Politics and Governance
2024 • Volume 12 • Article 8648
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8648

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Trust the People? Populism, Trust, and Support for Direct Democracy

Nina Wiesehomeier [1] and Saskia P. Ruth-Lovell [2]

[1] School of Politics, Economics & Global Affairs, IE University, Spain
[2] Department of Political Science, Radboud University, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Saskia P. Ruth-Lovell (saskia.ruth-lovell@ru.nl)

Submitted: 8 May 2024 **Accepted:** 29 July 2024 **Published:** 28 October 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Challenging Democracy: How Do Ideas of Populists and Disenchanted Citizens Align?" edited by Reinhard Heinisch (University of Salzburg) and Oscar Mazzoleni (University of Lausanne), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i385

Abstract

Populism is commonly understood as a response to frustrations with the functioning of modern democracy, while the use of direct democratic mechanisms has been hailed as a remedy for the ailing of representative democracies. Indeed, populism's emphasis on direct citizen participation in decision-making is tightly linked to its distrust of representative institutions and the political elite as the cornerstone of mediated representation. Trust, however, matters for any functioning democratic institutional arrangement, and we contend that its role warrants more attention when considering the viability of alternative modes of decision-making such as referendums, particularly in the nexus of populism–democracy. Using original public opinion surveys implemented in Argentina, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, we distinguish among different objects of trust—elites, institutions, "the people," or the society at large. We also explore citizens' levels of trust in these objects and their association with institutional designs of direct democracy. Our results offer preliminary insights into the importance of horizontal and vertical trust relationships in shaping procedural preferences for different configurations of direct democracy.

Keywords

bottom-up mechanisms; direct democracy; populism; top-down mechanisms; trust

1. Introduction

Promising democratic renewal, populist leaders and parties often advocate for increased use or the institutional expansion of mechanisms of direct democracy to bolster the power of the people (cf. Gherghina & Pilet, 2021a; Ruth-Lovell & Welp, 2023). Accordingly, studies have shown that populist voters are more

likely to be dissatisfied democrats than anti-democrats (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020; Van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018), although it remained unclear what type of democracy they would support. More recently, scholars have started to explore the question of citizens' conceptions of democracy in general and that of populist voters in particular. These studies highlight that rather than subscribing to only one specific model of democracy, most citizens (including populist voters) appear to be mixing different elements (cf. Pilet et al., 2020), even considering models such as electoral or liberal democracy, that academics usually treat as distinct, as the same (Wegscheider et al., 2023). Similarly, Wiesehomeier and Singer (in press) show that European populist voters tend to add elements of direct democracy, government transparency, and enhanced welfare state provisions to standard elements of democracy. However, while some studies find that the prevalence of populist attitudes bolsters support for direct democracy (Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2021), empirical evidence of whether a preference for direct democracy increases the likelihood of supporting populist parties is mixed (cf. König, 2022; Zaslove et al., 2021).

A close relationship between populism and direct democracy is therefore often presupposed. However, disentangling the precise nature of this relationship is not straightforward, impeded by a considerable conceptual overlap as both entail the idea of citizens having a direct say in decision-making (Gherghina & Pilet, 2021b). However, not only is populism an exaltation of "the people," of the basic democratic idea of "rule by the people;" it is also characterized by the condemnation of "the elite" as self-serving and corrupt (cf. Hawkins et al., 2019). In the context of the crisis of representative democracy, the alienation of voters, feelings of betrayal, and thus political distrust are taken as a given. Yet, if populism concludes that "the elite" is not trustworthy and that mediated democracy and the link it establishes between citizens and elites has broken down, are "the people" in turn perceived as a political object that can be trusted—and thus entrusted with making decisions for the community?

Trust among citizens of a political community has been considered central to the democratic process (Lenard, 2008), leading Uslaner (2002, p. 217) to conclude that "democratic societies are trusting societies." We contend that in the current climate of declining trust levels in Western societies, discussions on direct democracy would benefit from reflecting on the role of trust concerning citizens' preferences for different structures of decision-making. This seems particularly pertinent when alternative modes are considered as potential remedies to the failures of modern, representative democracy, not the least to stem the populist tide. The trust citizens place in society at large as stipulated in the literature on generalized trust or in a group such as "the people" may have implications for the support of alternative modes of decision-making and the scope citizens are willing to tolerate.

Using original survey data from Argentina, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Germany, we take the first step in this direction (Ramos-González et al., 2024). We explore citizens' levels of trust in the political elite, political institutions, "the people," or society at large, and how they relate to preferences for different institutional configurations of mechanisms of direct democracy. We focus on facultative referendums, thereby following a narrow understanding of direct citizen participation in political decision-making through a direct vote on political issues (see Altman, 2010). However, we distinguish between top-down and bottom-up mechanisms (i.e., the question of *who can initiate a vote?*), contrast directly the binding with the consultative nature of referendums (i.e., the question of *how assertive is a referendum?*), and juxtapose safeguarding certain rights with the notion that all political issues should be up for decision by referendums (i.e., the question of *how far-reaching should the scope of a referendum be?*).

2. Populism, Trust, and Direct Democracy

Contrary to ancient, small city-states with citizens' direct participation in decision-making, modern democracies are based on the principle of representation, where citizens choose representatives to rule on their behalf (cf. Dahl, 1991). Yet, the legitimacy crisis that representative democracies are experiencing has led some to champion direct democratic ideas as a potential remedy (cf. Whitehead, 2017), and researchers often emphasize the intimate connection between populism and direct democratic ideas (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mény & Surel, 2002). This is no surprise as the populist worldview builds on a specific understanding of political representation (cf. Hawkins et al., 2019). Populism accentuates the idea of popular sovereignty and thus "involve[s] some kind of exaltation of and appeal to 'the people'" (Canovan, 1981, p. 294) as the ultimate power in politics. Indeed, a prominent populist critique of the current state of representative democracy is that popular sovereignty has been curtailed and needs to be restored (Aslanidis, 2015). In this sense, citizens' direct say in decision-making via a vote in a referendum can be seen as the strongest embodiment of an unmediated political expression of a unified "will of the people." Although a topic that is more vigorously pursued by left-wing populists, analyses of party manifestos show populist parties' strong advocacy of direct democracy and an increase in its mentions over time (cf. Best, 2020; Gherghina & Pilet, 2021a). Relatedly, populist presidents in Latin America are more likely than their non-populist counterparts to incorporate direct democracy in their countries' constitutions (Ruth-Lovell & Welp, 2023).

