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Limited Congruence: Citizens' Attitudes and Party Rhetoric About Referendums and Deliberative Practices

Sergiu Gherghina [1] , **Brigitte Geissel** [2], and **Fabian Henger** [2]

[1] Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow, Scotland
[2] Department of Political Science, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

Correspondence: Brigitte Geissel (geissel@soz.uni-frankfurt.de)

Abstract

Both citizens and political parties refer to novel participatory practices in the contemporary crisis of representative democracy. Survey data indicates a growing demand for such practices within the electorate, while political parties have also begun discussing them more frequently. However, previous studies on citizens' attitudes and parties' discourse on democratic innovations rarely speak to each other. It remains unclear whether citizens' attitudes and parties' discourse are congruent. This article seeks to address this gap in the literature and analyses the extent to which political parties reflect citizens' attitudes towards referendums and citizens' deliberation in their manifestos. We cover 15 political parties in Germany and the UK. Our analysis uses party manifesto data between 2010 and 2024, and data from surveys conducted on national representative samples. Our findings reveal that political parties and citizens rarely have congruent approaches towards referendums and deliberative practices. People's enthusiasm about referendums is hardly reflected in parties' rhetoric, but the latter reacts gradually to the public appetite for deliberation. There are visible differences between opposition parties and those in government.

Keywords

deliberative practices; Germany; party manifestos; political attitudes; political parties; referendums; UK

1. Introduction

There is an increasing appetite among citizens for direct and deliberative practices (Bedock & Pilet, 2021; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019) while several political parties now include such practices in their manifestos (Gherghina et al., 2020; Scarrow et al., 2022; Wuttke et al., 2019). Recent studies showed that populist

parties refer to direct and deliberative practices differently than do non-populist parties (Gherghina & Mitru, 2024; Gherghina & Pilet, 2021; Gherghina et al., 2024). This article takes one step further and seeks to understand the extent to which political parties in Germany and the UK reflect public attitudes towards direct and deliberative practices in their programmatic documents. To date, there have been only isolated attempts—for some examples, please see Garry et al. (2022) and Paulis and Rangoni (2023)—to investigate the congruence between voters and political parties in relation to new participatory practices.

Understanding how parties reflect citizens' preferences for novel participatory practices is important for at least two reasons. First, it indicates the extent to which political parties, which remain crucial institutions for decision-making in representative democracies, acknowledge the existence of complementary participatory procedures that could contribute to the quality of democracy. Such findings might speak to previous research about how both referendums and deliberative practices have the potential to improve the quality of democracy (Geissel et al., 2023). Second, in an era of increasing democratic backsliding and voter dissatisfaction (Decker et al., 2019, 2023), the ways in which political parties listen to people's voice can be instrumental in boosting the potential "curative effect" of participatory instruments.

Our analysis uses public opinion data from the UK and Germany, as well as the party manifestos of those political parties with a regular parliamentary presence in the two countries, for the last decade and a half. The two countries were selected due to (a) their differing experiences with direct and deliberative practices (the UK has organised referendums and deliberation at the national level, while Germany has used these forms only at the state and local level); (b) multi-party competition and seat division in parliament; and (c) the degree of polarisation in society, which is arguably higher in the UK after a divisive vote on Brexit. Our analysis includes the following parties in Germany: Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Christian-Democratic Union (CDU/CSU), the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Greens (GRÜNE), the Left (Die Linke), and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In the UK, our analysis includes: the Conservative Party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Greens, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party (SNP), Sinn Féin, and the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Out of these, four are considered populist in the literature: AfD and UKIP display an exclusionary type of populism, while the SNP and Sinn Féin are seen as inclusionary populist (Scanlan, 2022). We did not include the Brexit Party and its successor, the Reform UK Party, due to them not being present in parliament for most of the timeframe covered by our analysis.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides a brief literature review of the relationship between parties' and citizens' attitudes, together with our methodology. Next, we discuss citizens' support for referendums and deliberative practices in the UK and Germany over time. The fourth section analyses the content of party manifestos pertaining to referendums and deliberative practices. The fifth section compares citizens' and parties' support for referendums and deliberative practices. Then we briefly discuss the differences between populist and non-populist parties, while the conclusion summarises our findings and discusses their implications for the broader field of study.

When we use the terms "direct democratic practice" or "referendums," we refer to the practice of citizens' directly voting on policy proposals (Morel & Qvortrup, 2018). "Deliberative practices" include those practices in which citizens communicate, formulate arguments, and exchange justifications in the process of political will-formation and decision-making (Fishkin, 2011; Smith, 2009). Deliberative practices exist in different forms

such as citizens' assemblies, citizen juries, planning cells, or participatory budgeting (Curato & Calamba, 2024). Up until now, they are consultative.

2. Parties and Citizens' Attitudes: Theoretical Overview and Methodology

Congruence in the policy preferences of political parties and voters is crucial for representative democracy (Dahl, 1971). Incongruence can have detrimental effects, such as the political alienation of citizens and an increasing dissatisfaction with democracy (Curini et al., 2012; Przeworski, 2019). Absolute congruence can be defined as the distance between the policy position of the citizens and elites (Shim & Gherghina, 2020), while relative congruence is often reflected in the assessment of elites' policy stances in relation to their supporters in multiple time periods (Wlezien, 2017).

