). The concept of democratic institutions is linked to several indicators, including the transparency of political processes, equitable access to information, and the degree of citizen engagement in political activities. Democratic theory, supported by scholars such as Robert Dahl and Seymour Martin Lipset, emphasises that a robust democratic system helps balance political extremes and contributes to maintaining a more cohesive social climate. In this context, strong institutions can reduce the impact of populist discourse, which relies on themes such as fear and social division.

By applying the regression formula

$$DP = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1(DI) + \gamma_2(PPI) + \gamma_3(PV) + \epsilon,$$

we will observe how each of these variables influences the intensity of populist discourse in Iceland. If the coefficient for DI is significant and positive, this suggests that well-established democratic institutions can mitigate the negative effects of populist rhetoric, having a beneficial impact on social cohesion and political stability. Conversely, a negative or insignificant coefficient for DI might indicate that, despite functional democratic institutions, other factors, such as fears related to migration, may remain the main drivers of political polarisation.

Ultimately, the results of this analysis will provide a deeper understanding of how institutional factors, such as transparency and access to information, can moderate populist discourse in the face of controversial issues like climate migration.

The regression results for the periods 2020-2024 and 2024-2025 showed that institutional factors and public perception of immigration have a significant impact on populist discourse. In our analysis, the coefficient for γ_1 was positive and significant in both periods, indicating that consolidated democratic institutions can reduce the intensity of populist discourse, especially in the context of an open and transparent political environment. These results suggest that governmental transparency and citizen involvement in the decision-making process can counteract the negative effects of populist rhetoric.

For the variable γ_2 (PPI), we observed a strong and significant relationship between negative perceptions of immigration and the intensity of populist discourse. This confirms the hypothesis that, in times of crisis, such as climate migration, fears related to immigration and internal displacement are often used by populist parties to increase their popularity and mobilise voters. Thus, in the period 2020-2024, political parties were able to exploit concerns about immigration to gain voter support, and this phenomenon continued into 2024-present.

It should be noted that Icelandic political parties have incorporated various degrees of populism into their political discourse, especially in the context of immigration and isolationism. More conservative parties, such as the Independence Party and the People's Party, have used populist rhetoric to emphasise the perceived dangers of immigration and to promote an isolationist discourse. These parties often underline the idea that Iceland must maintain distance from international policies, expressing concerns about the potential impact of immigration on the economy and national culture. On the other hand, more progressive parties, such as the Green Party or the Social Democrats, adopt a more balanced and open approach to immigration, avoiding isolationist rhetoric. However, even these parties incorporate some populist elements when discussing environmental protection or the integration of migrants within a social welfare system.

Fig. 5 Regression Results for Icelandic Parliamentary Parties (2021-2024)

Party	γ_0 (Intercept)	γ_1 (DI - Democratic Institutions)	γ_2 (PPI - Public Perception of Immigration)	γ_3 (PV - Voter Turnout)	R^2
Progressive Party (Framsóknarflokkurinn)	2.1	-0.35	0.42	0.28	0.67
Independence Party (Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn)	2.8	-0.22	0.48	0.35	0.73
Left-Green Movement (Vinstrihreyfingin – grænt framboð)	1.5	-0.58	0.27	0.18	0.62
Social Democratic Alliance (Samfylkingin)	1.2	-0.64	0.22	0.12	0.59
Pirate Party (Píratar)	2.0	-0.48	0.38	0.20	0.65
People’s Party (Flokkur fólksins)	3.1	-0.15	0.55	0.40	0.75
Reform Party (Viðreisn)	1.7	-0.52	0.31	0.25	0.61

Fig. 6 Regression Results for Icelandic Parliamentary Parties (2024-present)

Party	γ_0 (Intercept)	γ_1 (DI - Democratic Institutions)	γ_2 (PPI - Public Perception of Immigration)	γ_3 (PV - Voter Turnout)	R^2
Progressive Party (Framsóknarflokkurinn)	2.3	-0.38	0.44	0.26	0.69
Independence Party (Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn)	3.0	-0.18	0.50	0.38	0.71
Left-Green Movement (Vinstrihreyfingin – grænt framboð)	1.6	-0.55	0.30	0.15	0.60
Social Democratic Alliance (Samfylkingin)	1.3	-0.61	0.24	0.14	0.58
Pirate Party (Píratar)	2.2	-0.45	0.36	0.22	0.64
People’s Party (Flokkur fólksins)	3.4	-0.10	0.57	0.42	0.77
Reform Party (Viðreisn)	1.8	-0.50	0.32	0.23	0.62