Of course, the emphasis of *people-centrism* needs to be understood in direct juxtaposition to populism's strong *anti-elitism* that typically perceives elites as small groups with illegitimate access to political power (Canovan, 1999). As these groups have been corrupted and are driven by self-interest, they undermine the common good and the well-being of "the people" (Mudde, 2007). Populism therefore pinpoints the internal paradoxes of liberal democracies to the power asymmetry inherent in the activities of mediated, representative democracy (Held, 2006, pp. 125–157). In the nexus of a moralistic and antagonistic notion of politics, "referendums fit with each of the three key aspects of populism: they are people-centered, reduce the power of the elite, and are a means to keep the corrupt elite in check (at least to some extent)" (Jacobs et al., 2018, p. 520).

This antagonistic relationship between the "virtuous people" and the "corrupt elite" articulates an undercurrent of anger, discontent, and feelings of betrayal (cf. Giurlando, 2020). Thus, populism is also undeniably linked with political trust, that is, with how citizens judge the performance of political institutions according to whether they fulfill citizens' expectations of serving the public interest (cf. Geurkink et al., 2020). Expectedly, there is strong individual-level evidence that political distrust increases electoral support for populism (e.g., Doyle, 2011; Pauwels, 2014; Roberts, 2019; Rooduijn et al., 2016; Voogd & Dassonneville, 2020) and does so on both the left and the right (Kriesi & Schulte-Cloos, 2020). Unsurprisingly, distrust in institutions can therefore be a strong motivator for supporting direct democracy, *in addition* to populist attitudes (Mohrenberg et al., 2021). Indeed, as Geurkink et al. (2020) demonstrate, populist attitudes and distrust in political institutions are distinct constructs.

We argue that the notion of (dis)trust warrants more attention in current discussions on alternative modes of decision-making that citizens in general, and populist citizens in particular, may be willing to support. The emphasis on trust as a key ingredient for a well-functioning society has, of course, a long tradition in the literature on diffuse system support, political culture, and social capital—generalized social trust and political trust are considered centerpieces of democracies, fostering compromise, cooperation, and compliance with

policies (e.g., Easton, 1965, 1975; Inglehart, 1997; Lenard, 2008; Putnam, 1995; Uslaner, 2002). Consequently, the crisis of representation has often been associated with a decline in political trust and, most importantly, a lack of trust in political elites and the institutional arrangements of mediated democracy they dominate (e.g., Levi & Stoker, 2000; Norris, 2011).

Railing against these arrangements, populism aims right at the core of the paradox of democratic legitimacy, i.e., the boundaries of the category "the people" and the legitimation of political authority (cf. Ochoa Espejo, 2017). In a democracy, "the people" rule. Thus, populist ideas align well with providing "the people" more say in decision-making. Yet, how these ideas resonate with the possibilities of implementing direct citizen participation may depend on the expectations and trust citizens place in their community, as well as in the institutions they are embedded in (cf. Bornschier, 2019). Put differently, trust is important for any functioning democratic institutional arrangement and system stability (cf. Bertsou, 2019; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011), but it comprises not only a vertical relationship as typically understood in political (dis)trust but also includes horizontal (dis)trust that spans across the members of a political community (cf. Lenard, 2008). This latter aspect has been largely ignored in discussions of populism and direct democracy.

Yet, mechanisms of direct democracy can be implemented in many ways concerning who should have the right to initiate a vote, their assertiveness, and their scope. The first aspect refers to who can trigger a call for a popular vote (cf. Setälä, 1999), with the most common distinction between top-down mechanisms, triggered by political elites, and bottom-up mechanisms, triggered by citizens or a segment thereof (Altman, 2010; Breuer, 2007). Secondly, the assertiveness of mechanisms refers to whether their results are binding or merely consultative for the political actors in charge of implementing them (Chambers, 1998; Cheneval & el-Wakil, 2018). Finally, the substantive reach of mechanisms, and their scope, may differ in terms of limitations on what citizens are allowed to directly decide upon; for example, specific civil liberties or minority rights may be shielded (cf. Donovan & Bowler, 1998; Haider-Markel et al., 2007). As terminological disagreements exist to distinguish these mechanisms, for simplicity, we will use the terms mechanisms and referendums synonymously.

Given the differences in these institutional configurations, citizens' procedural preferences may very well correlate with differing levels of trust in one or more of the actors involved or affected. It is, therefore, pertinent to distinguish between different objects of trust judgments (cf. Levi & Stoker, 2000). Regarding horizontal trust judgments, generalized trust is typically understood as an individual's diffuse trust in the wider society, i.e., as trust in individuals who are unfamiliar or unknown (Delhey et al., 2011, p. 792): "Trust leads to placing one's self in a position of vulnerability and allows cooperation" (Bertsou, 2019, p. 224) and as "the basis of reciprocity, social connectedness, peaceful collective action, inclusiveness, tolerance, gender equality, confidence in institutions, and democracy itself" (Delhey et al., 2011, p. 787), generalized trust has been considered as driving a society's civic behavior (Nannestad, 2008, p. 415). It is therefore intimately linked to a pluralistic understanding of one's political community on which liberal democracy is based, where societies are understood as sums of individuals with particularistic identities, interests, and needs that require representation and, potentially, protection (Dahl, 1991; Plattner, 1999). Accordingly, we state that:

> H1: The higher citizens' generalized trust, the more likely they favor citizens as initiators of referendums. They are also more likely to favor consultative referendums and limits on their scope.

It is precisely populism's understanding of the political community comprised of only "the people," defined as a unified homogenous in-group, which feeds its majoritarian tendency and puts it at loggerheads with the idea of pluralism (Müller, 2016). As Laclau (2005, p. 149) points out, "the people" are both the subject of democracy and an object invoked via a constructed meaning. The political construction of a people constitutes the representational character of "the people" not based on finding common interests, which would be hampered by the inherent heterogeneity of modern societies, but on converting unfulfilled demands into a "chain of equivalences" (Laclau, 2005, pp. 77–83). We contend that, converted into an object of representation, "the people" can likewise be an object of horizontal trust judgments. It is not as narrowly circumscribed as particularized (dis)trust extended to specific others based on personal experience or values. However, the reification of "the people" invokes a wholistic, unified in-group that is often linked to identity appeals along cultural lines, such as ethnic, regional, or national (cf. Heinisch et al., 2021; Taggart, 2017), but can also entail socio-economic definitions of "the people" (Tsatsanis et al., 2018). Akin to Putnam's idea of bonding social capital restricted to homogenous groups (Putnam, 2000), which van Staveren and Knorringa (2007) have also defined as ascribed trust, as a political community, "the people" are the ultimate sovereign, which leads us to stipulate that:

> H2: The higher citizens' trust in "the people," the more likely they are to favor citizens as initiators of referendums. They are also more likely to favor binding referendums and less likely to favor limits on their scope.