Previous studies have shown that there is limited congruence between the policy preferences of parties and voters. Since Dalton and Wattenberg (2002) highlighted the "partisan de-alignment thesis" more than two decades ago, there are few signs that party congruence has increased. A recent comparative study with a wider scope and timeframe by O'Grady and Abou-Chadi (2019, p. 1) confirms this impression. Comparing data on parties' policy positions and public opinion on several issue dimensions in 26 countries from 1981 to 2016, they "found virtually no evidence that European political parties respond to public opinion on any issue dimension" (O'Grady & Abou-Chadi, 2019, p. 1). The distance between political parties and society had already been discussed at the beginning of the 1990s when the cartel party model was first introduced (Katz & Mair, 1993). Higher electoral volatility, diminished trust in politicians and political parties, and lower voter turnout compared to past decades are all signs that parties remain disconnected from citizens (Dalton, 2020). This disconnection between public opinion and the policy positions of political parties is visible in the specific case of Germany. Examining approximately 100 policy proposals in Germany, Romeijn (2020, p. 426) argues that "while there is a link between general public preferences and the positions of political parties, this connection weakens considerably once political parties are in government." This article tests whether this finding also applies to parties' positions on referendums and deliberative practices.

This study's analysis covers the period 2010–2024, with slightly different timeframes for Germany and the UK due to different voting cycles. The choice of this analytical timeframe rests on two reasons. First, deliberative mini-publics became popular around 2010, with OECD data recognising a "notable trend for public authorities to increasingly use representative deliberative processes for public decision making" after that year (OECD, 2020, p. 66). This surge in the use of deliberative practices makes it likely to be reflected in public attitudes and party discourse. Related to the latter, a recent study indicates that parties' references to deliberation occurred mostly after 2010 (Gherghina & Mitru, 2024). Second, the starting point of the analysis marks the emergence of the newest political party of those investigated in this article, the AfD. Although the party did not gain parliamentary representation during its first attempt, it nevertheless drafted an election manifesto. For the UK we chose 2010 as a starting point as it was close to 2013 and thus provides grounds for comparison. Consequently, for Germany we cover the three federal elections of 2013, 2017, and 2021, while for the UK we cover the general elections of 2010, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2024.

This study uses two types of data: surveys and party manifestos. To assess citizens' preferences for referendums and deliberative practices, we use secondary sources (literature) and datasets. Since most studies on citizens' preferences have not yet evolved to be longitudinal or are on single practices (as is the

case with World Values Survey or European Social Survey [ESS] data), it was also necessary to search for studies from outside the designated timeframe. Other studies were consulted to answer specific questions, i.e., support for different types of mini-publics also yields data that is of use for our purpose (Goldberg et al., 2020; Grotz & Lewandowsky, 2020; Rojon & Pilet, 2021). For example, Grotz and Lewandowsky (2020) ask whether citizens prefer agenda-setting versus decision-making referendums based on party preference. These findings can be used for our study. As a starting point, we used the ESS dataset from 2012, where participants had to refer to the statement "Citizens have the final say on political issues by voting directly in referendums" and select from a 10-point scale ranging from *Not at all important for democracy in general* to *Extremely important for democracy in general* (ESS, 2012).

Another way to test for such preferences is to put several potential decision-makers against each other, e.g., experts vs. politicians, and have respondents pick one of a pre-selected range of models (Decker et al., 2019, 2023). In this study, respondents were asked to choose between "Alternative models of governance—who should best decide on laws?" with four potential answers: elected representatives and government representatives, citizens in regular referendums, neutral experts or constitutional courts, or a single person with comprehensive decision-making power. A second question asked respondents to rank certain statements according to the "suitability of different forms of democracy," using a 4-point scale (*very good, good, not very good, not at all*). The following statements, which were to be ranked, are relevant for this article: "Citizens should be able to call on parliament to deal with certain political issues by means of a popular initiative"; "Citizens should be able to change decisions made by the Bundestag through referendums" and "Groups of randomly selected citizens should be able to discuss fundamental social issues in depth and make proposals to the Bundestag." We excluded from our scrutiny those surveys that asked about specific referendums, such as Brexit in the UK case. There were many surveys asking explicitly whether the referendum should be repeated or if it had an impact on society. We focus on general support for referendums and, as such, such questions were not relevant for our purposes.

For the study of party manifestos, we completed a manual coding based on qualitative content analysis in which statements were assigned to one of the following three categories: no support, moderate support, or full support. We checked for both referendums and deliberative practices. In the category of "no support" (coded 0 in Figures 3 and 4) we included the neutral references, which only described or alluded to referendums or deliberative practices, or those statements that mentioned referendums and deliberation without making a judgment about them. Additionally, if the manifesto lacked references to referendums or deliberative practices, we included them in this same category. Those statements in which the parties showed a willingness to use or implement referendums or deliberation, or referred to them as viable complementary practices, were included in the category of "full support" (coded 1 in Figures 3 and 4) in line with previous comparative works using manifestos on these two topics (Gherghina & Mitru, 2024; Gherghina et al., 2024). One example of the support for referendums reads as follows: "We will use the influence of SNP votes at Westminster to ensure that promises made during the referendum are delivered. We believe that these proposals do not go far enough to honour the promises made during the referendum" (SNP, 2015). Those instances in which political parties do not use clear terminology to indicate support or support these practices in a limited manner (be it regional or only for certain subjects) were considered "limited support" (coded 0.5 in Figures 3 and 4). An illustrative example of such limited support of both direct and deliberative practices is the following: "We strengthen liberal democracy as a way of life by supporting voluntary and civic engagement, the selective use of professionally moderated citizen participation and the

trial expansion of direct democracy instruments at municipal and state level" (FDP, 2017, p. 53). A second example of limited support is as follows:

> We will take up the experiences with citizens' councils and make it our task to explore new ways of direct participation in government decisions. Systematic and early participation of citizens in government projects can shorten legal paths and speed up procedures. (SPD, 2021)
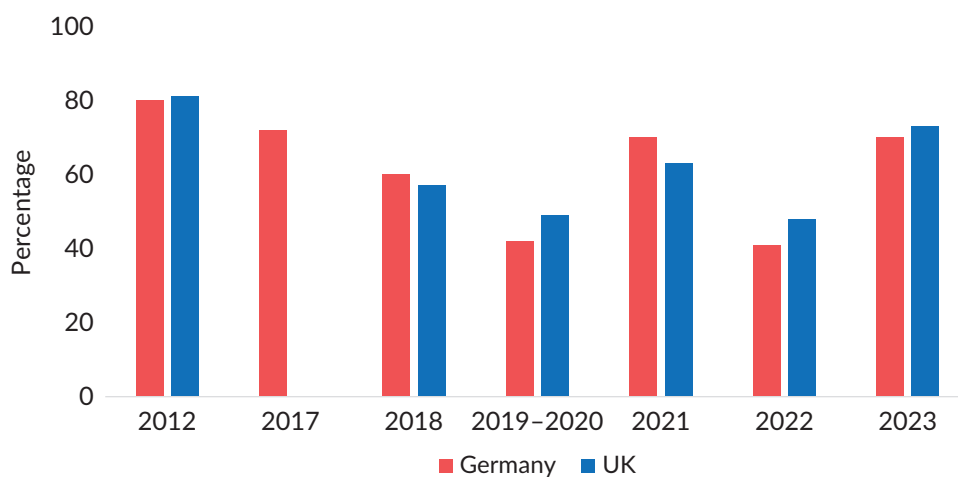
3. Citizen Support for Referendums

Empirical evidence of citizen preferences for more mass participation could already be seen in the 1970s, as shown by the Political Action project by Barnes and Kaase (1979), who explored this preference in five Western democracies. Wave 6 of the ESS in 2012 shows that 80% of Germans ranked referendums as a 7/10 or above, while approximately 38% ranked them as a 10. The same source of data indicates that in the UK the percentages are similar: almost 81% favour referendums with 7 or higher on the scale and almost 37% consider them to be extremely important for democracy in general; this is the maximum score on the scale (ESS, 2012). In the next Wave of ESS, in which both Germany and the UK were surveyed, namely Wave 10 (European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure, 2023a, 2023b), the percentage of Germans that ranked the importance of referendums as 7/10 or above dropped by 10% to 70%, with the highest support for referendums of 10/10 losing the most, from 38% to 30%. Respondents in the UK showed the same pattern, with the percentage of UK respondents ranking referendums with a 7/10 dropping from 81% to 73%, and the highest support for referendums dropping from 37% to 32%. These percentages are presented in Figure 1, with the data from ESS 10 falling under 2023, the year of their release.

Two surveys in Germany from 2017 and 2018 revealed support for referendums to be at 72% and 60% respectively, when respondents were asked whether they support the introduction of referendums on a national level (Vetter & Brettschneider, 2023, pp. 44–45). A survey conducted in 2018 on a representative sample of UK citizens shows that approximately 57% of the respondents believed that direct democracy should be adopted or implemented at the national level (Gherghina & Geissel, 2020). A 2019 study on the degree to which Germans trusted their democracy echoes the UK case. When asked to choose who should make decisions, 42% of Germans refer to nationwide referendums, more than those respondents who prefer representatives as the only decision-makers (40%; Decker et al., 2019, p. 39). Similarly, the YouGov Democracy Study found in 2020 that 49% of the British public believes that referendums are a good method for making important decisions for a country (Dinic, 2020).

A Pew Research Center study from 2021 found support for nationwide referendums in Germany to be approximately 70% (Wike et al., 2021). A national survey conducted in the UK using a representative sample indicated that 63% of respondents wanted to keep holding referendums to the same extent as until then, or even more frequently, to decide on important matters for the country (Electoral Calculus, 2021). A follow-up survey to the first Decker study done in 2022—again in Germany—asked the question differently and in relation to the addition of a new expertocracy-item, in which respondents again had to choose between different decision-makers. Approximately 41% of respondents believed direct democracy to be the best form of governance, followed by experts at 33%, and representatives at 25% (Decker et al., 2023, pp. 22–23).

Additional data covering related attitudes shows similar results. The willingness to participate in a national-level referendum in general was found to be at around 48% (Gherghina & Geissel, 2017, p. 31), but might be contingent on the topic. Grotz and Lewandowsky (2020) show that citizens strongly favour agenda-initiating referendums over mandatory referendums when deciding on amendments to the constitution. A 2022 study revealed that 48% of the UK respondents believe that "decisions on the most important issues should be made by everyone, voting in referendums." Similarly to the German case, the same study showed that support for referendums varies across policy issues with support as high as 71% for rejoining the EU or for deciding on a voting system. Much lower support for referendums occurs when people are asked about specific policies such as social care or pensions (Renwick et al., 2022). Figure 1 summarizes these percentages and illustrates two major observations: There is extensive support for referendums in Germany and the UK, and the levels are fairly similar across the two countries in the same year despite the different questions asked to gauge that support.

