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Challenging Democracy: How Do Ideas of Populists and Disenchanted Citizens Align?

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EDITORIAL

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Challenging Democracy: Understanding How the Ideas of Populists and Disenchanted Citizens Align

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Abstract

This thematic issue proceeds from the idea that, despite extensive research, we do not know enough about the alternatives to representative party democracy that people disenchanted with democracy and populists envision apart from greater citizen involvement. Citizens' potential preferences seem to range from stealth democracy and decision-making by apolitical experts to deliberative mechanisms and referenda. The picture is equally blurred when it comes to the views of populist actors themselves. Research suggests that their calls for referendums diminish over time and that they reject deliberative bodies outright. This thematic issue reassesses our understanding of the extent to which populists' and citizens' ideas and the alternatives they propose coincide and argues for a wider dissemination of relevant research that explores these shortcomings. The articles presented explore these points by featuring conceptually and/or methodologically innovative contributions that address issues such as the mismatch between populists and citizens in terms of democratic alternatives, (dis)satisfaction with populist parties in public office, the preferences of distinct subgroups as well as the role of political emotions among populist party supporters.

Keywords

citizen preferences; democracy; ideology; illiberalism; methodology; non-mainstream ideas; populism; referendums

1. Introduction

In contemporary politics, both people and populist parties criticize existing democracy. Indeed, the two forms of critique are linked in that populists cite popular grievances as justification for their own actions. Despite

extensive research on populism, however, we do not know enough about how the ideas of disenchanted citizens and populists align (but see Craig, et al., 2001; Hawkins et al., 2018; Huber & Ruth, 2017). For example, what are the specific alternatives to representative party democracy that both citizens and populists envision? More citizen participation? But in what form? Or, do people prefer stealth democracy and "apolitical" experts to citizen juries (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Mohrenberg et al., 2021)?

2. Objectives of This Thematic Issue

Recent work on the interaction between radicalism and democratic attitudes has examined systematic patterns in how individuals with non-mainstream ideologies relate to democratic principles. In innovative ways, these studies distinguish between different types of democracy (Ferrin & Kriesi, 2016). Heinisch and Wegscheider (2020) and Geurkink et al. (2020) also show the importance of disentangling populism from the radical host ideology with which it is associated, as some people's evaluation of democracy is shaped by authoritarianism rather than populism or the resentment of native elites. However, these studies are empirically and conceptually limited and do not allow for the emergence of previously untheorized democratic alternatives. The literature has also paid too little attention to the resilience of democratic support in the face of crisis or potential political alternatives (Diamond & Morlino, 2005) and the normative trade-offs involved.

Even on the question of direct democracy, a review of the literature shows both disagreement on people's motivations, ranging from dissatisfaction with party democracy (Caramani, 2017) and feelings of exclusion by ruling elites (Dalton, 2004; Pauwels, 2014) to preferences for input versus output-focused concerns (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Landwehr & Steiner, 2017; Strebel et al., 2019). Moreover, it is not clear to what extent people's understanding of and agreement with direct democracy corresponds to what experts understand by this concept.

The picture is equally blurred when it comes to the views of populist actors themselves. According to Mudde (2007, p. 152), almost all populist radical right parties call for the introduction or the increased use of referendums. However, recent research suggests that populist actors are less likely than non-populist actors to call for referendums and that their preference for referendums declines over time (Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020). Moreover, some authors show that populist voters are no more supportive of referendums than voters of other parties (Fölsch et al., 2024; Rooduijn, 2018). Alternatively, deliberative bodies designed to increase political participation in a more pluralistic way tend to be generally rejected by populists (Geurkink et al., 2020, p. 9). Finally, a similar tension exists between populism and a technocratic model of government. Bickerton and Accetti (2018) describe populists as technopopulist parties, while Caramani (2017) has systematically discussed what populism and technocracy have in common and how they differ.

Investigating this question also requires addressing methodological limitations. Support for democracy has largely been measured in rather general ways (Carlin & Singer, 2011; Inglehart, 2003; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007), while the use of innovative survey items, scenario-based interviews, and survey experiments (e.g., Baviskar & Malone, 2004; Braizat, 2010; Lu, 2013; Werner, 2019) to uncover the specific features that citizens associate with democracy has been limited.

3. Overview of the Contributions

The current state of scholarship has reached a point where we need to reassess our understanding of the extent to which the ideas of populists, citizens, and the alternatives they propose coincide. The articles in this issue, therefore, address the questions previously presented by offering conceptually and/or methodologically sophisticated contributions. Specifically, the issue consists of 13 articles that explore the aforementioned issues, conceptual questions, and methodological approaches.

Jean-Benoit Pilet, Davide Vittori, Emilien Paulis, and Sebastien Rojon examine which actors populist supporters prefer to see governing (Pilet et al., 2024). In this contribution, the authors surveyed people in eight European countries and found that citizens who are more sympathetic to populist parties, support models of government that challenge representative democracy. The findings reveal a complex relationship with democracy, as people prefer more input from citizens, but also from experts, which hardly matches the preferences of populist parties.

Simon D. Brause and Lucy Kinski analyze whether populist party voters would become more satisfied with democracy as populist parties gain success (Brause & Kinski, 2024). The authors analyzed data from 21 countries and found that populist parties in Europe are not more responsive to populist party voters than mainstream parties. However, while populist parties' agenda responsiveness increases voter satisfaction with democracy, populists in government do not appear to have a similar effect.

Viktoria Jansesberger and Susanne Rhein argue that female voters and radical right parties have different ideas about the delineation of in-groups and out-groups in society (Jansesberger & Rhein, 2024). They base this on evidence that women care more about specific attributes of democracy than men do. This helps explain why there is a gender gap in support for these parties. The authors employ data from the European Social Survey to support their ideas.

Nina Wiesehomeier and Saskia P. Ruth-Lovell examine how trust affects support for direct democracy (Wiesehomeier & Ruth-Lovell, 2024). Using original survey data from Argentina, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, the authors distinguish between different objects of trust, including elites, institutions, "the people," and society as a whole. The results highlight different groups of citizens and emphasize the importance of horizontal and vertical trust dynamics in preferences for different configurations of direct democracy.

Sergiu Gherghina, Brigitte Geissel, and Fabian Henger explore direct democracy and the rise of referendums and citizen deliberation (Gherghina et al., 2024). The article looks at 15 political parties in Germany and the UK. Drawing on party manifesto data from 2010 to 2024, the authors find that political parties and citizens rarely agree on the use of referendums and other forms of direct democracy. Furthermore, people's enthusiasm for these methods is seldom reflected in the parties' rhetoric. However, in terms of direct democracy, parties differ in their responsiveness and on whether they are in government or opposition.

Anne Küppers also deals with representative democracy but in the context of examining the role of conspiracy beliefs (Küppers, 2024). Using survey data from Germany, this author shows that belief in conspiracy theories is positively associated with a preference for direct democratic decision-making, but

crucially also with a preference for expert-based decision-making. As such, these findings dovetail with Pilet et al. (2024) in this issue.

Marco Fölsch asks whether affective polarization and populism affect the support for holding referendums (Fölsch, 2024). Using survey data from Austria and Germany, he finds that being affectively polarized has a positive effect on the support for holding referendums. However, this effect is moderated by citizens' individual-level populism.

Lea Kaftan proceeds from the idea that elected leaders, with the support of their voters, challenge liberal democratic institutions during election campaigns (Kaftan, 2024). This article looks at how post-war German citizens and parties have addressed democracy and liberal democracy in their regional and national election platforms. The findings show that democracy per se and conceptions of democracy in party competition can be both valiance issues and positional issues depending on the given positional logic. The same applies to the concepts of social and direct democracy, even in times without democratic backsliding.

Zsolt Enyedi continues the thread of challenges to democracy by theorizing the relationship between populism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism (Enyedi, 2024). The analysis conceptualizes the existence of nine different routes to illiberalism and identifies these pathways as authoritarian, traditionalist, religious, libertarian, nativist-nationalist, populist, paternalist, materialist-technocratic, and leftist. Illiberalism is conceived not as a stage between democracy and dictatorship, nor as a specific ideology, but as a complex ideational syndrome that inspires action against liberal democracy.

Annika Werner and Reinhard Heinisch test individuals' attitudes toward liberal democracy when being forced to consider effective but constitutionally suspect countermeasures to Covid-19 (Werner & Heinisch, 2024). The authors' survey experiment reveals contrary to the expectations: Feeling affected by the pandemic alone makes little difference in the respondent's willingness to adopt illiberal or anti-democratic policies. However, respondents are shown to be less likely to resist illiberal and anti-democratic policies, if they are personally affected and if they are also authoritarian or distrustful of the government.

Jochem Vanagt, Katrin Praprotnik, Luana Russo, and Markus Wagner deal with affective polarization too (Vanagt et al., 2024). Proceeding from the idea that affective dislike toward the radical right is well-established, the authors ask about the perspective of radical right supporters toward others. The researchers examine the differentiation of dislike of mainstream parties among these voters in nine European polities. The results show that some dislike all mainstream parties, while others show a more familiar pattern along ideological lines. Crucially, however, the dislike differentiation among radical right supporters is related to, among other things, ideological extremism, satisfaction with democracy, and political tolerance.

Fabian Habersack and Carsten Wegscheider argue that deprivation and feeling left behind increase one's sense of not being represented in politics (Habersack & Wegscheider, 2024). Using data from the *German Longitudinal Election Study* of 2021, the authors find that both perceptions of personal and societal deprivation as well as a greater perceived distance from government are associated with populist attitudes. Those who struggle economically care less about political representation, while among those who are better off, distance from the government is an effective driver of populist attitudes.

Cristiano Gianolla, Lisete Mónico, and Manuel João Cruz contend that there is insufficient research on the democratic views of radical right populism (Gianolla et al., 2024). To address this, the article uses the heuristic of "emotion narrative" to examine their political culture. The article evaluates the parties Chega and Fratelli d'Italia in Portugal and Italy, respectively, and finds that radical right populist parties use emotion to create exclusionary identities with an affinity for centralism.

We hope that those interested in comparing how citizens and populists challenge democracy will find this thematic issue to be an informative and useful collection of articles.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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The Preferred Governing Actors of Populist Supporters: Survey Evidence From Eight European Countries

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Abstract

Populist parties have been shown to attract many voters disillusioned with representative democracies. And some of these parties do indeed propose models of government that challenge contemporary democratic systems. However, we do not know exactly what the democratic preferences of populist party supporters are. We propose to fill this gap by investigating the types of actors that citizens who are more sympathetic to populist parties would like to see play a greater role in their national political system. First, we find that populists believe that citizens should be more involved, highlighting the people-centred nature of populism. Second, they advocate a greater role for business leaders, military generals, and religious leaders, a preference found among both right-wing and left-wing populists. Third, left-wing populists show a unique preference for scientific experts in government, suggesting a technocratic inclination. Conversely, right-wing populists are particularly critical of elected politicians, underlining their deep anti-elitist attitudes. Our findings suggest that, among citizens who are more sympathetic to populist parties, there is support for models of government that challenge representative democracy. The question is whether populist parties would be influenced by these citizens to push for institutional reforms.

Keywords

authoritarianism; democratic preferences; populist parties; populist voters; process preferences

1. Introduction

In the ever-growing literature on populism, one of the questions that has attracted attention in recent years is how populists relate to democracy and may potentially challenge it (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert,

2020; Zaslove et al., 2020). This debate is rooted in broader academic debates on citizens' disenchantment with representative democracy and on growing support for alternative models of government (Hibbing et al., 2023; Valgarðsson et al., in press). In the literature on populism and democracy, a first important question has been whether populist citizens and voters are democrats or rather hold more authoritarian views and would support a move away from democracy or at least some of its dimensions (especially the rule of law and respect for minority rights; Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Wuttke et al., 2023; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023). Other scholars have tried to examine the support of populist citizens for different alternatives to pure representative democracy, such as direct democracy, deliberative democracy, or technocracy (Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2023; Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2019).

However, this last strand of research has assessed populists' support for these actors in isolation. Recently, scholars have proposed a more direct comparison of support for different models of government by jointly examining citizens' process preferences (Beiser-McGrath et al., 2022; Font et al., 2015; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019; Hibbing et al., 2023; Pilet et al., 2024), that is, their preferences for how the political system should be organised and, in particular, which actors should govern. In this article, we build on this approach, and in particular on the survey battery developed by Hibbing et al. (2023), to systematically investigate how voters of populist parties want government to be organised and which actors they want to play a major role in shaping policy decisions. In particular, we examine whether populist voters—both on the radical right and the radical left—differ from voters of other parties in their process preferences. Our study follows in the footsteps of some previous studies that have taken a similar approach (see Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020) and proposes the most comprehensive comparative study to date, based on data from a survey conducted in the winter of 2022 in eight European democracies: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, and the Netherlands.

Our data show that both anti-politician and pro-citizen attitudes are strongly related to support for populist parties (left and right). Somewhat surprisingly, we found that right-wing populists are less enthusiastic about scientific experts than left-wing populists: In this respect, Covid-19 and right-wing scepticism towards medical experts in government may have played a role. While right-wing populist supporters are more inclined to trust non-traditional actors (such as businesspersons, religious leaders, and military generals), we would not expect this to be the case for left-wing populist supporters. However, our data show that supporters of left-wing populist parties appear to be more favourable towards these actors in government.

The article is structured as follows. In the second section, we build on previous research on citizens' process preferences and populist voters, and on citizens' attitudes towards representative democracy and its alternatives, to develop a set of hypotheses. In the third section, we present our data and methodology. In the fourth section of the article, we empirically test our hypotheses. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for the literature on populism and democratic preferences.

2. Earlier Research and Hypotheses

In this study, we propose to examine the relationship between decision-making processes and support for populist parties. In this respect, we depart from most previous studies that have chosen to examine populist citizens, defined as citizens who score high on batteries of populist attitudes (A. Akkerman et al., 2014). Building on this instrument, scholars have examined correlations between populist attitudes and support for

democracy in general, as well as for direct and deliberative democracy or technocracy (Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2023; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020; Wuttke et al., 2023; Zaslove et al., 2020; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023).

The decision to study voters of populist parties is motivated by the structural electoral growth of these parties across Europe. Populist attitudes tend to be more pronounced at the extremes of the left–right scale, but overall they are limited in public opinion (Vittori, Rojon, et al., 2023; Wuttke et al., 2023). For this reason, the overlap between populist party supporters and populist citizens is only partial: The well-documented mainstreaming of the radical right (T. Akkerman et al., 2016) and the electoral success of radical left parties is a consequence of the broader electoral appeal of these parties to non-populist citizens as well (Van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018). As political parties respond to their support base (Spoon & Klüver, 2014), knowing the process preferences of their supporters may be a good indicator of the parties' positions on these less documented issues. However, as the literature on the process preferences of populist voters remains scarce (see van der Brug et al., 2021 for an exception), we will mostly rely on the literature on populist citizens to build our hypotheses. A lively debate within this literature is whether populists have democratic preferences or whether they lean towards more authoritarian views. This debate stems from broader theoretical debates about the democratic or undemocratic nature of populism as an ideology (Canovan, 1999; Urbinati, 2014) and of populist parties (Vittori, 2022). Scholars have subsequently attempted to examine whether citizens with populist attitudes and voters of populist parties hold authoritarian or democratic views on how the political system should be organised.

In this article, we do not seek to contribute to this debate on the democratic character of populist citizens, nor do we insist on the democratic credentials of populist parties. Rather, we propose to build on another strand of research within the study of populism, which has examined which actors within a democratic system populists want to see play a central role in government. The questions that this study addresses are: What kind of actors do supporters of populist parties want to see play a greater role in shaping policy? And what are the differences between populist radical left and populist radical right voters in this respect?

Theoretically, we define populism as a thin-centred ideology that "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). One of the tenets of populism is its anti-elitist stance and, in particular, its anti-political elite stance: Populism has been defined as hostile to pluralism (Urbinati, 2014), as it rejects that society is made up of different groups with different interests. For populists, the homogeneity of people is translated into the homogeneity of social interests (Caramani, 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that the literature has examined the attitudes of populist citizens towards elected politicians and political parties, which are the core actors of the contemporary representative model of democracy. The findings are very consistent in this respect. Populist citizens and voters are disaffected democrats (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020), meaning that they are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their country (Zaslove & Meijers, 2023) and this is because they have very negative views of politicians and political parties (A. Akkerman et al., 2014; Rooduijn, 2018). Building on those studies, we can formulate a first hypothesis:

H1: Supporters of populist parties hold more negative attitudes toward elected politicians.

Another recurring and fairly well-studied dimension of populist citizens' and voters' views on how the political system should function and which actors should be given a key role in shaping policy decisions is that they strongly favour giving citizens a greater and more direct role. One of the three core dimensions of populism is people-centrism (A. Akkerman et al., 2014; Mudde, 2004). It is defined as support for a model of government in which core decisions are left directly to citizens, without the mediation of elected politicians, political parties, or representative institutions. In this context, several authors have shown a strong preference of populist citizens and voters for more referendums (Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Rojon & Rijken, 2020; Wuttke et al., 2023; Zaslove et al., 2020). On this basis, we can propose a second hypothesis:

> H2: Supporters of populist parties hold more positive attitudes toward giving citizens a greater and more direct role in policy-making.

Another area of interest that has recently emerged in studies of the types of governance that populist citizens and voters support, and the actors they would like to see empowered, is the relationship between populism and technocracy. Within this area of research, views are more mixed, both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, as discussed by Caramani (2017), populism and technocracy share some similarities, such as scepticism towards the party model of government and the idea that there is a single and accessible "best solution" for every policy decision. At the same time, the two models of government are very different in other respects. In particular, while populism is based on a deep trust in the ability of the people to govern, technocracy is based on the assumption that only a few experts have the necessary skills to govern. This ambivalent view of the links between populism and technocracy is reflected in empirical research. First, when populist parties are in government and electorally strong, they tend to appoint more technocrats than non-populist parties (Pilet et al., 2023). At the level of public opinion, some studies find a correlation between populist attitudes and support for a greater political role for independent experts (Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2023; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020). In contrast, other studies have shown that populist citizens have more negative views of science and scientific experts (Eberl et al., 2023). Although the literature is divided on this point, we propose a third hypothesis that postulates a positive relationship between populism and support for scientific experts:

> H3: Supporters of populist parties hold more positive attitudes toward giving a greater role in policy-making to scientific experts.

So far, all our hypotheses have been based on the idea that all populist voters share common views on how the political system should be organised. However, we also know from previous research that even if populist voters share some political attitudes, they form a rather heterogeneous group, especially when comparing voters of radical right and radical left populist parties (Rooduijn et al., 2017). In this respect, Heinisch and Wegscheider (2020) have shown that there are dimensions of the democratic preferences of populist citizens that are common to all populist citizens, but also other dimensions on which there are substantial differences related to the host ideology to which populism is attached (radical right or radical left). Following their example, we therefore propose to discuss where the supporters of radical right and radical left parties may differ in their preferences for who should govern.

First, what supporters of different types of populist parties have in common, in terms of their views on how government should work, is a negative evaluation of elected politicians and support for a greater and more

direct role for citizens in policy-making (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; van Dijk et al., 2020). These two aspects are directly related to two of the core dimensions of populism: anti-elitism and people-centrism (Mudde, 2004).

However, there are also dimensions of process preferences on which we can expect differences between voters of radical right and radical left populist parties. A first difference could be derived from studies on the so-called stealth democracy model (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Stealth democrats are described as citizens who are dissatisfied with representative democracy and elected politicians, but who do not want to move to a model of greater citizen participation. Rather, they want political decisions to be taken more quickly by independent actors who have acquired skills outside party politics. Experts, but also business leaders, are seen as such actors. This strand of research is useful for this study because several authors have linked stealth democratic attitudes and populism (Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Stoker & Hay, 2017; Webb, 2013). The two are not identical, but they share some features, such as a dislike of more consensual and deliberative ways of making policy, or the idea that decisive action should be taken by political outsiders. Support for such actors is often associated with more authoritarian views of politics and, more generally, with authoritarian regimes. In consolidated democracies, however, some citizens have been found to want to retain the core principles of democracy, but to involve these actors in political decision-making (Meyer et al., 2008). In Western countries, this link between populism and covert democratic views seems to be particularly strong when it comes to radical right-wing populism. It is less often associated with left-wing ideology (Hibbing et al., 2023; Pilet et al., 2023). This is because while both left-wing and right-wing populists are anti-elitist, their conception of anti-elitism and people-centredness is different: Right-wing populism is associated with a nationalist conception of the people, with a strong emphasis on old-fashioned traditions (Taggart, 2000) and a law-and-order approach to those who are not part of the people. Left-wing populism, on the other hand, is closer to the demands of populist social movements (Aslanidis, 2017), such as an emphasis on the inclusion of excluded minorities and lower social classes in the decision-making process. In particular, it is less likely that radical left populist voters would welcome giving business and religious leaders a greater role in politics. This is because supporters of radical right populist parties have stronger religious beliefs and hold authoritarian views (Dunn, 2015; Immerzeel et al., 2013; Tillman, 2021), while the opposite is true for supporters of radical left populist parties (Rooduijn et al., 2017; Visser et al., 2014):

> H4: Contrary to supporters of populist radical left parties, supporters of radical right populist parties hold more positive attitudes toward giving a greater role in policy-making to business leaders, religious leaders, and military generals.

3. Data and Method

We propose a comparative approach to test our hypotheses. Indeed, one of the main weaknesses of previous research on populists' preferences for how government should work is that it is mostly based on single-country case studies (and mostly in Northwestern Europe). Comparative research is scarce, while country differences may be important in shaping individuals' views on how the political system should be organised. Such cross-country differences have been observed, for example, in several papers examining support for liberal democracies among populists (van der Brug et al., 2021; Wuttke et al., 2023; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023).

3.1. Survey

For this article, we rely on an online survey fielded in January 2022 by the survey company Qualtrics, which covers eight countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, and the Netherlands. In the case of Belgium, we collected two samples, one for the French-speaking region and one for the Dutch-speaking region. In our sample, we include parliamentary democracies belonging to Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Czechia), Western Europe (Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands), Southern Europe (Greece), and Scandinavian countries (Denmark and Finland). We include countries with different levels of political institutionalization because it might be an important contextual variable affecting citizens' preferences for actors in government. We consider young (Bulgaria, Czechia, and Greece) and established democracies (the remaining five countries). There are countries with substantial previous involvement of technocrats in government (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, and Greece), and countries with no (e.g., Ireland) or limited previous experience of technocrats in government (Vittori, Pilet, et al., 2023). There are countries where direct democracy has often been used at the national and local level (Denmark and the Netherlands) or for major decisions (Greece), and others with limited or no experience with referenda (Hollander, 2019). There are democracies with higher trust in representative institutions (Denmark and the Netherlands) compared to those with intermediate (Greece) or low trust (Bulgaria and Czechia). As for the political system, the country selection ensures variation in party systems and the logic of government (ranging from single-party governments to broad coalitions). Finally, they present different configurations regarding populist parties, in terms of host ideology, electoral strength, and position within the party system (e.g., in power vs. ostracized challenger parties). Each country has a sample of approximately 1,500 respondents. Four stratification criteria were used to make the samples representative of the whole population in each country: age, gender, place of residence, and education. Since we could not match the exact quotas for each criterion, we weighted our sample to correct for underrepresented groups. In the Supplementary File, we provide full information about the sample in each country, the quotas, and the mismatches we have identified. The survey duration was approximately 15 minutes and included questions related to political attitudes, voting behaviour, process preferences, and respondents' socio-demographic characteristics. Attention checks were included during the survey: Respondents who did not pass the attention checks were dropped.

3.2. Dependent and Independent Variables

The dependent variables capture the views of populist voters regarding the role of four sets of actors that could be given a key role in shaping policy decisions in their country: elected politicians, citizens, scientific experts, and a fourth cluster of actors composed of business leaders, military generals, and religious leaders. The measures build upon the approach recently proposed by Hibbing et al. (2023) and replicated by Pilet et al. (2024). Hibbing and colleagues first developed a comprehensive battery of 21 survey items to capture citizens' process preferences (see Appendix I in the Supplementary File 1) and tested it for the case of the United States. They identified, via factor analysis, seven dimensions. The first revolves around citizens' capabilities as decision-makers; the second focuses on politicians' capabilities as decision-makers; the third is about conferring power to the people; the fourth is about transferring power to scientific experts; the fifth assumes shifting power to non-traditional actors, such military and business leaders; the sixth suggests empowering generic actors closer to citizens; and the final seventh dimension measures perceptions of the nature of governing. Based on the test of the same battery replicated in Europe, Pilet et al. (2024) identified five core dimensions that are consistent across the countries covered in this article. These dimensions are

aligned with those identified by Hibbing and colleagues, except for the third dimension (conferring power to the people) and the sixth dimension (actors closer to citizens; see Table 1). We thus focus on four dimensions and the policy-making role of (a) elected politicians, (b) citizens, (c) scientific experts, and (d) business leaders, military generals, and religious leaders. We leave out the fifth dimension which is not about who should govern but how decisions should be taken (consensus vs. majoritarian democracy). The factor scores extracted from the factor analyses are used as dependent variables in our regressions.

The main independent variable is the sympathy score for the populist parties in the eight countries under analysis. The wording of the question was the following: "How would you rate your feelings about each of the following political parties on a scale ranging from "very negative" (0) to "very positive" (100)?" Using the PopuList classification, we identified whether parties are populist or not. As we have separate expectations for left-wing and right-wing populist parties, we have considered populist left-wing parties as those that are "populist" and "far left" in the PopuList and populist right-wing parties as those that are "populist" and "far right." The full list of populist parties and their ideological inclination is available in Appendix II of the Supplementary File 1. In total, we identified 16 populist parties in our dataset: 9 radical right, 5 radical left, and 2 that are neither radical right nor radical left. Building on earlier research, we have added PTB-PVDA (The Workers' Party) in Belgium as a populist radical left party (Goovaerts et al., 2020) and excluded the New Flemish Alliance in Belgium, which is listed as a borderline case of right-wing populism.

For this study, we decided to focus on supporters of populist parties rather than citizens with populist attitudes as in other studies (Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2023; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Zaslove et al., 2020). Looking at populist citizens is extremely insightful, but would pose a problem for the goal of this study. Our aim is to examine whether supporters of populist parties differ from citizens who do not support these parties in terms of the actors they want to govern. Two of the four groups of actors that we examine are elected politicians and citizens. By definition, if we were to correlate populist attitudes with support for politicians and citizens as policy-makers, we would find a strong association, as attitudes towards these two actors are two of the three constituent dimensions of populist attitudes (Gherghina & Pilet, 2021). Studying the process preferences of populist voters is more interesting as the overlap between populist attitudes and populist voting is only partial (Hawkins et al., 2020; Van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018). In some countries under analysis, there is more than one relevant populist party (Appendix II of the Supplementary File 1). Therefore, we stacked our dataset to have each respondent providing a score for each populist party in the country. Our main independent variable is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 100, as indicated above. However, in order to make the analysis more convincing, we carry out two further robustness tests: In the first, instead of having a continuous variable, we have dichotomised it, distinguishing between respondents who support the populist parties (score above 50) and those who do not (score below 50). In the second robustness test, we subset our sample to include only those who scored above 50 on the scale of sympathy for populist parties. The results are robust and consistent regardless of whether we use continuous or binary variables for measuring support for populist parties (Appendices VI and VII of the Supplementary File 1).

We have also included other controls in our analyses that are relevant to the study of process preferences. Indeed, in addition to the traditional socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education, and subjective income), we included as controls several political attitudes, i.e., political interest, internal efficacy, and left–right self-positioning. These variables have been commonly used (either as explanatory or as control

variables) in previous analyses of process preferences, whether in support for particular models of democracy (Bedock & Pilet, 2020; Christensen & von Schoultz, 2019; Font et al., 2015; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019; Hibbing et al., 2023; Pilet et al., 2024; Webb, 2013) or their combination (Haesevoets et al., 2023, 2024). The descriptive statistics and the wording of the questions can be found in Appendix III of the Supplementary File 1.

3.3. Methods

In order to detect how citizens are split according to the actors they prefer to be in government, we first ran the same factor analysis as in Pilet et al. (2024), which is based on the 21-item battery we described above. To do so, we relied on the *factanal* function in R with varimax rotation, reporting Thompson's scores. The results of the factor analysis (pooled sample and by country) are presented in Appendix IV of the Supplementary File 1. Using the same data and items as in Pilet et al. (2024), we found the exact same five dimensions: (a) citizens' capabilities as decision-makers, (b) politicians' capabilities as decision-makers, (c) transferring power to scientific experts, (d) transferring power to non-traditional actors, and (e) the nature of governing. These dimensions are robust across countries. For our analysis, we decided to exclude the fifth dimension, as we are interested only in actors in government (Table 1).

After the factor analysis, to generate our dependent variables, we extracted each respondent's loading onto each factor. Therefore, each respondent has as many factor scores as the number of dimensions identified by the factor analysis (i.e., four, as we left aside the fifth one). For the dimensions related to the political role of citizens, scientists, and non-traditional actors, a higher factor score means that the respondent is in favour of giving a greater political role to this actor (citizens, politicians, scientific actors, non-traditional actors). For politicians, it goes in the opposite direction because the items of the survey battery are all phrased negatively. Therefore, a higher score means being more negative about elected politicians.

We ran four ordinary least square regressions with country fixed effects, in which the respondents' factor loadings on the four dimensions are our dependent variables, while the sympathy score for the populist parties is our main independent variable. Due to the stacked nature of the dataset, we clustered the standard errors at the respondent level. For all four dimensions, we distinguish between one model with all populist parties clustered together, one model where we include countries with radical left populist parties only, and one model where we include countries with radical right populist parties only.

Table 1. Dimensions under analysis in Hibbing et al. (2023), Pilet et al. (2024), and the present study.

Hibbing et al. (2023)	Pilet et al. (2024)	Present study
Citizens	Citizens	Citizens
Politicians	Politicians	Politicians
Power to the People	Experts	Experts
Experts	Non-traditional actors	Non-traditional actors
Non-traditional actors	Nature of governing	—
Actors closer to citizens	—	—
Nature of governing	—	—

4. Empirical Analysis

The main results of our analyses are presented in Table 2 (the full model specification can be found in Appendix V of the Supplementary File 1). Our first hypothesis (H1) was based on the well-established anti-elitist sentiments of populist citizens. Reflecting their negative views of politicians and political parties and their dissatisfaction with democracy in general, we expected populist supporters to hold negative views of politicians as decision-makers (and therefore to have higher factor score on that dimension—see methods section above). Our results in the first column (*Politicians*, *All pop*) confirm this expectation: A one-point increase in support for populist parties is associated with a $\beta = 0.003$ ($p < 0.001$) increase in the negative evaluation of politicians. This means that H1 is fully supported: The more individuals support populist parties, the more negative their view of politicians.

However, although we hypothesized that this effect would be present regardless of the host ideology of the populist party (radical left or radical right), the outcomes of the regression models distinguishing between radical left and right populist party supporters lead to a more nuanced conclusion. Indeed, we found that the effect in the main model seems to be driven mainly by supporters of radical right populist parties (Table 2, column three: *Right pop*). Indeed, while the coefficient is positive for both types of populist parties, it remains statistically significant only for supporters of a radical right populist party ($\beta = 0.004$, $p < 0.001$). This means that the support for radical left populist parties is not associated with holding negative views of politicians (Table 2, column two: *Left pop*), whereas the higher the support for radical right populist parties the more negative is the evaluation of the current political elite. This finding is consistent with some findings highlighting that if radical right and left populist voters share protest attitudes (distrust of politicians and parties, dissatisfaction with democracy) to a greater extent than mainstream voters, these attitudes are more strongly correlated with support for radical right than left populist parties (Goovaerts et al., 2020).

Our second hypothesis taps into a second core dimension of populism, namely people-centrism. Indeed, the literature has emphasised that populist citizens want to have a greater say in decision-making and are positive about models of democracy that give more direct power to ordinary citizens. The results of our analysis fully confirm this view and thus support H2. Indeed, Table 2 column four (*Citizens*, *All pop*) shows positive and statistically significant coefficients for the citizen dimension ($\beta = 0.003$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that populist party supporters tend to score higher on the ability of citizens to act as decision-makers. Moreover, this correlation is similar for radical left ($\beta = 0.004$, $p < 0.001$) and radical right party sympathy ($\beta = 0.004$, $p < 0.001$; Table 2, columns five and six: *Citizens*, *Left pop* and *Right pop*). This is unsurprising, as the literature has shown that radical supporters are much more supportive of direct democracy and referendums than mainstream voters (Rojon & Rijken, 2020; van Dijk et al., 2020).

Our third hypothesis rests on the debated proximity between populism and technocracy. Using theoretical grounds of techno-populism as a benchmark, we expected that populist supporters would value the suggestion of giving a greater role to independent experts. Our results show that supporting populist parties correlates positively ($\beta = 0.003$, $p < 0.001$) with our dimension grouping items covering shifting greater power to experts (Table 2, column eight: *Experts*, *All pop*). This means that H3 is supported. This finding may seem at odds with populist party supporters' support for citizens as decision-makers, as in a technocratic model only experts have the right to make decisions. However, these findings are in line with the techno-populist idea which suggests that strong rejection of the political elite may lead populists to also endorse technocrats (who circumvent traditional representative decision-making processes) as a solution.

Table 2. Ordinary least square regression with country fixed effects (standard errors clustered at respondent level).

	Politicians			Citizens			Experts			Non-traditional actors		
	All pop	Left pop	Right pop	All pop	Left pop	Right pop	All pop	Left pop	Right pop	All pop	Left pop	Right pop
Controls: age, gender, education, income, interest, efficacy, left-right	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Support for populist parties	0.003***			0.003***			0.001***			0.005***		
	(0.000)			(0.000)			(0.000)			(0.000)		
Support for left-wing populist parties		0.001			0.004***			0.003***			0.004***	
		(0.001)			(0.001)			(0.001)			(0.001)	
Support for right-wing populist parties			0.004***			0.004***			0.001†			0.006***
			(0.000)			(0.000)			(0.000)			(0.000)
R^2	0.191	0.200	0.217	0.111	0.069	0.137	0.043	0.042	0.051	0.209	0.215	0.237
Adj. R^2	0.190	0.198	0.216	0.110	0.067	0.136	0.042	0.039	0.050	0.208	0.212	0.236
Num. obs.	21,049	5,798	12,269	21,049	5,798	12,269	21,049	5,798	12,269	21,049	5,798	12,269

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.1$.

Nonetheless, distinguishing between radical left and right populist party supporters leads again to a more nuanced conclusion for H3. The positive coefficient ($\beta = 0.003$) on the experts' dimension is only statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) for the supporters of radical left populist parties (Table 2, column nine: *Experts*, *Left pop*). For radical right supporters, the coefficient remains slightly positive but significant ($p < 0.1$; Table 2, column 10: *Experts*, *Right pop*). To understand this, it is important to recall that two out of the three items used to measure support for experts in government were related to the power of scientific and medical experts. In this regard, some research investigated to what extent "science populism" overlaps with "political populism": In this regard, it has been shown that anti-science opinions are strongly predicted by political conservatism and right-wing partisanship, while liberal views generally correlate with trust in science and scientists (Blank & Shaw, 2015; Eberl et al., 2023; Remsö & Renström, 2023). We believe that what we observe might reflect this specific political division in the European context (while most studies on the topic focus on the United States), which became more salient in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Eberl et al., 2021).

Finally, turning to H4 and preferences for giving a greater role to non-traditional actors (business leaders, military generals, and religious leaders), we expected that such actors would be more supported by respondents feeling closer to right-wing than to left-wing populist parties. Findings from Table 2, however, do not confirm this expectation. We indeed find (Table 2, column 12: *Non-traditional actors*, *Right pop*) that supporting radical right populist parties correlates positively and significantly ($\beta = 0.006$, $p < 0.001$) with this dimension. But we also observe the same effect among supporters of radical left populist parties ($\beta = 0.004$, $p < 0.001$; Table 2, column 11: *Non-traditional actors*, *Left pop*) and among supporters of populist parties in general ($\beta = 0.005$, $p < 0.001$; Table 2, column 10: *Non-traditional actors*, *All pop*). In other words, supporters of populist parties, both on the left and on the right, hold more positive views than the rest of the citizenry regarding giving a greater political role to business leaders, military generals, and religious leaders.

This finding regarding supporters of left-wing populist parties is, however, puzzling and hard to reconcile with earlier studies. One interpretation might relate to authoritarianism among supporters of radical left populist parties. Indeed, some studies show that left- and right-wing authoritarians do not differ extensively in terms of psychological predispositions, as they both support "conservation" values favouring security, conformity, and tradition (Federico et al., 2017). Moreover, left-wing authoritarianism predicts a taste for political violence and disruptive order (Costello et al., 2022). Finally, another line of interpretation might be the relatively soft attitudes towards secularization of radical left populist parties in countries like Greece (Syriza) or Ireland (Sinn Fein), especially once they reached power and emerged as dominant electoral forces. Hence, their supporters might be more open toward non-traditional actors than what might be expected from traditional radical left voters (Ramiro, 2016). Looking at bivariate correlations between support for left-wing populist parties and the three questions about non-traditional actors, the highest association is (surprisingly again) with religious leaders (0.15; 0.11 for business leaders and generals). All in all, this counterintuitive finding would deserve more research and refinement, as it appears difficult to fully make sense of it.

5. Conclusion

In the current context of a "democratic malaise" and potential illiberal backsliding, the literature on populism and how it relates to the design of democratic systems has expanded over the last years (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020; Wegscheider et al., 2023; Wuttke et al., 2023; Zaslove et al., 2020). Our study aimed to contribute to this debate by disentangling what supporters of populist parties want in terms of democracy,

and more specifically what kind of actors they would like to play a greater role in shaping policy decisions. Our work specifically connects recent studies on citizens' process preferences with the literature on populism and democracy (Hibbing et al., 2023; Pilet et al., 2024). It also feeds into broader contemporary debates on citizens' disenchantment and on the risk that eroding democratic satisfaction would lead to support for models of government challenging representative democracy.

This article proposes a comparative study of the preferences of supporters of populist parties (both right-wing and left-wing) across eight European democracies (Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, and the Netherlands). Their views on the political role that should be given to elected politicians, citizens, scientific experts, and non-traditional actors (business, army, and religious leaders) are compared to those of the supporters of mainstream parties. The goal was twofold: (a) to see whether supporters of populist parties have unique process preferences compared to the rest of the electorate, and (b) to compare the views of both left-wing and right-wing populist party supporters.

The first and main finding is that we indeed observed, across the nine countries covered, some specificities in how populist party supporters want government to be organized in their country. In particular, they differ from supporters of mainstream parties in two respects. First, they think that citizens are highly capable of being closely associated to policy-making. This finding confirms the importance of people-centrism as a major trait of populism (Canovan, 1999; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2018). The second specificity of populist party supporters is more puzzling. It is that they support giving a greater role to business leaders, military generals, and religious leaders. We expected to observe it among supporters of right-wing populist parties who have been shown to hold more authoritarian and conservative political views, but we find it as well for supporters of left-wing populist parties. This last finding remains harder to explain, even if some studies have also suggested authoritarian inclinations among supporters of radical left populist parties (Federico et al., 2017).

On the other hand, we have also observed some differences in the preferences of radical right- and left-wing party supporters. When it comes to supporters of left-wing populist parties, they appear to be more in favour of giving a greater role to scientific experts in policy-making. This finding gives some credit to earlier works that have connected populist and technocratic views (Bertsou & Caramani, 2022), but they only hold for left-wing populism, not for their right-wing counterpart.

Turning to supporters of radical right populist parties, the literature suggests that they differ from mainstream voters and from supporters of left-wing populist parties in being (even) more critical of elected politicians (Rojon & Rijken, 2020). This is in line with the core definition of populist attitudes (A. Akkerman et al., 2014) as a combination of people-centric and anti-elitist views. We can confirm this finding: They are (even) more people-centric and anti-elitist, as our study also reveals that these two views on how government should function are widely shared, beyond populist party supporters.