When it comes to vertical trust judgments, it is important to keep in mind that "the people" is constructed negatively in binary opposition to a shared enemy, a shared antipathy towards the out-group that threatens the political community. In other words, "the people" is constructed with a fair injection of distrust of the political elite perceived as using democratic institutions to empower themselves (Busby et al., in press). Trust and distrust are relational and evaluative, yet, while both will have behavioral consequences, their implications are distinct (Bertsou, 2019). As Bertsou (2019, p. 222) points out, "trust can help to mitigate risk and bridge uncertainty…while distrust flags risks…and motivates action to subvert the vulnerability and reliance on the distrusted agent." We therefore distinguish between political (dis)trust understood as a trust judgment passed upon political institutions and a moralistic distrust in political elites as political agents, which we define as Manichean anti-elitism. As vertical trust judgments focus on the actors involved in political processes, we anticipate a relationship concerning the initiation and assertiveness of referendums, but not their scope. Accordingly, we state that:

> H3: The higher citizens' political trust, the less likely they are to favor citizens as initiators of referendums. They are also more likely to favor consultative referendums.

> H4: The higher citizens' Manichean anti-elitism, the less likely they are to favor elites as initiators of referendums. They are also more likely to favor binding referendums.

3. Data

We test our expectations using original population-based online survey data of the resident population aged 18 and over in Argentina (fielded 7–17 September 2020), Italy (fielded 16–26 November 2020), Portugal (fielded 16–26 November 2020), Spain (fielded 20–25 January 2020), and Germany (fielded 8–18

March 2021) with quota sampling gathered via the ISO-certified (ISO 26362 standard for online access panels) provider Netquest (Ramos-González et al., 2024). This survey includes questions that allow us to test our expectations of the relationship between trust judgments and procedural preferences of referendums. All countries included hosted at least one populist party at the time of the surveys. Argentina has a long history of Peronist populism, especially in the left-leaning iteration of *Kirchnerismo*, which was prominent when the survey was conducted. According to PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2024), with Lega, Fratelli d'Italia, and Forza Italia, Italy had three successful right-wing parties and, with Movimento 5 Stelle, one Eurosceptic populist party. The right-wing party Chega had just had their electoral breakthrough in the 2019 national election in Portugal, while Germany (Die Linke and AfD) and Spain (Podemos and Vox) stand out with populist parties on the ideological left and right. Combined, this data allows us to explore similarities concerning the average association between trust judgments and preferences for configurations of referendums among a diverse set of cases in terms of their constitutional design of democracy.

3.1. Dependent Variables

Our four dependent variables tap into different institutional configurations of referendums as to their initiation, assertiveness, and scope. Preferences on initiation were captured with two separate questions. The first aimed at top-down mechanisms and asked respondents whether politicians should have the right to initiate referendums on issues of particular public interest, using a Likert scale from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (5). Using the same scale, the second question aimed at bottom-up mechanisms and asked respondents whether citizens should have the right to initiate referendums on laws (enacted or not) with the collection of a minimum number of signatures. In the ensuing analyses, the scales of both questions are reversed so that higher numbers correspond to stronger agreement. The remaining two institutional configurations were measured using explicit trade-off questions. To capture preferences about assertiveness, respondents were asked to locate themselves on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 denoted that *a referendum should be binding, and the legislature must implement what the citizens voted for unchanged*, while 10 indicated that *a referendum should only be advisory, and the legislature can take other factors into account, even if this would ultimately not implement the vote result*. The question about scope asked respondents to place themselves on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating that *citizens should have the right to decide all important issues by direct vote, even if this results in the elimination or restriction of, for example, minority rights*, and 10 that *some rights, such as those of minorities, should be guaranteed even if this means that citizens cannot decide on them through their direct vote*.

3.2. Independent Variables

Our four main independent variables relate to different notions of horizontal and vertical trust. Horizontal trust judgments are captured with two different variables. We measure generalized trust with the standard question asking respondents whether they would say that *one cannot be too careful* (1), or that *in general, most people can be trusted* (10). To gauge trust in "the people" we use a two-step procedure. In a first instance, respondents were asked to choose from a list of definitions the one that best reflects their perception of who belongs to "the people." Options provided were (a) all people living in the same territory, (b) all people who share a common history, culture, and language, (c) all people who belong to the same ethnic group, (d) all people who suffer economic difficulties, or (e) other. To ensure that respondents reflected on a circumscribed in-group when providing a trust judgment, in the subsequent question their respective responses on who

belongs to "the people" were piped in. Respondents were thus prompted to indicate their level of trust in "the people" according to their own definitions, on a scale from 1 (*one cannot be too careful*) to 10 (*in general, one can trust "the people,"* which is the response variable used in our analyses).

For political distrust, our first variable of vertical trust judgments, we build an additive index of trust in political institutions, using perceptions of trust in the national parliament and political parties, measured on a scale from 1 (*do not trust at all*) to 10 (*trust completely*). To capture the moralistic distrust of Manichean anti-elitism, our second variable of vertical trust judgments, we extract four items from question batteries originally used for measuring populist attitudes. The first two items listed in Table 1 are taken from Akkerman et al. (2014), while the last two are taken from Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018). The four items we use, measured on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*), are particularly apt for tapping into the perceived self-interest of political elites. Our measure therefore follows more closely the definition of political distrust advanced by Bertsou (2019) as "a relational attitude that reflects *perceptions of untrustworthiness* specific to the political system in its entirety or its components" (p. 220, emphasis in the original), in our case with a specific focus on the political elite. Arguably, the items reflect fewer perceptions of performance evaluation, one of Bertsou's (2019) three types of evaluations of untrustworthiness. But they strongly draw on the second type, the ethical component in terms of violation of shared norms such as honesty or integrity, and the third, the perception of incongruent interests, i.e., that actions pursued by the political agent will prove harmful (cf. Bertsou, 2019). For our subsequent analyses, the scales have been reversed so that higher levels correspond with higher Manichean anti-elitism. For descriptive analyses, we rely on an additive index of these items (mean = 3.41, minimum = 0, maximum = 4.75), but we use factor scores in our regression analyses.

Table 1. Descriptives of Manichean anti-elitism.