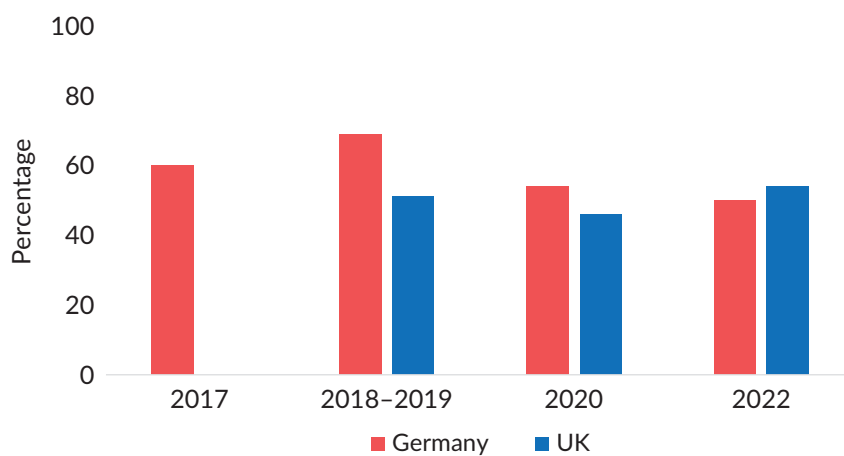**Figure 1.** Public support for referendums in Germany and the UK over time.

3.1. Citizen Support for Deliberative Practices

The support for deliberative practices is more difficult to gauge due to the fact that several practices are often included under the broader semantic umbrella of deliberation. Furthermore, few surveys ask about attitudes towards deliberative practices and the questions are usually quite specific. In the case of Germany, a 2017 study that focused on local deliberative practices found 6.04 points of mean support out of 10 points (Rojon & Pilet, 2021, p. 7).

A survey conducted in 2018 on a representative sample of UK citizens showed that approximately 51% of respondents agree that deliberative practices should be adopted or implemented at the national level (Gherghina & Geissel, 2020). The Civey 2019 survey found that almost 69% of German citizens support advisory mini-publics (Bürgerrat Demokratie, 2019). Another study in the same year revealed that 62% of respondents think that mini-publics are suitable as a form of government (Decker et al., 2019). Additional studies have found that support for deliberative mini-publics in Germany is not only less pronounced, but also contingent on policy issues and whether the mini-publics have deciding powers or play a more advisory role (Pilet et al., 2023; Rojon & Pilet, 2021).

In the UK, a 2022 study using a representative sample revealed that 54% of respondents support having citizens' assemblies becoming part of how the UK decides difficult political issues (Renwick et al., 2022). A survey fielded in March 2020 on national representative samples indicated that almost 54% of the Germans and approximately 46% of the UK respondents support the replacement of elected politicians by citizens selected by lot (Pilet et al., 2023). This is a radical version of deliberation and can be a possible explanation for why the levels of support are lower than those in previous years for Germany.

Overall, the support for deliberative practices in both countries (Figure 2) is lower on average than for referendums and more contingent on the practices and on the issues to be addressed (Goldberg et al., 2020; Pilet et al., 2023; Rojon & Pilet, 2021).

Figure 2. Public support for deliberative practices in Germany and the UK over time.

4. Referendums and Deliberative Practices in Party Manifestos

This section discusses the ways in which political parties in Germany and the UK cover the topic of referendums and deliberative practices in their manifestos. In the elections of 2013, 2017, and 2021, several German political parties called for some citizen involvement. Left-wing political parties were especially supportive: "We are fighting for the political majority to amend the Basic Law in order to introduce popular initiatives, referendums and plebiscites and thus strengthen democracy" (GRÜNE, 2013), or "We want to introduce popular initiatives and referendums at federal level. The expansion of co-determination rights also includes the introduction of referendums, i.e., citizens can veto parliamentary decisions" (Die Linke, 2021). The liberal-conservative parties support citizen involvement on specific topics such as the creation of a European Constitution: "The citizens of the EU are to decide on the new European Constitution in a joint European referendum and thus create the basis for a federal and decentralized European federal state" (FDP, 2021).

However, the support for citizen involvement has changed over time. In 2013, the SPD and the GRÜNE supported national-level referendums. In 2017, the SPD dropped support for nation-wide referendums and added in 2021 some support for deliberative practices. The GRÜNE supported national-level referendums until 2021, after which they withdrew their support for referendums altogether. Their manifesto is now silent on the topic. Instead, the GRÜNE switched in 2021 to supporting deliberative

practices. The CDU/CSU and the FDP are rather consistent in their silence on national-level referendums. The FDP supported referendums for very few topics in 2017, which they dropped in the next election. In the same year, the party added limited support for deliberative practices, which was increased in 2021 to full support for deliberative practices. The CDU/CSU did not mention deliberative practices in any of the manifestos covered in this article. The populist party AfD and Die Linke consistently supported referendums between 2013 and 2021. Die Linke added full support for deliberative practices in 2021. Figure 3 summarizes the support of each German party for referendums and deliberative practices over time (see Section 2 for details on our research design).