These findings also have limitations. In particular, it is not entirely clear what the new mix of actors that would be empowered at the expense of elected politicians would look like. We may observe support for models that appear contradictory. Actually, we observe support for both more democratic developments (empowering citizens) and more authoritarian views (giving a greater role to military generals or religious leaders). Such puzzling findings highlight the need to dig deeper into populists' process preferences. In particular, the way

forward seems to be to look more closely at preferences for mixed actors rather than for different actors taken separately. This approach would allow us to see more precisely what the ideal model of government might be that is preferred by supporters of populist parties across Europe. Another important next step would then be to take more global approaches to comparing the views of populist party supporters in Europe and on other continents.

Nevertheless, our results have important implications. They confirm that citizens who feel closer to populist parties, and especially to far-right populist parties, have a complex relationship with representative democracy. They are disillusioned with elected politicians and representative institutions. And they are open to giving a greater role to other actors in policy-making: citizens, but also experts. The question is whether these preferences might pose a challenge to contemporary democracies. Two conditions must be met. First, we know that supporters of populist parties have different process preferences, but it is not clear that these preferences are very high on their list of political priorities, so that they become a game changer, for example in terms of vote choice (Rooduijn, 2018). Second, populist parties should care about these preferences and push for democratic reforms within the institutions. However, this does not seem to have been very much the case in recent years (Bedock et al., 2023; Gherghina & Pilet, 2021).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Replication material is available here: https://osf.io/uemw6

Supplementary Material

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

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Populist Party Responsiveness and Populist Party Voter Satisfaction With Democracy in Europe

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Abstract

Voters of populist parties tend to be dissatisfied with democracy. Some scholars attribute this dissatisfaction with how our democracies function to poor representation by mainstream parties and a feeling of not being heard. We should see this representation improve with the success of populist parties. This improved representation should, in turn, have a positive impact on populist party voters' satisfaction with democracy (SWD). Existing case studies have only looked at the link between formal populist party representation in parliament or government, and populist party voters' SWD, with mixed findings, the most puzzling of which is that populist party voters may even become less satisfied with growing formal representation. There is no comparative study on populist parties' actual responsiveness to populist party voters and the connection to their SWD. Thus, we ask: How well do populist parties represent populist party voters, and how does this populist party responsiveness influence populist party voters' satisfaction with democracy? We define populist party responsiveness as issue-based agenda-responsiveness between populist party voters and populist parties and investigate the link to SWD using data on 21 countries from the 2019 European Election Studies. We find that populist parties in Europe are not generally more responsive to populist party voters than mainstream parties. Populist parties' agenda-responsiveness has a positive effect on populist voters' SWD while being in government does not increase the positive effect of populist party responsiveness on their voters' SWD. They may be disenchanted by how well their parties can eventually "walk the talk."

Keywords

agenda-responsiveness; democracy; European Election Studies; European Union; issue congruence; populist parties; populist party voters; representation; satisfaction with democracy

1. Introduction

In modern democracies, the quality of representation shapes citizens' assessment of the political system and their satisfaction with democracy (SWD). Overall, the higher the congruence of policy priorities and positions between citizens and elites, the more satisfied these citizens are with the way democracy works (e.g., Ferland, 2021; Reher, 2015; Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016). Voters of radical populist parties are a special case: Beyond a collective gloomy "zeitgeist" (van der Bles et al., 2015), they are not only overall less satisfied with the functioning of democracy (e.g., Bowler et al., 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020) and their lives more generally (e.g., Burger & Eiselt, 2023) compared to non-populist party voters, but existing research also has mixed findings on the origins and dynamics of this dissatisfaction.

Some scholars attribute this dissatisfaction of populist party voters with how our democracies function to poor representation by mainstream parties (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2006; Werner & Giebler, 2019). There is evidence that these voter groups are indeed less well represented (e.g., Brause & Kinski, 2024; Kübler & Schäfer, 2022), with mainstream parties failing to adequately address crucial issues that concern them (e.g., Betz, 2019; Bornschier, 2019), such as immigration and cultural integration for voters of the populist radical right (e.g., Helms, 1997; van Kessel, 2011). Other explanations focus on populist actors themselves, who repeatedly stoke fear of potential threats (e.g., through immigration) and blame crises on the parties in government. In the EU, populist parties in government actively perpetuate a constant state of crisis to ensure continuous demand for populist supply (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023). This reinforcement of negative communication at both the national and the EU level seems to be linked to lower satisfaction levels of populist voter groups (e.g., Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2016).

With the growing success of populist parties, we should not only see the representation of populist party voters improve, but, intuitively, this improved representation should also positively affect these voters' assessment of the democratic system. Studies that have investigated the extent to which populist parties may "serve as a corrective to the crisis of representative democracy" by "incorporating citizens that were not (or did not feel) represented by established elites" (Huber & Ruth, 2017, p. 462) come to mixed conclusions. For 31 European countries from 1990 to 2014, Huber and Ruth (2017, p. 473) do not find any general effect of the presence of populist parties in parliament on ideological congruence as a proxy for substantive representation. In a recent case study, Kübler and Schäfer (2022) show that opinion congruence between parliamentarians and citizens increased as a result of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) entering the German national parliament in 2017, although this increase was mostly driven by congruence on immigration.

We have quite a few studies on how populist representation in parliament and/or government shapes political trust among populist party voters. The findings are also mixed, with some authors showing that trust in democracy tends to increase among populist supporters (e.g., Hajdinjak, 2022; Juen, 2023), while others find the opposite to be the case (Haugsgjerd, 2019). In comparison, there is much less research on the link to populist party voters' SWD, which is surprising given that it is an equally important indicator of the health and legitimacy of a democracy.

The limited research that has investigated the link to populist party voters' SWD has only looked at formal representation, i.e., populist party presence in parliament and/or government. Case studies on Belgium (Rooduijn et al., 2016), France (Canalejo-Molero & Le Corre Juratic, 2024), and the Netherlands (Hooghe &

Dassonneville, 2018) come to the puzzling conclusion that populist voters actually become less satisfied with growing formal representation. In contrast, again for the Netherlands, Harteveld et al. (2021) find that nativist voters become significantly more satisfied with democracy, at least in the very short term. Schäfer and Reinl (2022) also confirm this for Germany, where the short-term positive effect for populist party voters subsides very quickly post-election.

Hence, existing research has examined the impact of formal populist party representation, i.e., gaining parliamentary representation and government participation on populist voter SWD. There is, however, no study, let alone a comparative one, that investigates populist parties' actual responsiveness to populist party voters and the link between this substantive form of representation and populist party voters' SWD. Thus, we ask: *How well do populist parties represent populist party voters, and how does this populist party responsiveness influence populist voters' satisfaction with democracy?* This contributes to our understanding of the alternatives to representative party democracy that populist parties and voters envision, in that it allows us to capture how important actual, substantive representation is for populists and their voters. Do populists only cite popular grievances as justification for their actions or do they act upon them? Do populist party voters, in turn, respond with greater satisfaction with the functioning of conventional representative party democracy, which would make calling for alternatives less catchy? Could this, in the end, foster the resilience of representative democracy in the face of growing citizen disenchantment or may other, affective forms of representation be more decisive?

While representation in parliament and government is, of course, important, the focus in existing research on formal representation overlooks the substantive quality of this representation. This is crucial because populist parties in parliament, and even more so in government, may not deliver on their promises, thus weakening their representative appeal. Böhmelt and Ezrow (2023), for example, show that populists in government are, in fact, weak in fulfilling their electoral promises on immigration issues. Besides being among the first to look at the effects of actual responsiveness on populist party voters' SWD, the second feature that makes our comparative study unique is that we neither look at positional/ideological congruence nor policy congruence (Ferland, 2021), but investigate issue congruence, i.e., the match between voters' and parties' issue priorities (see also Brause & Kinski, 2024; Traber et al., 2022). This form of rhetorical (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008) or agenda-responsiveness (Alexandrova et al., 2016) is often overlooked but equally vital, as parties need to raise the issues citizens care about for those citizens to feel heard in the first place. Such agenda-responsiveness is an important precondition for policy and output responsiveness further down the line (Powell, 2004).

We anticipate that populist party voters will be more satisfied with democracy when issues of great importance to them are more frequently put on the political agenda. As populist parties become more successful, they gain greater access to political discourse, and should more prominently represent the concerns of populist party voters in the public sphere. This could, in turn, lead to a sense of being heard, which may increase these voters' SWD.

We investigate the link between populist party agenda-responsiveness and populist party voter SWD using a new measure of issue-based agenda-responsiveness (Brause & Kinski, 2024) comparing populist party voters' "Most Important Problem" (MIP) with salient issues in populist party manifestos for the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections based on data from the 2019 European Election Studies (EES) in 21 member states of the EU. We then link this agenda-responsiveness to these voters' SWD. EP elections,

while still predominantly national electoral contests with national parties and candidates prioritising national EU issues (Schmitt & Toygür, 2016), offer a common temporal and spatial context.

We find that populist parties in Europe are not generally more responsive to populist party voters than mainstream parties. In many countries, populist parties do not represent populist party voters better than mainstream parties, while in others they do. Populist parties' agenda-responsiveness has a positive effect on populist party voters' SWD while being in government does not increase the positive effect of populist party responsiveness on their voters' SWD. They may be disenchanted by how well their parties can eventually "walk the talk" when in government. When we think in terms of alternatives to existing representative party democracy, these findings indicate that populist party voters may look at democratic representation not only from an instrumental, rational choice perspective of priority/preference alignment but also from an affective and expressive perspective centred on social identity (Mouffe, 2012; see also Huddy et al., 2018). Populist voters may seek representation that is built on emotional engagement and a sense of belonging. They may desire a form of representation that resonates with their identity and provides a clear and direct connection to their values and aspirations; something that populist narratives claim to achieve.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses: Populism, Representation, and SWD

The rise of populist parties in Europe is frequently attributed to a "crisis of representation" with populist parties claiming to better "represent the people" than their mainstream counterparts (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Laclau, 2005). We know that citizens who are not well-represented and/or do not feel represented are more likely to be dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy (Dahlberg et al., 2015).

In the chain of responsiveness (Powell, 2004), putting issues on the political agenda is an important first step in substantive representation. If certain voters' priorities are not represented on the political agenda, they neither feel heard nor are they especially likely to be well represented further down the line, which in turn may lead to being dissatisfied with the way democracy works. Mainstream parties tend to struggle to adequately represent populist voters on issues such as EU integration and migration, leaving a representational gap for populist parties to fill (Kriesi et al., 2006). While mainstream parties are therefore less likely to represent populist voters well, populist parties may be able to mobilise this representational deficit (Bornschier, 2019; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019) by putting those issues that matter to populist voters on the agenda. As a result, these voters' perception of the functioning of democracy should improve as their (perceived) representation improves. The more rhetorically responsive populist parties are to populist voters, the higher these voters' SWD should be. Specifically, we argue that an *individual* populist party voter's SWD is affected by how responsive the populist party they vote for is to *its voters*. This is not only because populist party voters tend to be similar in their preferences (Backlund & Jungar, 2019; Van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018), but more importantly because of a network effect. Individual political preferences and attitudes are shaped by personal interactions with others and everyday political discussions (e.g., Huckfeldt et al., 2005; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Song, 2015). Traditional media informs about the preferences of others (e.g., Mutz, 1998, p. 79), and social media platforms enable (populist) voters to share experiences and evaluate representation (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017). Harteveld and van der Brug (2023) demonstrate that perceived alignment between voter preferences and party agendas significantly impacts an individual voter's democratic satisfaction. As populist party voters communicate with their peers, they assess whether their fellow voters are satisfied and whether they feel well-represented by the party. Taken

together, these network effects collectively influence individual SWD—and may even be stronger for populist party voters given their Manichean "us-vs.-them" perceptual lens.

> H1: The higher the agenda-responsiveness of populist parties, the more satisfied a populist party voter is with the way democracy works.

From the literature on the winner–loser gap, we know that voters of winning parties tend to report higher levels of SWD compared to supporters of losing parties. Two mechanisms may be at play here (Daoust & Nadeau, 2023) that speak to the broader literature on instrumental and expressive partisanship (e.g., Huddy et al., 2018). Instrumental partisans care about responsiveness and party performance, while expressive partisans mainly try to preserve (affective) positive party identity. According to the utilitarian argument, voters of winning parties are more satisfied because they expect their party in government to keep its promises and implement their policy preferences. The second mechanism is more emotional and affective in that winners will simply feel happier and more satisfied because their party has won. Concerning populist party voters, Canalejo-Molero and Le Corre Juratic (2024) argue, and show this for the case of France, that strong negative feelings towards a mainstream winning party offset to some extent the perceived utility they receive from their party's first-time representation in parliament.

The winner–loser gap is a key explanation for existing differences in the level of SWD with mixed findings on the effect of government participation on populist party voters' SWD. Similarly, we can formulate two competing hypotheses on how government participation of a populist party moderates the link between agenda-responsiveness and SWD. On the one hand, we may expect government participation to strengthen the positive effect of agenda-responsiveness on SWD in that the likelihood of items on the agenda being implemented into actual policy output is higher for governing as compared to opposition parties (e.g., Thomson et al., 2017). Put differently, agenda-responsiveness becomes more credible because it will more likely be followed through in the chain of responsiveness. If it becomes more likely that populist party voters' priorities will be reflected in policy output, their SWD should increase.

> H2a: When a populist party is in government, the positive effect of populist party agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter satisfaction is stronger.

On the other hand, parties in government face multiple constraints when putting their words into action and implementing their policies, including international responsibilities, interdependencies, and commitments (Mair, 2009), external shocks and unexpected crises (Alexandrova et al., 2016), or coalition agreements and the need for compromise in multiparty governments (e.g., Klüver & Spoon, 2017; Thomson et al., 2017). These potential constraints are especially present for governments of EU member states given the supranational governance structure and governing coalitions as the norm in most member states. Against this background, it would become less likely for populist party voters' priorities to be reflected in policy output, which should dampen the positive effect of agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter satisfaction.

> H2b: When a populist party is in government, the positive effect of populist party agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter satisfaction is weaker.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1. Case Selection and Data

We focus on 21 member states of the EU (at the time): Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. These countries share a common supranational framework, and similar political and economic surroundings, while simultaneously offering enough variance between countries and parties (e.g., established democracies and young democracies, majority and consensus systems). We investigate the 2019 elections to the EP, which was dubbed a "fateful" election particularly successful for populist parties (Treib, 2021).

We identify populist parties using the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al., 2024) and exclude radical left and radical right parties that were not populist according to the dataset and borderline cases such as Forza Italia or Die Linke. In total, we cover 35 populist parties, 21 radical right populist parties, 10 moderate populist parties, and 4 radical left populist parties (see A.1 in the Supplementary File). For both voters and parties, we use data from the 2019 EES post-election Voter Study (Schmitt et al., 2022) and the 2019 Manifesto Project (Reinl & Braun, 2023a). We identify populist party voters as the respondents who said that they voted for that respective populist party in the 2019 EP elections. Unfortunately, a comparison across time was not possible as the 2014 EES wave does not include the SWD variable and, in 2009, there were comparatively few populist parties. The EES offers distinct advantages over national election studies (where only a few countries provide recent and consistent data on our main variables) as it employs standardised question wording and surveys all EU member states. The EES includes data on all our variables of interest: SWD in a respondent's country, vote choice, the "Most Important Problem" in a respondent's country on the demand side, and data on the issue saliences in manifestos for the EP elections for each party on the supply side. Besides these practical reasons for using EES data, there are several substantive reasons for measuring the agenda-responsiveness of populist parties across the EU in the context of the EP elections. EP elections are still considered predominantly national elections (Schmitt & Toygür, 2016). National parties nominate the candidates, have control over their national party manifestos, and base their campaigns on them. Although parties tend to emphasise EU issues more in EP than in national elections (Braun & Schmitt, 2020), they do focus on national EU issues. For example, if citizens see immigration as the most important issue in the country, a party from this country may prioritise EU migration and asylum policies in its manifesto. At the same time, given that parties place a significant emphasis on EU topics and those topics tend to be of lesser importance to their voters, we can consider EP elections the least likely case for agenda-responsiveness.

3.2. Operationalisation and Measurement

Our dependent variable is the classic *satisfaction with democracy* variable ("On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?"). In the EES, the variable is ordinal with four categories: "very satisfied," "fairly satisfied," "not very satisfied," and "not at all satisfied" (Schmitt et al., 2022).

To measure our main independent variable, *issue-based agenda-responsiveness*, we use the approach recently introduced by Brause and Kinski (2024). We match the issue salience among populist party voters (demand side) with the issue salience of populist parties (supply side). As the best available option to comparatively

capture the former (Spoon & Klüver, 2014), we take the "Most Important Problem" in your country variable ("What do you think is the most important issue or problem facing [your country] at the moment?"; Schmitt et al., 2022). For the 2019 wave, only the raw data was available, so we automatically translated and manually coded the open answers. We use DeepL, supplemented by Google Translate verification, for the translation (see also Kinski & Ripoll Servent, 2022). Subsequently, three different coders independently coded the first mentioned problem into 13 categories that correspond well to the manifesto coding categories. This allows us to match them and calculate the responsiveness index (for details, see A.2 in the Supplementary File). The categories include classic policy fields such as Economics, Employment, Environment, Foreign Policy & Defence, Immigration, Law, Crime & Terrorism, Social Policies & Welfare State, but also polity-related issues such as Democracy & Political Systems, Corruption, or EU system. We also include societal issues such as Social Fabric or Emigration & Demographic Change. Reliability test results far exceed accepted standards (see A.3 in the Supplementary File).

The national EP manifesto coding (Reinl & Braun, 2023b) is based on the well-known Manifesto Project's coding scheme but offers a more nuanced differentiation within each issue category across three levels—General, European, and National. We classify all Manifesto variables consistently into the 13 categories established for the MIP. Based on Brause and Kinski (2024), issue-based agenda-responsiveness is measured by comparing the mean Most Important Problem salience of each populist party's voters against its manifesto salience, akin to a many-to-one congruence analysis on the party level (Golder & Stramski, 2010). Put differently, we calculate differences between the salience scores of each party electorate and each populist party. A score of 100 indicates full issue congruence, whereas a score of 0 indicates no issue congruence at all (Brause & Kinski, 2024, p. 305). A populist party's government participation is also based on data from the 2019 European Manifesto Study (Reinl & Braun, 2023a).

As controls, we include both demand-side and supply-side factors at the individual, party, and country levels (see also A.4 in the Supplementary File). While objective deprivation is not unequivocally linked to populist party support and their voters' dissatisfaction with democracy, economic anxiety is a crucial factor (Mols & Jetten, 2017, 2020; Mudde, 2007; see also Inglehart & Norris, 2016). To control for both, we add the individual outlook on the economy as a measure of subjective deprivation, and unemployment rates at the country level as a measure of objective economic conditions (Eurostat, 2020a). To account for the dynamics of cultural backlash, which contrasts younger, well-educated, progressive individuals with older, conservative, less well-educated groups (Inglehart & Norris, 2016), we include age and education as individual-level controls. Additionally, we control for cultural anxiety linked to immigration by including immigration inflow at the country level (Eurostat 2020b; Gidron & Hall, 2017; Golder, 2016; Mols & Jetten, 2020). This is crucial because perceptions of immigration often do not align with actual migration rates (Mols & Jetten, 2020). At the party level, we control for the party's national government status at election time, ideological orientation (Rile), party age, and electoral performance in the 2019 EP elections (increased vote share). These data are sourced from the EES Manifesto Study and the MAPP Project (van Haute & Paulis, 2016). At the country level, additional controls include the level of political corruption based on the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al., 2023) and the age of democracy, measured by the most recent significant change in the political system (Marschall & Gurr, 2020).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Analysis: Not (so Well) Represented, and Still Dissatisfied

Turning to populist party voters' SWD, we see that a large majority (58.7%) expresses dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in their country ("not very satisfied," "not at all satisfied"). However, there is a significant variance between countries (Figure 1). Poland (91.2%) leads with a very high satisfaction rate, followed by Denmark (69.9%). In contrast, Germany (10.1%) and Sweden (12.5%) exhibit the lowest satisfaction levels. Overall, populist party voter SWD is higher in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe.

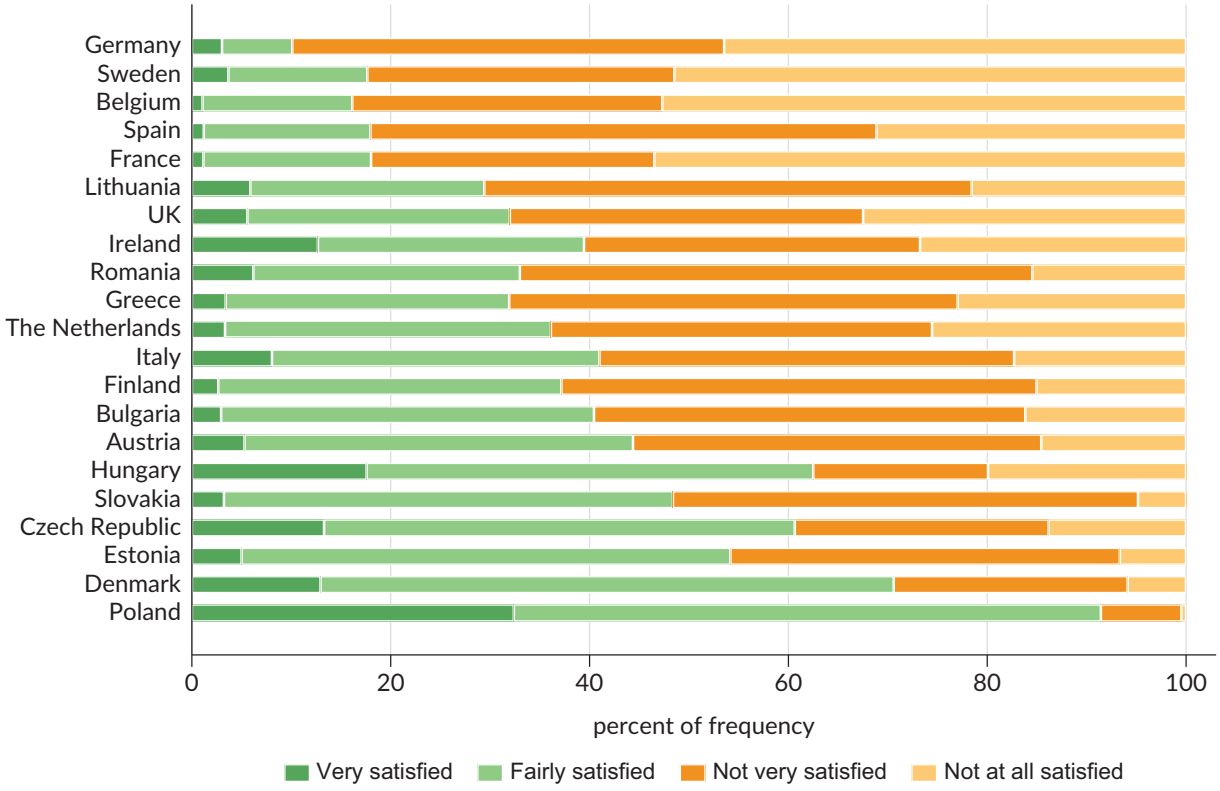

Figure 1. SWD of populist party voters across Europe.

Looking at the agenda-responsiveness between populist parties and populist party voters, which can range from 0 (no issue congruence) to 100 (perfect issue congruence), the mean is 42.28 (SD = 11.81). Ninety percent of all surveyed populist parties display a value between 30 and 60. As a standard of comparison, we also calculate the agenda-responsiveness between all mainstream parties and populist party voters. Here the mean is higher at 45.53 (SD = 6.87). Thus, on average, populist parties display a lower level of responsiveness towards their electorates than the average mainstream party. However, we again see significant country differences (Figure 2).

In some countries, populist parties indeed represent populist party voters better than their mainstream counterparts (e.g., Denmark, Austria, Romania, Hungary), but in many they do not—by quite a large margin (e.g., France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Estonia). The average responsiveness score in Western Europe is notably lower at 37.80 (SD = 12.57), compared to Central and Eastern Europe, which has a higher mean of 47.45 (SD = 8.13; Figure 3). This difference is statistically significant (t-test, p = 0.000).

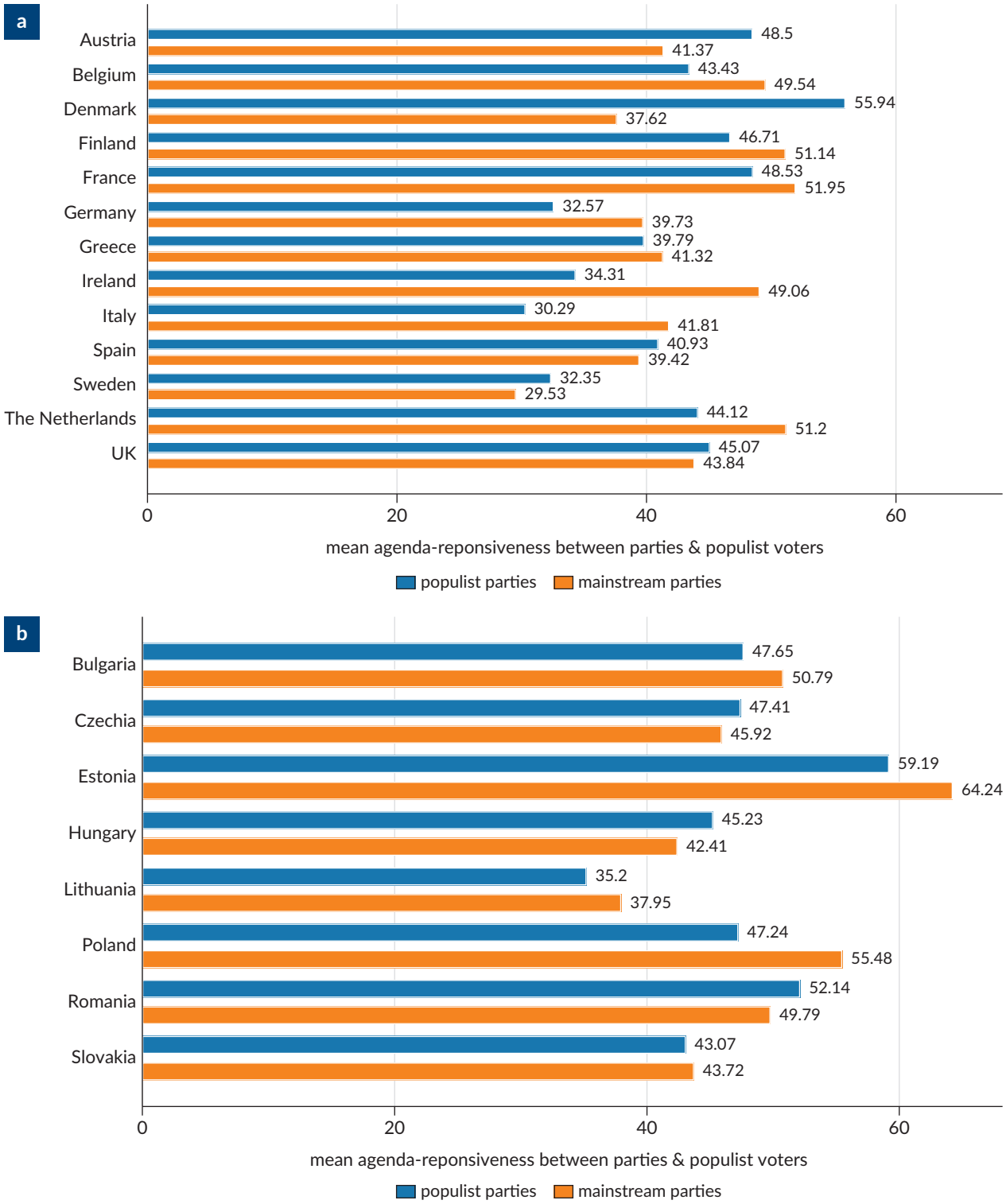

Figure 2. Agenda-responsiveness of populist parties vs. mainstream parties towards populist party voters in (a) Western and (b) Central and Eastern European countries.

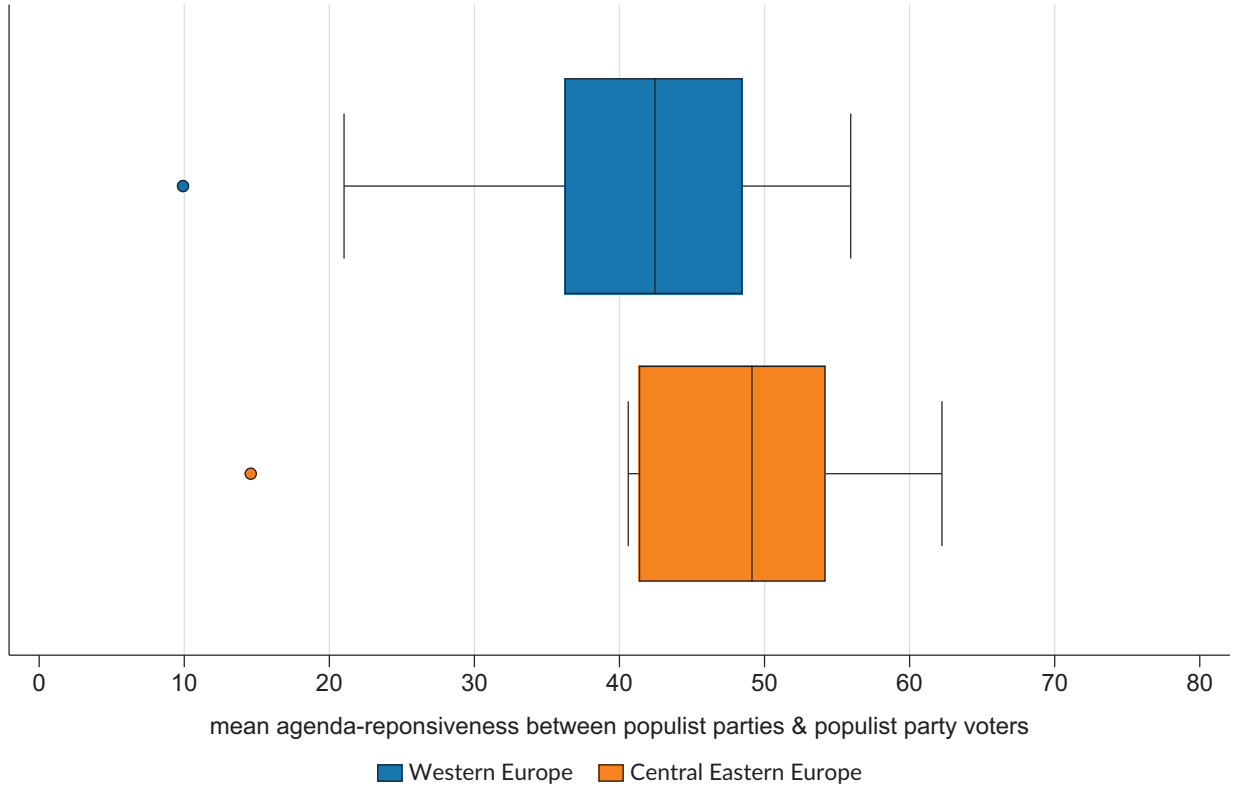

Figure 3. Agenda-responsiveness in Western and Central and Eastern Europe.

The Estonian Centre Party has the highest responsiveness value (63.72), while the Italian Northern League displays the lowest responsiveness score (8.21) in the sample. Despite being central concerns for populist party voters, both economic and socio-cultural issues, but also polity issues are not as effectively addressed by populist parties as one might expect (see A.5 in the Supplementary File for a more detailed analysis).

This descriptive analysis reveals that populist parties do not exhibit the high level of agenda-responsiveness towards their electorate that might be expected. In fact, they display a lower average level of responsiveness compared to mainstream parties. Populist parties underperform especially in core issues that resonate with populist party voters, such as immigration, economic concerns, and EU policies. Furthermore, this study highlights considerable variation in agenda-responsiveness across countries and regions. In Central and Eastern Europe, populist parties speak to their voters' priorities more effectively than in Western Europe.

4.2. Regression Analyses: The More Responsive, the More Satisfied

We test our hypotheses using ordinary least squares and country fixed effect regression models with robust standard errors (Table 1, models 1 and 2). We use linear regression analysis as our dependent variable is quasi-metric (Breen et al., 2018, pp. 49–50), and opt against a multilevel model given that, for many countries, there is just one populist party in the sample. We also have unbalanced sub-samples on the demand side: While Italy has over 350 respondents coded as populist party voters, the minimum is only 44 in Lithuania. We integrate fixed effects to account for the unobserved heterogeneity at the country level but also estimate the models without country fixed effects to capture the effects of country-level control variables (Table 1, models 3 and 4). We centre the main independent variables for interpretability. Models 2 and 4 contain the

interaction effect. Our findings remain robust using logit and ordered logit models treating the dependent variable as dichotomous/ordinal (see A.6 in the Supplementary File).

Table 1. Regression results of populist party agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter SWD.

	Model 1 (fixed effects)	Model 2 (fixed effects)	Model 3	Model 4
Agenda-responsiveness	0.022***	0.026***	0.005***	0.007***
	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Government status	0.538***	0.461***	0.479***	0.519***
	(0.117)	(0.126)	(0.042)	(0.042)
Agenda-responsiveness x government		0.016		−0.021***
		(0.010)		(0.003)
Age	−0.002	−0.002	−0.002**	−0.003***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Gender (female)	−0.065**	−0.067**	−0.060**	−0.057**
	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Economic outlook (decline)	−0.278***	−0.277***	−0.299***	−0.293***
	(0.024)	(0.023)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Education: low	−0.137**	−0.136*	−0.200***	−0.204***
	(0.066)	(0.066)	(0.065)	(0.065)
Education: medium	−0.060**	−0.060**	−0.095***	−0.099***
	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Living area: rural	−0.013	−0.011	−0.034	−0.039
	(0.032)	(0.031)	(0.040)	(0.039)
Living area: medium town	−0.014	−0.012	−0.011	−0.025
	(0.039)	(0.038)	(0.033)	(0.033)
Vote share increased 2019	0.022***	0.032***	0.002	−0.002
	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Rile (party left–right)	0.009***	0.007***	0.003***	0.005***
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Age of populist parties	0.001	0.003	−0.000	−0.001
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Age of democracy			−0.000	−0.000
			(0.001)	(0.001)
Unemployment			−0.024***	−0.025***
			(0.004)	(0.004)
Inflow of immigrants/population			−0.125***	−0.009
			(0.046)	(0.049)
Political corruption			−0.867***	−0.837***
			(0.113)	(0.112)
Constant	3.216***	3.166***	3.818***	3.739***
	(0.097)	(0.096)	(0.107)	(0.108)
Observations	2,946	2,946	2,946	2,946
R-squared	0.193	0.195	0.289	0.298
Number of countries	21	21	21	21

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

Across all models (Table 1), we find a consistent positive significant effect of populist party agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter SWD. Put differently, with increasing populist party agenda-responsiveness, populist party voters become more satisfied with democracy. This is in line with our first hypothesis: The more populist parties talk about the issues their voters care about in the election manifestos, the more satisfied these voters are with the way democracy works in their country. The effect holds with and without country fixed effects, regardless of whether we include the interaction effect.

Figure 4 plots the main effect of populist party agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter SWD based on model 2. All else constant, with a 10-point increase in agenda-responsiveness by their populist party, a populist party voter's SWD would increase by 0.22 on a 4-point scale.

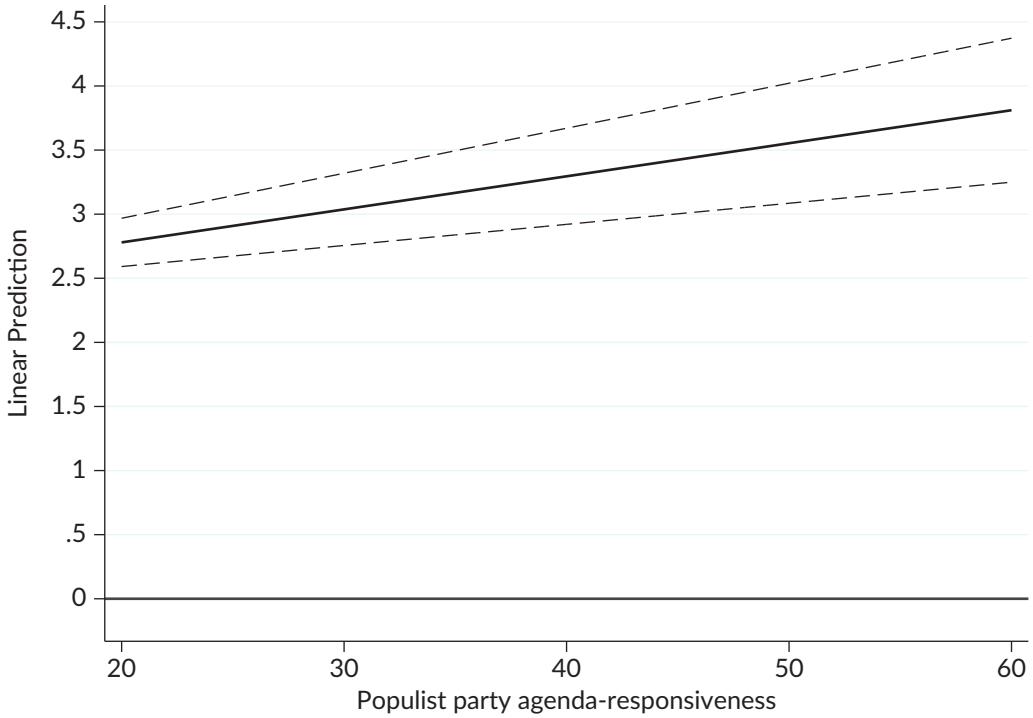

Figure 4. Linear prediction based on model 2, Table 1, 95% confidence interval.

We had competing hypotheses (H2a and H2b) on how a populist party's government status would shape this positive relationship between populist party agenda-responsiveness and populist party voter SWD in that it could either reinforce or dampen it. Looking first at the direct relationship between populist party government participation and populist party voter SWD, we again see a consistent positive significant effect across all models. Populist parties' formal representation in government increases their voters' SWD. When we now include the interaction term between agenda-responsiveness and government participation, we find no consistent support for either of the two competing hypotheses. In fixed-effect model 2, the interaction term is not significant, whereas it is negative and significant in model 4 without country fixed effects. The latter would suggest that the positive effect of agenda-responsiveness on SWD is weaker when populist parties are in government. Put differently, the impact of an extra unit of agenda-responsiveness is smaller among parties in government than it is among opposition parties. This would be in line with H2b, indicating that government status dampens the positive effect of agenda-responsiveness on SWD. This could be the result of disappointed populist party voters because populist government parties are constrained and not able to

fully "walk the talk." We have to, however, be cautious not to over-interpret this result because we do not find the same effect controlling for unobserved differences across countries (fixed-effect model 2).

5. Conclusion

Scholars have identified a crisis of representation, where populist party voters feel unheard and unrepresented because their concerns are not reflected on the political agenda (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). It is argued that this leads to dissatisfaction with how liberal democracy works and a significant decrease in support for the system, pushing these disenchanted voters towards populist parties that often stand in opposition to liberal democratic principles. Populist parties are expected to provide better representation for populist party voters (Backlund & Jungar, 2019). Our findings, however, reveal that populist parties in Europe do not represent their voters better than mainstream parties do (see also Plescia et al., 2019). If anything, they are worse on average, especially when it comes to issues that populist party voters care about. In some EU member states, populist parties are more responsive, but in many, they are not, which challenges a key assumption that populist parties "can easily stylize themselves—and indeed be conceived by citizens—as saviors come to mend a broken system" (Mauk, 2020, p. 46).