Item	*N*	Min–max	Mean	*SD*	Factor loading
Politicians talk too much and take too little action	5,116	1–5	4.24	0.94	0.836
What people call "compromise" in politics is just selling out on one's principles	4,819	1–5	3.40	1.09	0.643
The particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people	5,017	1–5	4.15	0.94	0.852
Politicians always end up agreeing when it comes to protecting their privileges	5,036	1–5	4.28	0.92	0.829

Notes: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$; survey weights were used for Argentina and Portugal (Ramos-González et al., 2024).

3.3. Controls

Since we are interested in the relationship between trust and procedural preferences for different institutional configurations of direct democratic mechanisms in the populism–democracy nexus, we use several important control variables in this context. First, we control for populist party support (e.g., Van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018). We use respondents' revealed vote choices in the last presidential or parliamentary election. We record a respondent's revealed populist party support as 1 if the respondent indicates having voted for any of the populist parties listed in the introduction to this data section. Second, we include four items from the Akkerman et al. (2014, p. 1331) battery capturing people-centrist attitudes of respondents, measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*): (a) The people, and not

politicians, should make our most important policy decisions; (b) I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than by a specialized politician; (c) Politicians in [parliament/congress] should follow the will of the people; and (d) The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people. We include these items separately since we do not expect homogeneous associations with procedural preferences for direct democracy (cf. Gherghina & Pilet, 2021b). Third, we include two proxies to gauge different types of participatory preferences and behavior among our respondents. We use a trade-off question that contrasts whether *it is good that people take to the streets to protest, even if it leads to unrest* (1) with the statement that *participation should only take place within formal institutions* (10). We also use a question asking whether a respondent has ever taken to the streets to demand their rights or criticize the authorities' policies (yes/no). Finally, we include the standard battery of political and socio-economic control variables deployed in studies on political attitudes and direct democracy (e.g., Gherghina & Pilet, 2021b; Jacobs et al., 2018; Zaslove et al., 2021): left-right self-placement, interest in politics, and socio-economic background in terms of age, sex, education, and income.

4. Analysis

4.1. Descriptives: Trust, Populism, and "the People"

Given the novel treatment of "the people" as an object of trust judgments, we start our exploration of the trust variables by reporting the answers given to how respondents conceive of this group. Figure 1 shows these responses for the pooled sample of all respondents, but also separately according to their ideological self-placement. As the left pane indicates, most respondents understand "the people" either in terms of those living in the same territory or in terms of shared history, culture, and language (cf. Heinisch et al., 2020; Ochoa Espejo, 2017). Only about two percent of respondents attribute an ethnic connotation to this term and, with

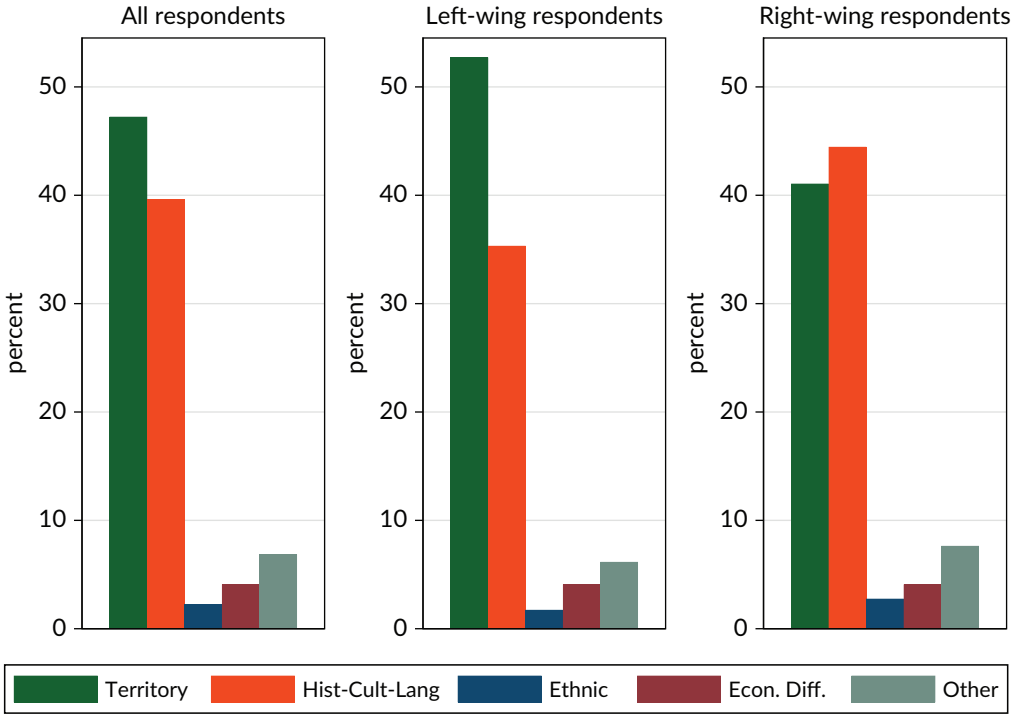

Figure 1. Definition of "the people."

around four percent, the share of respondents considering "the people" as a group struggling with economic difficulties is only slightly larger. Interestingly, almost seven percent of respondents do not subscribe to either of these pre-defined categories, opting for the category "other." Unsurprisingly, as the second and third pane in Figure 1 highlight, right-wing respondents (understood as having a score of 5.5 or higher on the left–right self-placement question) tend to indicate a shared history, culture, and language as a defining feature of "the people," while the majority of left-wing respondents tend to understand "the people" as those living on the same territory.

Figure 2 plots understandings of "the people" across voter-revealed populism and ideology and highlights three noteworthy relationships. Firstly, and most interestingly, populist voters seem to be more likely to form an understanding of who is part of "the people"—only 2.8 percent fall into the category "other" compared to eight percent of non-populist voters. The difference is particularly stark for the contrast of right-wing populist (2 percent) versus right-wing non-populist (9.4 percent) voters. Secondly, populist voters also appear to be more likely to attribute the definition of a shared history, culture, and language to this term. However, this is driven predominantly by voters from the right, in particular populist voters, 52.9 percent of which opt for this definition. Thirdly, with 4.6 percent, understanding "the people" in terms of economic difficulties is more prevalent among left-wing populist voters than right-wing populist voters (3 percent).