When it comes to the support of parties in the UK for referendums and deliberative practices, we also observe some shifts between the elections held in 2010 and 2019. Before the national elections in 2010, political parties were mostly talking about referendums as a method to legitimize the decisions made by the British citizens. The parties called for referendums whenever the national authorities had to decide on constitutional changes, e.g., "We would give people the power to determine this constitution in a citizens' convention, subject to final approval in a referendum" (Liberal Democrats, 2010).

The 2015 electoral manifestos show the intent to organise a referendum regarding EU membership. The SNP and Sinn Féin opposed such a referendum because they were both more concerned with independence referendums. For example, Sinn Féin "has called for a referendum on Irish Unity to be conducted in the next political term" (Sinn Féin, 2015). Starting with the national elections in 2017, the British political parties
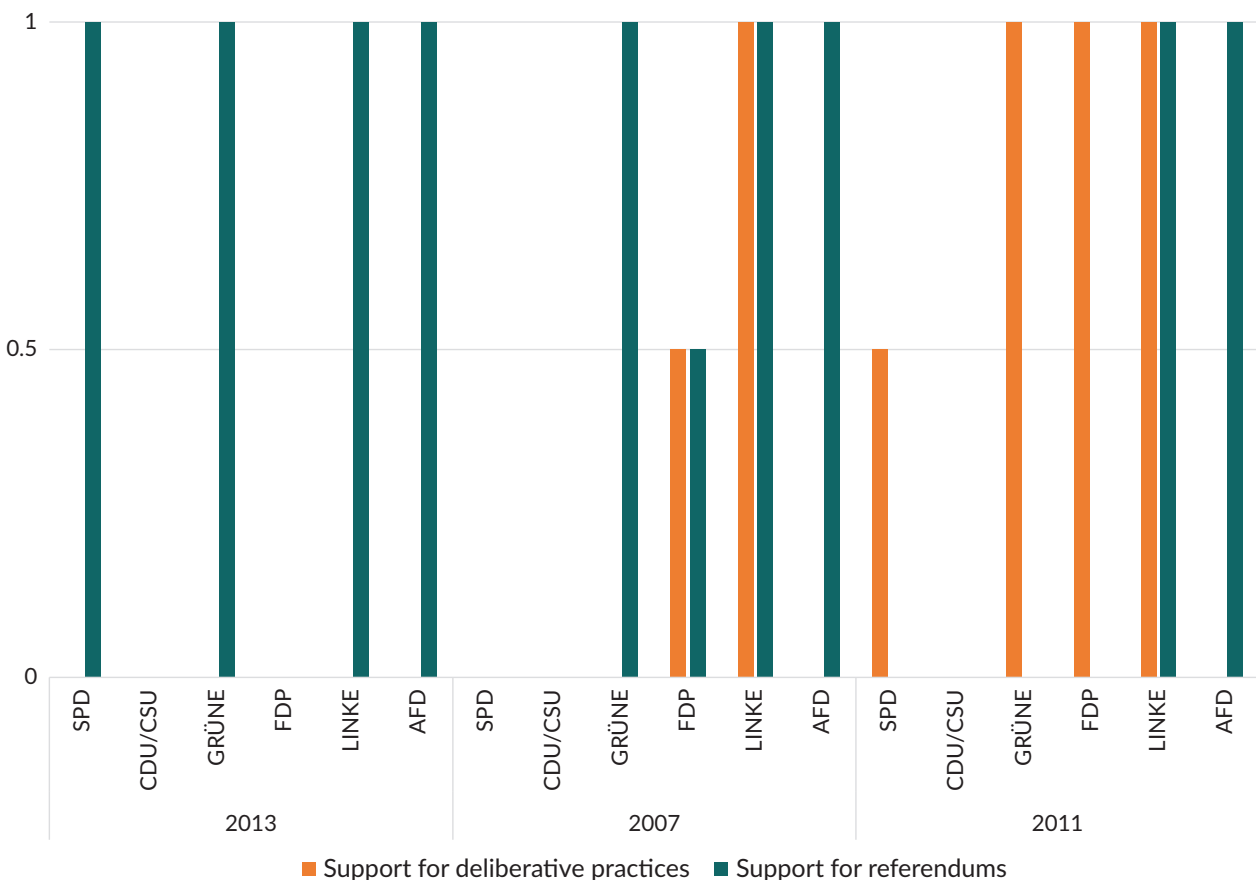
Figure 3. References to referendums or deliberative practices by party (Germany).

began discussing direct democracy through referendums, more precisely that there was a need to allow their citizens to express their views about Brexit and other important issues using referendums: "Given that an independence referendum would happen at the end of the Brexit process, this election also presents Scotland with a more immediate opportunity" (SNP, 2017); "If in a referendum the British people decide to remain in the EU, this must not mean accepting the status quo" (Labour Party, 2019).