At the same time, we show that the agenda-responsiveness of populist parties does indeed have a positive effect on populist party voters' democratic satisfaction. The more populist parties put the issues on the agenda that their voters care about, such as immigration and socio-cultural issues, the more satisfied these voters are with democracy. The downside from a democratic perspective is that this tends to perpetuate a constant state of crisis. While formal representation in government boosts the populist party voters' SWD, it does not increase the positive effect of populist party responsiveness on their voters' SWD. They may be disenchanted by how well their parties can eventually "walk the talk." All the while, other contextual factors matter. For example, the decline in a populist party voter's economic situation shows a strong negative effect on their SWD as do a lower level of education and a higher level of unemployment within a country.

Our findings indicate that populist party voters evaluate populist parties based on their actual performance and responsiveness. At the same time, affective partisanship rooted in emotional connection and social identity (Huddy et al., 2018) helps us understand why populist party responsiveness can enhance populist party voter SWD, even when mainstream parties may be objectively better at representing their interests. It demonstrates that satisfaction with democracy is not only about policy outcomes but also about the emotional bonds and partisan identity that voters form with their parties. Despite mainstream parties representing populist voters better on average, these voters report higher satisfaction when represented by populist parties. This may indicate that populist party voters seek a specific type of democratic representation beyond policy representation.

In sum, these findings underscore the complexity of the relationship between populist parties and their electorate across Europe. Populist party voters are indeed disenchanted citizens and this disenchantment is particularly pronounced in countries in which populists are not in power. While agenda-responsiveness as a part of substantive representation has a positive effect on democratic satisfaction, it is not the sole determinant. There seems to be a limit to the benefits of issue representation and the utilitarian mechanisms behind this, beyond which other, more emotional and symbolic forms of representation and affective voter concerns may be of greater importance (Loew & Faas, 2019). To address the concerns of disenchanted

citizens, it is essential to move beyond mere performance metrics and ensure that these voters feel heard, ultimately renewing shared positive identities between parties and voters (Mouffe, 2012). We need to continue to study these alternative forms of democratic representation to understand what makes democracies resilient against the populist threat.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The research data is available on ResearchGate via the corresponding author.

Supplementary Material

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

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Different Perspectives on Democracy as an Explanation for the "Populist Radical Right Gender Gap"?

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Abstract

The "radical right gender gap" is an established finding in contemporary research, indicating that women support populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in significantly lower numbers than men. Despite substantial literature dedicated to uncovering the reasons behind this gap, significant questions remain unanswered. This article examines the nature of the radical right gender gap in greater detail, focusing on Switzerland—a country with one of the most established PRRPs in Western Europe, the SVP/SPP (Schweizer Volkspartei/Swiss People's Party), making it a representative case. A defining feature of PRRPs that sets them apart from other parties is their clear distinction between in-groups and out-groups in society, coupled with the propagation of nativist and anti-pluralist values. While PRRPs emphasize caring for the in-group, they often advocate excluding the out-group from rights and privileges. This article argues that the preferences of PRRPs and female voters are in stark contrast regarding these issues. Building on empirical evidence that women place more importance on certain features of a democratic system than men do, we propose that this discrepancy may help explain the gender gap in support for these parties. Utilizing data from the European Social Survey 2020, which includes detailed questions on various understandings of democracy, we find robust support for our hypotheses within the Swiss context. Compared to men, women consider protecting the rights of minorities and safeguarding all citizens from poverty as especially important for a functioning democracy. These preferences emerge as influential factors contributing to women's reluctance to support PRRPs.

Keywords

gender gap; minority rights; populist radical right parties; voting; Switzerland

1. Introduction

Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) continue to achieve significant electoral success globally. The sustained electoral performance of these parties, which have even been entrusted with governmental responsibilities, has garnered considerable scholarly interest (Coffé, 2019; Oshri et al., 2023; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). This attention is warranted for several reasons. These parties gain traction through intense criticism of the established political system. Studies indicate that a major driving force behind their success is the discontent of voters with the perceived malfunctioning of political institutions (Harteveld et al., 2015; Rooduijn et al., 2016; Schulte-Cloos & Leininger, 2022; Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2024). However, rather than acting as a corrective force to enhance democratic processes and foster vibrant political competition, many experts caution that some of the ideas proposed by PRRPs contradict fundamental democratic principles and may even jeopardize liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023; Urbinati, 2019; Zaslove et al., 2021). Thus, understanding what makes these parties appealing to citizens dissatisfied with the current system is of utmost importance.

It is noteworthy that the appeal of PRRPs does not resonate equally across all societal groups, with systematic disparities evident. Early research identified that women are underrepresented among supporters of PRRPs (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Betz, 1994, Chapter 4; Fontana et al., 2006; Gidengil et al., 2005). A prominent explanation, supported by recent empirical evidence, suggests that one primary reason women are deterred from voting for these parties is the perceived risk involved (Oshri et al., 2023). Women are generally more risk-averse than men (Byrnes et al., 1999). Consequently, women may be reluctant to vote for PRRPs, often perceived as inexperienced protest parties.

However, this characterization of PRRPs as inexperienced protest parties is increasingly outdated. Many PRRPs have assumed roles as governing parties at various levels, ranging from supporting partners in minority governments to dominant coalition partners (Capaul & Ewert, 2021; Paxton, 2020). More recent studies, including cases from diverse geographical regions such as Eastern and Southern Europe, have found that the gender gap in voting for PRRPs is not universal and has diminished in some instances (Mayer, 2013, 2015). Nevertheless, a pronounced gender imbalance persists in the electorate of several Western European PRRPs, some of which have been part of their respective governments (Finnsdottir, 2022; Immerzeel et al., 2015; Weeks et al., 2023). This suggests that the risk-aversion theory has limited explanatory power for understanding why women are reluctant to support these parties, prompting the question: What other factors contribute to this reluctance?

Reflecting on the idea that radical populist voting is, at least partly, a response to democratic discontent, it is plausible that the specific democratic ideals propagated by PRRPs do not resonate well with female voters. The core characteristics of PRRPs include populism and a radical right-wing ideology, both influencing their conceptualization of an ideal political system (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020). PRRPs promote a specific understanding of democracy shaped by anti-pluralism and nativism (Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). They advocate for a political system where "the will of the people," as the ultimate source of legitimacy, must prevail over the needs of minorities and out-groups within society (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Plattner, 2010; Urbinati, 2019). The potential influence of this specific democratic notion on the "populist radical right gender gap" has not been thoroughly tested.

Our study aims to address this gap in the literature. We argue that the unique democratic understanding of PRRPs, characterized by a singular "*volonté générale*" coupled with anti-pluralist sentiments, does not align with the preferences of female citizens and discourages their support. This argument builds upon novel empirical insights suggesting that women and men differ in what they prioritize in a democratic system, with women placing greater importance on the protection of minorities and less powerful groups from the "tyranny of the majority" (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021, 2024). This stands in stark contrast to the ideal system envisioned by PRRPs.

To test this hypothesis, we focus on a typical case of the PRRP-voting gap: the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in Switzerland. The SVP is a conservative, anti-immigrant, right-wing populist party in Western Europe, exemplifying the type of PRRP often associated with a gender voting gap. Despite the SVP's established presence and governmental experience, a pronounced gender gap persists among its voters. Given the low social and political risk of supporting the SVP, the gender gap in voting cannot be explained by risk aversion alone and requires further investigation. We utilize data from the European Social Survey (ESS) 2020 (ESS, 2023) for Switzerland, conducting logistic regression analyses. The ESS 2020 offers a rare module on different understandings of democracy. Our analysis reveals a significant gender gap among PRRP voters in Switzerland, amounting to approximately 5 percentage points, even when controlling for education, age, income, and immigration attitudes. In line with our theory, the gender gap diminishes by 2 percentage points and becomes statistically insignificant when controlling for attitudes on the protection of minority rights. Additionally, women and men with similar attitudes on the protection of minority rights are also equally likely to vote for PRRPs. These findings suggest that the higher importance placed on an inclusive and liberal version of democracy by women partly explains their reluctance to endorse the populist radical right, opening new avenues for research on gender and PRRP voting.

2. The Populist Radical Right Gender Gap

With the rise in success of right-wing populist parties, there has been a growing interest in the role of women within these political entities. As a result, research on the topic has examined whether representatives of PRRPs are predominantly male (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017; Rashkova & Zankina, 2017), how female members differ from male members in their experiences and demeanor (Mayer, 2013), and to what extent "typical" women's issues are an integral part of right-wing populist rhetoric and discourse (Akkerman, 2015; Mayer, 2015; Norocel, 2011). Furthermore, numerous scholars have focused on characteristics supporters of PRRPs share (Coffé, 2019; Fontana et al., 2006; Gidengil et al., 2005; Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018; Harteveld et al., 2015; Immerzeel et al., 2015). Among those, several studies concluded that gender is a factor in the decision of whether to endorse a PRRP and that women are considerably more hesitant than men to do so. Despite ongoing efforts to better understand the so-called "radical right gender gap," scholars still struggle to fully explain the nature of this phenomenon.

One of the primary questions that arises is whether the programmatic and personal offerings of PRRPs—what they supply to voters—are unattractive to women. De Lange and Mügge (2015), in their comparative analysis of party manifestos and policy proposals of various PRRPs, identified significant variance in political measures affecting women's lives. These proposals range from traditional to less conservative stances, such as emphasizing the importance of protecting women's rights against "the spread of Islam in Europe." Therefore, there is little evidence to suggest that a consistent supply of anti-feminist policies is the main reason for women's reluctance to support PRRPs.

However, research by Rashkova and Zankina (2017) and Mayer (2015) indicates that PRRPs have historically been "*Männerparteien*" (men's parties), dominated by male leaders, representatives, and officials. A prevalent theory is that women struggle to identify with these parties and feel alienated due to a lack of descriptive representation. For instance, the gender gap in support for the Rassemblement National (formerly Front National) disappeared after leadership transitioned from Jean-Marie Le Pen to Marine Le Pen. Furthermore, a study by Weeks et al. (2023) demonstrates that PRRPs are aware that a male-dominated personnel base may deter female voters. Weeks et al. (2023) find that PRRPs respond to observed gender gaps in their electorate by nominating more women, particularly after electoral losses and under high pressure.

Nevertheless, in some Nordic countries, a gender gap in support for PRRPs persists despite the presence of prominent female candidates (Finnsdottir, 2022). Immerzeel and Mayer (2015) argue that unique electoral dynamics such as political scandals, dissatisfaction with other parties, and the polarizing nature of the PRRP itself must be considered when analyzing the "radical right voting gap." Additionally, beyond the supply side of PRRPs' offerings, another line of inquiry explores whether differences in voter preferences—the demand side—provide further insight into why women may be more hesitant to support PRRPs.

Original demand-side explanations of the radical right gender gap focused primarily on the different socio-economic positions of men and women. For a long time, men and women typically held very different occupational positions, with men constituting many blue-collar workers while women were more frequently employed in the public sector. As blue-collar sectors are most threatened by globalization, numerous scholars reasoned that the opposition to globalization and internationalization proclaimed by many PRRPs resonates well with "working class men" (Coffé, 2012; Givens, 2016; Mayer, 2013, 2015, p. 20; Rippeyoung, 2007). Women, on the other hand, who are more likely to be employed in the public sector and dependent on the state for support, such as childcare, are more likely to disagree with state retrenchment policies advocated by PRRPs (Fontana et al., 2006; Gidengil et al., 2005; Lodders & Weldon, 2019). However, despite the intuitive appeal of these explanations, many studies have detected a persistent gender gap in PRRP support even after controlling for the occupational positions of different respondents (Fontana et al., 2006; Givens, 2016; Immerzeel et al., 2015). Additionally, conservative, or market-liberal parties also advocate state retrenchment policies (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017; Giger, 2009; Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Consequently, different socio-economic positions of men and women have little explanatory potential for the radical right gender gap.

Since socio-economic positions of men and women seemed to lack explanatory power, attitudinal differences between men and women regarding immigration, religiosity, gender issues, and risk aversion have come into focus. PRRPs in Western Europe propagate more nativist and sometimes even racist positions compared to other parties (Arzheimer, 2015; Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018; Mughan & Paxton, 2006; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). Although many mainstream parties have become more critical after the 2015 refugee crisis, their proposals for dealing with immigrants are still much more liberal than the approach promoted by right-wing populists (Akkerman, 2012; Arzheimer, 2015; Boswell & Hough, 2009). Several scholars (Kuran & McCaffery, 2008; Lodders & Weldon, 2019; Rashkova & Zankina, 2017) argue that PRRPs' nativist, sometimes even xenophobic, rhetoric discourages women from supporting PRRPs since women are seen as having more open and liberal attitudes in this regard. Here, the values communicated by PRRPs and supposed women's preferences do not coincide, suggesting that this may be one reason why fewer women voters support PRRPs. However, empirical support for this theoretical claim has remained very low. A variety

of studies has found that women are at least as skeptical towards immigration as men are (Akrami et al., 2000; Coffé, 2019). Even today, scholars remain divided in their assessments of the significance of anti-immigrant sentiments in explaining the phenomenon of the populist radical right voting gap. Finnsdottir (2022), for instance, demonstrates that variations in attitudes toward immigration significantly influence the extent to which citizens are inclined to support PRRPs. Conversely, Hansen (2019) finds, in a study that includes a broader sample of PRRPs beyond the four Northern European countries examined by Finnsdottir (2022), that the differences between men and women in their views on immigration are minimal. However, Hansen (2019) notes that women are considerably more reluctant to translate such sentiments into actual voting behavior.

Some scholars have raised that this disparity between traditional conservative parties and PRRPs regarding religious ties might explain why women are well-represented among the supporters of center-right parties while being very few in the electorates of PRRPs (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Betz, 1994, Chapter 4; Schnabel, 2016). PRRPs in Western Europe overwhelmingly promote a secular image. Women on the other hand are notably more religious than men (Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Schnabel, 2016). Even in times when the importance of religion is in decline, one must not overlook this factor. Therefore, several researchers have stressed that women are less attracted to PRRPs because of deeper ties to religious groups. Yet, most of them found that gender differences persist once one incorporates variables such as church attendance or religiousness (Fontana et al., 2006; Gidengil et al., 2005; Harteveld et al., 2015).

Despite the efforts made, these explanatory approaches have yielded limited results. Thus, the literature has moved on to pay more attention to how PRRPs talk about women, how they treat them, and which gender roles they exactly propagate. A common theory in the literature is that women reject certain gender values promoted by PRRPs. Often, PRRPs espouse rather traditional gender roles and a hierarchical societal structure as such (Harteveld et al., 2015; Lodders & Weldon, 2019; Rippeyoung, 2007). From these conservative orientations, the policy plans advocated by PRRPs are not very attractive to women. Indeed, many of the newer works in this strand of research document that sexism, more masculine personality traits, and traditional views on gender issues perform quite well in explaining the populist radical right gender gap (Campbell & Erzeel, 2018; Coffé, 2019; Coffé et al., 2023; Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018; Lodders & Weldon, 2019; Ralph-Morrow, 2022).

However, it is worth noting that this characteristic, claimed to discourage women from voting for PRRPs, is also present in mainstream conservative parties. Mainstream conservative parties and PRRPs alike promote traditional family images (Giger, 2009; Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Thus, there is doubt (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017) that this factor is the main and single explanation for the discrepancy between men and women in supporting PRRPs. Notably, in recent years, many PRRPs have seen an increase in female support and have portrayed themselves as champions for women's rights, particularly concerning immigrants who may uphold more traditional gender values (Akkerman, 2015; Ben-Shitrit et al., 2022; de Lange & Mügge, 2015). Thus, the question of what exactly it is that women find so deterring about the rhetoric of PRRPs persists. Therefore, one needs to take a step back and reflect again on what sets PRRPs apart from the rest of the party spectrum, thereby triangulating potential supply- and demand-side explanations.

One approach in this vein is the argument that the openly hostile stance towards the established political system PRRPs often take might be too radical for women (Coffé, 2019; Fontana et al., 2006; Immerzeel et al.,

2015). Several scholars thus reasoned that anti-elitism could help explain why these parties seem to be so unattractive for women (Mayer, 2013; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015, 2017). Previous works pointed out that women are less likely to vote for protest parties and join confrontational forms of participation (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Roth, 2004). Thus, many infer that the behavior of anti-system parties might deter women from supporting them because of their greater aversion to radicalism. While anti-elitist sentiments measured via political distrust have been frequently incorporated in existing studies on the radical right gender gap (Fontana et al., 2006; Gidengil et al., 2005; Off, 2023; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017), little support for this line of reasoning has been found. However, most recent insights demonstrate that women are indeed more concerned about potentially wasting their vote and the social stigma of voting for inexperienced outsider parties. Oshri et al. (2023) convincingly show that women, therefore, are less likely to support outsider parties in risky electoral contexts, which also explains the variation of the populist radical right gender gap in voting across time and contexts.

While socio-economic and attitudinal differences between men and women have been explored, most of these discrepancies struggle to explain on their own why PRRPs are unappealing to women. The most decisive explanation seems to be women's more pronounced risk aversion in combination with PRRPs' outsider status (Immerzeel et al., 2015; Oshri et al., 2023). Additionally, recent studies (Spierings & Zaslove, 2017) also emphasize the importance of populist views on democracy for PRRPs' identity and citizens' decision to vote for these parties. While authoritarianism does very little to explain the radical right gender gap (Immerzeel et al., 2015; Lodders & Weldon, 2019; Mayer, 2013), populist attitudes can explain at least part of the gender gap in PRRP voting across Europe. However, the gender gap in voting for PRRPs persists in some contexts where PRRPs have become established parts of the political spectrum. Hence, we believe that it is of utmost importance to investigate additional factors. We argue that the very specific views on democracy propagated by PRRPs carry considerable explanatory potential in this regard.

Recent research shows that women and men differ in their understanding of what a properly functioning political system ought to look like (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021, 2024). Women and men are not alike when it comes to opinions about what a political system needs to prioritize and achieve to be considered a democracy (Afsahi, 2021; Konte & Klasen, 2016; Walker & Kehoe, 2013). Among other factors, women are more likely to prioritize the protection of minority rights in their characterization of an ideal democracy (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021). While recent studies test populist attitudes in general, authoritarianism, and anti-elitism, the gender differences in attributing importance to the protection of minority rights have remained unaddressed.

Building upon the specific approach of PRRPs to democratic decision-making, rooted in the radical right-wing host ideologies of these parties, which is hardly compatible with protecting minority rights, we develop an argument as to why the mismatch between PRRPs and female voters concerning what is most important in a democratic system could help explain the reluctance of women to support these parties.

3. Gender, the Populist Radical Right, and Different Views on Democracy

The ideational approach to populism introduced by Mudde (2004) is the most established definition of populism. In this article, we follow it and define populism as a thin ideology. Building upon the propositions of Mudde, populists view society as consisting of two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite." As a key part of their populist character, PRRPs rely on highly

confrontational "us versus them" rhetoric. In so doing, they do not simply criticize political elites but communicate a "Manichean worldview" and proclaim a constant struggle between the "pure and homogeneous people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2002, 2007). They also convey a strong people-centered view about how political decisions should be made. In their understanding, there exists just one *volonté générale* (general will) of the people which should be expressed and implemented as directly as possible (Mudde, 2004). Yet, the definition of the people is rather abstract, and its boundaries are not clearly defined.

There are several different types of populist parties, for instance, radical right, radical left, or technocratic populists. Depending on whether populism is coupled with radical right-wing or left-wing ideological stances, the conception of who belongs to "the good and pure people" changes. Right-wing populists emphasize the importance of nativism and often promote anti-pluralism. Consequently, they define the people based on cultural criteria, usually resulting in very strong opposition to immigration (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

Several scholars have concluded that some of these elements might harm democracy (Canovan, 2002; Guasti, 2020; Huber & Schimpf, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). However, the theoretical debates about this issue, as well as the empirical findings, paint a much more complex picture, with PRRPs being at odds with some aspects of democracy while being perfectly compatible with others (Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Plattner, 2010; Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023). Insights derived from works such as Heinisch and Wegscheider (2020) show that the respective left-wing or right-wing ideology coupled with the populist "core ideology" exerts a large influence on which facets of democracy a given populist party affects negatively. In the remainder of this theoretical argument, we will elaborate on which aspects of democracy populism coupled with radical right-wing ideologies—which is the distinguishing feature of PRRPs—might come into conflict with.

Right-wing populist parties are not anti-democratic per se, as they clearly state that the will of the people should determine the course of action in a state. They are strong proponents of political participation and direct decisions by citizens. In so doing, PRRPs emphasize the importance of one of the foundational pillars of democracy: rule by the people for the people. Nonetheless, their relations to other facets of democracy are a bit more complicated, especially regarding out-groups in society (Urbinati, 2019; Zaslove et al., 2021). Although emphasizing that the people are the source of political power and that only decisions taken by them should be viewed as legitimate, "the people" are viewed as a uniform mass. However, this does not reflect reality, as in no system are all citizens alike or think alike (Adamidis, 2021; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Plattner, 2010). Most societies are quite diverse, and even if there exists a political majority for certain decisions, there most likely exist several groups opposing it. The political system favored by PRRPs does not account for this. They push for the immediate implementation of the will of the people without being blurred by opposing demands (Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Mudde, 2004; Urbinati, 2019).

Importantly, given the anti-pluralist and often nativist orientations of PRRPs, the interests of minorities and other marginalized groups in society do not necessarily have to be considered equally in political decisions, according to the democratic concept proposed by PRRPs. This is at odds with the defining features of liberal democracy, stressing that all parts of the population have certain rights which must be taken care of and protected against an unconstrained "tyranny of the majority" (Canovan, 2002; Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023; Zanotti & Rama, 2021). This tension is illustrated and emphasized by findings yielding that radical right-wing

populist rule has particularly negative effects on certain aspects of democracy, such as minority rights (Huber & Schimpf, 2017).

Novel findings by Hansen and Goenaga (2021) demonstrate that, unlike men, women place more emphasis on the equal protection of civil, political, and social rights and value democratic institutions that prevent the violation of those rights. In contrast to their male counterparts, they value all precautions a political system takes to protect the rights of minorities and weaker groups in society. While women are number-wise not a minority, such preferences are rational and in line with female interests. For a long time, women had faced structural marginalization and are still frequently subject to discrimination nowadays (Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018). Thus, one might argue that women can better relate to how unfair treatment concerning rights and privileges feels and thus perceive this as more of a priority in a well-functioning democracy. Several studies (Afsahi, 2021; Hansen & Goenaga, 2024; Konte & Klasen, 2016; Walker & Kehoe, 2013) corroborate this claim and suggest that women are more likely to reject political practices and institutions that might restrict barriers to what extent the majority population can prevail over less powerful groups in society.

Going back to the vision of democracy PRRPs promote, certain tensions with what women appreciate particularly about a political system become obvious. In the view of radical right-wing populists, there is a uniform will of the good people that ought to be implemented as directly as possible (Mudde, 2002, 2004). Hence, everything that delays this process and all institutions promoting anti-majoritarian procedures are considered unbeneficial and even threatening to the implementation of the people's will (Canovan, 2002; Plattner, 2010; Urbinati, 2019). As shown by previous studies, this starkly contrasts with the features characteristic of a liberal democracy, where the rights of all groups, no matter how small and powerless, should be well protected (Adamidis, 2021; Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023; Zanotti & Rama, 2021; Zaslove et al., 2021).

Yet, it is particularly the strong protection of weaker groups, such as less resource-endowed individuals and minorities, that is crucial for women in a democracy. This highlights where the democratic ideals of PRRPs and women are incompatible. Even though women might be as skeptical about the impacts of immigration and the accompanying economic and cultural repercussions, they will still be more likely to advocate that the rights of such groups need to be protected against the rule of the majority. Findings (Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018) emphasize that women, stemming from their own negative experiences with prejudice, are more eager to make sure that societal dynamics that harm weaker groups are kept in check. We argue that this disconnect between what women value about a democratic system and what PRRPs offer in terms of the structural design of a system is a decisive factor in explaining why women are so often hesitant to endorse those parties. Thus, we hypothesize:

> H: Citizens who attach great importance to the protection of minority rights are less likely to vote for PRRPs. As women attach greater importance to such features of a political system than men, they are less likely to support PRRPs.

4. Research Design

4.1. The Populist Radical Right Gender Gap in the 2019 Swiss National Elections

We selected the SVP to test our hypothesis because this PRRP represents an established PRRP in a consolidated Western European party system. According to scholars concerned with the logic of meaningful case selection techniques (Gerring, 2006; Herron & Quinn, 2016), choosing a case with a *typical* set of values against the background of the general understanding of the phenomenon can provide valuable insights into a broader phenomenon. In our case, this concerns the pronounced gender voting gap in the electorate of PRRPs in stable democracies in Western Europe and North America. Moreover, the 2019 Swiss national elections present a suitable examination period, as several potential rival explanations to our theory can be ruled out. For instance, protest party image and anti-feminist rhetoric are unlikely to have played a significant role in the disparity in votes cast by men and women for the SVP in this election. Please see Figure 1 for a graphical illustration of this imbalance.

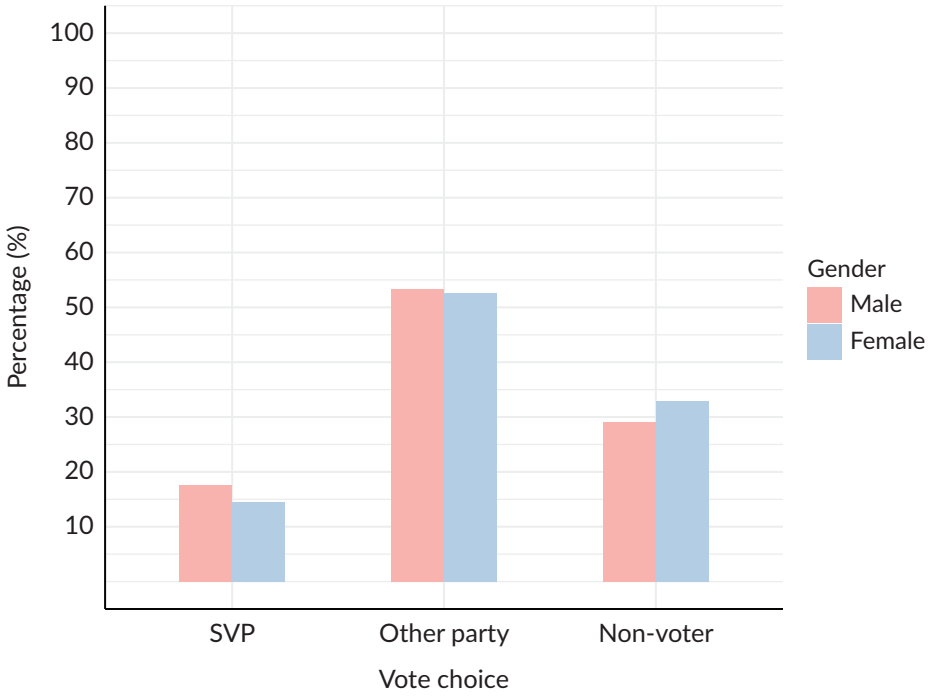

Figure 1. Vote choice in the Swiss national elections of 2019 ($N = 1032$).

While this disequilibrium is striking, some popular explanations found in the literature for similar phenomena do not apply to this case. The SVP is an established party that secured 25.59% of all votes in the 2019 national elections (Federal Statistical Office, 2023). It has been represented in the Swiss national government since 2003 and is also the Swiss party that has received the most votes in national elections since 1999. This renders the party one of the most experienced and successful PRRPs in Europe (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016; Mazzoleni & Skenderovic, 2007). While deploying an anti-elitist rhetoric, it did so from within the government, already established as part of the Swiss political elites. Consequently, women should neither perceive the SVP as an unpredictable and inexperienced party nor fear that it is socially undesirable to vote for the party.

Furthermore, Switzerland is still a rather conservative country concerning gender values in public and private life. The last communes in Switzerland granted women the right to vote only in 1991 (EJPD, 2021). In 2019, the SVP increased the number of women on their party lists in Switzerland. Notably, the SVP increased its share of women by 7.6 percentage points, surpassing the average increase among other parties of 5.8 percentage points (Giger et al., 2022). This is in line with literature claiming that even PRRPs are currently trying to appeal more to women, rendering arguments about traditional gender values prompted by PRRPs less relevant today.

4.2. Data

We test our hypothesis using individual-level data from the most recent ESS, Round 10 (from 2020). This survey offers cross-national micro-level data. As Switzerland is included in the most recent round, it provides us with extensive information on individual-level data about Swiss citizens. This data source is ideal for the application of our research interest as democratic attitudes are rarely polled in surveys.

Our dependent variable measures a respondent's vote choice in the 2019 national elections. It captures whether an individual endorses the SVP, a different party, or did not vote at all in the last election. We operationalize this by using respondents' stated vote choice in the 2019 national elections. In our analyses, we code the vote choice for a party other than the SVP as a reference group relative to voting for the SVP and abstaining from the vote.

The main independent variable of this article is *gender*. We assign the value 1 to all respondents who identify themselves as *female*. *Males* are coded as 0. To find out whether we can find empirical support for our hypothesis, namely that the gender gap in PRRP-voting is driven by different understandings of democracy between men and women, we construct a minority rights index by calculating the mean value of respondents' answers to three questions included in the ESS Round 10. The questions are part of a larger question box on democracy attitudes and ask on a scale from 0 to 10 if respondents consider it important that the government protects minority groups, the poor, or combats income inequality. Table 1 provides an overview of the wording of each component of our minority rights index. We selected these items based on the findings of Hansen and Goenaga (2021), which highlight gender differences in the perceived importance of minority rights for democracy. A correlation coefficient of 0.68 indicates that these three items tap into the same theoretical concept and can be combined into an index. Importantly, Swiss women in our sample assign higher importance to minority rights compared to men even if the gender differences are small (see Figure 2). Considering the low variation on the minority rights index, we consider even this small difference relevant.

It should also be emphasized that recent empirical evidence (Goenaga & Hansen, 2022; Hansen & Goenaga, 2024) clearly shows that women are less likely to answer questions about democratic evaluations. The Swiss ESS reports 38 respondents who did not answer at least one of the questions constituting our minority rights index; among them, 31 women and only 6 men. This implies that our sample is affected by this observation. Given their lower levels of internal efficacy, they are more hesitant to answer questions about the actual or ideal functioning of various dimensions of political systems. When women are unsure whether they have sufficient knowledge to answer correctly and competently, they tend to refrain from answering survey questions about such issues altogether. For our study, this implies that by drawing on public survey

Table 1. Overview of ESS questions used to construct the minority rights index.

Category	Survey item	Coding
Protection of minority rights	Please tell me how important you think it is for democracy in general that the rights of minority groups are protected.	Range: 0–10 0 = *unimportant* 10 = *important*
Protection against poverty	Please tell me how important you think it is for democracy in general that the government protects all citizens against poverty.	
Protection against inequality	Please tell me how important you think it is for democracy in general that the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels.	

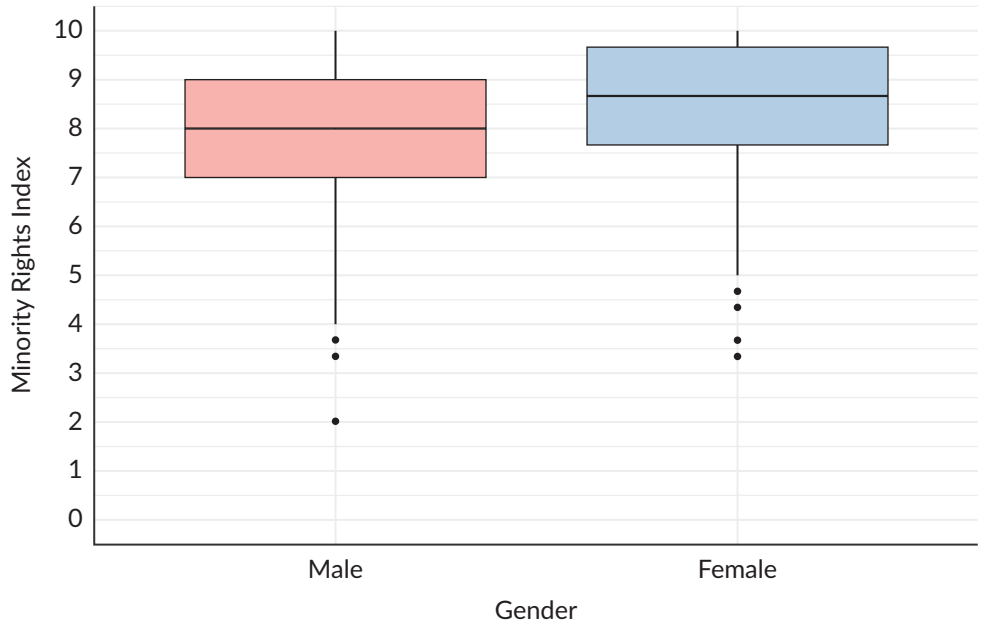

Figure 2. Boxplot on the distribution of male and female respondents on the minority rights index.

data, we are more likely to *underestimate* rather than overestimate the potential effect of different perspectives on certain democratic features.

We control respondents' education status, age, and income to account for the most important socio-demographic characteristics. We do not use objective household income as this leads to a very high number of missing values. We prefer to capture individuals' perception of whether they can comfortably live on their present income, which we also view as the more appropriate and interesting question when it comes to assessing the socio-economic situation of individuals. Furthermore, we account for anti-immigration sentiments, as an important alternative explanation for the radical right gender gap, by using a question targeted at whether respondents are worried about the economic impact of immigration. We do so to make sure that the omission of this potential rival explanation for the radical right gender gap does not affect our key findings. The question's focus on economics is aligned with PRRPs focusing on the economic consequences of immigration, which the SVP also deploys. For example, it proclaims that open borders lead to an inflow of unskilled labor and family reunions instead of a skilled labor force. In addition,

this question is less sensitive to social desirability biases compared to questions that capture nativism and racism more directly, which may deter respondents from providing honest answers.

5. Empirical Findings

To test our hypothesis, we conducted a set of nominal logistic regression analyses (see Table 2). The purpose of the first regression model is to test whether there is a gender gap between supporters of mainstream parties and supporters of the PRRP. To this end, we only include gender and our control variables in Model 1. Model 2 tests our central argument and includes a variable that measures the importance a respondent attaches to minority rights in a democracy. The last model, Model 3, includes an interaction term between gender and the minority rights index displayed in Figure 3 (see Appendix A2 in the Supplementary File for the respective regression table). We repeat this analytical approach with the individual components of the minority rights index to check if our results are robust (see Appendix A3 in the Supplementary File).

We now take a closer look at the results of the first set of regression analyses. Table 2 displays the results of the regression analyses designed to test our hypothesis, which states that women are less likely than men to support the SVP as they perceive minority rights as an integral aspect of democracy which does not match with what the SVP offers. The coefficient for *female* in Model 1 for SVP vote choice is statistically significant at a 0.05 level and the odds ratio is smaller than 1. We do not report a statistically significant difference between

Table 2. Nominal logistic regression models displaying respondents' vote choice in odds ratios.

Predictors	Vote choice			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	SVP	Non-voters	SVP	Non-voters
Female	0.67* 0.19	1.00 0.16	0.74 0.20	0.99 0.17
Education	0.76*** 0.06	0.67*** 0.05	0.77*** 0.06	0.67*** 0.05
Age	1.00 0.00	0.95*** 0.00	1.00 0.01	0.95*** 0.01
Income	1.15 0.38	0.45** 0.27	0.99 0.39	0.45** 0.27
Immigration	0.66*** 0.05	0.76*** 0.04	0.68*** 0.05	0.77*** 0.05
Minority rights			0.75*** 0.07	0.96 0.06
(Intercept)	18.35*** 0.65	427.21*** 0.53	133.35*** 0.84	507.62*** 0.72
Reference group	Other party		Other party	
Observations	1,013		994	
Residual deviance	1,697.016		1,639.507	
AIC	1,721.016		1,667.507	
R^2/R^2 adjusted	0.172/0.171		0.200/0.199	

Notes: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

men and women who did not vote and those who voted for other parties. This indicates that in 2019, Swiss women were less likely to vote for the PRRP compared to men, but not more or less likely to vote in the national elections. To help interpret the regression coefficient, we calculate the predicted probabilities for both men and women, holding all included control variables at their means (see Figure 3, SVP, Baseline). According to the model, the predicted probability of supporting the SVP is 18.4% on average for a man and 13.1% on average for a woman. Hence, we observe a significant gender gap, with a 5.3-percentage-point difference between the predicted probabilities.

Model 2 focuses on the first test of our main hypothesis. According to our theoretical expectation, women deem minority rights more important for a functioning democratic system and thus abstain more often from supporting the PRRP, as they demand a restriction of minority rights. The model empirically tests our hypothesis by including a variable that measures respondents' perceptions of the importance of minority rights. The coefficient of the variable *minority rights index* is significant at a level of 0.001 and the odds ratio is smaller than 1. As anticipated by our hypotheses, the inclusion of this variable renders the coefficient of gender insignificant. The predicted probabilities show that the gender gap in this model is 3.6 percentage points, and thus considerably smaller than in Model 1 (see Figure 3, SVP, Minority). This implies that controlling attitudes on the importance of minority rights for democracy can reduce the populist radical right gender gap, which is not visible for voters of other parties or non-voters independent of the model specifications.

Besides including a measure for attitudes on the importance of minority rights for democracy in Model 2, we also deploy an additional nominal logistic regression model with an interaction term between gender and

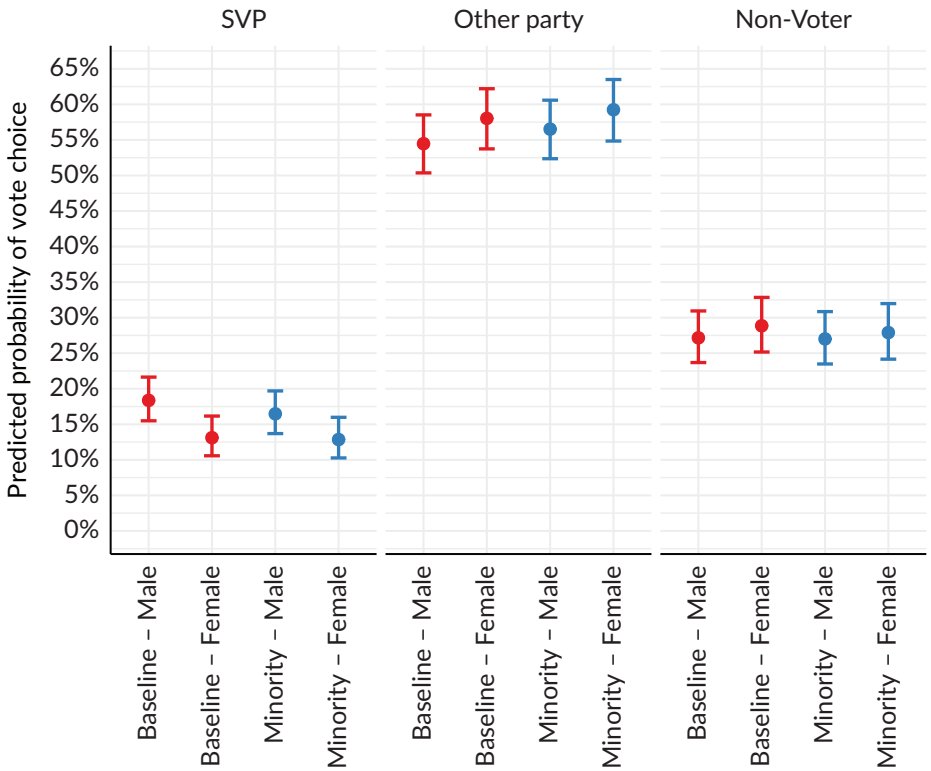

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of vote choice for Model 1 (Baseline) and Model 2 (Minority) based on gender.

our minority rights index. The purpose of this is to examine whether women and men who score similarly on our minority rights index display a similar likelihood of voting for the SVP. Women and men with similar attitudes on the importance of minority rights for democracy display similar voting behavior which implies that, as expected, these attitudes and not gender explain differences in voting behavior. To avoid extrapolation of predictions based on a limited set of observations, we distinguish between respondents that scored low, medium, and high values on our minority rights index, which is skewed towards higher values (Hainmueller et al., 2019). Higher values imply a higher importance of minority rights for democracies. We report the results of this approach as predicted probabilities in Figure 4. The results aligned with our expectations. Men and women with similar scores on the minority rights index display a similar likelihood to vote for the SVP that is not statistically significantly different (see Figure 4, SVP). This implies that the gender differences we identified in Model 1 were likely driven by women placing more importance on minority rights protection in democracies. Summing up, we can empirically demonstrate that there is a gender gap between the support bases of the PRRP and other Swiss parties and that this gap is moderated by different understandings of what matters in a well-functioning democracy between the genders. Our robustness checks based on the individual components of the minority rights index reemphasize this finding (see Appendix A3 in the Supplementary File).