How do trust levels in this circumscribed entity of "the people" compare to other objects of trust? Table 2 contrasts the levels of horizontal and vertical trust judgments across voter-revealed populism and ideology. The results show that, on average, left-wing voters are more trusting than right-wing voters. Left-wing non-populist and left-wing populist voters do not differ much in their trust judgments, except for generalized trust and Manichean anti-elitism, which are slightly higher for the latter. Right-wing populist

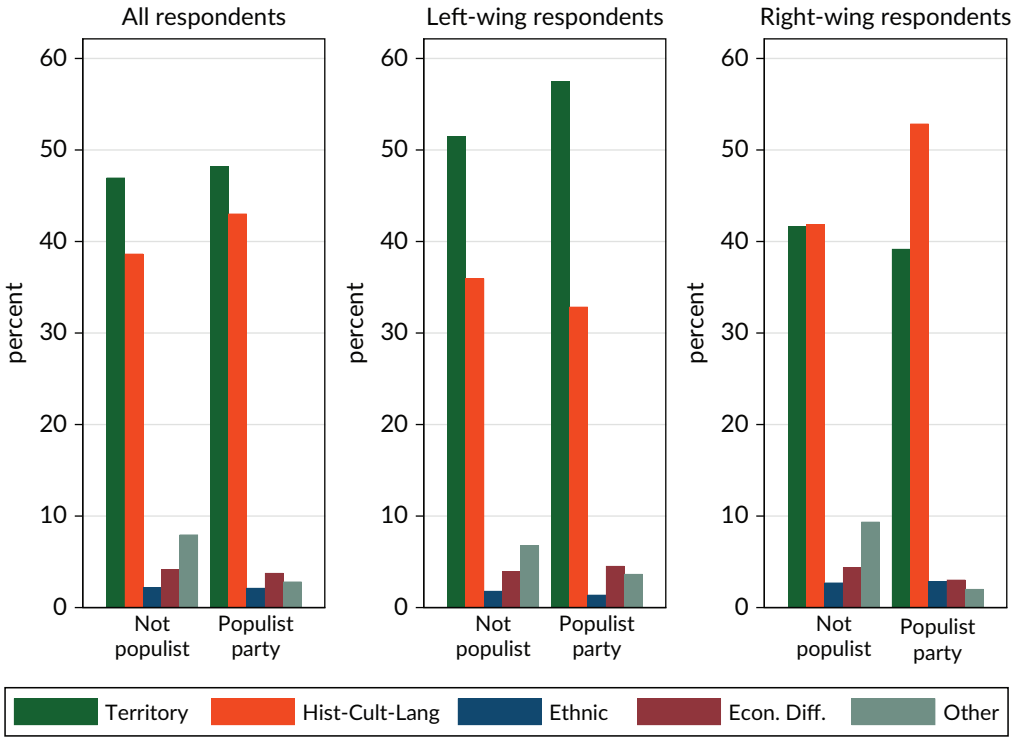

Figure 2. Definition of "the people," across voter-revealed populism and ideology.

Table 2. Descriptives of trust variables, across voter-revealed populism and ideology.

		All respondents	Left-wing respondents		Right-wing respondents	
			Non-populist voter	Populist voter	Non-populist voter	Populist voter
Generalized trust	Mean	4.58	4.77	4.87	4.40	4.14
	SD	2.29	2.18	2.24	2.37	2.38
	N	5,326	2,253	572	1,909	592
Trust in "the people"	Mean	5.49	5.67	5.61	5.32	5.27
	SD	2.37	2.20	2.54	2.41	2.66
	N	5,206	2,228	568	1,823	587
Political trust	Mean	3.46	3.75	3.71	3.16	3.02
	SD	2.11	2.09	2.17	2.08	2.03
	N	5,246	2,242	569	1,846	589
Manichean anti-elitism	Mean	3.41	3.33	3.39	3.45	3.63
	SD	0.78	0.76	0.76	0.80	0.73
	N	4,749	2,096	531	1,566	556

Notes: Generalized trust, trust in "the people," and political trust are measured on scales from 1–10 where higher numbers indicate higher levels of trust; Manichean anti-elitism is measured on a scale from 1–5 where higher numbers indicate higher levels of Manichean anti-elitism.

voters, in turn, are generally more distrusting than their non-populist counterparts. While our descriptive analysis reveals interesting patterns, the question remains how these variables relate to preferences for different configurations of direct democracy.

4.2. Trust, Populism, and Direct Democracy

To estimate the average association between our variables of interest and control for unobserved heterogeneity, we run ordinary least squares regression analyses with country-fixed effects and pool the data to enhance statistical power. We ran several robustness checks, such as dropping a country at a time, and the results reported here remain unchanged (see the Supplementary File). We first include our four trust variables along with the participatory and socio-economic controls, and then add our populism measures in a second step.

Table 3 shows the results for the two dependent variables assessing who should initiate referendums. Overall, we find only partial confirmation for our hypotheses. For our horizontal trust measures, we find, for instance, a significant negative association between generalized trust and top-down (i.e., elite-initiated) referendums ($\beta = -0.02$, $p < 0.05$), contrary to our expectations (H1). This association, however, disappears once we control for populism (see Model 4). Models 1 and 2, in turn, confirm our expectation of a positive relationship with trust in "the people" (H2). Those who trust "the people" more are more likely to be in favor of bottom-up referendums ($\beta = 0.05$, $p < 0.01$), even if we control for populism. Interestingly, the same holds for top-down referendums (we will come back to this in the discussion below).

For political trust, our first variable for vertical trust judgments, the negative relationship with bottom-up referendums (H3) is confirmed in Model 1 ($\beta = -0.02$, $p < 0.1$); however, it is not robust to the inclusion of

our populism controls. Interestingly, we find that political trust is positively associated with higher levels of support for top-down referendums, once we control for populism (see Model 4). Finally, we expected respondents with higher levels of Manichean anti-elitism (H4) to be less likely in favor of top-down referendums. Our results, however, indicate that a higher level of Manichean anti-elitism is consistently linked with higher levels of support for both bottom-up and top-down referendums. Notably, although losing in strength, these associations hold even when controlling for voter-revealed populism and

Table 3. Trust, populism, and initiation of referendums.