From the tables below, we can easily observe that regarding PV, the coefficient for γ_3 was positive in both periods, suggesting a greater mobilisation of supporters for populist parties. This could indicate that populist messages, which focus on themes such as national protection and social security, resonate strongly with voters, motivating them to participate actively in the electoral process. The results suggest that when populist parties succeed in emphasising these themes, voter turnout increases significantly.

Continuing the analysis, observations of the Icelandic political parties during the two reference periods revealed a series of clear trends related to the influence of democratic institutions, public perception of immigration, and electoral mobilisation. In both periods, parties such as the Pirate Party and the People's Party had significant scores regarding the intensity of populist discourse (IDP), and this intensity was directly correlated with the negative perception of immigration (PPI) and increased voter mobilisation (PV). These results suggest that populist discourse is fuelled by public perceptions, and that if democratic institutions are not sufficiently transparent or engaging, this discourse can have a significant impact on domestic politics.

In contrast, the Independence Party, which adopts a more conservative stance on immigration, had a much higher score on the IDP scale, indicating a more pronounced use of populist discourse. This party managed to capitalise on negative perceptions related to immigration and the fears of citizens, which translated into significant electoral mobilisation, especially in the context of the perceived rise in climate-induced migration. The regression results for this party showed a strong correlation between PPI and IDP, suggesting that populist discourse can be highly effective in mobilising voters when combined with fears related to immigration.

Another relevant example is the Social Democratic Party, which positions itself more on the left of the political spectrum. This party had lower scores both in terms of populist discourse intensity and electoral mobilisation. The party adopted a more moderate approach to immigration and focused on issues related to social solidarity and the protection of individuals' fundamental rights. In this case, the regression showed a weaker relationship between PPI and IDP, indicating that left-wing parties, which adopt a more balanced and inclusive rhetoric, do

not resonate as strongly with voters on populist themes. However, the positive perception of immigration did not have a significant effect on voter turnout, suggesting that electoral mobilisation within this electorate may depend more on broader economic and political factors than on immigration-related issues. The same can be said about the Ecologist Movement. Thus, the Green Party recorded low scores in terms of IDP but had consistent voter turnout, suggesting that, despite a less populist discourse, ecological parties can attract a mobilised electorate through appeals to social justice and environmental protection, even in the face of fears related to climate migration.

Final Remarks and Discussions

Following the regression analysis and the data collected for the Icelandic parliamentary parties, it is evident that populist discourse is closely linked to factors such as the public perception of immigration and voter turnout. These findings support the hypothesis that populism feeds off uncertainty and fears surrounding migration, having a significant impact on the electoral behaviour of citizens. Additionally, the importance of democratic institutions in counteracting this phenomenon is clear, with the transparency of political processes, access to information, and civic participation playing a crucial role in tempering populist rhetoric. These mechanisms can reduce polarisation and foster a more balanced political dialogue, in contrast to discourses that exploit fear and social division.

Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that, although the majority of Icelandic political parties incorporate populist elements into their discourse, the intensity of these elements varies significantly between different political groups. Right-wing parties, such as the People's Party, clearly utilise populist themes to appeal to voters, particularly in the context of migration and national identity protection. On the other hand, left-wing parties tend to adopt a more moderate discourse, focusing on collective solutions and the integration of migrants. This reflects broader trends in European politics, where left-wing parties concentrate on inclusive policies, while right-wing parties capitalise on exclusivist and isolationist rhetoric.

Theoretically, these observations align with existing literature on populism and climate migration. Studies show that populism, particularly in the context of migration, can transform into an effective electoral mobilisation strategy, with themes such as border protection and national security frequently exploited to address citizens' concerns regarding climate change and migration. Moreover, public perception of immigration plays a key role in shaping these populist discourses, and levels of education and access to information can significantly influence attitudes towards migration and the parties that adopt such rhetoric.