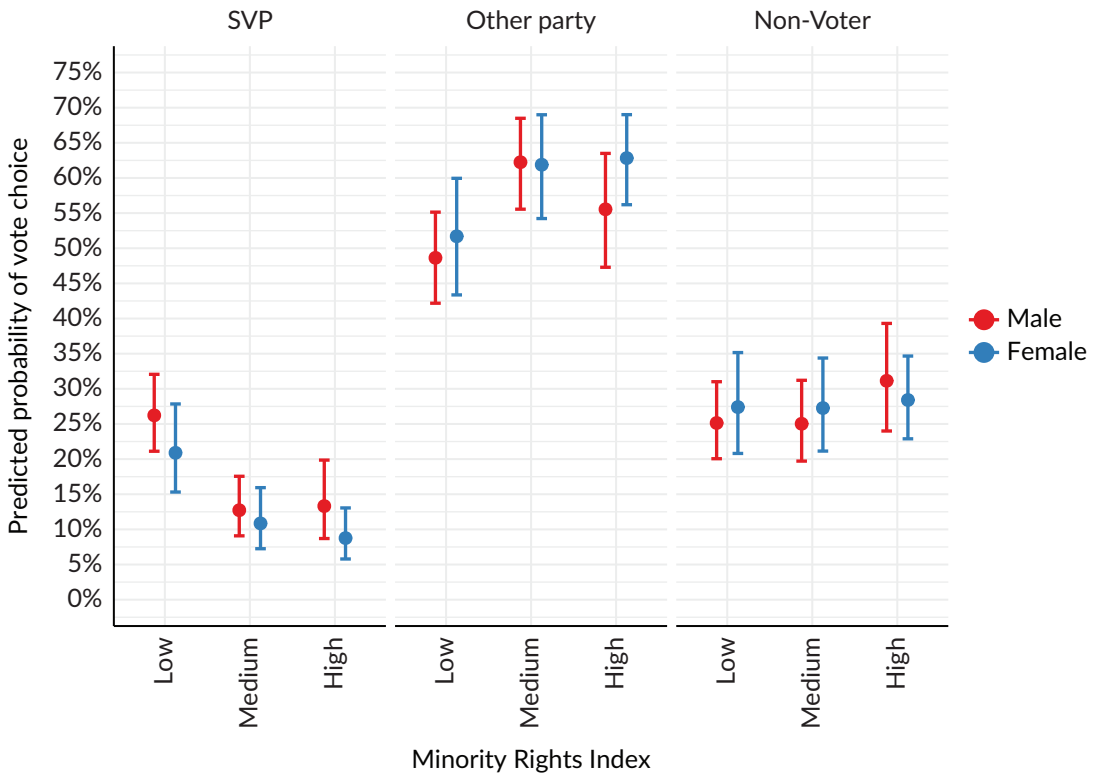

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of vote choice for the interaction between gender and the minority rights index.

6. Conclusion

When comparing the electorates of PRRPs and other parties in Western Europe, it is evident that women often vote for PRRPs in significantly lower numbers (Coffé, 2019; Off, 2023; Oshri et al., 2023; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). Recent insights attribute these effects to the protest and outsider stigma associated with

PRRPs. However, there are several cases where such explanations fall short. In many countries, PRRPs have been established for over two decades and have even assumed governing responsibilities. Therefore, the increased reluctance of women compared to men to vote for these parties can hardly be explained by a heightened risk aversion to inexperienced protest parties. A typical case for a PRRP in consolidated Western Europe is the SVP in Switzerland. Despite efforts by the SVP to appear more women-friendly, a considerable gender gap persists in their electorate (Federal Statistical Office, 2023). Here, too, a potential deterring outsider status carries very little explanatory power, as the SVP is one of the most experienced PRRPs.

Since the success of PRRPs is believed, at least to some extent, to be rooted in discontent with the current (mal)functioning of democratic institutions and practices, the question arises whether some of the responses and solutions proposed by PRRPs resonate less well with women than with men. We developed a theoretical argument stating that gender differences in democratic attitudes play an important role in explaining the persistence of the gender gap in PRRP voting, particularly in cases where established theories fall short. While recent empirical insights suggest that women and men prioritize different aspects of a democratic system, the extent to which this factor influences gender differences in PRRP voting has not been thoroughly explored. Women consider the equal protection of political and social rights particularly important for a functioning democracy and therefore attach great significance to safeguarding the rights of minorities against the majority's will (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021). This is in direct contrast to the PRRPs' vision of what a perfect democracy should look like (Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Plattner, 2010). The radical right-wing ideology propagated by such parties, especially their integral components of anti-pluralism and nativism, is hardly compatible with the orientations and stances of many women on these issues. We argue that the preferences of women and PRRPs do not align in this regard, causing lower levels of support for these parties among female voters. Therefore, we expect that this factor can explain at least part of the "populist radical right gender gap."

To test this argument, we utilize individual-level data from the ESS 2020 (ESS, 2023), which includes detailed questions about varying understandings of democracy. By analyzing this dataset, we can compare the importance of minority rights across genders and between SVP voters and mainstream party voters. This will help us determine to what extent diverging understandings of what constitutes a functioning political system contribute to the observed gender gap in the Swiss context. While minority rights and democracy are not identical concepts, the equal treatment of weaker non-mainstream groups in society is a crucial feature of the liberal version of democracy.

Our results strongly corroborate the argument that the different degrees of importance men and women attribute to the protection of minority rights cause the pronounced misalignment between female voters and the SVP. While the SVP has repeatedly advocated that objections against the majority's will from unwanted out-groups such as minorities need to be overruled, women are more likely to emphasize that minorities and groups with different opinions need to be protected from the "tyranny of the majority." These two viewpoints seem to be hardly compatible, which constitutes a powerful explanation for what discourages women from voting for PRRPs.

While we are convinced that examining gendered misalignments between what PRRPs offer in terms of democratic ideas to address prevalent grievances among citizens is a fruitful avenue for future research, our study is just one stride in this direction. Moreover, given the focus on one typical case for PRRPs, the

external validity of our findings is somewhat limited. Most importantly, by focusing on Switzerland, a consolidated democracy in Western Europe with a stable party system, we cannot generalize the extent to which the patterns observed in this study apply to other geographical and political contexts, such as Eastern Europe, where the presence of a populist radical right voting gap is much less established.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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

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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

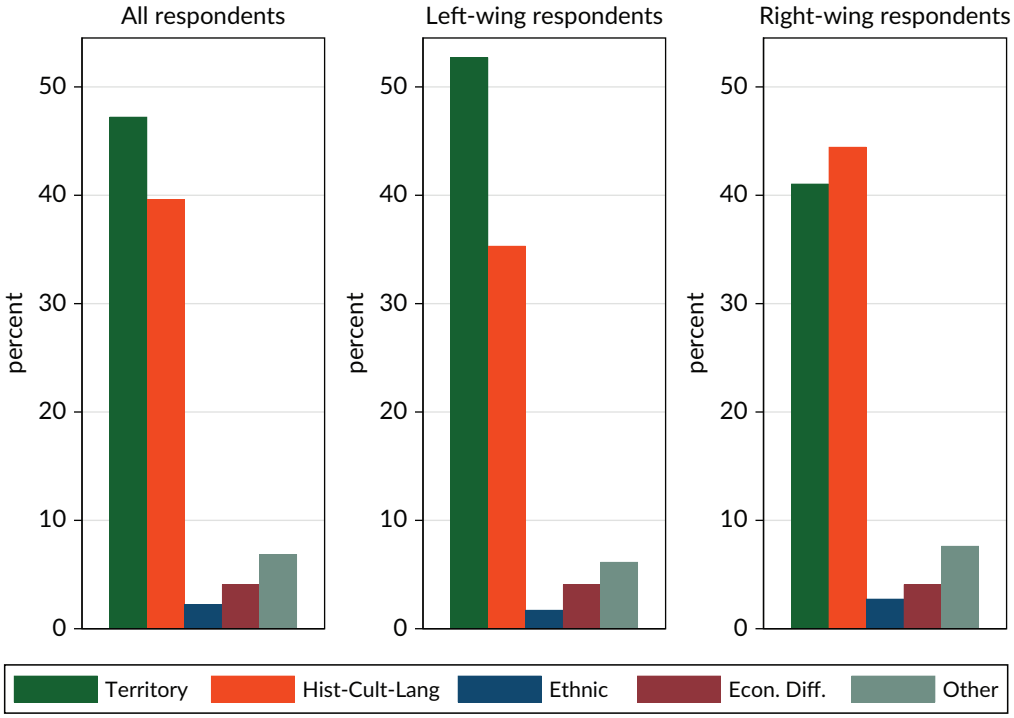

Figure 1. Definition of "the people."

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

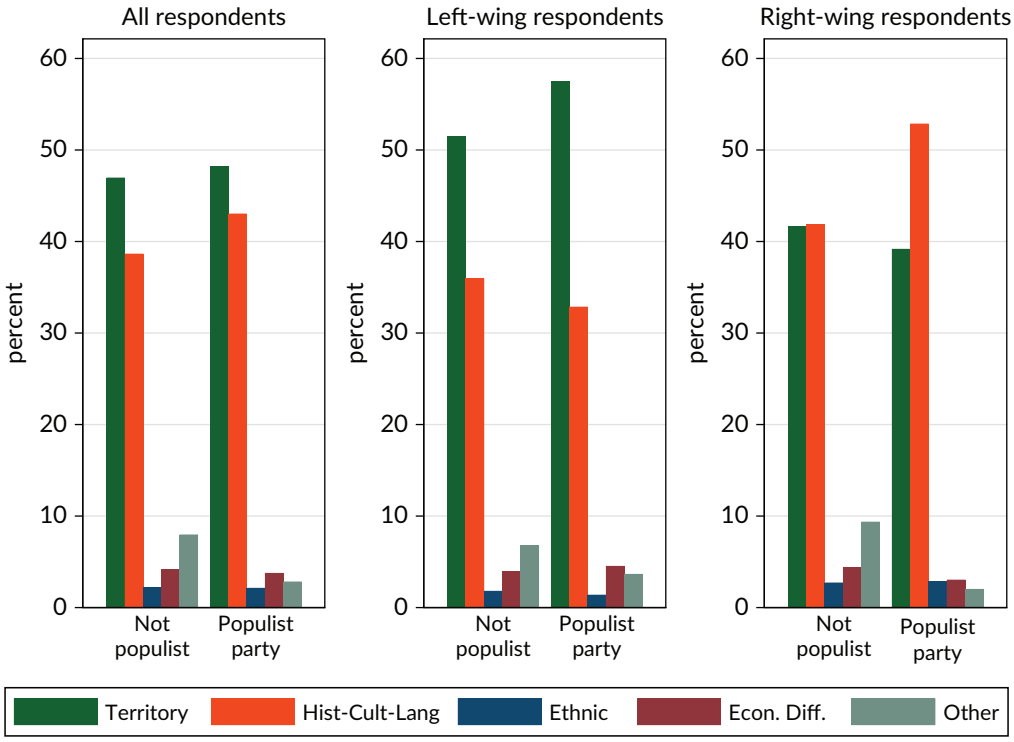

Figure 2. Definition of "the people," across voter-revealed populism and ideology.

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.

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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).

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

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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.

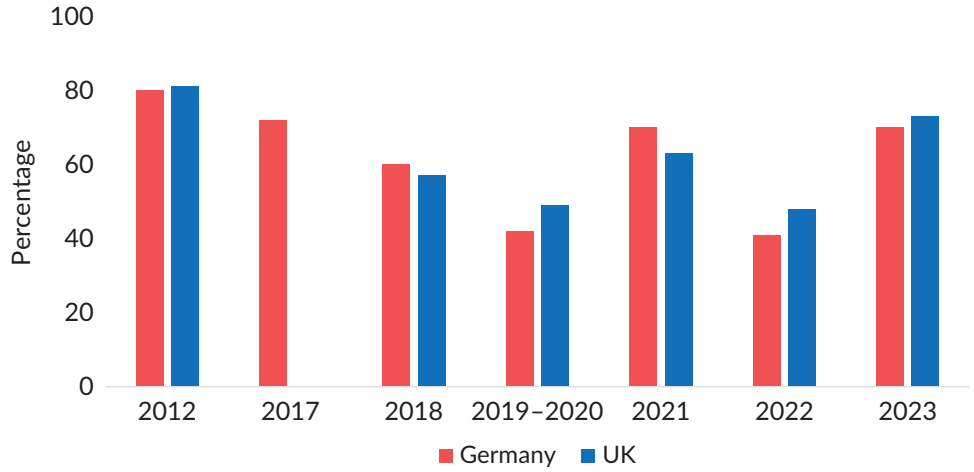

Figure 1. Public support for referendums in Germany and the UK over time.

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).

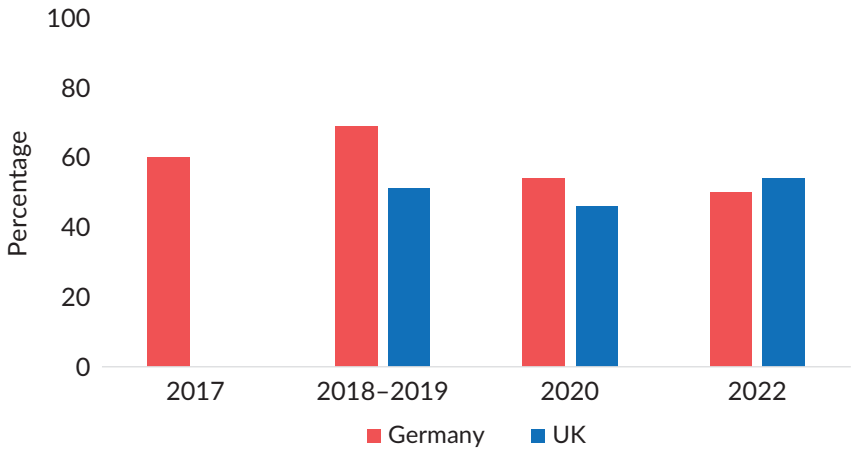

Figure 2. Public support for deliberative practices in Germany and the UK over time.

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

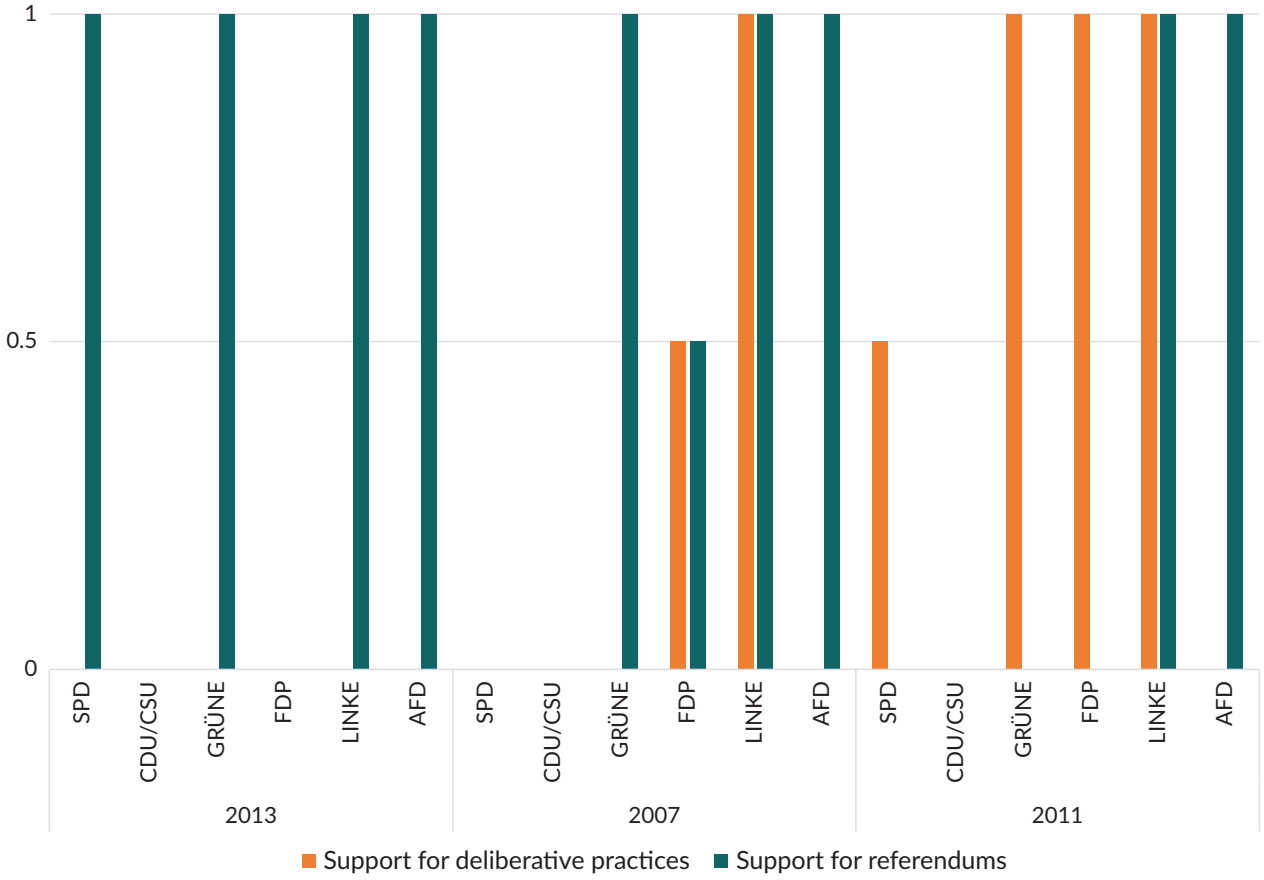

Figure 3. References to referendums or deliberative practices by party (Germany).

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.

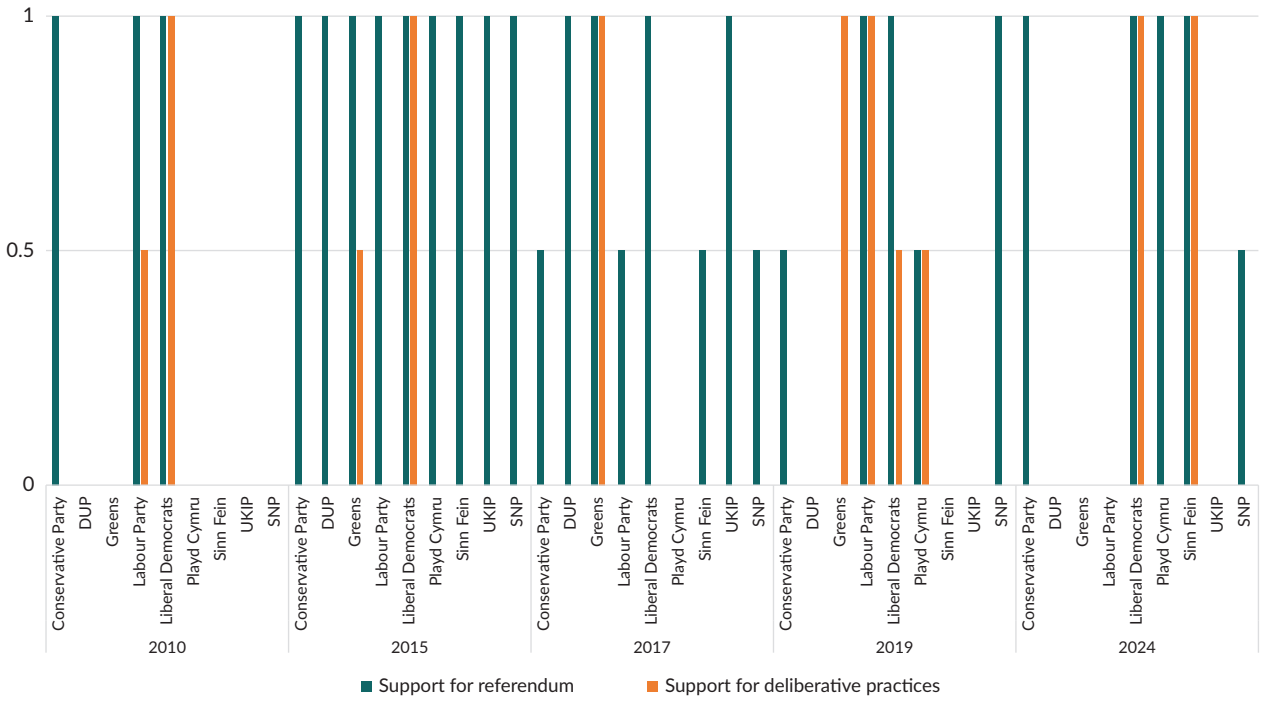

Figure 4. References to referendums or deliberative practices by party (UK).

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.

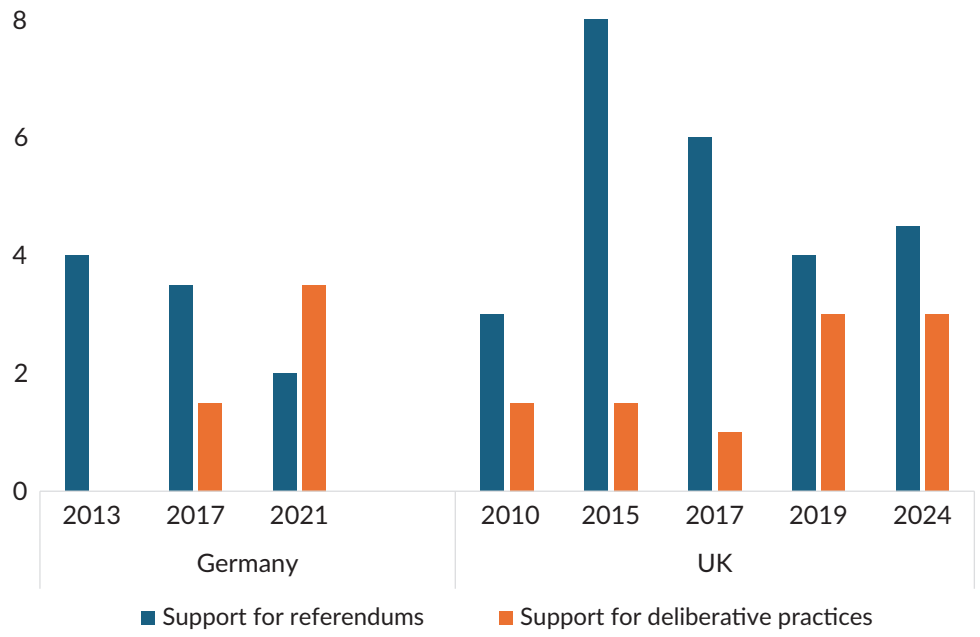

Figure 5. Party-system support for referendums and deliberative practices.

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.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

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

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ARTICLE

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Anything but Representative Democracy: Explaining Conspiracy Believers' Support for Direct Democracy and Technocracy

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories gained considerable attention during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although studies have extensively explored their (mostly) negative impacts on various political and social aspects, like participation, health-related behavior, and violence, their influence on support for democracy remains relatively unexplored. The few existing studies offer conflicting findings, prompting my focus to shift from assessing generic support for democracy to examining preferences for alternative decision-making models. To address some limitations of prior research on alternative models of decision-making, I combine a trade-off item with a ranking methodology: respondents were prompted to indicate their first and second preferences for different democratic and non-democratic models over representative democracy. The study is based on data from a representative survey in Germany (July/August 2022; $N = 2{,}536$). My findings confirm that the belief in conspiracy theories is positively associated with a preference for direct democratic decision-making. However, conspiracy believers also favor expert-based decision-making over elected politicians—but direct democracy would be their primary choice. Although the evidence for a preference for autocracy over representative democracy is associated with a higher degree of uncertainty, it does suggest that conspiracy believers tend to favor "anything but" representative democracy. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on the impact of conspiracy beliefs on democratic systems.

Keywords

conspiracy belief; conspiracy theories; direct democracy; representative democracy; technocracy

1. Introduction

Across the world, significant shares of the population believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Butter & Knight, 2020), i.e., they believe that major events are explained by secret plots of individuals or groups who pursue a

malevolent goal (Jolley et al., 2020). Conspiracy theories (e.g., about an allegedly stolen election) significantly influenced the violent storming of the US Capitol in January 2021, attacks on vaccination clinics during the Covid-19 pandemic, far-right terrorist attacks (e.g., Christchurch mosque attacks), and other violent actions. At the same time, the followers of the Anti-Covid movement—where conspiracy theories were abundant—have often portrayed themselves as the defenders of democracy against a so-called "hygiene dictatorship," in part alleging that the elites of the current representative democratic system fabricated a "fake" pandemic to curtail citizens' civil rights.

Given these events, the question arises as to whether conspiracy theories pose a threat to representative party democracy and what conspiracy believers think about this model of democracy. Specifically, since many conspiracy theories postulate that the political elite itself is the conspirator or that the strings are pulled by "secret powers" in the background, which could make democratic elections seem obsolete in the eyes of the conspiracy believers, it is important to scrutinize conspiracy believers' support for representative democracy, or more precisely: their support for elected political representatives as decision-makers.

Extensive scholarly attention has thus far been devoted to studying citizens' preferences for alternative models of political decision-making (see for an overview, König et al., 2022). Efforts to explain these preferences often center around two hypotheses: the "new politics" hypothesis vs. the "disaffection hypothesis" (Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan & Karp, 2006; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019). Other factors that have been considered in this discussion are political ideology—in the form of left–right self-placement or populism (see, e.g., Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Chiru & Enyedi, 2021; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Mohrenberg et al., 2021)—as well as authoritarianism (Chiru & Enyedi, 2021). The belief in conspiracy theories, however, has only very recently been discussed in isolated publications (Pantazi et al., 2021; Papaioannou et al., 2023; Reiser & Küppers, 2022). So, despite the growing body of research on conspiracy theories—often highlighting their detrimental social consequences in domains such as health behavior, vaccine hesitancy, and affinity towards violence (Pilch et al., 2023; van Mulukom et al., 2022; Vegetti & Littvay, 2021)—the link between conspiracy beliefs and preferences for alternative models of political decision-making remains a blind spot. Political consequences of conspiracy theories have mainly been scrutinized concerning institutional trust, voting behavior, and political participation (see for an overview, Pilch et al., 2023), but not in the field of democracy research.

Moreover, the few existing studies have mostly used questions on generic support for democracy (Pickel et al., 2022; Yendell & Herbert, 2022), while only three studies probe conspiracy believers' support for alternatives to (representative) democracy, albeit, with contradictory results. The works by Pantazi et al. (2021) as well as Reiser and Küppers (2022) find that conspiracy believers are not opposed to democracy per se, but support certain forms of democratic government such as models where citizens or experts are the decision-makers. In contrast, the study by Papaioannou et al. (2023) suggests that conspiracy belief is associated with a preference for autocratic models of government. One explanation for these mixed findings is an "anything but" attitude towards representative democracy: "As such, conspiracy beliefs may predict support for either direct democracy or autocracy, depending on what is offered as an alternative option to the current democratic system" (Papaioannou et al., 2023, p. 853). Another reason for the unclear findings may be the design of previous survey questions. First, previous studies did not probe support for both democratic (e.g., citizens) and non-democratic alternatives over elected representatives simultaneously (but see, Reiser & Küppers, 2022). Second, respondents were not forced to choose one (or all) alternatives over representative democracy. Instead, as each model was measured with its own survey item(s), respondents

could, in theory, indicate support for all of them (see for a similar critique regarding the general literature on alternative models of decision-making, Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; König et al., 2022).

This suggests that whether conspiracy believers will support direct, technocratic, or non-democratic alternatives to representative democracy may be conditional on *what* alternatives are presented to them (Papaioannou et al., 2023), but also on *how* these alternatives are presented to them. In other words: to test the assumption that conspiracy believers will support "anything but" representative democracy, the survey design will need to have respondents indicate whether they support multiple models of decision-making over representative democracy.

The primary contribution of this study, therefore, is that it uses a more robust measure to capture conspiracy believers' preferences for alternative models of decision-making that avoids inconsistent preferences (by using a trade-off item), while at the same time allowing respondents to indicate support for more than one model of government (in the form of a first and second-best option). In the study design, respondents were forced to indicate their first and second preference for one of the four options: representative democracy, direct democracy, technocracy, or autocracy. Next to this methodological contribution, this article highlights conspiracy beliefs as an important factor shaping citizens' preferences toward alternative models of political decision-making. By doing so, this study may enhance our understanding of why populists, as well as other dissatisfied citizens, who share conspiracy beliefs, are often at odds with representative party democracy, thus contributing to this thematic issue's focus. Moreover, the study will contribute to the political psychology literature by extending the focus of the debate on the political consequences of conspiracy beliefs to attitudes toward democracy. Thereby, it will enhance our understanding of the impact of conspiracy beliefs on representative party democracy. By showing that citizens with conspiracy beliefs support a variety of alternatives that are not necessarily anti-democratic (such as technocracy), the focus of this article aligns with the thematic issue's goal of uncovering preferences for alternatives to representative party democracy beyond greater participatory opportunities.

This article wants to answer the questions of how belief in conspiracy theories is linked to preferences for different models of political decision-making and whether conspiracy believers will favor any (that is, also non-democratic) alternative(s) over the representative model of democracy. To scrutinize the link between conspiracy belief and the preferred model of government, a representative survey was conducted in Germany in July/August 2022. The articles' findings reveal that conspiracy belief is negatively related to supporting representative democracy while it is positively associated with a preference for citizens as decision-makers. Additionally, conspiracy believers show a preference for experts over elected representatives, but with direct democracy (i.e., citizens as decision-makers) being their first choice. While the evidence regarding a preference for autocracy over representative democracy is associated with higher uncertainty, this study's findings, nonetheless, reinforce the idea proposed by Papaioannou et al. (2023) that conspiracy believers tend to favor any alternative model over representative democracy.

2. Literature Review

This chapter will first outline the main explanatory factors used in scholarship on citizens' preferences for alternative decision-making models. Then, existing research on conspiracy belief and attitudes toward (representative) democracy will be summarized.

2.1. Support for Alternative Models of Political Decision-Making

When support for alternative models of political decision-making is tested, existing studies have often looked at direct democratic alternatives, i.e., a preference for citizens over politicians as the key decision-makers, such as via the use of (binding or consultative) referendums (e.g., Gherghina & Geissel, 2019). Much less attention has been devoted toward preferences for deliberative democracy (but see, Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; Neblo et al., 2010). In the past decade, preferences for expert-based models of decision-making (sometimes under the label technocracy or stealth democracy) have gained much attention in political science (e.g., Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Chiru & Enyedi, 2021; Ganuza & Font, 2020; VanderMolen, 2017). Key actors in such decision-making processes are politically independent experts, whereas citizens do not play an active role in politics. Again, other studies assess citizens' support for the general idea of democracy or non-democratic alternatives (e.g., Kirsch & Welzel, 2019). While this debate agrees that citizens are calling for a shift from the current representative democratic model, disagreement remains over the explanatory factors fuelling this demand and the specific direction in which this change should take place. In the following, I will discuss the main drivers as identified by existing scholarship.

Citizens' preferences toward alternative models of political decision-making are often explained as a result of dissatisfaction. Two perspectives prevail: the "new politics" vs. the "disaffection" hypothesis (Dalton et al., 2001). The new politics hypothesis suggests that politically interested citizens with postmaterialist attitudes and citizens more actively engaged in politics tend to support alternative models of democracy (Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan & Karp, 2006; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019). These citizens are dissatisfied with the means of participation available to them and strive for greater participatory opportunities. In contrast, the disaffection hypothesis posits that dissatisfaction stems from citizens' perception that the political system is not responsive, and, hence, they prefer alternative models of democracy—especially stealth democracy. In contrast to the "new politics" hypothesis, dissatisfaction in this case is not grounded in the wish for greater participatory opportunities; instead, citizens do not want to become more involved (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009). The empirical evidence from studies testing both hypotheses is mixed, with some studies supporting the disaffection hypothesis (Allen & Birch, 2015; Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Coffe & Michels, 2014; Dalton et al., 2001), and others yielding more ambiguous results, failing to clearly endorse or reject either of the two explanations (Donovan & Karp, 2006; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019).

Moreover, studies demonstrate that citizens' preferences for alternative models of political decision-making are shaped by their political attitudes and ideology, e.g., left–right self-placement (e.g., Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Chiru & Enyedi, 2021), populism (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023), and authoritarianism (Chiru & Enyedi, 2021). Despite its significance, the belief in conspiracy theories has unfortunately not yet received much attention.

Despite the valuable input provided by the works on alternative models of decision-making, many studies have been limited to exploring one single alternative to representative democracy (see for an overview, König et al., 2022). This approach overlooks the possibility that citizens may endorse multiple models simultaneously. When several alternative models were studied, often, each model was measured with its own survey item(s), and respondents could, in theory, indicate their joint support for all of them (see for a similar critique, Gherghina & Geissel, 2019; König et al., 2022). This results in inconsistent preferences where citizens can simultaneously prefer a direct democratic model (i.e., more involvement) and stealth

democracy (which means less involvement; Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsou & Caramani, 2022). One way to interpret this finding is that citizens "do not necessarily have well thought-out options for the direction this change [of the existing situation] should take" (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009, p. 1045).

While it is reasonable to assume that citizens may lack a clear idea of the ideal alternative to the current system, it is also possible that they favor a certain model over another. However, current survey questionnaire designs, which allow citizens to express support for multiple alternatives simultaneously, fail to capture these nuances. A promising alternative lies in utilizing trade-off items or bipolar rating scales, where respondents must choose one alternative over another (e.g., indicate their preference for decision-making by citizens over politicians; see for examples, Allen & Birch, 2015; Coffe & Michels, 2014; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019; Rapeli, 2016). Regrettably, trade-off items have not been extensively utilized in existing research (see, König et al., 2022).

While the use of bipolar rating items has advanced our understanding of citizens' preferences, two limitations must be acknowledged. First, several of these articles only test the support for one alternative over another in isolation (Allen & Birch, 2015; Rapeli, 2016). Using such a design, bipolar rating scales fail to uncover that citizens may have a clear preference for one model while still appreciating other alternatives to some degree. Second, existing research often neglects to test the preference for non-democratic over democratic alternatives. This is especially relevant in the context of this article, given the association between conspiracy belief and affinity towards violence (e.g., Jolley & Paterson, 2020; Vegetti & Littvay, 2021) and its stronger prevalence on both extremes of the political spectrum (Imhoff et al., 2022).

To overcome previous limitations, I have chosen a novel methodological approach that avoids inconsistent preferences while enabling citizens to express support for multiple alternatives over representative democracy. I combined a trade-off item with a ranking of preferences and respondents were forced to indicate their first and second preferences for either representative, direct, expert-based, or autocratic models of political decision-making (see also Section 4).

2.2. Conspiracy Theories and Alternatives to Representative Democracy

Understanding the consequences of an individual's belief in conspiracy theories for their preferences toward alternative models of political decision-making is an understudied topic. Conspiracy theories "explain the ultimate causes of distressing and complex political or social events concerning secret plots conducted by malevolent groups, which can either represent powerful (e.g., politicians, scientists) or socially marginalized groups (e.g., Jews, Muslims)" (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020, p. 1486). Previous studies have demonstrated the (mostly) negative effects of conspiracy belief across various political and social domains (see for an overview, Jolley et al., 2020; Pilch et al., 2023). Existing studies concerned with the consequences of conspiracy theories for political behavior have largely focused on the link between conspiracy belief and unconventional or illegal forms of political participation (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2021; Mari et al., 2017), (far-right) voting behavior (Jolley et al., 2020; Lamberty et al., 2018; Pickel et al., 2022), institutional trust (e.g., Einstein & Glick, 2015; Mari et al., 2022; Nera et al., 2022), or affinity towards violence (Pickel et al., 2022; Rottweiler & Gill, 2020; Vegetti & Littvay, 2021).

Regarding the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and attitudes toward democracy, the few existing studies show inconsistent results. Studies that scrutinize conspiracy believers' generic support for

the idea of democracy or support of an autocratic model of government (see, Czech, 2022; Papaioannou et al., 2023; Pickel et al., 2022; Yendell & Herbert, 2022) find evidence for non-democratic tendencies among conspiracy believers. In contrast, other findings point towards higher support for democratic norms and principles among this group (Stojanov & Douglas, 2022; Swami et al., 2011). The focus of this article is on the consequences of conspiracy beliefs for the support of representative democracy, as well as other democratic (citizens and experts as decision-makers) and non-democratic alternative decision-making models. Again, existing research is scarce, and findings are mixed: two studies indicate that conspiracy believers reject representative democracy and prefer alternative, yet democratic, models instead, such as direct democracy (Pantazi et al., 2021; Reiser & Küppers, 2022), while Papaioannou et al. (2023) find that they support autocratic forms of government.

These inconsistencies in conspiracy believers' attitudes toward alternative models of decision-making can be attributed to several factors: Firstly, conspiracy belief may lead to an "anything but" attitude towards representative democracy, resulting in support for both direct democracy and technocracy, or even autocracy—contingent on the options presented (Papaioannou et al., 2023). Secondly, differences in the design of survey items may contribute to these results. While generating valuable insights, the study conducted by Pantazi et al. (2021) did not inquire about respondents' support for non-democratic forms of government. Moreover, the survey items scrutinizing support for different models of political decision-making were not mutually exclusive. Consequently, respondents could, in theory, simultaneously indicate their support for direct, deliberative, expert-based, and representative models of decision-making. Much like the broader population (see Sub-section 2.1), conspiracy believers, therefore, display inconsistent preferences—supporting direct and technocratic models of decision-making simultaneously (Pantazi et al., 2021; Reiser & Küppers, 2022).

Moreover, the study by Papaioannou et al. (2023) did not include items on support for democratic alternatives (e.g., direct or expert-based models of democracy) and studies conspiracy believers' support for an autocratic alternative in isolation. Consequently, there is a risk of overestimating conspiracy believers' inclination towards non-democratic forms of government. Due to the study's design, it has to remain unclear whether an autocracy represents their first choice or if they simply prefer any alternative over representative democracy—including non-democratic ones.

While the study by Reiser and Küppers (2022) advances on this and measures both support for democratic and non-democratic alternatives, it also did not force respondents to pick an alternative over representative democracy or to choose democratic over non-democratic alternatives. Furthermore, it was limited to Covid-19-related conspiracy theories only, whereby a potential bias may arise: The followers of the Anti-Covid movement have often portrayed themselves as the defenders of democracy against a "hygiene dictatorship." This suggests that they may oppose autocratic rule and that Covid-19 conspiracy believers could potentially be more supportive of democracy than individuals who believe in other conspiracy theories.