	Bottom-up		Top-down	
	(1) Trust	(2) +Populism	(3) Trust	(4) +Populism
Generalized trust	0.00	0.01	−0.02**	−0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Trust in "the people"	0.05***	0.02***	0.05***	0.03***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Political trust	−0.02*	0.00	0.01	0.02*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Manichean anti-elitism	0.28***	0.10***	0.24***	0.09***
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Voter-revealed populism	—	0.08**	—	0.13***
		(0.04)		(0.04)
People-centrism				
People make decisions	—	0.18***	—	0.16***
		(0.02)		(0.02)
Ordinary citizen	—	0.03*	—	0.00
		(0.02)		(0.02)
Will of the people	—	0.16***	—	0.13***
		(0.03)		(0.03)
Differences elite–people	—	0.03	—	0.05**
		(0.02)		(0.02)
Left–right self-placement	−0.01*	−0.01*	−0.02**	−0.02**
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Participation within formal institutions	−0.06***	−0.05***	−0.03***	−0.03***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Has protested	0.04	0.05	0.09**	0.09**
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Political Interest	0.06***	0.06***	0.05**	0.04**
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Socio-economic controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Country-fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	3.98***	2.24***	3.83***	2.37***
	(0.13)	(0.18)	(0.13)	(0.18)
Observations	3,508	3,433	3,498	3,425
R-squared	0.13	0.21	0.10	0.16

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

people-centrism, which by and large show the same relationship with the initiation of referendums as Manichean anti-elitism.

Table 4 reports results for preferences of the assertiveness of referendums (Models 5 and 6) and their scope (Models 7 and 8). Again, we find partial confirmation for our hypotheses. Concerning citizen's generalized trust (H1), we expected a positive association with consultative referendums as well as with limitations on the scope of referendums. Only the latter relationship is confirmed (see Models 7 and 8). On average, a

Table 4. Trust, populism, and the assertiveness and scope of referendums.

	Consultative		Safeguards	
	(5) Trust	(6) +Populism	(7) Trust	(8) +Populism
Generalized trust	0.02	0.01	0.11***	0.10***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Trust in "the people"	−0.02	0.02	−0.05*	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Political trust	0.12***	0.11***	0.16***	0.11***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Manichean anti-elitism	−0.40***	−0.08	−0.51***	−0.10*
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Voter-revealed populism	–	−0.24**	–	−0.22*
		(0.11)		(0.12)
People-centrism				
People make decisions	–	−0.32***	–	−0.65***
		(0.06)		(0.05)
Ordinary citizen	–	0.08	–	0.00
		(0.05)		(0.05)
Will of "the people"	–	−0.43***	–	−0.23***
		(0.07)		(0.06)
Differences elite–people	–	−0.09	–	−0.06
		(0.06)		(0.06)
Left–right self-placement	0.09***	0.09***	−0.03	−0.03
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Participation within formal institutions	0.31***	0.29***	0.23***	0.21***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Has protested	−0.12	−0.14	0.27***	0.26***
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Political Interest	−0.01	0.02	0.10*	0.10*
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Socio-economic controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Country-fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	3.28***	6.68***	2.68***	6.63***
	(0.36)	(0.51)	(0.37)	(0.49)
Observations	3,382	3,316	3,395	3,334
R-squared	0.21	0.24	0.15	0.22

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

one-unit difference in levels of generalized trust among citizens is associated with a 0.1-point higher level of support for safeguards on the scope of referendums, which is a substantively small relationship given the 10-point scale of the scope variable. Conversely, we do not find the expected negative association with the consultative nature and limitations on referendums with trust in "the people" (H2). Both directionality and significance levels are not robust across different models. Models 5 and 6, however, confirm the positive association between political trust and consultative referendums (H3). Interestingly, we also find that political trust is positively associated with more support for limitations on the scope of referendums (Models 7 and 8). Finally, for Manichean anti-elitism, we find a strong and significant negative association with consultative referendums as stipulated in H4 in Model 5 ($\beta = -0.40$, $p < 0.01$). This association vanishes once we control for voter-revealed populism and people-centrism. Instead, our results indicate that a higher level of Manichean anti-elitism is negatively associated with limitations on the scope of referendums (see Model 8). Notably, this association holds even when controlling for voter-revealed populism and people-centrism.

5. Discussion

Our analyses confirm some of our expectations about the relationships between citizens' procedural preferences and their trust judgments of different objects of trust. Yet, the results also revealed interesting additional patterns concerning our novel measures of trust in "the people" and Manichean anti-elitism that expand on the traditional horizontal and vertical trust judgments of generalized and political trust commonly used. Above all, our results highlight that both dimensions of trust relationships should be taken into account in discussions on direct democracy.

Firstly, although we had separate expectations for bottom-up and top-down referendums, our newly proposed measures are consistently positively associated with both. One possible explanation may lie in respondents' accounting for "the people" being the ultimate decision-maker in this context, irrespective of who triggers the vote. Moreover, from a Manichean anti-elitist perspective, a referendum may simply provide an additional vertical mechanism at the disposal of "the people" to hold elites accountable. Eventually, this highlights the importance of juxtaposing procedural preferences of direct citizen participation with purely mediated forms of representative democracy. This interpretation aligns well with our control variables on voter-revealed populism and people-centrism, which generally follow this pattern (cf. Gherghina & Pilet, 2021b).

Secondly, the results in Table 4 underscore our theoretical expectations. The binding nature and unlimited scope of referendums are in line with radical direct democratic ideas, while their opposite expressions (consultation and safeguards) resonate with mediated, liberal ideas of democratic procedures. Thus, the inverse mirror image of political trust (H3) and Manichean anti-elitism (H4) therefore indicate that foundational democratic ideas matter, as does the positive association between generalized trust (H1) and support to safeguard certain rights (cf. Müller, 2016). Along this line, the control variables of voter-revealed populism and people-centrism also highlight the uneasy relationship between populism and the protection of minority rights (e.g., Juon & Bochsler, 2020).

Finally, concerning other control variables, right-leaning respondents appear less enamored with the idea of direct democracy, in contrast to the general support for both bottom-up and top-down referendums of

those respondents interested in politics and those who have taken to the streets to demand their rights or criticize authorities' policies. It may very well be that this group of "critical citizens" (Norris, 2011), much like populist voters, demands a more active and direct role of citizens in political decision-making, albeit for different reasons.

6. Conclusion

We aim to add to the burgeoning literature on populism and direct democracy by initiating a conversation about the role of trust in the current climate that democratic societies find themselves in. It is no accident that scholars increasingly pay attention to elements related to trust and distrust in this context and focus on issues such as affective polarization (McCoy et al., 2018; Orhan, 2022). We take a first step towards disentangling the role of different types of trust and different institutional designs of direct democracy. Our results echo pleas in favor of a disaggregated perspective towards the varieties of direct democratic mechanisms (cf. Cheneval & el-Wakil, 2018), especially their trade-offs with other principles and ideas of democracy, like representation, pluralism, or liberalism. We highlight the need to consider both horizontal and vertical trust judgments, as well as pay attention to two overlooked objects of trust: "the people" and the "corrupt elite."