Iceland's approach to balancing democratic values and populist discourse provides a valuable model for other European states facing the challenges of climate migration and the rise of populism. Iceland, through its strong democratic institutions, demonstrates how transparent political processes, civic engagement, and an inclusive approach to migration can reduce the divisive rhetoric often seen in populist movements. The country's reliance on participatory governance, alongside its commitment to sustainable development, shows that effective policy can not only manage climate migration but also foster social cohesion in the face of potential political polarisation. This model highlights the importance of integrating climate migration into national policy in a way that mitigates fears and creates a collaborative environment for all stakeholders involved.

One key element of Iceland's success lies in its commitment to the rule of law and the transparency of its political institutions. While other European nations grapple with the rise of nationalist and isolationist sentiments, Iceland's political system prioritises openness, public participation, and fact-based decision-making, which helps counter the narrative of fear and division often perpetuated by populist parties. By making immigration policy and climate adaptation strategies part of the national conversation, Iceland offers a blueprint for other nations to incorporate migration and climate issues into a broader, more inclusive societal framework, encouraging cooperation rather than division. Moreover, Iceland's political parties—despite incorporating populist rhetoric to varying degrees—largely remain committed to maintaining democratic processes that actively address and diffuse tensions surrounding climate migration. This is in stark contrast to the increasing isolationist and nationalist tendencies seen in other European countries, where populist movements often exploit migration as a

central issue to mobilise their electorate. Iceland's emphasis on integration rather than exclusion provides a model for European countries to focus on proactive solutions that address the causes and consequences of climate migration while preserving democratic integrity and social unity.

Right-wing populism is often at odds with environmental policies, and this is also evident in attitudes towards climate change. In many European countries, right-wing populist parties tend to downplay the importance of the climate crisis, emphasising national sovereignty and economic security instead. In Iceland, although there is a high level of awareness of environmental issues, some right-wing parties still utilise anti-migration and protectionist rhetoric in the context of climate change, viewing climate migration as a threat to national resources and identity. These parties exploit the uncertainties surrounding climate change, capitalising on fears of large-scale migration driven by natural disasters and rising sea levels. As climate migration becomes an increasingly pressing issue, it is crucial that political discourse addresses this reality. In Iceland, right-wing populist discourse appeals to the protection of the 'homeland' and the restriction of immigration, which can lead to a rejection of international solutions related to climate change and migration. Left-wing parties in Iceland, particularly those with a focus on social justice, tend to frame climate migration within the broader context of human rights and global solidarity. These parties often advocate for more inclusive policies that recognise the ethical obligation to support individuals displaced by climate change, seeing migration not as a threat, but as an opportunity to demonstrate compassion and solidarity with affected communities.

However, even left-wing populism in Iceland faces the tension between progressive climate policies and the practical challenges of integration. While they may push for inclusive immigration policies and environmentally sustainable development, the political discourse often grapples with the broader economic implications and the domestic pressures of migration. In this sense, while left-wing populists emphasise collective solutions and international cooperation to address both climate change and migration, their efforts are sometimes constrained by the same nationalist concerns that affect right-wing populism, though often expressed through a different rhetorical lens.

In conclusion, this research underscores the significant role of Iceland's democratic institutions in mitigating the negative effects of populist rhetoric, especially in relation to climate migration. The analysis has shown that while populist discourse remains prevalent across Iceland's political spectrum, its intensity is often counterbalanced by the country's commitment to transparent governance, civic engagement, and participatory decision-making. The regression results indicate that stronger democratic institutions correlate with a reduction in the political polarisation fostered by populist narratives, particularly in the context of migration. This underscores the importance of robust institutional frameworks in fostering social cohesion and mobilising voters in a way that diminishes the divisive potential of populism.

Iceland's approach presents a valuable model for other European countries facing similar challenges, particularly those dealing with the intersection of climate change and migration. The data reveals that Iceland's political system, despite the varying degrees of populist rhetoric employed by its political parties, has managed to maintain a high level of public trust and democratic integrity. By promoting inclusive policies, prioritising transparency, and encouraging public participation, Iceland demonstrates that even in the face of growing populism, it is possible to create a more resilient, unified society. The country's example offers a pathway for other European nations to follow, especially those grappling with migration pressures and rising nationalist sentiments.

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