3. Theoretical Argument: The Link Between Conspiracy Belief and Support for Alternative Models of Government

The overarching question is whether conspiracy beliefs will be associated with preferring any alternative over representative democracy or only certain alternatives, thereby, e.g., rejecting non-democratic ones.

Synthesizing the literature on alternative decision-making preferences with the literature on conspiracy beliefs, multiple lines of argument can be identified which all point towards a rejection of representative democracy by people believing in conspiracy theories. First, following the explanation suggested by the disaffection hypothesis, citizens with low levels of institutional trust and external efficacy (i.e., a feeling of political powerlessness) will support alternatives to representative democracy (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Coffe & Michels, 2014; Dalton et al., 2001; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019)—both factors have been identified as correlates of conspiracy belief by various studies (e.g., Einstein & Glick, 2015; Mari et al., 2022).

Second, existing research on the consequences of conspiracy beliefs on political behavior has demonstrated that these decrease the likelihood of voting in elections (e.g., Lamberty & Leiser, 2019). Such behavior seems plausible when considering the perspective of conspiracy believers who might be convinced that political elites are mere "puppets," whereas the actual power is in the hands of secret organizations in the background. Under such a condition, "exchanging the political elites would be mere window dressing" (Reiser & Küppers, 2022). Moreover, the belief in a plot of secret actors with malevolent goals can make violence seem like the only effective means to bring down the political elite (Vegetti & Littvay, 2021).

Third, conspiracy theories that accuse powerful groups of a conspiracy (e.g., governments) can be understood as power-challenging, i.e., they aim at challenging existing social and political power structures. Research, for example, associates conspiracy mentality with political behavior aimed at changing the status quo (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Direct democracy then emerges as an appealing alternative for citizens believing in conspiracy theories, as political decision-making by citizens removes power from the political elites which are, from the perspective of conspiracy believers, involved in a malicious secret plot against society. Additionally, direct democracy could offer a potential "cure" for the feeling of political powerlessness as it offers citizens the possibility to directly influence political outcomes and could, potentially, create a feeling of empowerment. Promising results have already been reported from a survey experiment where empowering citizens through direct forms of participation mitigated the feeling of powerlessness associated with conspiracy beliefs (Pantazi et al., 2021).

In contrast to this, the link between conspiracy beliefs and attitudes toward expert-based decision-making is less clear. Citizens might hold even less power under this form of government than under a representative model of democracy (Reiser & Küppers, 2022). In opposition to citizens wanting more participation the "stealth democracy" thesis claims instead that citizens prefer alternative models of democracy where they do not have to become politically active (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009). While the political elites, whom conspiracy believers reject for their alleged involvement in a conspiracy, are less powerful in the technocratic model than in the representative model, conspiracy believers might, still, regard the experts as part of the elite conspiracy—as could be witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic (Reiser & Küppers, 2022). Nevertheless, it seems plausible that citizens who believe in conspiracy theories support an expert-based model, simply, because it, too, offers an alternative to representative democracy (Pantazi et al., 2021). This is supported by the previously mentioned two studies (Pantazi et al., 2021; Reiser & Küppers, 2022). In conclusion, it seems likely that technocracy will not be the first choice for most conspiracy believers. But if the assumption by Papaioannou et al. (2023) that conspiracy believers will prefer any alternative to representative democracy is true, we would expect them to favor decision-making by experts as a second (or third) best model over representative democracy.

Next to the argument that conspiracy believers will prefer any alternative over decision-making by elected representatives (Papaioannou et al., 2023), conspiracy belief might be correlated with support for autocracy. First, the two attitudes have the same roots and individuals on the ideological fringes are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2022); individuals with extremist attitudes are also more likely to support non-democratic forms of government (e.g., Torcal & Magalhães, 2022). Besides, conspiracy belief is associated with right-wing authoritarianism. People with such personalities are more obedient to authority figures and more inclined to support autocracy (Papaioannou et al., 2023). Second, conspiracy belief has moreover been linked to political violence and violent extremism (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020; Vegetti & Littvay, 2021), suggesting that conspiracy believers might have already left the realm of democracy. In the face of a secret plan by a malevolent elite, they no longer regard democratic means to remove the elite as sufficient—only violence will do (Vegetti & Littvay, 2021). This is underscored by individual studies already pointing towards a negative relationship between conspiracy beliefs and support for the idea of democracy (Pickel et al., 2022; Yendell & Herbert, 2022).

Given that the support for a model of government will be operationalized by asking respondents to indicate their first and second preference (see also Section 4), the theoretical expectations are illustrated in Figure 1 and can be summarized as follows:

- H1: Conspiracy belief is negatively associated with a preference for representative democracy as the best and second-best model of decision-making.
- H2: Conspiracy belief is positively associated with a preference for direct democracy as the best or second-best model of decision-making.
- H3: Conspiracy belief is positively associated with a preference for expert-based decision-making as the best or second-best model of decision-making.
- H4: Conspiracy belief is positively associated with a preference for an autocracy as the best or second-best model of decision-making.

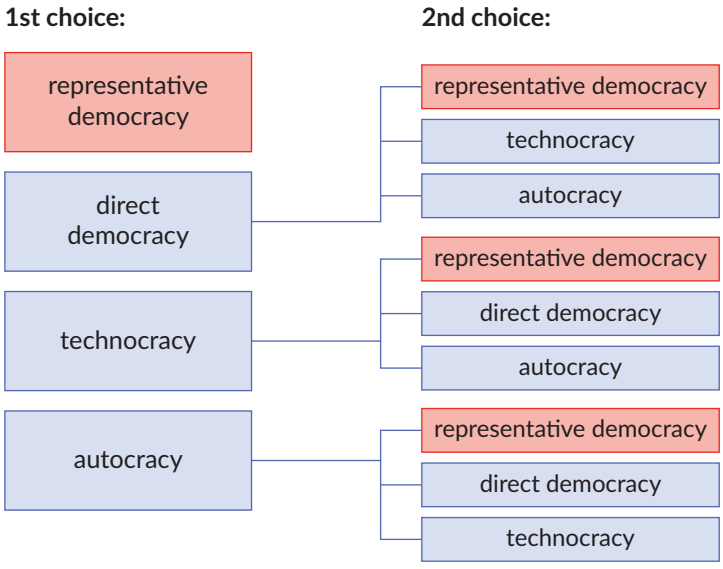

Figure 1. Illustration of theoretical expectations regarding survey item. Notes: Choices in red-colored boxes are not consistent with the idea that conspiracy believers prefer any alternative to representative democracy; choices in blue-colored boxes are in line with this assumption.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data

I use data from a representative survey conducted in Germany from July 11 to August 9, 2022, by the survey company Infratest dimap (N = 2,536). The survey was conducted via telephone and web interviews (CAWI/CATI). Relevant items measuring support for different models of democracy were, however, only used for 2/3 of the respondents (N = 1,660; see Best et al., 2023). Summary statistics can be found in Table S.10 in the Supplementary File.

4.2. Operationalization

One prevalent issue in prior studies related to how respondents' choices regarding alternative models of decision-making were handled—survey respondents were not forced to choose one (or all) alternative models over representative democracy. Instead, as each model is measured with its own survey item(s), respondents could, in theory, indicate support for all of them (see for a similar critique, Gherghina & Geissel, 2019).

In their study, Gherghina and Geissel (2019) chose to handle the issue of inconsistent preferences by excluding respondents showing such attitudinal patterns from their analysis. However, this exclusionary tactic might hinder a full understanding of citizens' preferences. When using items to scrutinize the support for more than two alternative models of government, existing research, usually, uses dual rating items (in the form of citizens vs. politicians, experts vs. politicians, or citizens vs. experts; e.g., Coffe & Michels, 2014). This still permits the existence of inconsistent preferences, while not revealing information about the ranking of citizens' preferences. An alternative method is to use ranking items, as demonstrated by VanderMolen (2017). Ranking items allow respondents to indicate their preferences by sorting different decision-making models based on how suitable they deem these. While this approach offers valuable insights, it may present challenges when implemented in a CATI survey. As a result, I have chosen an approach that combines trade-off items with a ranking methodology to navigate these complexities.

For the dependent variable, respondents were forced to indicate their first and second preferences for one of four options (while still having the option to choose "don't know"). To measure preferences for alternative models of government, participants were asked: "If it were up to you: Who should best decide on laws?" Survey respondents had to pick one of four models: representative democracy ("Elected members of parliament and government representatives"), direct democracy ("Citizens in regular referendums"), expert-based decision-making ("Specialized experts in the relevant subject area"), or an autocratic decision-making model ("A single leader with broad decision-making power"). The German wording can be found in Table S.9 in the Supplementary File.

To increase the robustness of our measure, all respondents who did not choose representative democracy were asked for their second choice ("And which of the other options is second best for you?"). If conspiracy believers prefer any alternative model over representative democracy, this approach should be able to more effectively capture and discern such a pattern.

My main independent variable is conspiracy belief, which was measured with five items that were each answered on a four-point scale (see Table 1). A mean index (with one missing value allowed; Cronbach's alpha = 0.8) was computed, ranging from 1 (no conspiracy belief) to 4 (high conspiracy belief).

Table 1. Items measuring conspiracy belief.

Item 1	The ruling elites pursue the goal of replacing the German people with immigrants.
Item 2	The Western world has conspired against Russia and Putin to expand its own power.
Item 3	The Coronavirus is a bioweapon intentionally designed to harm humans.
Item 4	The government deliberately created fear among the population during the Corona crisis to impose massive restrictions on fundamental rights.
Item 5	Scientists deliberately exaggerate the risks of climate change to get more money and credit for their research.

In the logistic regression models, I control for age, gender, education, immigrant background, social class, having problems coping financially, political interest, left–right self-placement, and whether respondents are from East or West Germany (a full list of the items is available in the Supplementary File).

5. Results

Notably, most respondents favor direct democracy (41.1%), this is followed by the expert-based decision-making model (33.4%). Representative democracy comes in third, being the first choice for only one-quarter of the respondents. A single leader with broad decision-making power was chosen by only 1% of the respondents as their preferred model of government (see Figure 2). Respondents who did not pick representative democracy as their first choice were asked in a follow-up question which of the options they considered second best. We see that the pattern now is somewhat reversed with elected politicians receiving the most support. Specialized experts again come in second with the share of respondents preferring this option as their second choice reaching similar levels as for the first choice. "Citizens in regular

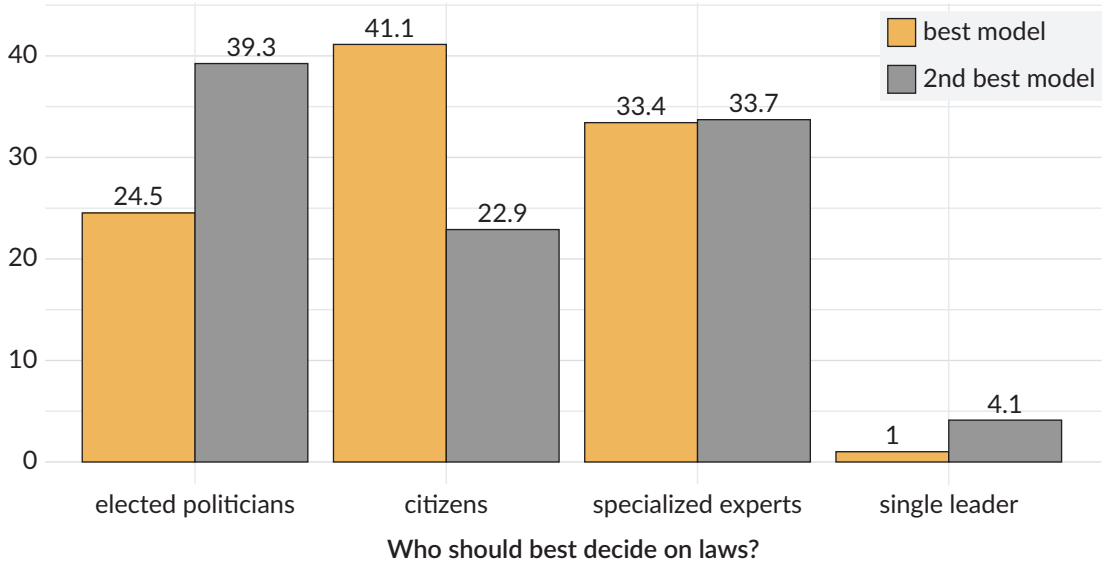

Figure 2. Support for decision-makers as best and second best option. Note: Values in %.

referendums" this time only receive the third-most support. Again, a "single leader with broad decision-making power" receives the least support (4.1%), suggesting that only very few respondents would choose a non-democratic alternative over the democratic alternatives presented to them.

Turning to our independent variable, it can be observed that conspiracy belief is fairly widespread among respondents. The five items are supported by 19% to 36% of the respondents each, and 53% of the respondents support at least one of the conspiracy theories. To illustrate the bivariate relationship between conspiracy belief and preferences for alternative models of political decision-making, a dummy variable was created, categorizing respondents into a "low conspiracy belief" group (conspiracy mean scale ≤ 2.5) and a "high conspiracy belief" group (conspiracy mean scale > 2.5).

Looking at the bivariate association between conspiracy beliefs and preferences for alternative models of decision-making, Figure 3 reveals that among the individuals with high conspiracy beliefs, a vast majority (70.8%) supports citizens as decision-makers as their first preference, while a majority favors specialized experts as their second choice (54.8%). In contrast, respondents with low conspiracy beliefs show a preference for an expert-based decision-making model as their top choice (37.1%), followed by direct democracy and representative democracy, although the differences are relatively small. Most low-conspiracy respondents consider elected politicians as their second preference for making political decisions. The support for an autocratic model with a single, powerful leader is limited in both groups. Notably, the support for an autocratic leader increases substantially from 1.2% as the first preference to almost 9% as the second choice for respondents with a high level of conspiracy beliefs.

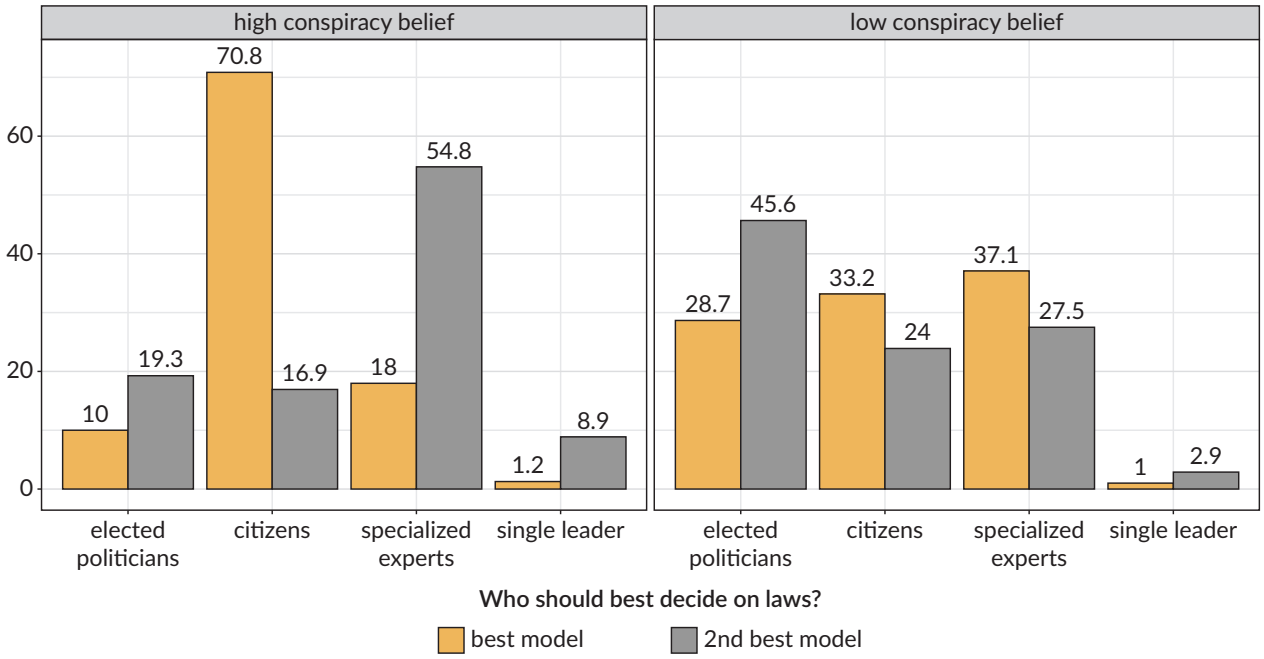

Figure 3. Support for decision-makers as the best and second-best option by the level of conspiracy belief. Note: Values in %.

5.1. Conspiracy Belief and Preference for the "Best" Model of Government

The bivariate logistic models (Table S.1 in the Supplementary File) indicate that support for direct democracy is significantly and positively associated with conspiracy belief as the "best" model of government. In contrast, both representative models of democracy, as well as expert-based models, are significantly and negatively associated with the belief in conspiracy theories. Notably, autocratic preferences are not significantly associated with the belief in conspiracy theories—neither positively nor negatively. By turning to the multivariate models where controls for sociodemographic factors as well as political interest and political ideology have been introduced, the sign and significance of the relationships between conspiracy belief and models of government remain unchanged (see Table S.3 in the Supplementary File). The multivariate logistic regression models assessing citizens' first preference thus lend first support for H1–H2, whereas H3–H4 cannot (yet) be confirmed. To illustrate the relationship, predicted probabilities were computed and are displayed in Figure 4.

The lower left pane in Figure 4 illustrates that the probability of preferring representative democracy over the three alternatives drops significantly if the conspiracy variable increases to its maximum (value 4). For respondents with a value of 4 on the conspiracy index, the probability of supporting representative democracy falls to only 3.6%. This suggests that individuals with stronger conspiracy beliefs are much less likely to favor representative democracy. The decline for the technocratic model is slightly less pronounced. In contrast, as the conspiracy belief variable reaches its maximum, the probability of supporting direct democracy rises to 80.1% (upper right pane). This suggests that individuals with higher conspiracy beliefs are much more likely to favor direct democracy. In contrast, respondents without conspiracy belief (value 1

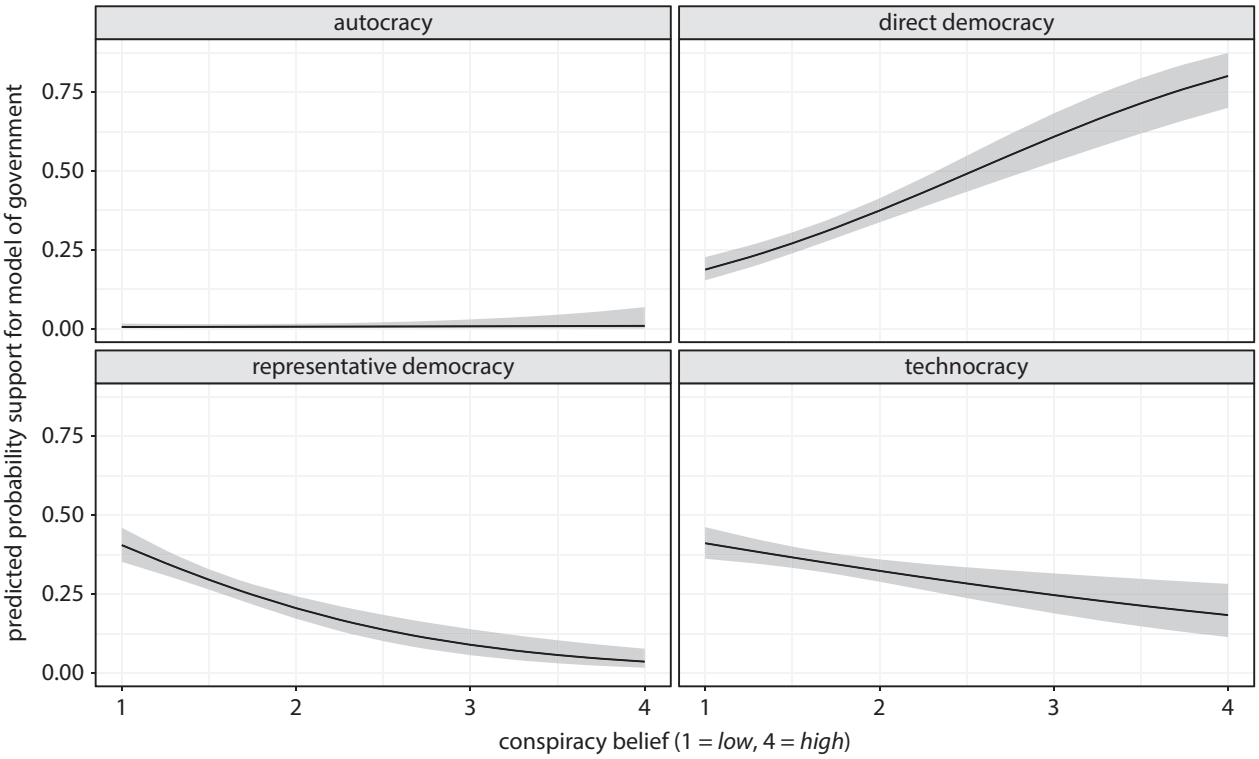

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities for preferred decision-making model by level of conspiracy belief (best model).

on the conspiracy mean scale) have equal probabilities for supporting representative democracy (40.5%) or an expert-based model of decision-making (41%), while they are less inclined to support direct democracy (probability of 18.7%).

5.2. Conspiracy Belief and Preference for the "Second Best" Model of Government

When respondents indicated the model of government they liked second best, a significant and positive association emerged with both technocracy and autocracy, while the association with representative democracy remained negative (Tables S.2 and S.4 in the Supplementary File). Again, predicted probability plots can help to illustrate the relationship (see Figure 5). While the positive association between conspiracy belief and preference for an autocratic leader is rather weak and the prediction is associated with a high degree of uncertainty (likely due to the small number of respondents, who picked this response option), a clear trend is visible regarding experts and politicians as decision-makers. Similar to the first preference, the probability of choosing representative democracy over the three alternatives drops significantly as the conspiracy variable increases to its maximum (from 56% for respondents without conspiracy belief to 12% for respondents with a value of 4). Conversely, the predicted probability of choosing the expert-based decision-making model increases from 19.3% to 60.7% as conspiracy belief increases from its lowest to its highest value. The predicted probability of supporting direct democracy now remains unchanged, suggesting that conspiracy believers already picked this model as their first option. Hence, we can now confirm H1–H4.

As a robustness check, the models were recalculated using an index derived from only the two Covid-19-related conspiracy theories as my main independent variable, confirming my initial results. The only noticeable

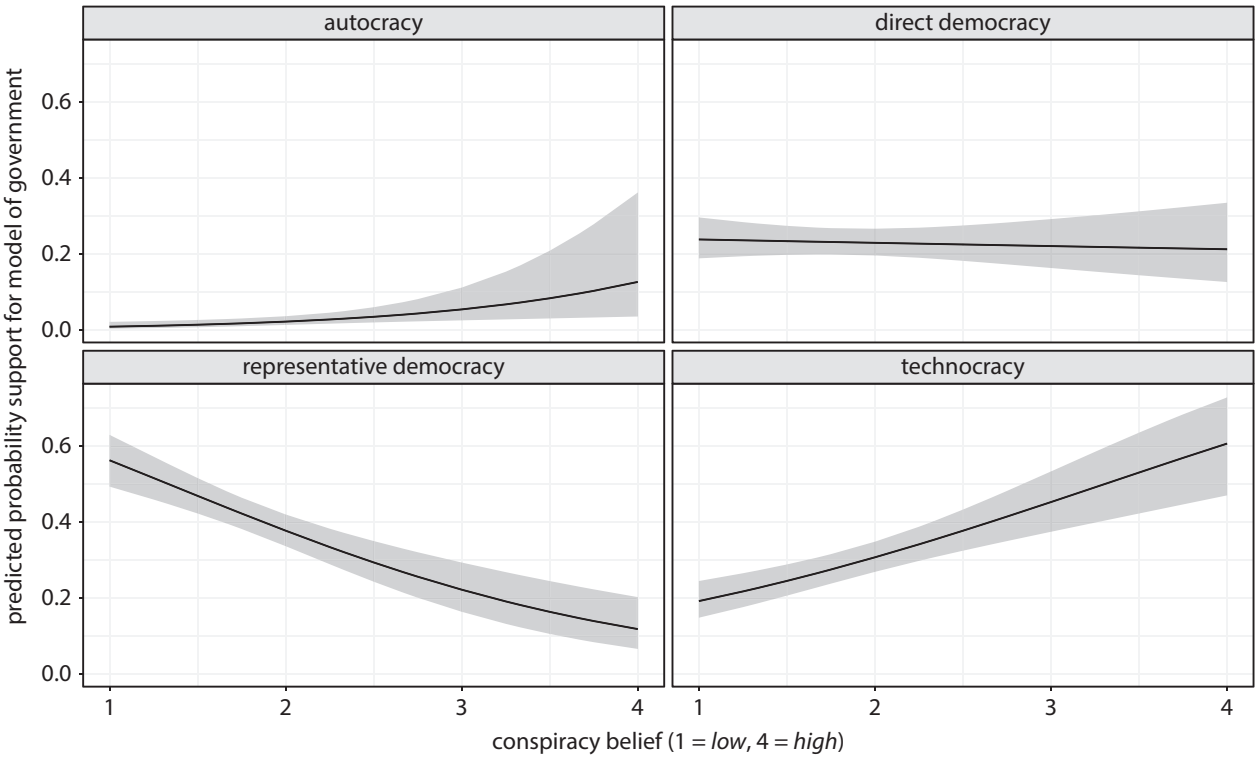

Figure 5. Predicted probabilities for preferred decision-making model by level of conspiracy belief (second best model).

difference was that the coefficient for Covid-19-related conspiracy belief failed to reach statistical significance at the 95%-level for the model predicting support for autocracy as a second choice (Tables S.5 and S.6 in the Supplementary File).

Furthermore, a robustness check was conducted to test an interaction effect between conspiracy belief and the level of education (see Tables S.7 and S.8 and Figures S.1 and S.2 in the Supplementary File). We can see that for the best model, the effect of conspiracy belief always varies across levels of education. The effect of conspiracy belief does not vary by education for any second-best model. Regarding the autocracy model, neither the main effect nor the interaction term was significant, likely due to the small number of respondents favoring this model.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary aim of the study was to explore the link between conspiracy beliefs and preferences for different models of decision-making. The analysis is based on a representative survey conducted in Germany during July/August 2022, utilizing a mixed-mode design (web and telephone), and employed a more robust trade-off measure to assess preferences for different democratic and non-democratic models of political decision-making. The findings revealed a positive association between belief in conspiracy theories and a preference for direct democracy as the best model of political decision-making, confirming H2. Considering respondents' first choice, conspiracy belief was additionally linked to a rejection of elected representatives and expert-based decision-making models. Interestingly, I found no significant association between conspiracy beliefs and support for non-democratic forms of government for the best model of decision-making. However, when respondents indicated the model they liked the second best, a shift occurred. Now, the analysis revealed a highly significant and positive association between conspiracy beliefs and expert-based decision-making models, while the association with representative democracy remained negative—confirming H1 and H3. Regarding conspiracy believers' preference for autocracy over representative democracy, a significant association was found in the logistic regression model for second preference, which also confirms H4. However, the predicted probability plot indicated a high level of uncertainty. Moreover, when examining the relative frequencies, it became apparent that only a minority of respondents with a high level of conspiracy belief favored a single powerful leader over all democratic alternatives as their second choice—although the share was substantially higher than for the individuals with low levels of conspiracy belief.

My findings thus challenge the negative association found between conspiracy belief and generic items measuring support for the idea of democracy (as found, e.g., by Pickel et al., 2022; Yendell & Herbert, 2022; but see Reiser & Küppers, 2022). My results indicate that the alternative to representative democracy is not necessarily autocratic; instead, various alternatives are not necessarily anti-democratic, such as technocracy. When given the choice between different models of decision-making, conspiracy believers preferred direct democracy over non-democratic alternatives. Nevertheless, there were also weak indications of a potential association between conspiracy beliefs and support for an autocracy. Hence, it is plausible to suggest that if presented solely with this alternative (as observed in the study by Papaioannou et al., 2023), they might endorse it. Also, a note of caution is required here, as the fact that conspiracy believers support referendums does not mean that this view is compatible with the liberal understanding of democracy. Just like populism can be a tool of a privileged group to protect their status (De Cleen & Ruiz Casado, 2023), direct democracy

can be viewed by conspiracy believers as a means to protect their interest against underprivileged minority groups (such as immigrants). This would also speak to findings by Nera et al. (2021) who show that the belief in downward conspiracy theories that view minorities (e.g., LGBTQ+ community and immigrants) at the heart of the alleged conspiracy, are associated with conservative, status-quo protecting attitudes. Further research is required to scrutinize whether belief in different types of conspiracy theories (e.g., upward and downward conspiracy theories) is associated with different decision-making preferences.

My research corroborates findings from the general literature on alternative models of decision-making. Like the general population, conspiracy believers can express support for multiple alternatives over representative democracy (e.g., Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009). However, by choosing a more robust approach to measuring citizens' preferences, I was able to paint a more nuanced picture. I chose an approach that combined a trade-off item with a ranking methodology: respondents were forced to indicate their first and second preferences. Thereby, I was able to demonstrate that individuals who believe in conspiracy theories have a clear preference for one model (direct democracy), while still appreciating other alternatives over representative democracy, at least to some degree. In terms of methodology, this study revealed that it is (a) important to allow respondents to prefer multiple alternatives over representative democracy, however, (b) to also use some sort of ranking methodology whereby respondents can indicate a clear preference for one model, while still being able to indicate support for alternative models. As a next step, a web survey could implement a ranking scale, similar to that used in VanderMolen (2017), where we then could get an even clearer picture of whether conspiracy believers indeed rank all alternatives higher than representative democracy—or only the democratic ones. Another option would be to replicate the measure by VanderMolen (2017) to determine whether conspiracy believers rank only certain types of experts, but not others (e.g., bureaucrats), higher than elected representatives.

Some limitations of the study need to be acknowledged. First, it was not clearly specified who the "specialized experts in the relevant subject area" are, leaving it up to the respondents to whom they attributed the expert label. Newer research, however, points out that it matters for the empirical results how the term "expert" is filled with meaning and that we see different results for different types of experts (VanderMolen, 2017). Hence, future research could tap into the support between conspiracy beliefs and differences between various types of experts (see also, Hibbing et al., 2023). Another potential limitation concerns the measurement of conspiracy belief, which was measured with an index consisting of five specific conspiracy theories. An alternative would have been to use one of the conspiracy mentality scales such as Imhoff and Bruder (2014). Regarding the specific conspiracy theories tested in the study, it needs to be acknowledged that two items (Great Replacement and conspiracy of climate scientists) might be more prevalent on the far-right. Thus, our measure of conspiracy belief might be skewed. Another limitation might be the chosen items for measuring Covid-related conspiracy beliefs. The notions that Covid-19 is a bioweapon and that governments used the crisis to curtail rights could also appeal to those who otherwise reject conspiracy theories, given media reports of scare tactics and the lab-origin theory at the time of the survey.

While representative party democracy requires, as Caramani (2017) highlights, competition between different parties, which in turn requires freedoms like access to diverse sources of information or freedom of expression, this article did not test conspiracy believers' attitudes towards these fundamental liberal principles. Instead, the focus was on conspiracy believers' decision-making preferences, which is only one element of democracy.

Further studies should probe in more detail the associations between conspiracy belief and the principles of liberal democracy, as well as explore the conceptions of democracy of conspiracy believers in more detail. As neither scholars of political science nor citizens agree about the meaning of democracy and thus hold different conceptions (see for a recent overview, König et al., 2022), additional interesting insights could be generated by using inductive in-depth approaches like interviews.

Last but not least, several studies explore the conceptual overlap between populism and conspiracy beliefs. According to these studies, both populism and conspiracy beliefs frame society in terms of a moral battle between homogeneous virtuous people and malevolent elites (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Pirro & Taggart, 2022). Both portray ordinary people as victims, employ a "monocausal logic" to explain events, and view both the people and the elite as homogeneous groups (Pirro & Taggart, 2022). However, while government-related conspiracy theories always depict the elite as "conspiring," this is not necessarily the case in populist narratives. Moreover, the alleged homogeneity of the people is questionable for both populists and conspiracy theorists. In the eyes of conspiracy believers, "the people" are divided into the "sheeple" (i.e., the unknowing masses) and the awakened people (i.e., the conspiracy believers who have uncovered the alleged conspiracy plot). Moreover, left-wing (i.e., inclusionary) populism—unlike right-wing populism, which emphasizes the homogeneity of the people as a nation (see, e.g., Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017)—calls for various outgroups to be included in the concept of the people (Font et al., 2021). Hence, Pirro and Taggart (2022) emphasize that while compatible, the connection between populism and conspiracy theories is not inevitable. Consequently, each may foster distinct process preferences. With no suitable item(s) available, the study at hand could not control for the influence of populism. Future studies could compare the process preferences of populists without conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy believers.

The parallels between populism and conspiracy belief may offer an additional explanation (beyond the mere "anything but") as to why conspiracy believers support the expert-based decision-making model. Both populism and technocracy hold that there is only one correct solution to political problems (it is either the general will of the people or what the experts say); moreover, both reject the need for ideological contestation and compromise (Bickerton & Accetti, 2018; Caramani, 2017). This simplicity may be appealing to conspiracy believers, as such beliefs have been found to be associated with belief in simple solutions (van Prooijen, 2017), which makes sense given that conspiracy theories offer simple explanations to complex events by identifying a clear culprit and dividing the world into good people and malevolent conspiring elites.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

Data can be made available via the Friedrich Ebert Foundation upon reasonable request.

Supplementary Material

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

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Do Affective Polarization and Populism Affect the Support for Holding Referendums?

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Abstract

What populism and polarization have in common is that their relationship with democracy is an ambiguous one. Studies have found that certain degrees of polarization can be helpful for citizens to make up their minds about their choices and because of that encourage them to democratic participation. Similarly, populism can help increase participation by, for example, presenting policies in a simpler language. Citizens with less political interest and political knowledge might be incited to participate in elections and democratic politics in general. However, high levels of polarization lead to the irreconcilability of factions and thereby to gridlock. Democracy can be regarded as incapable of solving citizens' problems. Likewise, populism can be destructive to democracy when occurring in certain forms and degrees. While populism is not per se antidemocratic, populist parties and leaders, when in power, repeatedly challenge democratic elements. To disentangle how polarization and populism affect democracy, I focus on certain specifics of these three concepts (democracy, populism, and polarization). Namely, I analyze how affective polarization and individual-level populism affect the support for the direct democratic instrument of holding referendums. Drawing on survey data from Austria and Germany, I find that being affectively polarized has a positive effect on the support for holding referendums. However, this effect is moderated by citizens' individual-level populism. Thus, this study provides insights into citizens' preferences for democratic decision-making, dependent on their levels of affective polarization and populism.

Keywords

affective polarization; democracy; populism; referendums

1. Introduction

The phenomena of populism and polarization are intertwined. Populism promotes societal polarization by its worldview that divides society into two homogeneous groups: the good and the evil. Furthermore, populism

and polarization share an ambivalent relationship to democracy. Populism is not inherently antidemocratic. Under certain circumstances, the emergence of populist parties and populist sentiments among citizens have been shown to stimulate democratic behavior (Canovan, 1999; Zaslove et al., 2021). However, various forms of populism explicitly call for changes in how representative democracy functions. Some forms advocate for more direct democratic instruments (Mohrenberg et al., 2021), while others call for strong leaders to make policy decisions (Donovan, 2021).

Similarly, polarization is a double-edged sword. It can be both a consequence of and a catalyst for populism, as seen in the United States and it may pose dangers to democracy (Finkel et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2018). On the other hand, scholars have argued that polarization can enhance democratic knowledge and participation (Jost et al., 2022). Heltzel and Laurin (2020) argue that the effect of polarization is ambiguous. Intensified policy positions might provide clearer information, particularly for citizens with lower political interest and political knowledge. In consequence, politics might become more tangible for these citizens and thus foster political engagement. While some degree of polarization can mobilize the public for specific policies, excessive polarization can hinder the coordination of collective actions, such as climate change measures (Vasconcelos et al., 2021). Polarization was also found to affect voting behavior, with scholars divided over its consequences. On one hand, polarization might lead to more accurate voting, with citizens choosing parties that align closely with their policy attitudes (Pierce & Lau, 2019). On the other hand, Druckman et al. (2013) find that in highly polarized settings, voters rely more on cues and shortcuts, such as partisanship, and invest less effort in understanding policy content.

Given the ambivalence of both populism and polarization's effects on democracy, research on these relationships remains limited (but see Voelkel et al., 2023). In this article, I analyze the effect of affective polarization, as a specific form of polarization, on attitudes towards democracy, particularly the support for holding referendums. I also examine how this effect differs between populist and non-populist citizens.

Analyzing the effects of populism and polarization on support for direct democracy and, more specifically, for holding referendums provides insights into citizens' varying notions of democracy. Studies consistently find that nearly all citizens in democracies, but also autocracies, consider democracy the best form of governance. In European countries, almost 100% of citizens believe democracy is a very good or fairly good way to govern their country (Inglehart, 2003). Nevertheless, citizens differ widely in their preferred conceptions of democracy (Bryan, 2023). In other words, while there is consensus on democracy being the best political system, preferences for its specific configurations vary. These configurations include preferences for more referendums over parliamentary decisions and support for populist parties, provided they are not genuinely anti-democratic. Extremist and antidemocratic citizens are not the focus of this article. However, populist citizens challenge liberal democratic principles without rejecting democracy itself (Wegscheider et al., 2023).

From this, the following research question arises:

RQ: How do affective polarization and populist attitudes affect the support for referendums?

2. Theoretical Considerations

In this article, I focus on the individual-level aspects of populism and polarization, commonly operationalized as affective polarization and populist attitudes. Affective polarization is conceptualized as the ratio between the propensity to vote for one's preferred party and the dislike of other parties. In other words, citizens are more affectively polarized when there is a significant gap between their support for their in-party and their animosity towards out-parties (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Wagner, 2024). Populism at the individual level is operationalized through populist attitudes, drawing on the conceptualization of populism as a set of ideas forming a thin ideology (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde, 2017).

Citizens differ in their preferences for specific configurations of democratic decision-making (Bengtsson, 2012; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Hibbing, 2001). Thus, I analyze the support for holding referendums as one specific characteristic of citizens' preferred conception of democracy. There are many reasons why citizens prefer referendums to decide on various policies (Beiser-McGrath et al., 2022; Fölsch et al., 2024; Schuck & De Vreese, 2015). Overall, the support for referendums in Europe is high. Rose and Weßels (2021) claim that a majority of citizens in 14 out of 17 European countries analyzed, including Germany and Austria, agree or strongly agree that referendums are a good way to decide important political questions. Although the use of referendums is increasing in Europe, I argue that electing representatives remains the norm and the implicit reference point for citizens when asked if they prefer holding referendums (Rose & Weßels, 2021).

In Sections 2.1 and 2.2, I explain why the support for holding referendums is influenced by affective polarization and how this mechanism differs between populist and non-populist citizens.

2.1. Affective Polarization and Referendum Support

In the literature, affective polarization refers to the gap between individuals' sympathy for their preferred party and their animosity towards other parties (Iyengar et al., 2012). This concept differs from party system polarization, which measures the gap between party positions in a political system (Taylor & Herman, 1971). When measured on the individual level, affective polarization draws on social identity theory, which contrasts in-group support with out-group opposition (Lelkes, 2018). Being affectively polarized thus means strongly supporting one's own party (the in-group) while strongly opposing other parties (the out-group). For example, a person who does not have strong opinions about any party would score at a medium level for all parties on a like-dislike scale.