Our results based on survey data from five countries in Europe and Latin America highlight that the object of trust is relevant to citizens' procedural preferences of direct democratic mechanisms. The patterns we uncover offer ample inspiration for future research on the matter. For one, our descriptive exploration of the different understandings of who belongs to "the people" across non-populist, left-wing populists, and right-wing populists echoes theoretical debates about the boundary problem of "the people" and the intimate connection between populism and the paradox of democratic legitimacy (cf. Ochoa Espejo, 2017). It also highlights the need for further research on the role that territory plays in defining "the people," particularly for left-wing populists (cf. Heinisch et al., 2020). The comparison between different constructions of "the people" and procedural preference is another potential avenue of research that we were not able to address in our study. Our study is, of course, only a first step towards a better understanding of the relationship between trust, populism, and direct democracy. Here we took a bird's-eye view towards this relationship, and we encourage future research to probe into the role contextual differences may play, as well as further refine the distinctions of trust and distrust we propose to improve our understanding of the populism–democracy nexus. We believe that this will have broader implications for advocating for mechanisms of direct democracy as a potential remedy to the ailing of representative democracy.

Acknowledgments

We thank the three anonymous reviewers, as well as the editors, for their constructive and helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. We also thank Yanina Welp for her helpful comments on the direct democracy items included in the survey. All remaining errors are ours.

Funding

The data collection was funded by the National R&D Plan, Government of Spain, project Populism, Political Preferences and Political Representation: Changes in Party Systems After the Great Recession (PGC2018-098207-B-I00).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data used is available at the Harvard Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GQ89SK

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

References

Akkerman, A., Mudde, C., & Zaslove, A. (2014). How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters. *Comparative Political Studies*, *47*(9), 1324–1353.

Altman, D. (2010). *Direct democracy worldwide*. Cambridge University Press.

Aslanidis, P. (2015). Is populism an ideology? A refutation and a new perspective. *Political Studies*, *64*(1), 88–104.

Bertsou, E. (2019). Rethinking political distrust. *European Political Science Review*, *11*(2), 213–230.

Best, V. (2020). Democracy reform as a populist policy supply. In S. Bukow & U. Jun (Eds.), *Continuity and change of party democracies in Europe* (pp. 203–251). Springer.

Bornschier, S. (2019). Populist success in Latin America and Western Europe: Ideational and party-system-centered explanations. In K. A. Hawkins, R. E. Carlin, L. Littvay, & C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds.), *The ideational approach to populism* (pp. 202–237). Routledge.

Breuer, A. (2007). Institutions of direct democracy and accountability in Latin America's presidential democracies. *Democratization*, *14*(4), 554–579.

Busby, E., Chryssogelos, A., Hawkins, E. T., Hawkins, K. A., Littvay, L., & Wiesehomeier, N. (in press). The ideational approach. In A. Chryssogelos, E. T. Hawkins, K. A. Hawkins, L. Littvay, & N. Wiesehomeier (Eds.), *The ideational approach to populism. Volume II: Consequences and mitigation*. Routledge.

Canovan, M. (1981). *Populism*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies*, *47*(1), 2–16.

Chambers, S. (1998). Contract or conversation? Theoretical lessons from the Canadian constitutional crisis. *Politics & Society*, *26*(1), 143–172.

Cheneval, F., & el-Wakil, A. (2018). The institutional design of referendums: Bottom-up and binding. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *24*, 294–304.

Dahl, R. A. (1991). *Democracy and its critics*. Yale University Press.

Delhey, J., Newton, K., & Welzel, C. (2011). How general is trust in "most people"? Solving the radius of trust problem. *American Sociological Review*, *76*(5), 786–807.

Donovan, T., & Bowler, S. (1998). Direct democracy and minority rights: An extension. *American Journal of Political Science*, *42*(3), 1020–1024.

Doyle, D. (2011). The legitimacy of political institutions: Explaining contemporary populism in Latin America. *Comparative Political Studies*, *44*(11), 1447–1473.

Easton, D. (1965). *A systems analysis of political life*. Wiley.

Easton, D. (1975). A re-assessment of the concept of political support. *British Journal of Political Science*, *5*(4), 435–457.

Geurkink, B., Zaslove, A., Sluiter, R., & Jacobs, K. (2020). Populist attitudes, political trust, and external political efficacy: Old wine in new bottles? *Political Studies*, *68*(1), 247–267.

Gherghina, S., & Pilet, J.-B. (2021a). Do populist parties support referendums? A comparative analysis of election manifestos in Europe. *Electoral Studies*, *74*, Article 102419.

Gherghina, S., & Pilet, J.-B. (2021b). Populist attitudes and direct democracy: A questionable relationship. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *27*, 496–505.

Giurlando, P. (2020). "This was not supposed to happen!": Betrayal, populism, and the demand for control. *Populism*, *3*(1), 65–86.

Haider-Markel, D. P., Querze, A., & Lindaman, K. (2007). Lose, win, or draw? A reexamination of direct democracy and minority rights. *Political Research Quarterly*, *60*(2), 304–314.

Hawkins, K. A., Carlin, R. E., Littvay, L., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (Eds.). (2019). *The ideational approach to populism: Concept, theory, and analysis*. Routledge.

Heinisch, R., Holtz-Bacha, C., & Mazzoleni, O. (Eds.). (2021). *Political populism. Handbook of concepts, questions and strategies of research* (2nd ed.). Nomos.

Heinisch, R., Massetti, E., & Mazzoleni, O. (Eds.). (2020). *The people and the nation. Populism and ethno-territorial politics in Europe*. Routledge.

Held, D. (2006). *Models of democracy* (3rd ed.). Stanford University Press.

Inglehart, R. (1997). *Modernization and postmodernization: Cultural, economic, and political change in 43 societies*. Princeton University Press.

Jacobs, K., Akkerman, A., & Zaslove, A. (2018). The voice of populist people? Referendum preferences, practices and populist attitudes. *Acta Politica*, *53*(4), 517–541.

Juon, A., & Bochsler, D. (2020). Hurricane or fresh breeze? Disentangling the populist effect on the quality of democracy. *European Political Science Review*, *12*(3), 391–408.

König, P. D. (2022). Support for a populist form of democratic politics or political discontent? How conceptions of democracy relate to support for the AfD. *Electoral Studies*, *78*, Article 102493.