Most references to referendums made by UK political parties refer to their use at national and regional levels, such as the independence referendum in Scotland, the Irish unity referendum in Northern Ireland, or the Welsh independence referendum. For example, "This will be the paving legislation that an incoming Plaid Cymru Government will bring forward in 2021, aimed at preparing for the referendum on Welsh independence that will take place before the end of the next decade" (Plaid Cymru, 2019); "Sinn Féin believes there should be a referendum vote on Irish unity within the next five years" (Sinn Féin, 2017); and also:

> We have a clear mandate to deliver a new referendum on becoming an independent country, and we are making it clear at this election that next year we intend to offer the people of Scotland a choice over their future. (SNP, 2019)

The UK parties are more heterogeneous when referring to deliberative practices. Some focus on the use or expansion of local participatory budgeting nationwide: "We will extend the use of participatory budgeting to give local people a stronger say" (Labour Party, 2010). Several political parties had referred in a couple of instances to the organisation of general or thematic citizens' assemblies:

> Establish UK and local citizens' assemblies to ensure that the public are fully engaged in finding solutions to the greatest challenges we face, such as tackling the climate emergency and the use of artificial intelligence and algorithms by the state. (Liberal Democrats, 2019)

And also: "The renewal of our Parliament will be subject to recommendations made by a UK-wide Constitutional Convention, led by a citizens' assembly" (Labour Party, 2019). Even though during the 2017 elections UK political parties focused on the use of referendums and respecting citizens' demands regarding the implementation of voting results for Brexit, none of the political parties included in the study has made any reference to the implementation or use of deliberative practices.

In general, there are no differences between the UK populist and non-populist parties in their references to referendums and deliberative practices. There is support for referendums across the board, which reflects the prominence of this topic on the British political agenda. The use of three referendums in the investigated decade (2011 and 2016 at the national level, and 2014 at the regional level), plus ongoing discussions about the possibility of other regional referendums, has enhanced this supportive attitude. The referendums lost a bit of momentum in the 2019 election manifestos, but this is not specific to populist or non-populist parties. Deliberative practices are rarely mentioned by the UK parties in general and by none of the populists in particular. The latter observation confirms earlier findings according to which populists rarely engage with deliberation (Gherghina & Mitru, 2024). Figure 4 summarizes the support for or silence on referendums and deliberative practices among the UK political parties.
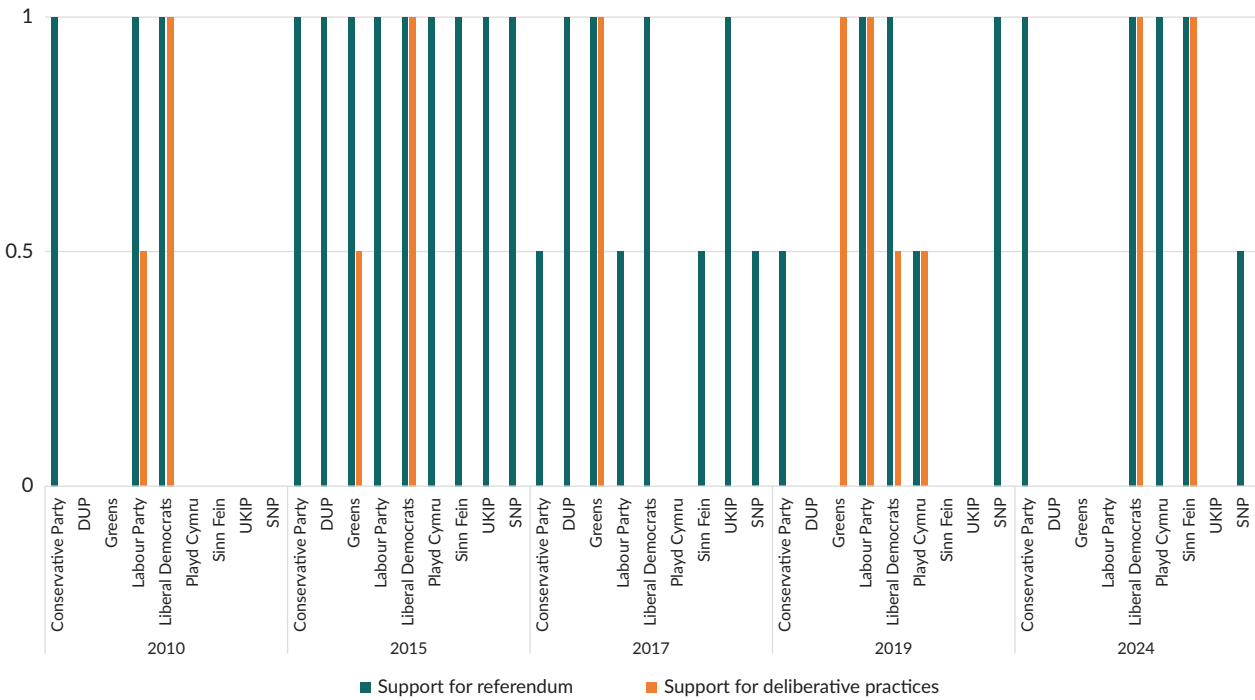
Figure 4. References to referendums or deliberative practices by party (UK).

Figure 5 provides an overview of the party-system support, which includes only the parties analysed here, for referendums and deliberative practices in Germany and the UK. The horizontal axis reflects the number of parties that supported referendums or deliberative practices in each country. For example, in Germany there were four parties that supported referendums in 2013 and thus the total on the vertical axis is 4. The maximum score in the two countries varies: It is 6 for Germany and 9 for the UK, based on the representation in Figures 3 and 4. In both countries we see changes in the last decade. Whereas in Germany the support for referendums decreased and the support for deliberative practices increased, the UK party landscape consistently supports referendums much more than deliberative practices. However, also in the UK, support for referendums decreased after a peek in 2015 and support for deliberative practices increased. In 2019 and 2024, there is a similar level of support for deliberative democracy, which may indicate a certain stabilisation of party rhetoric.