Research has shown that levels of affective polarization affect citizens' attitudes towards various aspects of democracy. Wagner (2021) found that higher levels of affective polarization are associated with lower levels of satisfaction with democracy. This suggests that strongly affectively polarized citizens prefer alternative concepts of democracy to the current parliamentary decision-making process. However, Broockman et al. (2023) found that higher levels of affective polarization do not lead citizens to oppose democratic norms, such as justifying violence. Combined, the findings by Broockman et al. (2023) and Wagner (2021) suggest that while affectively polarized citizens may not reject democratic norms, they may support democratic instruments other than parliamentary decision-making. Similarly, Ouattara and Van der Meer (2023) found that citizens with low political trust are more likely to support direct democratic instruments but are not more supportive of authoritarianism.

I argue that there are several reasons why referendums are key tools used by affectively polarized citizens: First, they may perceive parliamentary decisions as biased towards the out-group and thus unrepresentative. Not only have affectively polarized citizens been found to be less satisfied with how democracy works, but they also exhibit lower levels of institutional trust (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). The argument here is that institutional trust reflects the overall political culture. When polarized, personal and institutional distrust can interplay, as Christensen and Lægreid (2005) point out. Citizens might distrust institutions when they have encountered negative experiences with representatives of the government and actors of the public sector, for example. In affectively polarized citizens, this effect may form even more.

Second, and related, because affective polarization can also manifest itself in party system polarization (Reiljan, 2020), situations of political gridlock can arise, which may lead to frustration among affectively polarized citizens. Referendums can overcome such deadlock situations because their outcomes are binary and avoid the prolonged negotiations necessary for parliamentary decisions. This efficiency can appeal to emotionally polarized citizens who feel an urgency to express their political views and prefer timely decisions. Also, compromise might be disdained by these citizens altogether (McCoy et al., 2018).

Based on these theoretical considerations, my first hypothesis is:

H1: Being affectively polarized increases the probability to support holding referendums.

2.2. Effect of Populist Attitudes

As previously mentioned, affective polarization and populism at the individual level are intertwined due to their shared notion of a divided society. In conceptualizations of populism, society is characterized as consisting of two poles, the good and pure people on the one side and the evil and corrupt elite on the other (Mudde, 2017). Similarly, affective polarization involves strong positive feelings towards an in-group and negative emotions towards out-groups (Lelkes, 2018). Put differently, populism sees society divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the people and the elite, calling for politics to be retrieved from the elite and returned to the people, following the homogenous *volonté générale* of the people. Affective polarization is conceptualized by citizens holding a strong positive affect towards their in-group while harboring a strong negative affect towards out-groups. Clearly, these two concepts are intertwined, but research on their relationship is still limited, especially regarding their phenomena at the individual level (Pérez-Rajó, 2024).

2.3. Populism and Polarization

I argue that the effect of being affectively polarized on the support for holding a referendum is stronger for citizens holding populist attitudes than for those who do not for the following reasons: First, populist attitudes may reinforce the belief of affectively polarized citizens that holding a referendum is an effective way to avoid the perceived biases of parliamentary decision-making processes (for the populists, these are elitist processes). In general, populist citizens prefer a decision-making process that resides with the people, rather than with the elite (Jacobs et al., 2018; Wegscheider et al., 2023). People-centrism, a sub-dimension of populism, reflects this desire to regain power for the people. Second, populist attitudes exacerbate the suspicion among affectively polarized citizens that representative democracy may not truly represent the interests of the electorate. Referendums would help populist citizens, who are affectively polarized, bypass

the process of finding compromises that they believe might weaken the interests of the people. And third, the salience of political identities is important for a populist mindset. The narrative of a society that allegedly follows "us-versus-them" dynamics relies on a strong identity of both the in-group and the out-group. Affective polarization reinforces this identity by emphasizing positive emotional attachments to the own political group and negative emotional attachments to the other pole (Müller, 2016).

Based on these considerations, I hypothesize:

> H2: The increase in the probability to support holding referendums when being affectively polarized is larger for citizens holding populist attitudes than for those who do not.

Although I analyze both populist attitudes and affective polarization as factors at the individual level, it is important to note that the levels of both populism and polarization differ between supporters of different parties. In Figures A3 and A4 in the Supplementary File, I plot the means of affective polarization and populism, respectively, for those with a propensity to vote six and higher for a given party. The supporters of FPÖ and AfD (followed by SPÖ and SPD) exhibit the highest means of affective polarization, while the supporters of MFG and AfD (followed by FPÖ and Die Linke) exhibit the highest means of populist attitudes in Austria and Germany, respectively.

3. Data and Methods

In this section, I present the operationalizations of the key variables and the methods. Subsequently, I will describe in detail the data used to empirically answer the research question. To test the two hypotheses empirically, I draw on survey data from Austria and Germany, collected by the Austrian survey company Market, with a targeted sample size of 1,100 respondents for each country, collected at the end of May 2022. The sample is representative of eligible voters by gender, age, region, and education. Descriptive statistics can be found in Table A1 of the Supplementary File.

I consider Austria and Germany to be good cases for two reasons: While they are similar in most traits, they vary to a certain degree in their experience with holding referendums and the manifestation of populism. Arguably, Austria has more experience with more far-reaching referendums, as binding and non-binding referendums are technically possible at the federal level. In Germany, only referendums on a sub-national level are possible. However, the experience with far-reaching referendums is also rather limited in Austria, where only three national referendums have been held so far. However, I assume that citizens in both Austria and Germany have an understanding of and an attitude towards referendums for two reasons: First, the proximity to Switzerland means that Austrian and German citizens have a reference point for how instruments of direct democracy work (Hobolt, 2005). Second, a large number of citizens have experience with voting in referendums or plebiscites at the sub-national level, which provides citizens with a sense of what are referendums (Bowler & Donovan, 2019; Scarrow, 1999)—Trüdinger and Bächtiger (2023) show that 40% of Germans have participated in a referendum or plebiscite.

The differences in populism between Austria and Germany are more pronounced. Austria has an established radical right populist party, FPÖ, while Germany's radical right populist party, AfD, was founded only in 2013 and has not yet been part of the federal-level governments. However, Germany has also a left-wing populist

party, Die Linke (with a tradition dating back to reunification), which has been part of state governments in Berlin, Brandenburg, and Thuringia. Austria lacks a successful left-wing populist party at the state and federal levels. This divide can be traced back to the different ways the two countries processed their roles in World War II in public and political debates in the post-war period. Far-right parties have never been absent in the post-war era of both countries. In Germany, these parties have long been predominantly extreme right parties, with REP, DVU, and NPD being especially successful in the 1990s and 2000s. The AfD has arguably benefited from the decline of the NPD, following the party's financial problems, bans in the Bundesrat, and turmoil around the party's leader (Backes, 2018).

3.1. Dependent Variable: Support for Holding Referendums

The dependent variable (i.e., *the respondents' support for holding referendums*) is measured using a survey item that reads: "Citizens should have the final say in important political decisions by voting on them directly in referendums." Respondents could answer: "*do not agree at all*," "*agree a little*," "*neither nor*," "*pretty much agree*," and "*fully agree*." The generic wording of the question is advantageous because respondents are less likely to conflate the procedural question of supporting referendums with substantial attitudes towards specific policies (Rose & Weßels, 2021). This survey item was tested in a very similar form in the International Social Survey Programme (Scholz et al., 2017).

3.2. Independent Variable: Affective Polarization

Affective polarization is defined as the distribution of the scores for *likes* and *dislikes* expressed by an individual for a given party. Wagner (2021) recommends measuring this with a feeling thermometer indicating how much individuals *like* a given party. Each respondent can give scores between 0 and 10 where 0 means they *strongly dislike* and 10 means they *strongly like* that party. As most datasets lack this survey item, researchers have relied on proxies instead. Especially the probability to vote (PTV) for a given party intuitively seems to tap into a similar concept. Orriols and León (2022) and Pérez-Rajó (2024) successfully applied PTV measures to capture affective polarization. The PTV question measures the spread between liking and disliking a party by asking how likely it is that the respondent would ever vote for that party. Affective polarization based on this measure is thus the difference between the score assigned to the party for which the respondent is most likely to vote and the scores assigned to the other parties. Respondents get the chance to reflect freely on their preferences for all parties in a system and assign their scores accordingly. For this reason, I argue that PTV scores measure a concept very similar to a feeling thermometer for parties.

I measure the PTV on an eleven-point scale from 0 (*very unlikely*) to 10 (*very likely*) for the question of how likely it is that the respondent will ever vote for a given party. I analyze six parties in each of the two countries: SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, Grüne, NEOS, and MFG (Austria); and SPD, CDU/CSU, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP, AfD, and Die Linke (Germany). Figures A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File show the distributions of the propensities to vote for each party in each country.

Except for using PTV instead of a like-dislike thermometer, I follow the recommendation of Wagner (2021) in calculating the individual affective polarization scores (see also Pérez-Rajó, 2024). I compute affective polarization as the average absolute difference in voting propensities relative to the individual's assigned average propensity. In this way, I obtain the spread of affective polarization (where p is the party, i is the

individual respondent, and PTV_{ip} is the assigned propensity to vote for each party by each individual):

$$\text{Spread}(AP)_i = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^{p} (PTV_{ip} - \overline{PTV_i})^2}{n_p}}$$

3.3. Independent Variable: Populist Attitudes

To test my second hypothesis and see if populism reinforces the relationship between affective polarization and support for referendums, I measure respondents' populist attitudes using the established scale developed by Castanho Silva et al. (2018). Respondents are asked to rate themselves on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) on nine items, three for each of the sub-dimensions of populism, namely people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichean worldview. As suggested by Castanho Silva et al. (2018), I use a simple factor analysis to calculate the level of individuals' populism. The items load on two different factors. I multiply the values of the two factors and divide the variable with the mean being the threshold. I consider those scoring above the mean as populist citizens and those at the mean or below as non-populist citizens. In Austria, 544 respondents (49.28%) are classified as populist citizens and, in Germany, 503 respondents (45.44%) are classified as populist citizens.

4. Results

First, I empirically test the first hypothesis H1 by using an ordered logistic regression. The dependent variable is the support for holding referendums, measured as previously described. The main independent variables are affective polarization and populist attitudes. I control for the following demographic and political variables that have been found to affect at least one of the dependent and independent variables: gender, education, age, political interest, left-right self-placement, and political extremism. The results of the ordered logistic regression models for both Austria and Germany are shown in Table 1. Model (2) shows the results for H1 for Austria and Model (8) shows the results for Germany. In Austria, the coefficient of the main independent variable affective polarization is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). In Germany, the coefficient is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This means that individuals who are affectively polarized according to the conceptualization explained above are more likely to support the holding of referendums in both Austria and Germany.

Table 1. Ordered logistic regression results for H1.

	(1) (Austria) without controls support for holding referendums	(2) (Austria) with controls support for holding referendums	(3) (Austria) with populism and interactions (dummy) support for holding referendums	(4) (Austria) with populism and interactions (people-centrism) support for holding referendums	(5) (Austria) with populism and interactions (anti-elitism) support for holding referendums	(6) (Austria) with populism and interactions (Manichean Outlook) support for holding referendums	(7) (Germany) without controls support for holding referendums	(8) (Germany) with controls support for holding referendums	(9) (Germany) with populism and interactions (dummy) support for holding referendums	(10) (Germany) with populism and interactions (people-centrism) support for holding referendums	(11) (Germany) with populism and interactions (anti-elitism) support for holding referendums	(12) (Germany) with populism and interactions (manichean outlook) support for holding referendums
Affective polarization	0.821*** (0.245)	0.530* (0.262)	−0.471 (0.370)	−2.845 (1.453)	−2.087 (1.235)	0.536 (0.658)	0.858*** (0.198)	0.843*** (0.205)	0.313 (0.275)	−1.907* (0.963)	−1.613 (0.901)	1.242* (0.610)
Populism (Dummy)			0.396 (0.281)						0.990*** (0.210)			
People-centrism				0.711*** (0.201)						0.514*** (0.137)		
Anti-elitism					0.650*** (0.194)						0.727*** (0.159)	
Manichean Outlook						0.0847 (0.142)						0.315** (0.113)
Populism (Dummy) #Affective polarization			1.553** (0.507)						0.812* (0.400)			
People-centrism #Affective polarization				0.724* (0.354)						0.580* (0.252)		
Anti-Elitism #Affective Polarization					0.621 (0.330)						0.557* (0.263)	

Table 1. (Cont.) Ordered logistic regression results for H1.

	(1) (Austria) without controls support for holding referendums	(2) (Austria) with controls support for holding referendums	(3) (Austria) with populism and interactions (dummy) support for holding referendums	(4) (Austria) with populism and interactions (people-centrism) support for holding referendums	(5) (Austria) with populism and interactions (anti-elitism) support for holding referendums	(6) (Austria) with populism and interactions (Manichean Outlook) support for holding referendums	(7) (Germany) without controls support for holding referendums	(8) (Germany) with controls support for holding referendums	(9) (Germany) with populism and interactions (dummy) support for holding referendums	(10) (Germany) with populism and interactions (people-centrism) support for holding referendums	(11) (Germany) with populism and interactions (anti-elitism) support for holding referendums	(12) (Germany) with populism and interactions (manichean outlook) support for holding referendums
Manichean Outlook #Affective Polarization						0.00557 (0.256)						−0.0696 (0.214)
Male		−0.168 (0.117)	−0.107 (0.119)	−0.0943 (0.119)	−0.0795 (0.120)	−0.167 (0.117)		0.0104 (0.113)	0.0419 (0.114)	0.116 (0.115)	0.0413 (0.115)	−0.0122 (0.113)
Higher education		−0.128 (0.113)	−0.103 (0.115)	−0.140 (0.115)	−0.157 (0.115)	−0.116 (0.114)		−0.103 (0.117)	−0.196 (0.119)	−0.212 (0.119)	−0.264* (0.120)	−0.0503 (0.118)
Age		0.0103** (0.00339)	0.0115*** (0.00345)	0.00478 (0.00349)	0.0126*** (0.00347)	0.0105** (0.00340)		−0.00339 (0.00365)	−0.00331 (0.00370)	−0.00944* (0.00376)	−0.00368 (0.00372)	−0.00148 (0.00369)
Political interest		−0.192** (0.0643)	−0.173** (0.0653)	−0.210** (0.0655)	−0.135* (0.0661)	−0.190** (0.0644)		0.141* (0.0561)	0.104 (0.0564)	0.0936 (0.0566)	0.155** (0.0569)	0.137* (0.0564)
Left-Right		0.0382 (0.121)	0.136 (0.124)	−0.114 (0.125)	0.0754 (0.126)	0.0616 (0.122)		−0.176 (0.102)	−0.168 (0.104)	−0.218* (0.104)	−0.232* (0.106)	−0.119 (0.103)
Extremism (Left-Right^2)		0.0169 (0.0106)	0.00786 (0.0110)	0.0286* (0.0111)	0.0118 (0.0111)	0.0148 (0.0108)		0.0198* (0.00861)	0.0173* (0.00881)	0.0241** (0.00880)	0.0203* (0.00896)	0.0141 (0.00875)
N	1069	1069	1069	1069	1069	1069	1064	1064	1064	1064	1064	1064
Pseudo R^2	0.00383	0.0314	0.0691	0.0747	0.0871	0.0320	0.00625	0.0119	0.0562	0.0469	0.0697	0.0182

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; standard errors in parentheses; high education is operationalized as *Berufsbildende mittlere Schule* (e.g., *Handelsschule*) or higher in Austria, and *Realschule* or higher in Germany.

Turning to H2, I add populism to the equation. In this step, I want to find out whether it makes a difference if the respondents are populist citizens or non-populist citizens when it comes to the effect of being affectively polarized on the support for referendums. To analyze this, I again apply ordered logistic regressions and include an interaction of affective polarization and individual-level populism, measured with populist attitudes as explained in Section 3.3. In Table 1, Model (3) shows the regression results including the interaction for Austria and Model (9) for Germany. For both countries, the effect of the interaction is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$ for Austria and $p < 0.05$ for Germany). The direct effect of affective polarization though is no longer statistically significant when adding populism and the interaction of both independent variables to the model. The direct effect of populism as the second main independent variable, in contrast, is positive and statistically significant in Germany ($p < 0.001$), but not in Austria. I interpret the differences between the countries in Section 4.2. The positive effects of interactions of populism and affective polarization indicate that the effect of affective polarization on support for referendums depends on the level of populist attitudes of the respondents. In other words, the effect of affective polarization on support for referendums is moderated by the level of populism. In summary, as the interaction term becomes significant, the direct effect of affective polarization disappears in both Austria and Germany and the direct effect of populism disappears in Austria.

To further illustrate the findings, Figures 1 and 2 show the marginal effects of the interaction terms for both Austria and Germany. The effect of populism increases with an increasing individual affective polarization for those who *fully agree* that important decisions should be made via referendums in both Austria and Germany. Based on this, H2 can be accepted.

4.1. Dimensions of Populist Attitudes

Since the measure of populist attitudes is a summary variable that conceptually consists of the three sub-dimensions of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichean outlook, I calculate the effects of each sub-dimension on the support for holding referendums as well as the interaction effects for each of the sub-dimensions with affective polarization. The results are shown in Table 1. Models 4–6 show the results for Austria and Models 10–12 for Germany. For Austria, the direct effects of people-centrism and anti-elitism are positive and significant ($p < 0.001$), while the effect of the Manichean outlook on support for holding a referendum is insignificant. For Germany, the direct effects of all three sub-dimensions are positive and significant ($p < 0.001$ for people-centrism and anti-elitism; $p < 0.01$ for Manichean outlook). By calculating the interaction effects for each sub-dimension separately I analyze which of the dimensions of populism drives the interaction effect. In Austria, only the interaction effect between people-centrism and affective polarization is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). In Germany, the interactions of affective polarization with both people-centrism and anti-elitism are positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This means that the sub-dimension Manichean outlook does not drive the interaction effect.

4.2. How Is Austria Different From Germany?

The results suggest that even though the main effects are the same for both Austria and Germany, there are relevant differences that are worth addressing. First, I find that in Germany, when integrating the interaction term of affective polarization and populism (Model 9), the direct effect of populism stays significant. This is not the case in Austria (Model 3). I interpret this as a closer connection between populism and affective

polarization in Austria, whereas in Germany, these phenomena seem to be more separate from each other. To support this interpretation, I analyze the effect of affective polarization on populist attitudes in a separate model. The results are shown in Table A2 in the Supplementary File. In Austria, the effect of affective polarization on populist attitudes is larger, which supports this interpretation.

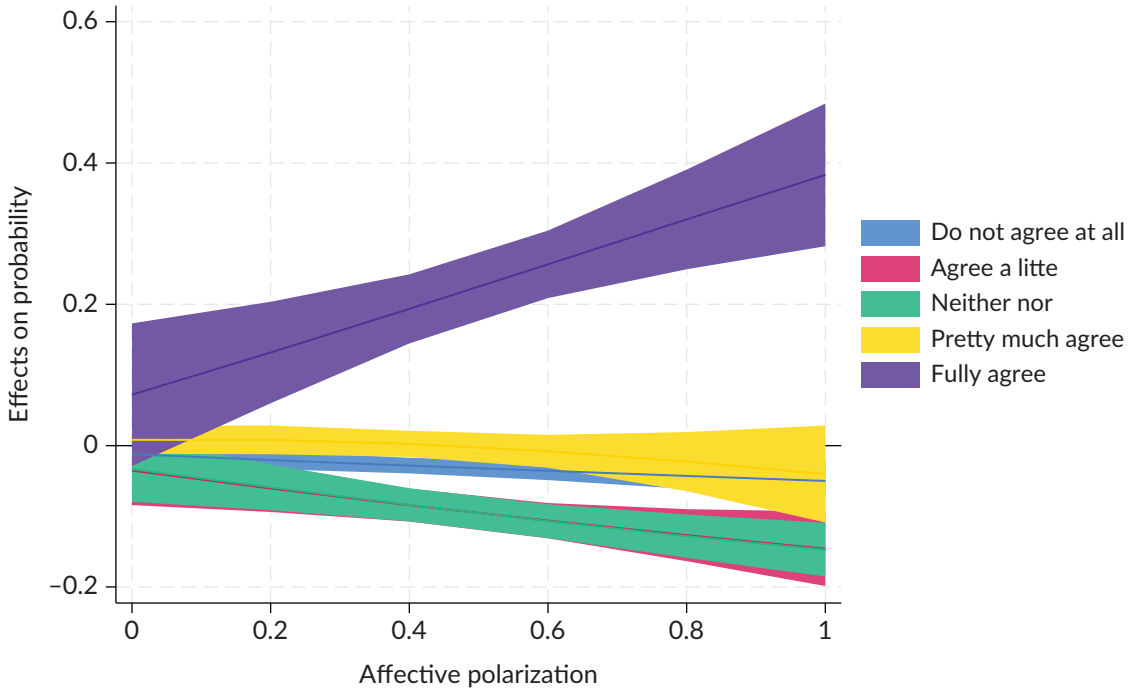

Figure 1. Marginal effects of the interaction model of affective polarization*populism (Austria).

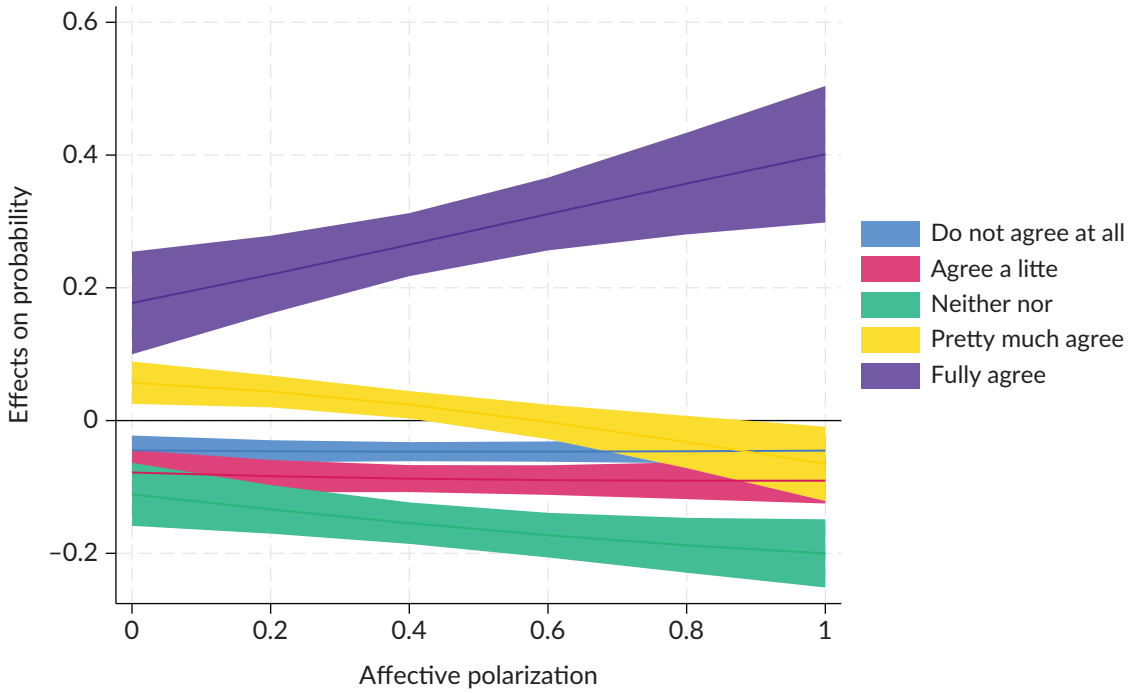

Figure 2. Marginal effects of the interaction model of affective polarization*populism (Germany).

Second, the interaction effects are driven by different sub-dimensions of populism in Austria and Germany. In Austria, it is solely driven by the sub-dimension of people-centrism according to the results shown in Table 1, while in Germany, both people-centrism and anti-elitism drive the interaction effect. Interestingly, the sub-dimension of the Manichean outlook, the feeling that the world is ultimately divided into two irreconcilable parts, does not drive the interaction with affective polarization in either country.

While not the focus of this article, the control variables exhibit interesting differences between Austria and Germany, which future research should address in more detail. It is interesting to note that in Austria the effect of political interest on support for holding referendums over all models (2–6) is negative, which means that respondents are more likely to support holding referendums when they are less interested in politics. In Germany, the effect of political interest is positive in Models 8, 11, and 12, indicating that respondents with higher political interest are more likely to support holding referendums on important questions.

5. Conclusion

As stated before in this article, both populism and polarization have an ambiguous relationship with democracy. Certain levels of populism and polarization might indeed be conducive to democracy, but real-world evidence indicates that high levels of polarization and certain forms of populism conflict with democratic principles. Based on these claims, I investigated these relationships by focusing on specific aspects of each concept, namely populist attitudes, affective polarization, and direct democratic instruments, specifically referendums.

This study contributes to various strands of the literature as, by examining populist attitudes, it adds to the literature on the effects of populism at the individual level. Furthermore, it addresses the emerging field of affective polarization, particularly relevant in multiparty systems, exploring its causes and consequences. Finally, the study connects these concepts and adds to the academic and public debate on whether and how democracy is facing a variety of threats.

First, I analyzed how affective polarization influences support for holding referendums. The data show a positive and statistically significant effect in both Austria and Germany. Citizens who are more affectively polarized are more likely to support the holding of referendums.

To test the second hypothesis, I examined the effect of populism on the relationship between affective polarization and support for holding referendums. In both countries, I found statistically significant positive effects when affective polarization and populist attitudes interact. Additionally, the direct effect of populism on the support for holding referendums was positive and significant in Germany. The direct effect of affective polarization, as analyzed in Section 4, in turn, disappeared. Thus, this result suggests that the effect of affective polarization on the support for holding referendums is moderated by respondents' individual-level populism.

While I was able to give insight into the ambiguous relationships between populism, polarization, and forms of democracy several paths are worth further investigation: First, while integrating similar phenomena is beneficial for understanding their reciprocal associations, it inherently introduces the problem of endogeneity. Specifically, direct democracy is sometimes viewed as a factor of populist attitudes itself, as it is intuitively an instrument to reach higher levels of people-centrism and at the same time foster the

sentiment of anti-elitism. Therefore, it is impossible to rule out a degree of endogeneity between the dependent and the independent variables. Future studies should address this issue, potentially by drawing on experimental settings or qualitative studies. Second, I could only include cases where citizens have only limited experience with referendums. This context must be considered when interpreting the results. There is a chance that polarization and populist attitudes affect support for holding referendums differently or not at all in countries with more experience with referendums or with even more limited traditions of populist parties in governments and parliaments. Therefore, I encourage further research to test these findings for countries in which referendums are more common, such as, for example, Switzerland. Third, in this study, I did not include any political supply side factors, i.e., the parties' behavior. Future research should pay attention to the reciprocal reactions between voters and parties. For this topic, it would be particularly interesting to examine populist and extreme parties in terms of their contribution to macro-level polarization and populism. Finally, in this study, I rely on cross-sectional data only. It would be instructive to complement these data and my findings with experimental or panel data to establish causal effects empirically.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data is available upon request from the author.

Supplementary Material

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

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About the Author

Marco Fölsch is a PhD fellow at the Department of Political Science at the University of Salzburg. His research interests include political participation, political psychology, and party competition. In his dissertation, he connects these aspects with research on populism and polarization in Europe as well as attitudes towards democracy. Photo credits © fotohech

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Party Competition Over Democracy: Democracy as Electoral Issue in Germany

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Abstract

Elected leaders increasingly undermine liberal democratic institutions with the support of their voters, openly challenging liberal democratic institutions in election campaigns. However, political scientists thus far have lacked the theoretical and empirical tools to study the role of elections in democratic backsliding. This article theorizes the degree to which democracy in general and liberal democracy more specifically can and should be conceptualized as valence and positional issues in multiparty electoral competitions of established liberal democracies. By investigating how German citizens and parties of the postwar period spoke about democracy per se and liberal democracy in their regional and national election manifestos, this article shows that democracy per se and liberal democracy, in particular, have been issues of different qualities in German postwar elections. While parties have used references to democracy in general as a mixed issue, showing both signs of valence and positional issues, parties' emphasis on liberal democracy is shaped by a positional logic. Social and direct democracy have also been positional issues. Studying democracy and its various conceptions as electoral issues will help us address many important questions concerning the stability of democracies, shifting researchers' focus to the competition of parties over citizens' support for reforms that undermine or stabilize liberal democracy.

Keywords

direct democracy; liberal democracy; Germany; party competition; positional issues; social democracy; valence issues

1. Introduction

Liberal democracies are increasingly threatened by democratically elected governments that openly promote restrictions on liberal rights, such as the protection of minorities and judicial autonomy in Poland and Hungary

(Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2019; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Sadurski, 2018, 2019). These attempts at executive aggrandizement have become increasingly relevant for the stability of liberal democracy (Bermeo, 2016) and are often tolerated by supporters of governments (Carey et al., 2022; Gidengil et al., 2022; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Simonovits et al., 2022). Rather than toppling democratic systems through military coups, illiberal and authoritarian leaders increasingly use the electoral arena to undermine liberal democracy.

There is ample anecdotal evidence that these leaders do not hesitate to publicly promote their illiberal or authoritarian reforms. Opposing parties seem to respond to these threats by campaigning for liberal democracy. Fidesz and PiS have won substantial electoral support in Hungary and Poland, respectively, despite—or because of—their attacks on liberal democracy (Kornai, 2015; Sadurski, 2018). In Poland, an electoral alliance, the Civic Coalition, was formed in opposition to PiS' nationalist politics and its attacks on liberal democracy. The Civic Coalition won enough support in the 2023 election to form a government. However, institutions of democratic systems also politicize long before democratic backsliding becomes evident. For example, Brexit politicized the questions of whether democracies should entail referenda and whether referenda should be binding (Blick & Salter, 2021). Allen and Mirwaldt (2010) showed that different conceptions of democracy and democratic values are indeed mentioned by parties in election campaigns, even in liberal democracies.

Because we have only recently started to study how and when parties politicize different conceptions of democracy (Allen & Mirwaldt, 2010; Bowler et al., 2017; Engler et al., 2023; Gessler, 2019), we still lack a theoretical framework to study the reasons and consequences of making democracy itself an issue of democratic elections. I propose using existing theories of party competition, especially the concepts of valence and positional issues, to study when and why parties politicize democracy and its different conceptions. More precisely, I focus on how German citizens have positioned themselves towards democracy per se—irrespective of what that term means to citizens or parties—and towards liberal democracy, a democratic system with a strong focus on checks and balances, the protection of minority rights, and the rule of law. Consequently, I study whether German parties politicized democracy per se or liberal democracy as valence or positional issues in national and regional election campaigns between 1977 and 2017. In Appendices D and E of the Supplementary File, I extend the analysis to social and direct democracy.

Before introducing the case, this study first derives empirical implications, describing distributions of data that we would expect to see if democracy per se and liberal democracy were politicized in election campaigns as valence, positional, or mixed issues (De Sio & Weber, 2014; Stokes, 1963). Positional issues are those on which citizens and voters take different, contrasting positions (e.g., social spending), whereas valence issues are those on which citizens typically universally agree regarding their desirability (e.g., corruption). In reality, issues might often be mixed issues, with a substantial number of citizens agreeing on the desirability and considerable potential for some parties to mobilize voters using these issues as valence issues, and some room for manoeuvre left for smaller parties to politicize these issues as positional issues (De Sio & Weber, 2014, p. 872). The conditions under which parties politicize democracy per se or liberal democracy should indicate the nature of each of these issues (see Section 3).

Using data from German citizens and party competition in German regional and national elections, this article demonstrates that even in an established liberal democracy, such as Germany, parties use liberal democracy as a positional issue and democracy in general as a mixed issue. Liberal conceptions of democracy are transmitted

mainly by liberal parties. Democracy per se, irrespective of its connotation, is most often put on the electoral agenda by challenger parties and by ecological, socialist, and social democratic parties. Additional analyses in Appendices D and E of the Supplementary File suggest that social democracy and direct democracy are also positional issues of German party competition.

This has implications for how political scientists conceive of debates surrounding democracy in electoral campaigns. Assuming that how parties campaign over democracy affects voters' support for democratic institutions (Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002) and that governments need at least some support for their early infringement on democracy, studying party competition over democracy and various conceptions of democracy might serve as an early warning system for potential democratic infringements, just as studying party competition on welfare issues serves as an early warning system for upcoming changes in policies related to welfare systems. When democracies become increasingly challenged by democratically elected governments during election campaigns, political scientists should focus on how theories of party competition can help us understand party competition over democracy.

2. The Politicization of Democracy in Elections

An increasing number of studies investigate when and why parties put democracy on the electoral agenda and take a specific position on it. Gessler (2019) was the first to investigate the factors shaping political systems' politicization. Studying press releases from 15 European countries, she finds that democracy is more salient in parties' press releases when the democratic quality of the country is low and that the tone parties use when speaking about democracy correlates with the parties' challenger status and ideology. Other studies have investigated in depth how parties speak publicly about democracy. Allen and Mirwaldt (2010) have shown for the first time that parties within the same country differ in how they speak about democracy. While radical right parties emphasize the participation of the people, left-wing parties emphasize individual freedoms (Engler et al., 2023). Futher research has studied how populist radical right parties politicize democracy, describing substantial changes in their discourses over time (Alekseev, 2024; Bobba & McDonnell, 2016; Kwiatkowska et al., 2022). A final set of studies has focused on parties' position towards direct democracy, arguing that parties promote and implement democracy, hoping for short-term electoral gains (Scarrow, 1997, 1999) and an increase in electoral participation (Scarrow, 1999). Support for more direct participation is, on average, greater within parties that are in opposition and within more right-wing parties (Bowler et al., 2017).

These studies are either interested in the factors that influence the implementation of direct democracy or in providing novel but still descriptive insights into how parties speak about democracy. With this study, I contribute to this literature, arguing that parties use democracy similarly to other policy issues in election campaigns. They can increase or decrease the salience of democracy issues as they increase or decrease the salience of economic or cultural issues. Parties can also position themselves on different issues related to democracy by speaking favourably or unfavourably about specific conceptions of democracy, just as they speak favourably or unfavourably about, for example, different types of welfare systems or immigration schemes. Conceptualizing and studying democracy as an electoral issue will inspire research on how illiberal and undemocratic parties garner support for political reforms through campaigning that gradually undermines liberal democracy.

In the rest of this article, I focus on democracy per se and liberal democracy. When referring to democracy per se, parties explicitly mention democracy, irrespective of their understanding of what democracy means and irrespective of their reason for doing so. By not predefining what parties must refer to when they allude to democracy, I explore why parties mention democracy in election campaigns, irrespective of whether they support liberal democracy. Liberal democracy refers to a political system that guarantees basic democratic rights, such as equal rights to participate in free and fair elections, free access to information, and free expression of opinion (Dahl, 1971, p. 3), as well as the protection of minority rights, the rule of law, and effective checks and balances on those in power (Coppedge et al., 2020a, p. 43).

I furthermore use the theoretical framework of valence and positional issues to theorize why parties speak about democracy per se and liberal democracy in election campaigns. From this theoretical framework, I derive visible empirical implications as to how voters should relate to democracy per se and liberal democracy and as to how German parties' references to democracy and liberal democracy should correlate with other variables if democracy and liberal democracy are indeed specific types of electoral issues. Appendix E of the Supplementary File provides additional analyses for direct and social democracy, showing that other conceptions of democracy are politicized, too, as electoral issues in postwar Germany.

3. Valence and Positional Issues

When studying the politicization of issues in elections, political scientists mostly rely on distinguishing positional and valence issues (Adams et al., 2020; De Sio & Weber, 2014; Stokes, 1963). Positional issues are studied extensively and "involve advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives over which distribution of voter preferences is defined" (Stokes, 1963, p. 373). If an issue is positional, voters disagree about the best action to take. For example, some voters might prefer more social spending, whereas others might prefer less social spending. Thus, parties present alternatives to their voters regarding the issue in question, such as more or less government spending.

Valence issues "merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate" (Stokes, 1963, p. 373). Corruption, honesty, and trustworthiness are among the most frequently analyzed valence issues (see, for example, Curini, 2017; Green, 2007). Although it is hard to believe that these issues could be positional, Stokes (1963, p. 373) explicitly states that "the question whether a given problem poses a positional- or valence-issue is a matter to be settled empirically and not on a priori logical grounds." Issues that are positional in one context could well be valence issues in another context, namely when voters agree on the necessity of one policy issue and when parties do not present alternatives to this specific policy issue. In other words, issues are valence issues "due solely to the fact that there is overwhelming consensus as to the goal of government action" (Stokes, 1963, p. 374).

Building on the premise that issues can be positional in one context and valence issues in another, De Sio and Weber (2014, p. 872) argue that valence and position should be considered the two "ideal" endpoints of a dimension on which all policy issues can be arranged for a given polity and period. They state, furthermore, that "issues can be classified as positional or valence issues, based on the distribution of policy preferences" (De Sio & Weber, 2014, p. 872). Thus, issues can be mixed, depending on the degree to which there is general agreement in the electorate about what the government should do and on the degree to which parties provide alternative solutions. Moreover, depending on the level of agreement within the electorate,

parties have different incentives. If agreement about what the government should do is low, they can distance themselves from their competitors by taking a different position. Alternatively, if agreement among voters is high, parties can emphasize that they are more competent in this area than their competitors are (De Sio & Weber, 2014).

However, how could we assess whether parties similarly politicize democracy as other positional or valence issues? We need to investigate voters' preferences and parties' electoral alternatives to this specific policy issue. Based on the theoretical arguments described above, we can derive several empirical implications summarized in Table 1. If voters disagreed regarding the benefits of democracy or liberal democracy, parties would be highly incentivized to take different positions regarding democracy per se or liberal democracy. In this case, democracy per se and liberal democracy are clearly positional issues. Assuming that positions on democracy and liberal democracy would align at least partially with other positions, parties from different party families and ideological spectra should differ in their emphasis on democracy per se or liberal democracy more specifically. Ideology more generally becomes an important covariate for parties' positions towards democracy per se and liberal democracy, whereas other factors such as parties' challenger status play no role in itself. Parties should be able to politicize democracy per se or liberal democracy irrespective of whether they benefit from being outsiders to the political system.

In contrast, if voters would universally agree on the benefits of democracy or liberal democracy, parties would have little incentive to set themselves apart from their opponents by proposing alternative positions towards democracy per se or liberal democracy since there would be little support for such positions in the electorate. However, they would have strong incentives to emphasize their personal strength in increasing the quality of democracy, in defending democratic institutions against attacks, or in highlighting other parties' weaknesses regarding their commitment to democracy per se or liberal democracy, especially when the quality of a country's democratic institutions deteriorates. This should be particularly "easy" for challenger parties who have never participated in government and who have, therefore, never had the chance to implement reforms that they are calling for—thus gaining extra credibility vis-à-vis mainstream or government parties. Indeed, previous studies have shown that challenger parties use anti-establishment rhetoric more often in their campaigns since their attacks on the political establishment are more credible than criticism from established parties (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020, pp. 141–177). Similarly, Gessler (2019) and Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2019) have shown that smaller parties and parties with less access to political

Table 1. Empirical implications for different variables if democracy or liberal democracy were valence, positional, or mixed issues.

Independent variables	Valence issue	Positional issue	Mixed issue
Agreement among voters	Universal	Low	High but not universal
Parties' ideology	Does not explain the variance in the dependent variable	Explains variance in the dependent variable substantially	Explains variance in the dependent variable partially
Challenger status of parties	Explains variance in the dependent variable substantially	Does not explain the variance in the dependent variable	Explains variance in the dependent variable partially

Note: The dependent variable refers either to the salience of democracy or to an emphasis on liberal democracy.

power are more likely to politicize and criticize the political system of their countries. Consequently, if democracy per se or liberal democracy are valence issues, challenger parties—irrespective of their ideological profile—should be more likely to refer to democracy and liberal democracy than established parties are.