Kriesi, H., & Schulte-Cloos, J. (2020). Support for radical parties in Western Europe: Structural conflicts and political dynamics. *Electoral Studies*, *65*, 102–138.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.

Lenard, P. T. (2008). Trust your compatriots, but count your change: The roles of trust, mistrust and distrust in democracy. *Political Studies*, *56*(2), 312–332.

Levi, M., & Stoker, L. (2000). Political trust and trustworthiness. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *3*(1), 475–507.

McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *62*(1), 16–42.

Mény, Y., & Surel, Y. (2002). The constitutive ambiguity of populism. In Y. Mény & Y. Surel (Eds.), *Democracies and the populist challenge* (pp. 1–21). Palgrave Macmillan.

Mohrenberg, S., Huber, R. A., & Freyburg, T. (2021). Love at first sight? Populist attitudes and support for direct democracy. *Party Politics*, *27*(3), 528–539.

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Müller, J.-W. (2016). *What is populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nannestad, P. (2008). What have we learned about generalized trust, if anything? *Annual Review of Political Science*, *11*, 413–436.

Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit. Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.

Ochoa Espejo, P. (2017). Populism and the idea of the people. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 607–628). Oxford University Press.

Orhan, Y. E. (2022). The relationship between affective polarization and democratic backsliding: Comparative evidence. *Democratization*, *29*(4), 714–735.

Pauwels, T. (2014). *Populism in Western Europe: Comparing Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands*. Routledge.

Pilet, J.-B., Talukder, D., Sanhueza, M. J., & Rangoni, S. (2020). Do citizens perceive elected politicians, experts and citizens as alternative or complementary policy-makers? A study of Belgian citizens. *Frontiers in Political Science*, *2*, Article 567297.

Plattner, M. F. (1999). From liberalism to liberal democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, *10*(3), 121–134.

Putnam, R. D. (1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, *6*(1), 65–78.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

Ramos-González, J., Sánchez-García, A., Sendra, M., Setien Escamendi, G., Rodrigues-Silveira, R., Wiesehomeier, N., Bóscan, G., Damiani, M., García Díez, F., García Sanz, M. D., Gómez-Reino, M., Gutierrez, J. M., Llamazares, I., Lisi, M., Manrique García, M. A., Marcos-Marné, H., & Plaza-Colodro, C. (2024). *Populist attitudes and political preferences after the Great Recession* [Data set]. https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/GQ89SK

Roberts, K. M. (2019). Bipolar disorders: Varieties of capitalism and populist out-flanking on the left and right. *Polity*, *51*(4), 641–653.

Rooduijn, M., Pirro, A. L. P., Halikiopoulou, D., Froio, C., van Kessel, S., de Lange, S. L., Mudde, C., & Taggart, P. (2024). The PopuList: A database of populist, far-left, and far-right parties using expert-informed qualitative comparative classification (EiQCC). *British Journal of Political Science*, *54*(3), 969–978.

Rooduijn, M., van der Brug, W., & de Lange, S. L. (2016). Expressing or fueling discontent? The relationship between populist voting and political discontent. *Electoral Studies*, *43*, 32–40.

Rovira Kaltwasser, C., & Van Hauwaert, S. M. (2020). The populist citizen: Empirical evidence from Europe and Latin America. *European Political Science Review*, *12*(1), 1–18.

Ruth-Lovell, S. P., & Welp, Y. (2023). Are Latin American populists more likely to introduce direct democracy? *Contemporary Politics*, *30*(4), 456–472.

Setälä, M. (1999). Referendums in Western Europe—A wave of direct democracy? *Scandinavian Political Studies*, *22*, 327–340.

Taggart, P. (2017). Populism in Western Europe. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 248–263). Oxford University Press.

Tsatsanis, E., Andreadis, I., & Teperoglou, E. (2018). Populism from below: Socio-economic and ideological correlates of mass attitudes in Greece. *South European Society and Politics*, *23*(4), 429–450.

Uslaner, E. M. (2002). *The moral foundation of trust*. Cambridge University Press.

van der Meer, T., & Dekker, P. (2011). Trustworthy states, trusting citizens? A multilevel study into objective and subjective determinants of political trust. In S. Zmerli & M. Hooghe (Eds.), *Political trust. Why context matters* (pp. 95–116). ECPR Press.

Van Hauwaert, S. M., & van Kessel, S. (2018). Beyond protest and discontent: A cross-national analysis of the effect of populist attitudes and issue positions on populist party support. *European Journal of Political Research*, *57*(1), 68–92.

van Staveren, I., & Knorringa, P. (2007). Unpacking social capital in economic development: How social relations matter. *Review of Social Economy*, *65*(1), 107–135.

Voogd, R., & Dassonneville, R. (2020). Are the supporters of populist parties loyal voters? Dissatisfaction and stable voting for populist parties. *Government and Opposition*, *55*(3), 349–370.

Wegscheider, C., Rovira Kaltwasser, C., & Van Hauwaert, S. M. (2023). How citizens' conceptions of democracy relate to positive and negative partisanship towards populist parties. *West European Politics*, *46*(7), 1235–1263.

Whitehead, L. (2017). Between the 'fiction' of representation and the 'faction' of direct democracy. In S. Ruth, Y. Welp, & L. Whitehead (Eds.), *Let the people rule? Direct democracy in the twenty-first century* (pp. 7–20). ECPR Press.

Wiesehomeier, N., & Singer, M. W. (in press). How populist voters understand democracy. Evidence from Europe. In A. Chryssogelos, E. T. Hawkins, K. A. Hawkins, L. Littvay, & N. Wiesehomeier (Eds.), *The ideational approach to populism. Volume II: Consequences and mitigation*. Routledge.

Zaslove, A., Geurkink, B., Jacobs, K., & Akkerman, A. (2021). Power to the people? Populism, democracy, and political participation: A citizen's perspective. *West European Politics*, *44*(4), 727–751.

About the Authors

Nina Wiesehomeier is an associate professor of comparative politics at the School of Politics, Economics and Global Affairs, IE University, Spain. Her research interests cover issues of political representation, political institutions, and political preferences. Her work has appeared in outlets such as *The Journal of Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Nina is the coordinator of the Political Representation, Executives, and Political Parties Survey.

Saskia P. Ruth-Lovell is an associate professor at the Department of Political Science, Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. She holds a degree in Latin American studies and a PhD in political science from the University of Cologne, Germany. In her research, she specializes in populism, clientelism, and the quality of democracy in Latin America and beyond. She has published articles in *The Journal of Politics*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Political Studies*, and *Latin American Politics and Society*, among others.