5. Citizens' and Parties' Support

This section brings together the findings from the previous two sections in an attempt to provide an answer to the research question. In Germany, citizens' support for referendums is strong and stable in the timeframe covered here. It is often above 70% in different surveys and always ranked first in terms of citizens' preferences for decision-making. Support for deliberative practices is also strong, around 60%, but it is more contingent on the issues addressed and the decision-making power of the deliberative practices.

The manifesto analysis indicates that political parties see referendums and deliberative practices differently than the public and rarely respond to citizens' preferences about them. The evidence presented above allows us to identify three main points of divergence between the public and political parties.
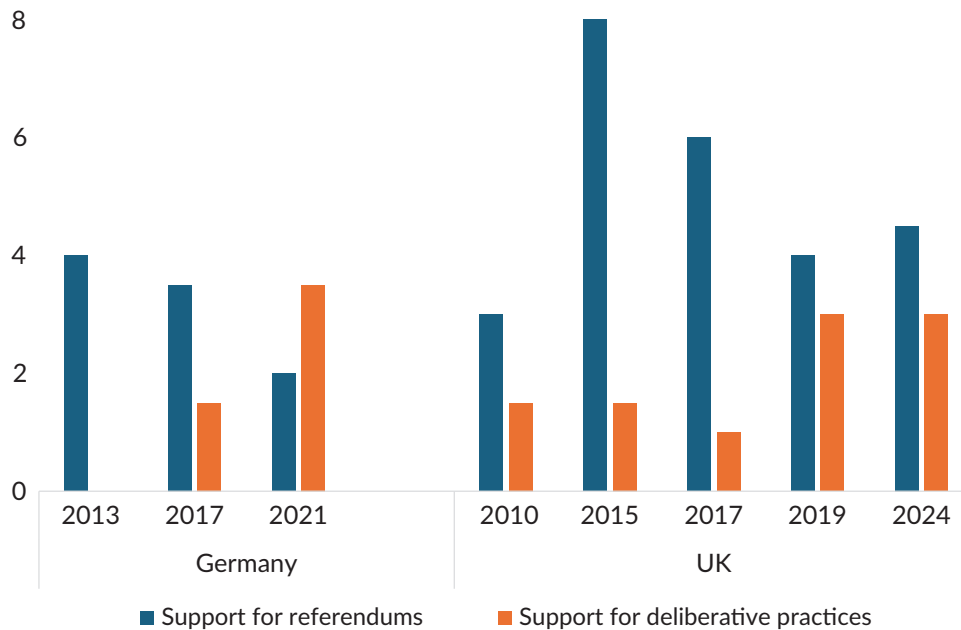
Figure 5. Party-system support for referendums and deliberative practices.

First, citizens' enthusiasm towards referendums and deliberative practices is hardly reflected in the party manifestos. On average, four of the six political parties covered in our analysis display this support, but they were not always the same parties. For example, FDP had no references to either referendum or deliberative practices in 2013, then had mild support for both in 2017, and in 2021 showed full support only for deliberative practices. The CDU/CSU and SPD, the two large parties that gauged between 50% and 67% of the votes in the three elections analysed here, show no or little interest in both.

Second, citizens consider referendums and deliberative practices as complementary and compatible models of decision-making and support both to a similar extent. In general, the German political parties support only one at a time, confirming the behaviour observed at country level around the world that these two models of decision-making are rarely favoured together (Geissel & Michels, 2018, pp. 129–146). Deliberative practices occurred later in the parties' discourse, but they gained terrain and determined a shift of several parties at the expense of direct democracy. The comparison of the three election years is illustrative of this "either/or" approach preferred by the parties in Germany: In 2013 the four parties supporting complementary participatory practices went for referendum; in 2017 two parties started supporting deliberative practices; and in 2021 only two parties supported referendums.

These results confirm earlier findings on party congruence, which indicate that parties rarely respond to citizens' preferences on various issues (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002; Invernizzi-Accetti & Wolkenstein, 2017; O'Grady & Abou-Chadi, 2019). The three parties that have been in the coalition government since 2021, i.e., the SPD, the GRÜNE, and the FDP, have cancelled their (in the case of the FDP only limited) support for referendums and switched to endorsing only deliberative practices between 2017 and 2021. This shift is quite contrary to the demands of citizens, who continued to strongly favour referendums. Only Die Linke and the AfD continued their support of referendums during this time. In general, the stable and relatively high support for referendums that citizens express is not matched by parties in Germany. The governing

parties switched to endorsing deliberative practices, which are somewhat less popular among the electorate and supported under more specific circumstances by citizens.

Third, it seems that parties that are in government or expect to become part of the government tend to drop their preference for referendums and switch to supporting deliberative practices. This was the case in the SPD, the GRÜNE, and the FDP.