Finally, if democracy per se or liberal democracy are mixed issues, there might be high but not universal agreement among voters regarding the benefits of democracy and liberal democracy, and both parties' ideology and their challenger status might explain the variance in parties' references to democracy and liberal democracy in election campaigns. Following De Sio and Weber (2014, p. 872), democracy per se and liberal democracy would be issues located between the ideal types of positional and valence issues. For contemporary democracies, this might be the most realistic scenario. However, this remains an educated guess because, at least to my knowledge, this is the first study to conceptualize and analyze democracy as an electoral issue.

In the following sections, I first introduce the case of postwar Germany. I then describe the data and methods used to analyze the quality of the two democracy issues in German regional and national election campaigns. I subsequently analyze German voters' attitudes towards democracy per se and parties' references to it in election campaigns. Finally, I study the quality of the liberal democracy issue for German voters and parties. Appendix E of the Supplementary File shows further analyses of direct and social democracy.

4. The Case of Germany

In the early postwar period, the stability of German democracy was much debated. On May 23, 1949, the German Basic Law came into effect, highly influenced by the Allies, who supervised its creation and could have vetoed its implementation. Although it enshrined basic liberal democratic rights as unalienable, it was highly questionable whether the West German political elite and German citizens would support newly created institutions (Wolfrum, 2006). Reunification and the collapse of the Soviet republic were other shocks to the German political system. However, it remained unclear whether East Germans would support liberal democracy in the long run (Gabriel, 2007; Pickel, 2016). Thus, the case of German national and regional elections provides interesting and important variation in the experience and degree of establishment of liberal democratic attitudes for the study of democracy issues in election campaigns.

The German case provides additional variation in other influential variables, namely, the government status of parties, the parliamentary strength of parties and the effective number of parties. In the period between 1945 and the end of the 1950s, the CDU/CSU, FDP, and SPD established their dominant positions, whereas many smaller parties with questionable relationships with newly created democratic institutions, such as the Deutsche Partei (German Party) and the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany), lost political relevance or were prohibited. The dominant position of the CDU/CSU, FDP, and SPD was only undermined by the rise of the Greens in the 1980s, the rise of Die Linke in the 1990s, and, finally, the rise of the AfD in the late 2010s. At the regional level, party competition was slightly more fragmented. For example, the radical right party NPD has been represented in various regional parliaments since the 1960s and has lost relevance only with the creation of the AfD. Considering German national and regional elections, we can compare the same party at similar points in time, once in opposition and once in government. In addition, regional election results for the same party often differ greatly, leaving the same party with few seats in one state parliament and many seats in another at similar points in time.

For these reasons, studying German national and regional elections allows us to control for many factors that might influence the likelihood that German parties made democracy an issue of their electoral campaigns. It also allows the study of different points in time when democracy issues might be more or less relevant to citizens, such as elections shortly after regime changes or elections with new parties that strongly criticize political institutions in place. This is a unique competitive advantage over a study taking a cross-country perspective on contemporary democracies because, in this within-country study, the variance in influential factors discussed above (e.g., government status and strength of challenger parties) is large. In contrast, the variance in many contextual factors (e.g., understanding of democracy and experience with democracy) is comparably small across the units of analysis or can be controlled for.

5. Data and Method

This study builds on data that (a) describe voters' attitudes towards democracy, (b) is produced by parties to promote their electoral pledges, i.e., election manifestos, and (c) contain important control variables that might influence parties' emphasis on democracy per se or liberal democracy.

Data describing voters' attitudes towards democracy: In the analysis, I first briefly review survey data collected and in parts already analyzed by others (Baker et al., 1981; European Social Survey, 2012; European Values Study, 2015; Haerpfer et al., 2022; Inglehart et al., 2014a, 2014b; Weil, 1987). This review sheds light on the evolution of German voters' support for democracy per se and liberal democracy. Since the available data are not comparable, are only available for short periods, or are no longer accessible in their raw format, this part of the analysis is performed descriptively, source by source.

Data produced by parties to promote their electoral pledges: Data on German parties' election campaigns have been collected by the Manifesto Project (Lewandowski et al., 2018; Volkens et al., 2019) and the Political Documents Archive (Benoit et al., 2009). To investigate whether democracy per se and liberal democracy are issues of German party competition, I split parties' national and regional election manifestos into sentences (for a table of parties by party family, see Appendix B of the Supplementary File). I then count all sentences that contain the term "*demokrat*," excluding all instances in which it is part of a party name. For example, a sentence containing "undemokratisch" (undemocratic) is counted as a democracy sentence, but a sentence containing only the party name "Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands" (German Social Democratic Party) is not. I measure the salience of democracy in election manifestos as the percentage of sentences per manifesto that mention the term "*demokrat*." In a few instances, quasi-sentences provided by the Manifesto Project lack punctuation at the end of sentences. I use quasi-sentences in these instances.

To assess how often parties speak about liberal democracy when they speak about democracy, I use a dictionary. The dictionary is based on the definition provided in the theory section and encompasses references to the German Basic Law, equal opportunities for different social groups, human rights, minorities, pluralism, public control, and the separation of power (see Appendix C of the Supplementary File for the dictionaries). The emphasis on liberal democracy measures the percentage of democracy sentences that refer to liberal democracy. Sentences that do not contain the term "*demokrat*" are not considered for this measurement (see for a similar procedure, Alekseev, 2024). By restricting the analysis to sentences that link the term democracy with liberal institutions, I study whether parties take an active stance towards liberal democracy. If sentences include any of the dictionary terms, irrespective of whether they contain the

term "*demokrat*," the measurement would also include instances in which parties claim to support the rights of specific minority groups (e.g., Russia Germans, "Russlanddeutsche") or speak about specific violations of human rights (e.g., by the US). However, parties can make these statements irrespective of their support for liberal democracy (e.g., the AfD); hence, a measurement focusing on democracy sentences has higher internal validity and is less biased.

Data that contains important control variables: Finally, I use a variety of sources to operationalize the independent and control variables. For the independent variables, I categorize parties as challenger parties if they have not previously participated in government at the national or state level. Once they have participated in any government at any level, they are categorized as established parties for all levels of government. The data on government participation and the percentage of votes gained in elections are taken from the ParlGov dataset (Döring & Manow, 2019) and the RD|SED dataset (Röth et al., in press). The data for party families are from the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2019). For parties with missing information, I completed the data myself.

I also add a sequence of control variables. To control for the strength of challenger parties in each election, I aggregate the percentage of votes gained by all challenger parties. The Politbarometer series provides information on the level of satisfaction with how democracy works among the electorate (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2020). For most years since 1990, the sample has been split between East and West Germans. I, therefore, use the overall percentage of respondents from East and West Germany who state that they are at least somewhat dissatisfied with how democracy works for each party for national elections in the respective year. For state elections in East Germany, I base the percentages only on data for East Germany and likewise use only West German data for parties competing in West German elections. Between 1996 and 1998, the Politbarometer samples were not split between East Germans and West Germans. I split the sample according to the states where the interviews were conducted. Since the data do not allow us to reliably measure the percentage of dissatisfied respondents by party in each state, this is a proxy for parties' supporters in East and West German regional elections.

I control for the quality of democracy each year via V-Dem's electoral democracy index (Coppedge et al., 2020b; Pemstein et al., 2020). Owing to a lack of alternatives, I also use these data for regional elections. I measure democratic experience in years since 1949 for all national and West German elections and in years since 1990 for all East German elections. Finally, I include data on the change in GDP for each state and nationally to account for changes and differences in economic circumstances across territories and time. These data are taken from the statistical offices of Germany and the German states (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2006, 2019). I do not control for time or period because democratic experience measured in years since the first democratic elections after 1945 already captures changes in each dependent variable due to changes in time.

Owing to a lack of data for other periods, I restrict my analyses to parties' election manifestos published between 1977 and 2017 and link the data described above to them. I include clustered standard errors for parties in territories over time. Although parties share similar values and party platforms across German states and at the national level, there are still significant differences between party branches from different territories, which leads to within-group serial correlation. I, therefore, account for heteroscedasticity across these groups. Unfortunately, the use of a panel regression model is not possible because the dataset is strongly unbalanced.

Appendix F of the Supplementary File shows the robustness checks. Furthermore, I assume that parties that place more emphasis on liberal democracy also favour liberal democracy more strongly than other parties do.

6. Democracy Per Se as an Electoral Issue

German citizens' support for democracy has been the focus of several studies. Weil (1987) has shown that, by the 1960s, few West Germans supported a new Nazi regime, and nearly two-thirds believed that the postwar democratic system was better than any other regime since the pre-1914 Wilhelmine era (Baker et al., 1981, p. 92). In the early 1990s and the early 2000s, 88 percent and 93 percent of German respondents, respectively, either agreed or strongly agreed that "democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government" (European Values Study, 2015, waves 2 and 4). German citizens' support for democracy has remained high in recent years. In 2020, only 8–10 percent of German citizens agreed that "it would be better if Germany would not be a democracy" (Kaftan, 2024). Moreover, differences in support for democracy per se between East and West German citizens seem to have vanished (Pickel & Pickel, 2023). Overall, German citizens have shown increasing levels of support for democracy, with a high level of agreement at least since the early 1990s (see Table 1).

But under what conditions do parties speak about democracy in their election campaigns? Table 2 shows the results of the regression analyses that seek to explain the variation in the salience of democracy in German parties' national and regional election manifestos between 1977 and 2017. In line with democracy per se being a mixed issue (see Table 1), both the challenger status of parties and their party family are important for explaining the variation in the salience of democracy in parties' election manifestos. Challenger parties are more likely than established parties to mention democracy in their election manifestos. The coefficient becomes even more precise and larger once controlling for party families, indicating this is not driven by a correlation between party families and the challenger status of parties. Moreover, since established parties do not become more likely to mention democracy as challenger parties strengthen, this is most likely not an effect of periods with many or strong challenger parties. There are also some significant differences in the salience of democracy in election manifestos from different party families. Ecological, socialist, and social democratic parties are more likely to mention democracy than liberal parties, while the salience of democracy in manifestos of Christian democratic, conservative, nationalist, and special issue parties does not differ from the salience of democracy in election manifestos of liberal parties.

In conclusion, the distribution of the data described above suggests that democracy per se is a mixed issue. German citizens have steadily supported democracy since the 1960s, but substantial agreement might have been reached only in the 1990s. Regardless of their ideological positions, challenger parties are more likely to speak about democracy, suggesting that references to democracy per se can be used as a valence issue by parties who are not (yet) mainstream parties with government experience. However, some variation in the salience of democracy in election manifestos is related to parties' families. Compared with liberal parties, ecological, socialist, and social democratic parties are more likely to speak about democracy in their election manifestos.

Table 2. Linear regression results for the salience of democracy per se in German election manifestos.

	All parties	All parties	Established parties	Established parties
Challenger	0.66*	1.68**		
	(0.26)	(0.50)		
Challenger strength			0.00	0.00
			(0.01)	(0.00)
Ecological (vs. liberals)		0.99***		1.20***
		(0.20)		(0.12)
Socialists (vs. liberals)		3.96***		3.50***
		(0.39)		(0.27)
Social democrats (vs. liberals)		0.72***		0.70***
		(0.13)		(0.13)
Christian democrats (vs. liberals)		−0.20		−0.19
		(0.10)		(0.10)
Conservatives (vs. liberals)		0.24		N.A.
		(0.80)		
Nationalists (vs. liberals)		0.11		N.A.
		(0.52)		
Special issue (vs. liberals)		0.21		N.A.
		(0.53)		
Dissatisfied voters	0.04***	−0.01	0.05***	0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Previous GDP change	0.09	0.08	−0.02	0.01
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Democratic experience	−0.02***	−0.03***	−0.01	−0.02***
	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)
National (vs. East)	1.72***	1.38***	1.07**	1.32***
	(0.36)	(0.30)	(0.34)	(0.26)
West (vs. East)	0.73**	0.39	0.31	0.49*
	(0.27)	(0.26)	(0.25)	(0.21)
Democratic quality	−6.88*	0.65	−14.20***	−1.54
	(3.43)	(3.55)	(3.02)	(2.65)
Intercept	6.24*	1.10	12.75***	3.08
	(3.04)	(3.02)	(2.67)	(2.30)
N	677	677	566	566
R^2	0.28	0.51	0.23	0.52
Adj. R^2	0.27	0.50	0.22	0.51

Notes: Linear regression results with clustered standard errors for parties in territories over time that are additionally corrected for heteroscedasticity across territorial party branches; standard errors are shown in parentheses; significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.; a list of parties included by party families is shown in Appendix B of the Supplementary File.

7. Liberal Democracy as an Electoral Issue

The European Social Survey, wave 6 (European Social Survey, 2012), and waves 5, 6, and 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS; Haerpfer et al., 2022; Inglehart et al., 2014a, 2014b) contain survey items that are closely linked to the definition of liberal democracy presented above as a democratic system that protects

the rights of minorities, upholds the rule of law, and contains effective checks and balances for governments. The European Social Survey (ESS) conceptualizes citizens' support for liberal democracy along three survey items: the courts treat everyone the same, the courts can stop the government from acting beyond its authority, and the rights of minority groups are protected. Similarly, the WVS survey asks respondents whether women have the same rights as men and whether civil rights protect people's liberty from state oppression are essential characteristics of democracy.

Figure 1 shows the mean importance that German citizens attribute to liberal democracy in each survey, including 95 percent confidence intervals. The mean values are first calculated for each respondent across the survey items and then for each group of party supporters. The category "All" includes respondents who indicated no or any party preference. German citizens have, on average, attributed high importance to liberal democracy since 2006, but there are small differences among supporters of different parties that are most likely not the result of sampling errors. Since both surveys ask respondents to indicate the level of importance they attribute to liberal democracy rather than asking them whether they support liberal democracy, it remains unclear whether this indicates little or substantial disagreement among the German citizenry concerning the attractiveness of liberal democracy (see Table 1).

Table 3 shifts the focus back to the party competition, showing regression results for the emphasis on liberal democracy for all parties and established parties. In line with the empirical implications of issues being positional, only the party family correlates significantly with the parties' emphasis on liberal democracy. Ecological, socialist, social democratic, conservative, nationalist, and special issue parties emphasize liberal democracy less than liberal parties do when discussing democracy. When the outlier is excluded, the

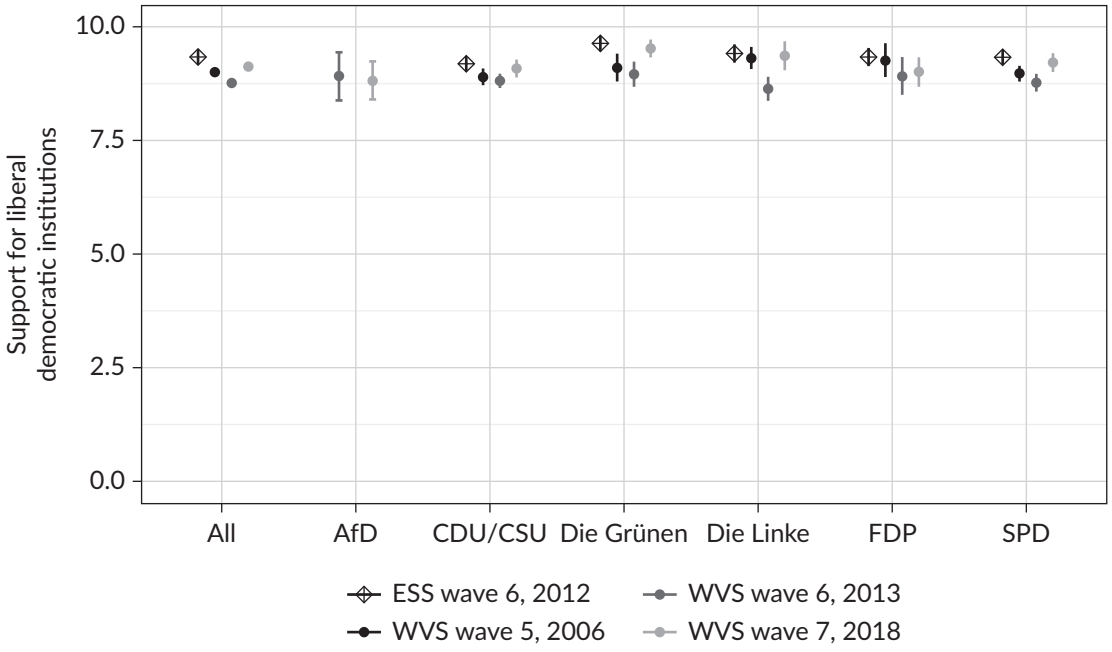

Figure 1. Importance of liberal democracy among German party supporters. Notes: This figure is based on data from the ESS wave 6 (European Social Survey, 2012) and WVS waves 5, 6, and 7 (Haerpfer et al., 2022; Inglehart et al., 2014a, 2014b); party support is conceptualized as the party respondents voted for in the last general election (ESS) or an upcoming election (WVS; second ballot in both cases); for more information, see Appendix A of the Supplementary File.

Table 3. Linear regression results for German parties' emphasis on liberal democracy in election campaigns.

	All parties	All parties	Established parties	Established parties
Dissatisfied voters	−0.23***	−0.16	−0.29***	−0.11
	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.07)	(0.11)
Challenger	−4.25*	0.73		
	(2.02)	(3.27)		
Challenger strength			−0.22	−0.20
			(0.14)	(0.14)
Ecological (vs. liberals)		−19.38***		−17.42***
		(2.80)		(2.77)
Socialist (vs. liberals)		−16.12***		−19.14***
		(4.10)		(4.21)
Social democrats (vs. liberals)		−18.62***		−18.75***
		(2.70)		(2.71)
Christian democrats (vs. liberals)		−5.06		−4.91
		(3.42)		(3.44)
Conservatives (vs. liberals)		−27.33***		N.A.
		(6.05)		
Nationalists (vs. liberals)		−11.81*		N.A.
		(5.68)		
Special issue (vs. liberals)		−17.01**		N.A.
		(6.09)		
Previous GDP change	0.38	0.29	0.04	−0.11
	(0.34)	(0.32)	(0.37)	(0.35)
Democratic experience	−0.05	0.01	−0.13	−0.04
	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
National (vs. East)	3.44	1.65	6.38	3.93
	(4.09	(4.39)	(5.07)	(4.97)
West (vs. East)	−2.94	−4.02	0.18	−1.48
	(3.27)	(3.82)	(4.18)	(4.26)
Democratic quality	−32.79	−37.54	−5.32	−50.67
	(54.29)	(54.81)	(60.89)	(63.03)
Intercept	63.30	74.26	61.67	102.57
	(45.57)	(48.09)	(53.57)	(54.41)
N	653	653	544	544
R^2	0.06	0.18	0.05	0.16
Adj. R^2	0.05	0.16	0.04	0.15

Notes: Linear regression results with clustered standard errors for parties in territories over time that are additionally corrected for heteroskedasticity across territorial party branches. Standard errors are shown in parentheses; significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; a list of parties included by party families is shown in Appendix B of the Supplementary File.

differences between conservative and nationalist parties, on the one hand, and liberal parties, on the other hand, are not significantly different from zero. While challengers, parties do not emphasize liberal democracy more than established parties do, and established parties do not react to changes in the strength of challenger parties by adapting their emphasis on liberal democracy. Thus, the regression provides no evidence that parties consider liberal democracy to be a valence issue.

In conclusion, how parties emphasize liberal democracy in election campaigns indicates that liberal democracy is a positional rather than a valence or mixed issue. While data on German citizens' position towards liberal democracy are scarce, available sources measuring the importance Germans attribute to liberal democracy suggest some small but meaningful differences between supporters of different parties. I find no evidence that liberal democracy is politicized by parties with challenger statues more than by parties that have already governed at least once or that liberal democracy is a valence issue in the elections under study.

8. Discussion

The results presented in this study are robust in several ways. First and foremost, the results are not biased due to negative references to democracy. The share of negative references to democracy in all manifestos is considerably low, with only 0.06 percent of all democracy sentences using negative references to democracy (see Appendix C.4 in the Supplementary File for the measurement). Neither do parties speak negatively about democracy, nor do parties use negations of the term democracy such as "undemocratic." Second, all the results remain stable for including territory fixed effects and clustered standard errors for parties over time and for excluding the artificial outlier Die Linke in Saxony-Anhalt in 1994 (see Tables 6 to 11 and Appendix F in the Supplementary File). Third, analyses in Appendix E (in the Supplementary File) show that parties also put forward social and direct democracy as positional issues in election campaigns. In contrast to liberal and direct democracy, social democracy is not put forward by liberals but by left-wing parties. Fourth, the results for the emphasis on liberal democracy are stable when the analysis is extended to sentences that do not contain the term "*demokrat*" (see Table 12 in Appendix F of the Supplementary File).

However, data on German citizens' attitudes towards democracy in general and liberal democracy specifically are far too scarce to make general arguments for larger time frames. Owing to the scarcity of data on German citizens, it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate possible changes in the quality of democracy issues over time. Potentially, parties change their positions due to factors other than those included in the regression analyses, and investigating trends would be of interest in itself. In addition, comparative studies could use more advanced techniques of computational text analysis, combined with hand coding, to develop comparative measures of party positions regarding different conceptions of democracy, making a better distinction between framing and position-taking.

9. Conclusion

Given the proposition that "the question whether a given problem poses a positional—or valence-issue is a matter to be settled empirically" (Stokes, 1963, p. 373), this article does not argue that democracy per se is a mixed issue in all polities or that conceptions of democracy are always positional issues. However, democracy per se and conceptions of democracy can be issues of different types in democratic multiparty competition, even in countries such as Germany and even during periods without actual attempts at democratic backsliding, such as between 1977 and 2017. While democracy per se, irrespective of its connotation, is often put forward by left-wing parties and challenger parties, all else being equal, liberal democracy is clearly an issue put forward by liberal parties more often than by any other party family. In combination with the data on citizens' attitudes towards democracy per se and liberal democracy, this suggests that democracy per se has been a mixed issue and that liberal democracy has been a positional issue in Germany during the period under study.

Establishing whether democracy per se and different conceptions of democracy are issues of party competition and, if so, what types of issues they are, will help us address many important questions concerning democratic stability. Just as we use theories surrounding party competition to study the potential effects of a change in government on social policies, we should increasingly use theories of party competition to study how democratic institutions themselves become politicized in democratic elections and what consequences this has for the stability of liberal democracies worldwide. Since the way parties speak about democracy in election campaigns is likely to affect citizens (Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002), it helps us understand how much parties and election campaigns, such as those put forward by Donald Trump's Republicans and Victor Orbán's Fidesz, contribute to destabilizing liberal democracies.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The replication material is available upon request from the author or at: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/dzni2riesyxg4h3ro817c/replication-material_party-competition-over-democracy.zip?rlkey=xbv1mkdhtqdfwaj3jb4bq7jkr&e=1&dl=0

Supplementary Material

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

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Concept and Varieties of Illiberalism

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Abstract

This article discusses various conceptualizations of illiberalism and adopts a definition that equates the concept with the negation of three liberal democratic principles: limited power, a neutral state, and an open society. The second part of the article explores the implications of this definitional strategy for empirical research, describes the relationship between populism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism, and identifies nine distinct routes to illiberalism: authoritarian, traditionalist, religious, libertarian, nativist-nationalist, populist, paternalist, materialist-technocratic, and left-wing.

Keywords

authoritarianism; illiberalism; liberal democracy; open society; populism; state neutrality

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, one of the foremost challenges in the social sciences has been to come to terms with democratic backsliding. The coming to terms-task is to be taken literally, meaning the identification of the right terms that describe and explain these phenomena. The concept many scholars are converging on is illiberalism. The term's sudden prominence is well illustrated by the fact that two leading academic publishers, Routledge (Sajó et al., 2021) and Oxford University Press (Laruelle, 2024), have almost simultaneously issued their own *Handbook of Illiberalism*, showcasing the research of about 100 academics on the subject.

The studies within this rapidly growing field present a bewildering variety of definitions of illiberalism and its relationship to other relevant concepts, particularly authoritarianism and populism. This article aims to select some of the most prominent approaches, evaluate their merits, and propose adjustments to arrive at a conceptual toolbox that can guide empirical applications. After reviewing and critically examining the chosen conceptualizations, I argue for a definition of illiberalism centered on power concentration, a partisan state,

and a closed society, in response to the three principles that govern liberal democracies: limited power, a neutral state, and an open society. This framework captures most (though not all) existing meanings of the term. It is specific yet adequately broad to differentiate various types of illiberalisms. The broad scope is crucial since the intent is to grasp an internally heterogeneous ideological and political syndrome. To illustrate the term's potential for bringing together different ways of questioning liberal democracy, I conclude the article by introducing nine distinct varieties of illiberalism.

2. Alternative Approaches

Given its relative novelty (for occasional references dating back to the 17th century, see Fawcett, 2024), many idiosyncratic usages of the term "illiberal" exist. Most of them imply opposition to constitutional freedoms and constraints on power. These fundamental characteristics are frequently complemented with additional features. For example, in Diamond's account, illiberal states are characterized not only by weak rule of law but also by high levels of corruption (Diamond, 2021, p. 33). Pappas (2019, pp. 35–37, 265) associates illiberalism with a particularly long list of attributes: disregard for individual liberties, minority rights, and the rule of law; political polarization; the idea of an oversoul people; adversarial politics; majoritarianism; patronage politics; charismatic leadership; political moralism; and contagiousness. Kauth and King (2020, p. 367) define illiberalism through two clusters of phenomena: "disruptive practices" that undermine fair competition (e.g., restriction on media freedoms, packing state bureaucracies with loyalists) and "ideological illiberalism," meaning practices that "defy basic liberal criteria, such as equal treatment vis-à-vis outsiders without necessarily attempting to undermine the quality of democracy for insiders" (Kauth & King, 2020, p. 377).

Most of these approaches emphasize that illiberalism is found in political systems that select leaders through elections. The close association of illiberalism with democratic contexts stems from Zakaria's (1997) seminal work, wherein he coined the term "illiberal democracy" to describe democratic regimes marked by violations of liberal and constitutional principles, uneven political playing fields, and unfair elections. The growing interest in illiberalism is largely due to the increasing number of such countries, that is, states that cannot be unequivocally classified as dictatorships or democracies, in the first decades of the 21st century (Nord et al., 2024).

Thus, the term illiberal typically appears as a qualifier of democracy. Ruzha Smilova reverses the expression and defines "democratic illiberalism" by the promotion of unrestrained popular sovereignty, ethno-nationalist "common good" anti-individualism, anti-pluralism, and anti-liberal anti-globalism within electoral regimes (Smilova, 2021, p. 193). Along very similar lines, Guasti and Bustikova understand illiberalism as a set of principles opposed to pluralism, minority accommodation, and ideological heterogeneity, emphasizing that illiberalism "calls for hetero-normative sexuality and ties of solidarity formed around a communitarian view of nationhood and sovereignty" (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023, p. 131).

The most elaborate departure point for defining illiberalism is provided by Marlène Laruelle. She takes the radical position of divorcing the term from regime literature. According to her, illiberalism is a "new ideological universe," a "backlash against today's liberalism in all its varied scripts—political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational—often in the name of democratic principles." It is "majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favouring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity," it is focused on

cultural issues, and "is post-post-modern in its claims of rootedness in an age of globalization" (Laruelle, 2022, p. 304). This definition posits illiberal ideas as possible causes and facilitators of democratic backsliding while emphasizing that such ideas emerge out of democracies. It conceptualizes illiberalism as a "realist" reaction to the fluid, relativist, postmodern era that promotes liquid boundaries in general and cosmopolitanism in particular. The five liberal scripts that illiberals reject are: classical political, economic, cultural, and geopolitical liberalisms, and liberal colonialism. Political liberalism (individual freedoms, checks and balances, etc.) is attacked by illiberals in the name of electoral majoritarian democracy. The economic script of liberalism is lambasted as irresponsible and greedy neoliberalism. Cultural liberalism is questioned from a traditionalist angle. Geopolitical liberalism is criticized because it promotes unjust, unipolar, and US-dominant international configurations. Finally, liberal colonialism is rejected in the name of "multiple modernities."

I turn now to the critical consideration of the innovative ideas in Laruelle's (2002) complex definition. First, it is important to welcome the emphasis on ideas instead of institutions. Narrowly institution-centered approaches are inadequate for grasping the 21st century setbacks in democratization. The widespread mimicry of the formal institutions of liberal democracies shows that they can be used for multiple purposes (Magyar & Madlovics, 2020).

A somewhat more questionable decision is to narrow the temporal scope of illiberalism to the post-1970s period, and primarily to the decades that followed the Cold War. Narrowing the temporal scope aligns with conceptualizing illiberalism as a backlash to contemporary liberalism but has considerable costs. First, if understood rigidly, it makes it impossible to note structural parallels across various eras, for example, to observe that because it lacked constitutional rights, protection of minorities, and proper checks and balances, the classical Athenian democracy was of an illiberal sort. Second, it assumes too much discontinuity. The conflicts around "liquidity" predate the postmodern era as liberalism—a robust ideological framework dating back to the first decades of the 19th century—has consistently advocated for the loosening of traditional social bonds in favor of promoting individual autonomy and choice. The criticisms of liberalism in the 2020s typically echo those of the 1920s. Those who rejected the liberal experiment in the early 20th century (including most of the European governments) deserve to be considered illiberal.

Laruelle's proposal to restrict the concept of illiberalism to societies that have experienced liberalism seems unnecessarily limiting as well. In the integrated global media environment, the products of liberalism and the various features of liberal democracy can trigger a backlash in any corner of the world, irrespective of direct experience. Hamid (2014), for example, finds the illiberal label fitting for Islamist movements particularly well. Admittedly, there is less analytic utility in calling the Iranian or the Chinese leadership illiberal than in calling the Hungarian one so, but the motives and arguments behind questioning liberal standards may be very similar in these cases.

Obviously, relaxing the scope limitations implies more heterogeneity. But if actors from advanced knowledge economies, impoverished societies, emerging democracies, and even authoritarian contexts are part of the same global conversation, then they need to be analyzed together, despite the differences in local contexts.

One of the further specificities of Laruelle's (2002) definition is that it identifies liberalism as the opposite of illiberalism, the target to which it reacts. Thinking of illiberalism as the opposite of a particular ideology can

have problematic consequences. It may be interpreted, or misinterpreted, as creating a stark divide between liberalism and other ideologies such as social democracy, Christian democracy, conservatism, environmentalism, and so forth. But these latter traditions are integral constituents of liberal democratic regimes. While they react negatively to several scripts of liberalism, they embrace many of the values once championed primarily by liberals. Therefore, we need a definition that keeps them explicitly outside of the illiberal box.

A further question concerns the scripts listed as representing liberalism. Some of them, like the neoliberal and liberal colonialist scripts, belong to the periphery of the liberal ideology and not to its core (Freeden, 2009), and are rejected by many liberals. Without any doubt, these scripts emerged out of classical liberalism, and, even more importantly, illiberal actors often consider these aspects as inherently tied to political liberalism. Therefore, Laruelle (2002) is right that the attacks against them need to be part of the research agenda of illiberalism. But because many, perhaps even most, contemporary liberals repudiate them, they are better kept separate from the definition of liberalism/illiberalism itself.

Finally, the most controversial decision is to exclude the possibility of leftist illiberalism. This follows from identifying illiberalism with the support for traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity. "These two features exclude today's leftist movements, which almost systematically defend cultural liberalism and largely advance an inclusive definition of the nation" (Laruelle, 2022, p. 318). On this issue, three points can be raised. First, quite a few leftist actors, like Slovak politician Robert Fico, the Czech Communists, or the Bulgarian Socialists, have made peace with cultural homogeneity and traditional hierarchies. Second, while radical leftist projects typically stay away from demanding ethnocultural homogeneity, their occasional insistence on ideational, class-based, or behavioral homogeneities follows a similar approach, equally at odds with liberal democratic values. Therefore, treating them together may help the analysis. Finally, a conceptual apparatus that excludes Leninist and Maoist movements, the Venezuelan regime under Chavez and Maduro, the South African Economic Freedom Fighters, or Western progressive activists, who promote deplatforming their opponents from the scope of the illiberal concept would be, simply, one-sided.

In fact, the leftist critique of liberalism is almost indistinguishable from the conservative one in certain areas: both oppose rational-universalistic and individualistic worldviews, complain about the liberals' readiness to insulate the legal system from social influences, and identify liberal economic policies as the main causes of social malaise (Blokker, 2021; Holmes, 1993). Empirical research may show leftist illiberalism to be less consequential than its right-wing variety, but to build typologies and map the varieties of illiberalism, its inclusion in the overall framework is essential.

3. Recalibrating the Definition

Building on previous definitions, but also departing from them, I propose to define illiberalism as the rejection of the underlying principles of liberal democracy. While liberal democracy is conceptualized in various ways, most of its features can be subsumed under three principles: (a) limited power, (b) neutral state, and (c) open society.

Among these, the demand for limited power is the least controversial. The fight against the arbitrary and unconstrained rule, the defense of the rule of law, is the oldest concern of those who wish to enhance freedom

and the rule of the people. The importance of this principle is also reflected in the fact that the essence of liberal democracy is typically framed in terms of the rights of citizens, accountability, and limitations on rulers, features that are less central to other conceptions of democracy.

In contrast, state neutrality is a more disputed principle. For current purposes, neutrality refers to overlapping concepts of impartiality, evenhandedness, non-discrimination, and inclusiveness. The Rawlsian demand that the state should be impartial vis-à-vis alternative conceptions of the good and that it must justify its actions in a way acceptable from all reasonable points of view, whether correct or mistaken, is debated by some supporters of liberal democracy (Arneson, 2003; Raz, 1986), but others consider it to be both a leading value of liberalism and an operational feature of democratic arrangements (Dworkin, 1985; Kis, 2012; Patten, 2012). The principle of state neutrality limits the scope of state interventions by assigning the task of selecting which ways of life are valuable and which are worthless to the cultural marketplace of civil society rather than to governments. But it does not equal moral relativism and it permits state actions that support the existence of an adequate range of options—in other words, pluralism (Kymlicka, 1989).

Lastly, open society is a somewhat less commonly used category in academic literature to denote a fundamental principle of liberal democracy, but it appears suitable for identifying the nature of socio-cultural conditions presupposed by liberal democratic systems. Building on the original understanding of the term (for Henri Bergson it meant moral universalism and for Karl Popper rational individualism), open society is understood here to refer to forms of communication and social relations based on universalism, free-thinking, tolerance, individual autonomy, and moral equality, as opposed to inherited and uncritically accepted collective loyalties and antagonisms. Support for an open society does not imply denigrating in-group norms, but it does allow for their critical review.

Accordingly, a political system is liberal democratic if (a) the political institutions constrain the leaders, (b) the state treats all its citizens as equals and does not favor or disfavor anyone based on their conception of the good life or group membership, and (c) it is underpinned by dispositions and social practices such as argument-based public discourse, tolerance, pluralism, universalism, and respect for the individual.

It follows that the term illiberalism should primarily apply to efforts aimed at power concentration, partisan state, and closed society. These efforts can consist of political actions and their justifying ideas, but because ideas provide coherence, the emphasis will be on the latter.

Each aspect of illiberalism can unfold in the following distinct ways (see also Figure 1):

- Power concentration is advanced firstly by rejecting constraints on executive power, typically by attacking or undermining counter-majoritarian institutions. Secondly, it can be facilitated by advocating for the curtailment of political rights. The first implies opposition to horizontal accountability and the second to vertical accountability.
- Attacks on state neutrality imply either the authoritative imposition of cultural standards on non-mainstream groups or the prioritization of the dominant group in distributive conflicts, depriving specific individuals or entire groups of the resources needed for participation in democratic deliberations. The use of state administration as the instrument of a political party is evidently part of the "partisan state" syndrome, just as the use of public broadcasting to promote particularistic worldviews.

- Support for a closed society is expressed in two ways. First, it manifests through resistance to social changes perceived as externally generated and non-organic, and through opposition to norms that extend beyond group identities and individual societies. The norms of universal human rights and international governance are cases in point. Second, it is represented by the advocacy for non-rational and uncivil forms of decision-making, including the demonization of political opponents and opposition to the culture of skeptical scrutiny (the rejection of the "liberal ethics of controversy"; Main, 2021, p. 59). While opposition to state neutrality primarily involves favoring one group and its norms through state actions, support for a closed society centers on intolerance toward non-mainstream ideas and behaviors in social relations.

To qualify as a liberal democracy, all three listed characteristics—limited power, neutral state, and open society—must be present, constituting a coherent vision. This is not the case with illiberalism, as there are multiple ways to attack these principles, and not all need to be attacked at once. The Wittgensteinian family resemblance logic applies: there may be no single attribute that illiberals share except that they all question some essential aspect of liberal democracy.

The existence of "many roads to Rome" (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019) does not mean that quantification can play no role in empirical investigations of illiberalism. One may rank discourses or policy profiles by considering the centrality of the above claims, the uncompromising nature of the positions, or the comprehensiveness of the attacks against liberal democratic principles.

By juxtaposing illiberalism with the principles of liberal democracy, I steer clear of two alternative options. Firstly, I avoid opposing it to liberal ideology, preventing the implication that all critics of liberal ideas, whether democratic or not, embody illiberalism. Secondly, I refrain from defining illiberalism solely as the negation of checks and balances, constitutional rights, independent judiciary, and free and fair elections. While the rejection of these institutional aspects eminently deserves the illiberal label, it is more fortunate to contrast illiberalism with a broader understanding of liberal democracy. This broad understanding (the liberal democratic vision) must include those moral fundamentals and cultural value orientations without which the political institutions would not survive. Illiberalism is opposed to these principles, regardless of whether institutional alternatives are proposed.

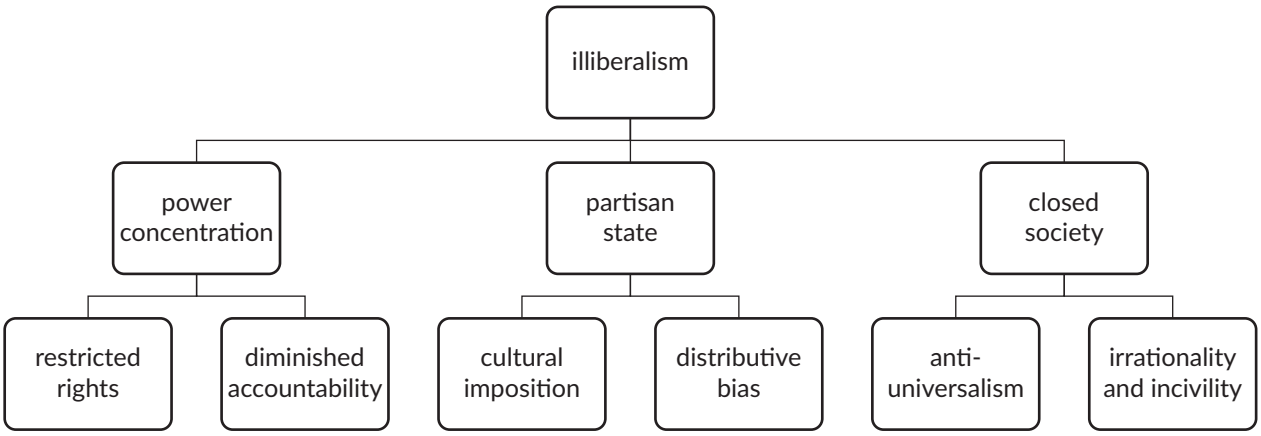

Figure 1. Components and manifestations of illiberalism.