In the UK, citizens' support for referendums is relatively high and stable, usually above 50% in surveys. There are some fluctuations: There were peaks in which more than 70% favoured referendums, but also low points after the Brexit referendum that created some divisions in society in which the support was about 40%. Support for deliberative practices is comparable with support for referendums, but it is more homogeneous. The UK parties reflect a somewhat different picture than what we observed in Germany. First, citizens' preferences for referendums are well reflected in parties' rhetorical support, which follows similar trends with public opinion. For example, citizens' support for referendums had a peak around 2012, which is mirrored in all the party manifestos in 2015. In 2019, the support for referendums among the UK public was somewhat lower, which was reflected in the absence of support for referendums among three UK parties and the partial support among the other two; only three out of eight parties fully supported the referendum and one of these was the SNP, that had a direct interest in pursuing at the time a second independence referendum for Scotland. The two large political parties, the Conservatives and Labour, are moderately or fully supportive of referendums.

Second, the UK parties see referendums and deliberative practices as complementary and compatible. All three political parties that make positive references to deliberation also support referendums. Third, citizens' support for deliberative practices is not reflected in party manifestos. Although two political parties, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, made references to deliberative practices in their 2010 manifestos, their rhetorical support is not continuous. For example, no political party in the UK makes references to deliberative practices in their 2017 manifestos. Equally important, there is no uptake among the other parties: Only one political party expressed moderate support for deliberation in one election manifesto (2019). In general, small parties in the UK do not refer to deliberative practices. The large party in government between 2010 and 2024, the Conservatives, makes no reference to deliberation, which resembles the behaviour of the German conservative party that was in government until 2021.

5.1. Populists vs Non-Populists: A Comparative Discussion

Our results confirm the conclusions of previous comparative work about the differences between populists and non-populists in their relationship with referendum and deliberative practices. Although populist parties are far from being a homogeneous group, in both Germany and the UK they strongly and continuously support referendums. In Germany, they do so in contrast to the other parties. In the UK, they do it to a similar extent as the non-populists. This support did not change over time. In the two countries, the populist parties appear to be slightly more congruent with citizens' support towards referendums compared to the non-populist parties. Such an observation is in line with the conclusions of comparative studies between populists and non-populists in Europe (Gherghina et al., 2024).

However, this observation overlaps with the differences between parties in opposition and in government. Our analysis shows that parties in opposition support referendums considerably more than those who were

in government in the analysed time period. Opposition parties that have little hope of getting into government tend to support referendums because they are not directly affected by any power-sharing with citizens. Since none of the populists were in government, the opposition status may explain their approach. The incumbency status is worth exploring, particularly since our findings do not indicate relevant differences in the support for referendums or deliberative practices between left- and right-wing parties in the two countries.

Populist parties rarely support deliberative practices and are thus less congruent with citizens' attitudes. We know from previous studies that there is little to gain for populists in deliberative practices and that may explain the reluctance of these parties to engage rhetorically with deliberation. In conclusion, non-populists are more congruent with citizens' attitudes towards deliberative practices than populists.

6. Conclusion

This article aimed to understand the extent to which political parties reflect in their manifestos the support expressed by citizens for referendums and deliberative practices in Germany and the UK. We examined the existence of a congruence or mismatch between citizens' attitudes and parties' rhetoric. The general picture is quite blurred: There is a relationship between citizens' preferences and parties' rhetoric, but there are considerable mismatches. This confirms earlier findings from other political settings (Garry et al., 2022). Most political parties in Germany have either never supported or recently stopped their support for referendums, thus not reflecting public support for referendums. In the UK, the popular support for referendums is reflected in parties' manifestos. The situation is different for deliberative practices: In Germany, the deliberative hype attracted both citizens and parties. An increasing number of parties display rhetorical support for deliberative processes similar to deliberative preferences within the population. In the UK, most political parties are indifferent to deliberative practices. However, Labour is among those few parties that support deliberation.

One finding is specifically instructive: In the German case, parties in the opposition have a higher tendency to support direct democratic practices. Government parties do not support referendums because they threaten their power-sharing monopoly but support deliberative practices that maintain the political power of parties. This is also partly true for the UK, where the Conservatives alternated between limited and full support for referendums over time. For example, they had high support for referendums in 2015, limited support in 2017 and 2019, and then again full support in 2024. However, this increase for 2024 is in line with the observation about government and opposition: The probability for the Conservatives to continue in government after the 2024 elections was very small and thus once again they embraced the idea of power-sharing mechanisms. In a comparative perspective, while the German parties in government switched completely to supporting deliberative procedures, the UK government parties support referendums to some degree.

One limitation of our study is the exclusive use of party manifestos at the national level, which may not reflect the complexity of parties' approaches towards referendums and deliberative practices. To address these shortcomings, future research could expand the number of observations. One way to do that is to include rhetoric used in elections at the local level, which is also the place where most direct and deliberative practices take place. Further studies could look also at parties' rhetoric as reflected in public speeches, press releases, or media interviews. More comparative research is necessary to test our observation of the different preferences between government and opposition parties.

Data Availability
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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About the Authors

Sergiu Gherghina is an associate professor in comparative politics at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow. His research interests lie in party politics, legislative and voting behaviour, democratization, and democratic innovations.

Brigitte Geissel is a professor of political science and political sociology and head of the research unit Democratic Innovations at Goethe University Frankfurt. Her research interests include democratic innovations, new forms of governance, and political actors (new social movements, associations, civil society, parties, political elites, and citizens).

Fabian Henger is a student assistant at the Chair of Political Science and Political Sociology at Goethe University Frankfurt. His research interests include political systems and democratic innovations in East Asia.