While this approach implies, similarly to Laruelle (2022), an emphasis on ideas and culture, it is important to see that the cultural references are kept thin. This is necessary to allow for legitimate disagreements within liberal democracy on important issues such as gender relations, specific rights of sexual minorities, border openness, or reproductive rights. Equality is also considered here in a thin way: the illiberal label is assigned only to those who question the political and moral equality of community members or support depriving them of resources necessary for participation in democratic deliberations. The definition does not promote the exclusion of non-citizens into the very center of the concept as the approach of Kauth and King (2020) does.

In contrast to the earlier discussed approaches, the proposed definition does not exclude the possibility of leftist illiberalism. Furthermore, it avoids incorporating phenomena better considered as possible correlates of illiberalism, such as corruption, charismatic leadership, or polarization. While disrespect for open-ended debates and adversaries frequently entails polarization and the lack of constraints on power often facilitates corrupt practices, illiberals tend to project unity onto community members and can be effective against corruption if it is not needed for their economic or cultural hegemony.

Furthermore, this definition does not contain direct references to ideas central to Laruelle's (2022) and Smilova's (2021) conceptualizations, such as traditionalism, nation-centrism, realist reaction to post-modernity, "common good" anti-individualism, etc. I consider these as possible applications of the illiberal logic, not as part of the definition. Moving the definition to a higher level of abstraction increases its ability to travel through space and time. Empirical investigations may very well prove that in contemporary politics illiberalism indeed manifests itself through the applications identified by Laruelle (2022) and Smilova (2021). But rather than viewing these orientations as defining characteristics of illiberalism, it is more useful to consider them as its most significant contemporary themes. This also means that one allows for significant changes across time and space in the array of topics addressed by illiberalism. For example, the international liberal order can become a central target of criticism for a while and then fade away, replaced by other tropes, without necessitating a change in the fundamental definition.

A further consequence of the proposed definitional strategy is that specific topics or positions belong to the illiberalism syndrome only if a direct negative link between them and liberal democratic principles can be established. For example, traditionalism is illiberal only to the extent it conflicts with individual autonomy and universalism. Opposition to the America-dominated, international liberal order is illiberal only if it can be shown to contradict support for an open society, limitations on power, or international cooperation.

The literature tends to emphasize that illiberalism is compatible with elections, it may respect specific democratic mechanisms, and it often emerges from democratic contexts. I agree, which is why illiberalism means something other than anti-democracy. But to conclude that one can speak of illiberalism only in competitive electoral regimes is another unnecessary restriction, forcing one to counterintuitively abandon the term whenever the degree of competitiveness falls below a certain threshold even if all the players and their ideologies remain the same. To put it differently, while the term illiberalism may be most useful in electoral regimes, the presence and endorsement of elections should not be a definitional matter.

Finally, it follows from the approach that one does not need to oppose every single principle of liberal democracy to be illiberal. Since all the listed principles are essential and consequential, violating any of them implies a departure from liberal democratic norms and a rejection of the liberal democratic vision. This

amounts to understanding illiberalism as a broad, umbrella concept that accommodates radically different arguments. In other words, illiberalism is not a specific ideology but a syndrome whose common core is the questioning of liberal democracy.

The proposed definition attempts to optimize the eight principles of concept formation proposed by Gerring (1999): familiarity, resonance, parsimony, coherence, differentiation, depth, theoretical utility, and field utility. It incorporates as many of the term's standard meanings as possible (familiarity and resonance), it is structured around three components (parsimony), these components all refer to the liberal democratic vision (coherence), the concept is sufficiently distinct from terms like anti-democratic orientation or traditionalism (differentiation), it identifies six different manifestations (depth), it helps map the intersection between ideologies and political regimes (theoretical utility), and it can be used without damaging neighboring concepts used to capture aspects of this area (field utility).

Not all these objectives can be maximized, however, some trade-offs are necessary. Since we need a broad concept, the definition is most challengable in the aspect of differentiation. The two terms that overlap most with illiberalism are authoritarianism and populism. Therefore, I now turn to the question of how to differentiate illiberalism from these two concepts.

4. Relations to Other Concepts: Authoritarianism and Populism

Authoritarianism is perhaps the concept closest to illiberalism. Delineating the two is challenging due to the compartmentalized nature of the authoritarianism literature, which includes socio-psychological, political behavioral, and political regime sub-literatures, each with diverging definitions (Waller, 2023). Existing regime classifications typically define authoritarianism as either the opposite of democracy or an intermediary regime between democracy and autocracy. Juan Linz's typology (Linz, 1975) describes authoritarianism as a regime that is less ideological, less oppressive, and more traditionalist than totalitarianism. Pappas's glossary, on the other hand, defines authoritarianism as a political system "of limited pluralism and low social mobilization run by an interventionist and ideological state; it occasionally allows unfair elections" (Pappas, 2019, p. 365).

Regardless of the approach, authoritarian regimes oppose virtually all principles of liberal democracy. In this regard, they qualify as illiberal. Furthermore, in contemporary politics, they have no choice but to oppose these principles consciously. Therefore, in the realm of modern regimes, we are speaking of a subset relationship, with illiberalism being the superset.

This understanding contrasts with Waller's (2023) perspective, which considers authoritarian (non-democratic) regimes distinct from those supporting illiberal ideas. Waller argues that authoritarian regimes can be based on various ideological tenets, including liberalism. While I agree, I contend that the source of specific policies or official discourse is secondary to whether the principles of liberal democracy are respected. For example, Singapore's current regime may embody many liberal elements, but its violations of liberal democratic principles make it both illiberal and authoritarian.

When examining attitudes and values, however, the differences between illiberalism and authoritarianism become more pronounced. In social psychology, authoritarianism typically denotes a combination of

submissiveness, conventionalism, and aggression, along with a morally absolutist desire for the coercive imposition of particular beliefs (Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt, 2022). The term is also often narrowly applied to social conservative preferences and law-and-order concerns. Cas Mudde defines authoritarianism as a belief in a strictly ordered society where breaches of authority are met with severe punishment (Mudde, 2007, p. 23).

Most definitions in the socio-psychological and political behavior literature position conformity, support for hierarchical relations, strict penalization of rule-breakers, and opposition to bottom-up democratic mechanisms at the core of authoritarianism. But none of them are essential for illiberalism. While some illiberal projects may rely on such preferences, others are rather structured around very different ideas and sentiments, including revolutionary, anti-establishment, or eschatological attitudes and beliefs.

Populism, the other key concept, neighbors illiberalism from the opposite side. Simply put, while authoritarianism attacks liberal democracy from above, populism attacks it from below. Existing populist regimes, such as Venezuela's, may be managed from the top, but they fit the classical populist narrative where the homogenous people's general will is threatened by corrupt elites (primarily the local rich and their international allies in Venezuela's case).

Populism asserts that the will of the people, often operationalized as majoritarianism, must prevail without compromise due to the logic of popular sovereignty (Abts & Rummens, 2007) and the moral superiority of the people (Meijers & Zaslove, 2021; Mudde, 2007; Urbinati, 2019). While authoritarianism focuses on hierarchical relations, populism emphasizes boundless majoritarian decision-making. Accordingly, Sajó (2021) views populism as limitless majoritarianism, a totalitarian version of democracy.

Populism overlaps with authoritarianism and illiberalism in its hostility towards power-limiting institutions. Its illiberal and authoritarian potential stems from its insistence on the homogeneity of the people, rejection of compromise, and opposition to representative institutions and constitutional constraints (Calhoun, 2020).

Understandably, many scholars associate populism closely with illiberalism, sometimes even equating the two. Takis Pappas, for instance, defines populism as democratic illiberalism (Pappas, 2019). This parsimonious definition highlights a salient characteristic of many populist movements. However, this approach is problematic. Many actors, such as Spain's Podemos or the historical American Populist Party, are widely acknowledged as populist without being illiberal. Moreover, Pappas projects anti-elitism onto illiberalism:

> Illiberal politics is motivated by a monochromatic rather than pluralist view of a world, in which the body politic in societies can belong to one of only two camps—one composed of the "people" and another comprising some "establishment," that is, the people's foes. (Pappas, 2019, p. 58)

It is unclear why pro-establishment forces should be excluded from the scope of illiberal politics.

Other scholars rather emphasize the differences between populism and illiberalism. Laruelle (2022), for instance, aligns with those who view populism as a "discursive frame that juxtaposes the people against the elite, characterized by immediate and direct communication that intentionally disregards the norms of polite speech and behavior" (Laruelle, 2022, p. 317). Consequently, populism is seen as distinct from ideological

opposition to liberalism. She draws attention not only to the existence of populist movements that are not illiberal but also to the fact that many actors, e.g., Vladimir Putin, are illiberal but not populist. Such actors, instead of propagating popular sovereignty, believe in some other ultimate authority, for example, in state sovereignty.

There is further room for differentiating the two concepts. Illiberalism does not inherently oppose intermediaries between leaders and the people, while populism does. Populism politicizes society in its search for the volonté générale, whereas illiberalism does not necessarily do so. Public opinion-based justifications are optional for illiberalism but essential for populism. Both are compatible with majoritarianism, but non-majoritarian populism is a contradiction in terms, while non-majoritarian illiberalism is conceivable.

To conclude this section, authoritarianism, populism, and illiberalism can be given different meanings, even if specific actors and regimes frequently use some cocktail of the three. From the perspective of illiberalism, authoritarianism and populism are separate angles from which liberal democracy can be questioned. The populist angle means to criticize liberal democratic principles as alien from the popular will, while the authoritarian angle means to reject these principles because they place freedom above order.

5. Variants

Illiberalism has been introduced as an umbrella concept encompassing various ideas and practices that challenge the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. The next logical step would be to build an elaborate typology. Unfortunately, this is not currently feasible. A full typology can only be created through dialogue with empirical material, as many relevant dimensions may emerge from issues politicized in particular contexts. Therefore, the units and dimensions of the typology are likely to differ across time and space. For example, attitudes towards environmentalism or technological changes, while not currently major divides, are likely to become polarizing dimensions in the future, defining separate ideological templates. Specific issues such as immigration, gender politics, tariffs, or attitudes towards supranational institutions like the European Union can easily become sources of significant differences, even collisions, among illiberal actors. For instance, understanding why various right-wing illiberal initiatives do not coalesce into one large bloc in the European Parliament may require considering attitudes towards Russia as a major dividing line. Similarly, attitudes towards Israel or the United States can play a significant role in certain periods and places. Furthermore, different dimensions may be relevant at different levels of analysis, depending on whether one studies the work of intellectuals, party programs, governmental actions, or citizens' attitudes.

In other words, a one-size-fits-all typology is unlikely to emerge. Nevertheless, I propose nine distinct versions of illiberalism, or nine "roads to Rome" (Barrenechea & Castillo, 2019), to illustrate the concept's wide coverage. These varieties are based on intuitive guesses rather than pure logic or systematic empirical investigation. Due to space constraints, only the most essential characteristics and some straightforward empirical manifestations are sketched.

5.1. Populist Illiberalism

In fact, by identifying populism and authoritarianism as two separate angles, the first step towards creating a typology has already been completed. Accordingly, a major way of questioning the principles of liberal democracy is the populist way. This approach is characterized by assertions of the absolute authority of the ordinary people's will, devoid of compromise, and accompanied by sweeping critiques of elite establishments. This is perhaps the most thoroughly mapped variety of illiberalism, given the extensive research on populism, which has produced several scales for both mass and expert surveys.

5.2. Authoritarian Illiberalism

The second approach is the authoritarian way. Giveaways include calls for unrestricted police power, nostalgia for compulsory military service as a means of instilling discipline in youth, rejection of bottom-up democratic mechanisms that limit leaders' authority, demands for harsher punishment of rule-breakers, and opposition to the political involvement of the "undeserving" or "unfit" groups such as the uneducated.

5.3. Traditionalist Illiberalism

The third route to attacking liberal democracy is the traditionalist route. This is probably the most visible version of illiberalism today. It includes criticisms of the emancipation of women and sexual minorities and calls to resist the spread of egalitarian moral codes. Traditionalist illiberals aim to defend patriarchal family models and hierarchical gender roles, often at the expense of principles such as non-discrimination, freedom of speech, the autonomy of educational institutions, or the right to challenge inherited taboos.

5.4. Religious Illiberalism

A related but distinct angle is provided by religious approaches. Arguments that question liberal democratic principles using explicit references to religiosity, either as a value or as a focus of collective identification, belong here. Building political programs on fundamentalist adherence to religious dogmas, providing privileged positions to members or leaders of particular religious organizations, and demanding symbolic recognition of specific religious traditions are examples.

5.5. Paternalist Illiberalism

The fifth type of challenge to liberal democracy comes from paternalist arguments (Enyedi, 2024a, 2024b). Paternalist illiberalism calls for state guidance and intervention in both economic and non-economic realms. It places the responsibility of protecting and educating citizens on a select group of actors who are supposed to have intimate access to historical traditions, revolutionary knowledge, or moral excellence. This approach intersects with traditionalism but focuses on individuals' perceived inability to navigate life without guardianship. It underscores the state's responsibility to promote valuable lifestyles while discouraging those it views as lacking worth.

5.6. Libertarian Illiberalism

The sixth way, perhaps the least self-evident, is the libertarian approach. Although freedom is the most fundamental value of the liberal democratic vision, liberal democracy involves limited government, meaning some government. Libertarian illiberals reject even those state actions aimed at mitigating blatantly exploitative social relations and condemn interventions meant to secure basic human dignity, safety, health, and freedom. Such interventions are perceived as state overreach, as exemplified by many anti-vaccine movements during Covid-19.

5.7. Nativist Illiberalism

The seventh form of illiberalism is the nativist or ethnic nationalist type. This approach insists on the privileged position of the dominant cultural-ethnic group. The imposition of particular cultural standards on every citizen is justified by claims of cultural superiority or the assertion that the dominant group's survival depends on the social and political system identifying with that group. This orientation is most often expressed through opposition to the inclusion of ethnic minorities and immigrants, particularly those from different cultural-religious traditions. The empirical measurement of nativist illiberalism can rely on routinely applied indicators of prejudice, discrimination, and ethnocentrism. Criticism of cosmopolitans and globalists may also belong here, but only if associated with a demand for a closed society. In Europe, the nativist-nationalist orientation has recently been complemented by a supra-ethnic civilizationist logic (Brubaker, 2017), bringing distinct ethnocultural units together against perceived rival civilizations, incorporating anti-traditionalist and pro-gender equality arguments against cultural outsiders.

5.8. Materialistic Illiberalism

The eighth, and perhaps the least obviously ideological perspective, is the materialistic-technocratic type. This approach rejects efforts to uphold the principles of liberal democracy because they come with costs. For materialist illiberals, the scope of legitimate politics is narrowed to the efficient management of the status quo. Reforms aimed at maximizing values such as freedom or equality are seen as unnecessary virtue-signaling or harmful interventions. Various versions of Ronald Inglehart's well-known postmaterialism scales can serve as indicators of this orientation but reversed.

5.9. Left-Wing Illiberalism

The final type is left-wing illiberalism. This category covers anti-capitalistic, egalitarian, and collectivistic criticisms of liberal democratic principles. Positions that express a willingness to sacrifice freedom of expression, pluralism, neutral state, limited government, or privacy in return for social justice, equality, and progress belong here.

It is the job of empirical investigation to verify the existence of these and potentially other varieties of illiberalism. Many of these types may overlap in practice and are better merged for certain domains. It is also clear that some types are relevant only in specific environments. Euroscepticism, for example, may be a robust and consequential orientation in certain European Union countries, meriting a separate type. Public opinion surveys, elite surveys, expert surveys, focus groups, policy analyses, and text analyses of party

manifestos, political speeches, social media conversations, legacy media products, and even novels could provide information on different levels. Such analyses could reveal differences between political actors with otherwise relatively similar profiles (e.g., the traditionalist but non-nativist Recep Tayyip Erdoğan vs. the traditionalist-nativist Viktor Orbán vs. the non-traditionalist but nativist Geert Wilders), while also showing how these actors converge in their opposition to the liberal democratic vision.

6. Conclusions

The article argued for conceptualizing illiberalism not as a stage between democracy and dictatorship, nor as a specific ideology, but as a complex, internally differentiated ideational syndrome that inspires action against liberal democracy. Through a critical analysis of recent conceptual innovations, I propose a fine-tuned definition of illiberalism that focuses on the rejection of three main principles of liberal democracy: limited power, a neutral state, and an open society.

The proposed definition is less thick than some other conceptualizations. While acknowledging the importance of the criticism of post-modernity to contemporary Western illiberal projects, I recommend not identifying illiberalism solely with this criticism. Although illiberalism is often accompanied by corruption, charismatic leadership, or polarization, and is most fruitfully applied in electoral political regimes, I suggest leaving these phenomena outside the concept's boundaries. This strategy allows for a wider temporal and geographic scope while keeping the definition anchored in the concept of liberal democracy, rather than treating it as a summary of empirically observable trends.

Liberal democracy is a homogeneous concept in the sense that its principles are interrelated, providing an integrated political vision. Illiberalism, on the other hand, is not. Power concentration, a partisan state, and a closed society can be promoted in multiple ways, based on different logic and arguments. Illiberalism research should cover all these logic and arguments, even if they attack only one fundamental principle of liberal democracy. Therefore, illiberalism is best understood as an umbrella concept, that leaves room for distinct sub-types. Some types proposed in this article (e.g., the authoritarian, traditionalist, religious fundamentalist, libertarian, and nativist-nationalist types) are more commonly found on the right, while others (e.g., the populist, paternalist, and materialist-technocratic types) are open to both leftist and rightist interpretations. The definition also allows for the emergence of a distinctly left-wing variety. The exact relations and prominence of the individual orientations should be a matter of empirical investigation.

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Conflict of Interests

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ARTICLE

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Democracy Amid Pandemic: A Survey Experiment on How Covid-19 Affectedness Influences Support for Anti-Liberal Policies

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Abstract

Do people support ostensibly effective policy measures that curtail liberal rights and civil liberties or instead stick to liberal principles when confronted with an unprecedented crisis? This article examines the relationship between individuals' perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic and their attitudes toward democracy as they consider effective countermeasures. It asks (a) whether individuals' sense of being affected by the pandemic shapes their attitudes toward democratic policymaking and (b) whether this relationship is moderated by trust and authoritarianism. The analysis builds on a customized survey in Austria that includes a conjoint experiment to test the acceptability of various illiberal policies. It shows that while feeling affected by Covid-19 does not have the hypothesized effect, there are strong interactions with respondents' political attitudes. Citizens' willingness to sacrifice democracy for more effective policies depends both on whether they perceive the pandemic as a personal problem and on their attitudes toward government and democracy.

Keywords

Austria; Covid-19 pandemic; crisis; democracy; public policy attitudes; survey experiment

1. Introduction

In the literature on democratic backsliding, the rollback of freedoms and the rule of law is often associated with radical politics and the rise of non-mainstream parties. Radical parties and their supporters are said to engage in responsive but not responsible policymaking by testing the limits of liberal democracy and the rule of law (Karremans & Lefkofridi, 2020; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). But what if the shoe is on the other foot? What happens if there is an unprecedented crisis, and the most effective response calls for curtailing

liberal rights and civil liberties? Importantly, what measures do citizens support when mainstream political actors pursue responsive but constitutionally suspect policies in the name of effectiveness?

The following example illustrates our point: Early in the Covid-19 pandemic, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz explained his approach to effective countermeasures by saying he did not want to deal with "legal niceties" (Rohrer, 2021). Besides, he explained, by the time his government's decrees reached Austria's Constitutional Court, "they would no longer be in force anyway." The ensuing public debate about whether liberal democratic rights are a luxury in times of crisis was not only an issue in Austria, but also in countries as diverse as Hungary, Slovenia, the United States, Germany, and Ghana. Nonetheless, the academic debate on this issue was primarily conducted in law journals rather than political science literature (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2020; Flander, 2022; Levine et al., 2022).

While responsiveness and effectiveness are core principles in the modern understanding of functioning democratic regimes (Goetz, 2017), crises like the Covid-19 pandemic have shown that these principles can also lead to pressures on fundamental democratic processes. Liberal democracy imposes limits on responsiveness and effectiveness when their implementation threatens democratic principles (for an overview discussion, see Michelman, 1997). However, a pandemic differs from most other political problems in that political decisions must be made quickly and directly impact people's health and physical survival.

This tension leads us to investigate the following two-part research question: Which option do individuals support when confronted with the potential trade-off between liberal democracy on the one hand and effective but possibly less than democratic measures on the other? What explains the differences between such individual evaluations?

Therefore, we start from the individual experience of the crisis and examine its implications for government policies to combat the pandemic. In a dedicated representative survey and survey experiment in Austria, respondents were asked to choose between different policy responses that varied in their effectiveness and constitutionality. In the first step, we assess the extent to which this choice is affected by how people feel affected by Covid-19. We then turn to authoritarian attitudes and trust in government as political attitudes that might influence the relationship between feeling affected by Covid-19 and the trade-offs between effectiveness and liberal democratic principles. This survey was fielded when respondents experienced the pandemic's consequences, but neither the crisis nor any policy responses had been colored by partisan rhetoric. As a result, we were able to conduct the survey at a time when efficiency considerations were primarily driving policy responses. We found that feeling affected by Covid-19 in their health or economic situation as a factor by itself did not significantly affect people's willingness to accept illiberal and anti-democratic policies. However, when combined with respondents' political attitudes, the individual perception of affectedness showed clear effects. Thus, in the early stages of the crisis and before the emergence of clear partisan divisions and specific political narratives, the crisis did not seem to turn people into anti-liberals or anti-democrats.

This article proceeds as follows: First, we outline the existing knowledge about the relationship between the Covid-19 crisis and its effects on democracy. We then develop our hypotheses and present our conjoint survey experiment and the other measures. Following a brief overview of the Austrian case, we present our findings and discuss their implications for understanding the relationship between crises and democratic stability.

2. Theory

Support for anti-liberal policies and disenchantment with democracy can have a variety of causes and have been explored in a rich literature. Scholars began discussing the legitimacy crisis of democracy as early as the 1970s (Crozier et al., 1975; Habermas, 1973). There has been considerable debate as to whether the support for democracy is based on universal principles that citizens share, or whether utilitarian attitudes drive it, with democracy being supported as long as it delivers to its constituents. Some, therefore, see the functioning of the democratic system as crucial to maintaining support for its existence (cf. Ferrín & Kriesi, 2016; Foa & Mounk, 2017; Landwehr & Steiner, 2017; Norris, 2017). Another debate revolves around the question of whether support for democracy has declined, while authoritarian and populist attitudes appear to be on the rise (Dalton, 2004; Schmitter & Trechsel, 2004; for a detailed discussion, see Thomassen & Van Ham, 2017). While we address this question, particularly the trade-off between commitment to liberal principles and support for more effective outcomes, we focus on a very specific context: the early stages of a global crisis, when many individuals faced challenging circumstances in which to evaluate policy choices. Thus, we focus on a situation where support for liberal democratic principles and effective policymaking are in sharp contrast. Hence, our research explores how, in a crisis such as a pandemic, people weigh the need for effective policy against the importance of preserving liberal democratic rights when these two goals seem incompatible. Under normal circumstances, representative politics has opted for a deliberative legislative process that maximizes the legitimacy of the input and serves as a filter to improve the quality of the policy output.

However, a pandemic is a unique situation for three reasons: First, it is a matter of life and death, so effective decisions save lives. Second, time is of the essence, as rapid action rather than a slow deliberative process may be indispensable to contain the spread of the disease. Third, policymakers and experts have yet to gain real first-hand experience dealing with the pandemic, so there may be a greater willingness to try new ideas and radical solutions. The case of Covid-19 thus differs from other crises, with their often diffuse and delayed effects at the individual level, by a much greater immediacy and directness of impact (Buštíková & Baboš, 2020). As a result, people with liberal orientations may adopt illiberal positions or follow radical policy proposals.

Although society as a whole was confronted with the pandemic, the threat and impact of the disease were not felt equally by all. People differ in their circumstances, physical and mental health, economic and social resources, and outlook. As a result, the urgency and perceived need for extreme measures vary and are shaped by people's attitudes toward democracy and the government (Barrios & Hochberg, 2020).

Although research on the political impact of Covid-19 is still ongoing, there is growing evidence that the pandemic has harmed the quality of democracy (see Heinisch & Werner, 2024; Thomson & Ip, 2020, p. 1356). In a survey experiment, Amat et al. (2020) found a demand for strong leadership, a willingness to give up individual freedom, and a sharp increase in support for technocratic governance. In addition, Arceneaux et al. (2020, p. 1) suggest that people's attitudes are relatively malleable and that "trusted experts" can shift support for policies that erode civil liberties. The corrosive effect of Covid-19 on democracy may explain the growth of conspiracy theories and their impact on politics (Eberl et al., 2021; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Żuk & Żuk, 2020). A related literature has pointed to the close correlation between the experience of crisis and democratic aberrations (Buštíková & Baboš, 2020; Moffitt, 2015).

In contrast, other research reports that lockdowns tended to increase vote intentions for the party of the government leader and satisfaction with democracy, pointing to the importance of political trust (Bol et al.,

2021). Another strand of the literature shows a growing resentment toward policy decisions driven and communicated by experts (Guasti, 2020; Hameleers, 2021; Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020), while other work shows no uniform negative effects (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). The disease and government responses are often rapid, have immediate effects, and dominate public and political discourse, making it difficult for most citizens to escape their effects and the political debate about them. This includes questions about the responsiveness, effectiveness, and constitutional soundness of policies (Thomson & Ip, 2020, p. 1356). However, our theoretical discussion so far has made clear that people respond differently to responsiveness and effectiveness. We, therefore, focus primarily on the extent to which citizens' general political attitudes contribute to the trade-off between effectiveness and liberal democratic rights. We focus on effectiveness (achieving a superior outcome) rather than efficiency (achieving the same outcome with fewer resources; Huber et al., 2020). While the underlying argument about a trade-off with democracy also applies to efficiency, measures to combat a pandemic are generally viewed from the standpoint of effectiveness in containing and counteracting the disease. We must emphasize at this point that the concept of effectiveness here is not a scientific concept used to measure a certain degree of improvement objectively, but rather a subjective idea in people's minds that emerges from public discourse and suggests a better outcome. As a result, we derive a set of variables that we hypothesize will explain this relationship.

We turn first to our dependent variable, a person's willingness to sacrifice individual democratic rights and freedoms in a health crisis. With this trade-off between democratic principles and the effectiveness of policymaking in mind, when citizens face a major threat to their lives, livelihoods, and society, we designed a survey experiment, described below. We chose this approach for two reasons: First, it makes the nature of the trade-offs under investigation non-obvious; and second, any abstract questioning of democracy is normatively sanctioned in Western society. As a result, we will likely avoid untruthful or evasive responses that we would otherwise receive if we asked people directly about trade-offs between democratic principles and other preferences (Winstone et al., 2016).

In this experiment, we present a series of concrete policies, each of which touches on one of the following dimensions of democracy: the right to privacy, freedom of movement, freedom from unlawful search and seizure, and the rule of law. Therefore, the stimulus of the experiment aims at the liberal part of liberal democracy in that it underscores the principle of limited government. By implication, even highly effective policies are subject to constitutional limits. At least, this is the central issue. Thus, rather than viewing democracy as an abstract concept when we ask respondents about the Covid-19 pandemic, we want to determine to what extent respondents who feel affected by the pandemic would support extreme measures restricting these rights and freedoms. The policies we propose to respondents each have a constitutional and an unconstitutional component, the latter being incompatible with liberal democracy.

This is where we hope to find the line that people will draw when deciding whether to support or oppose each measure in the fight against the pandemic. The measures were designed to appear effective and were all loosely part of the public discourse during the first months of the pandemic in Austria.

Turning to our independent variables, we note that an extensive literature focuses on various emotional and psychological states as drivers of political radicalization. In a pandemic, the emotion of fear may be particularly important in generating support for radical politics (Wodak, 2015). Likewise, anger, e.g., about the government's response to the pandemic, has been found to increase support for radical politics

(Demertzis, 2006; Magni, 2017). Similarly, economic anxiety has featured prominently in recent literature on political choice and populism (Capelos & Katsanidou, 2018; Skonieczny, 2018). In Salmela and von Scheve (2018), economic anxiety and anger are shown as intertwined factors that strengthen a preference for radical populist parties, with the former evolving into the latter under certain conditions. Closely related to fear, the sense of lack of control has also been found to reinforce radical attitudes (Heinisch & Jansesberger, 2022). A pandemic is an extreme experience that induces strong emotions in most people. Arguably, fear of physical well-being and fear of economic well-being are the primary emotional drivers in an international health crisis in which people fear for their lives and livelihoods. This is why we have focused on these two factors as crucial.

Thus, our primary independent variable is the subjective sense of being affected by Covid-19. In line with the previous discussion, we follow the argument from political psychology that people who experience anxiety or a loss of control tend to favor authoritarian measures to regain a sense of security (Betz, 2002; Cramer, 2016; Eberl et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2019; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017, 2018). In the context of Covid-19, two impacts are most important: individuals' health and economic situation. Few things are more precious to individuals than their health, which is ultimately tied to physical survival. In a pandemic, this impact can occur in several ways: people may become seriously ill from the disease itself; they may suffer psychological trauma from the illness itself or the fear of it, particularly in vulnerable populations; or people with other health problems may receive inadequate or insufficient care due to an overburdened health sector. This is why we emphasize the importance of the subjective sense of being affected in one's health. We must leave it to the respondent to determine the degree to which they feel affected, no matter how "objectively" ill or not a person may have been. Individual perceptions are important because they influence attitudes and behaviors.

The other significant and widespread impact has been on economic well-being. Many individuals lost their employment, were required to work from home under less than ideal working conditions, or were forced to cease operations, leading to existential concerns. Once more, this has a significant subjective aspect, as some individuals are more resilient than others in similar circumstances and may assess their vulnerability differently. As a result, our concept of vulnerability is not limited to the disease itself or the loss of a job or business. Still, it remains at a subjective level that is susceptible to political influence and public discourse. Our expectation that people who feel affected will also accept constitutionally questionable measures is supported by research showing that people rally around the government, especially in the early stages of the pandemic expertise (Arceneaux et al., 2020; Bol et al., 2021). They also demand strong leadership and are willing to give up individual freedom (Amat et al., 2020). This tendency is motivated by the desire to feel safe and protected in times of fear and uncertainty. Thus, individuals who feel particularly affected by Covid-19 should prioritize the effectiveness of disease control over less immediate concerns about democracy.

> H1a: An individual's sense of their health-related well-being being affected by Covid-19 increases the preference for policy effectiveness over democratic principles.

> H1b: An individual's sense of their economic well-being being affected by Covid-19 increases the preference for policy effectiveness over democratic principles.

In terms of the role of political attitudes, we assume that in times of a pandemic, partisan political factors may not be as relevant compared with more traditional political issues that are shaped along party lines.

Instead, some voters are generally more comfortable with a strong top-down relationship between the state and society, while others reject such a view of government power. Under a strong authoritarian orientation, we understand the belief in a strictly ordered hierarchical society demanding submission to authority and social conventions (Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2018), which in turn arises from an "uncritical, respectful, obedient support for existing societal authorities and institutions" (Duckitt & Bizumic, 2013, p. 843). In contrast, liberal orientations generally imply strong support for civil liberties and political rights, including minority rights and the rule of law.

Thus, individuals with authoritarian values are likely to find effectiveness-based, less democratic policies more compatible with their values than individuals with a liberal worldview. In other words, authoritarians would seem to be the least likely advocates of liberal democratic principles. Instead, we would expect them to value leadership and decisive, results-oriented action.

> H2a: Individuals with authoritarian values are more likely to prefer policy effectiveness to democratic principles than individuals with liberal values.

> H2b: An individual's liberal or authoritarian values affect the relationship between an individual's sense of feeling affected by Covid-19 and support for the effectiveness of the policy.

It should also be noted that support for effective measures against Covid-19 would likely depend on citizens being convinced that policymakers are competent and well-intentioned. Importantly, voters' belief in the competence and good intentions of those in power depends on their trust in their leaders and institutions (Guasti, 2020; Hameleers, 2021; Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020). Without such trust, power is seen as illegitimate, and decisions are deemed harmful and nefarious. Lack of trust is also a basis for conspiracy theories, especially in conjunction with expert-directed mandatory health policies (e.g., Silva et al., 2021), which in turn is believed to have negative consequences for democracy (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Żuk & Żuk, 2020). Thus, trust in government is expected to be a key variable in perceptions of action.

Nonetheless, the key question that arises is the direction of the effect of trust here. On one hand, a lack of trust is said to negatively affect democracy. On the other, trust in government may increase a person's willingness to support effective but constitutionally suspect measures of a "trusted" government. Thus, whether this would make such voters more or less likely to reject illiberal government measures remains an open question.

> H3a: An individual's trust in government increases the preference for policy effectiveness over democratic principles.

> H3b: An individual's trust in the government affects the relationship between an individual's sense of feeling affected by Covid-19 and support for the effectiveness of the policy.

3. Surveying Austrian's Attitudes During the Covid-19 Pandemic

To empirically test our hypotheses, we designed a representative survey in Austria that was conducted in early September 2020, with a sample size of 1,200 respondents. Table A1 in the Supplementary File shows the demographic sample composition. In 2020, Austria weathered the first wave of the pandemic quite

successfully, following the government's initial decisive response, which culminated in a strict lockdown in March 2020. Importantly, this survey captured public opinion before the more specific discussions of vaccine skepticism and dissent over anti-Covid-19 policies began to dominate the public discourse. This context, therefore, provides a rather unvarnished rare insight into the Austrian public's views before one specific aspect—vaccination—began to overshadow other issues. The survey was conducted online by the Market Institute, which randomly selected respondents from a pool of 25,000–30,000 Austrians, and occurred at a time when Austrians had experienced the health and economic impact of the pandemic but were in a period of relative calm.

The tailor-made survey contained two questions about the respondents' feelings about being affected by the Covid-19 crisis, one targeting their health and the other asking about their economic situation. As argued previously, we leave it to the respondents and their subjective assessment of whether and to what extent they felt personally affected. The question was: *On a scale of 0 to 10, how much did you feel negatively affected [in your health well-being OR economically] by the Corona crisis?* Respondents were also asked whether they felt that those close to them were affected in their health or economic wellbeing. These factors have no additional effect. We show this in the Supplementary File (Figure A2).

To measure individuals' level of authoritarian and liberal values, we refrained from directly inquiring about the preferred relationship between the state and society as such a measurement would be too closely related to the democratic nature of the policies we are investigating. Instead, we used a general measure of authoritarianism by asking for respondents' agreement with the statement: *The country would be better off if the young people were educated to be obedient and disciplined.* The response scale also ran from 0 to 10, with higher values denoting more authoritarian values.

The survey contained the standard question regarding trust in the government: *On the whole, you can trust that the government wants only the best for the country.* While the original response scale ran from (0) *strongly agree* to (10) *strongly disagree*, we reversed the answer categories so that higher values denote more trust in the government to facilitate interpretation. We also asked for respondents' trust in people, which does not affect our analysis, as shown in the Supplementary File (Figures A3a and A3b).

Finally, to measure our dependent variables of respondents' choices between effective and democratic policies, the survey included a conjoint experiment that simulates a decision-making situation by giving respondents a binary choice between two policy packages designed to combat the spread of Covid-19. Of course, a survey experiment cannot perfectly simulate a real policy decision with all its personal or societal consequences. However, our experiment comes as close to this ideal as possible, given that we ask respondents to make policy decisions and that the experimental setup hides the theoretically interesting decision parameters. Moreover, Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) have shown that forced-choice conjoint experiments closely mimic real-world behavior, using field experiments as a benchmark. Thus, while our experiment is subject to the usual limitations, voters' responses in conjoint experiments are a functional proxy for real-world behavior.

The conjoint experiment asked respondents to indicate their preferences between two policy packages. Table 1 shows an example of an experimental decision. To set up this decision, we provide respondents with a situational context and the instruction to imagine a hypothetical situation. The text shown (in German) is as follows:

> Please imagine the following situation:
>
> After months of opening up the economy, with shops and restaurants finally recovering and tourists also flocking to the country again, there is an explosive resurgence of Covid-19 disease that can no longer be controlled by conventional measures.
>
> In turn, the government again severely restricts freedom of movement in the country and announces additional measures as essential.

In September 2020, at the time of the survey, stable and low numbers of Covid-19 infections and hospitalizations marked Austria's situation. At the same time, there were widespread discussions about the possibility of a second wave of infections. Thus, the hypothetical situation described above envisioned the not-yet-existent but realistic potential threat of another wave of infection and the resulting necessary policy measures. We introduced the policy packages with the following statement: "Below, we show you different packages of measures that the government can take. Please select the package of measures you would personally prefer."

Each policy measure relates to a different aspect of liberal democracy. A technical device to reconstruct personal contacts interferes with people's right to privacy while indefinitely isolating a specific social group impinges on their freedom of movement and conduct harsher law and order measures—especially in conjunction with calling on the population to report suspects—are closely connected to the type of social

Table 1. All potential Covid-19 policy options, that are randomly selected into packages and shown to respondents in the conjoint experiment.

POLICY MEASURE 1	POLICY MEASURE 1
Only people with a phone app or chip for reconstructing personal contacts will be allowed to move around completely freely in the future.	The government decides **not** to introduce a **phone app or chip to reconstruct** personal contacts
POLICY MEASURE 2	POLICY MEASURE 2
Elderly people and special risk groups such as people with pre-existing conditions will be **required to remain in isolation** and other restrictions **indefinitely**.	Elderly people and special risk groups, such as people with pre-existing conditions, **are allowed to move around like everyone else**
POLICY MEASURE 3	POLICY MEASURE 3
Violations of Corona measures **will be punished more severely** and the population is urged to report so-called "**life endangerers**" to the authorities in the spirit of public protection.	**Violations** of the promulgated measures **will be punished at the same level** and there will be no specific call to report violations to the authorities.
POLICY MEASURE 4	POLICY MEASURE 4
The government demands understanding for the fact that in times of need, **measures are taken primarily according to the criterion of effectiveness rather than constitutionality**.	The government demands understanding that even in times of emergency, measures are **only taken according to the criterion of constitutionality**.

Note: Bolded sections in Table 1 were bolded in the experiment.

control implemented by non-democratic regimes and impede the rule of law, especially the freedom from unlawful search and seizure. The final statement openly contrasts effectiveness and constitutionality. Although presenting the policies as packages is artificial, they are related to the debate mentioned above. It is worth noting that no party had issued ownership of any of these policies. Furthermore, we opted against proposing alternative policies beyond maintaining the status quo as this would have shifted the focus away from the choice between liberal and illiberal policies to questions of Covid-19 mitigation. It would also have blurred the clear choice between stark alternatives and instead created a situation that offered respondents a comfortable way out by having a second seemingly effective policy option.

To test our hypotheses, we investigate whether our independent variables (feeling affected by Covid-19, authoritarianism, and trust in government) affect the policy packages respondents choose in the survey experiment. Due to the nature of conjoint analysis, we must first transform all continuous independent variables into categorical ones. Thus, we split the variables of feeling affected by the Covid-19 pandemic into three groups: *not feeling affected* (0–3), *somewhat affected* (4–6), and *very affected* (7–10). We divided all other continuous variables into two groups, excluding the true middle value of five. For the effects of single independent variables, we calculate the average marginal component effects (AMCE), which represent each policy's independent effects on the probability that a respondent chooses a given policy package. In other words, AMCEs tell us whether respondents are more or less likely to choose a policy package if the more effective policy alternative is included instead of the more democratic version. This method determines the way we read the figures. If a policy has a negative impact, that policy package is less likely to be selected if the effective policy is included instead of the democratic policy. An effect crossing the zero line means that it does not matter whether the policy packages contain effective or democratic policies.

To analyze the interactions between feeling affected by Covid-19 and the attitudinal variables, we calculate marginal means (MMs) instead of AMCEs. Leeper et al. (2020) have shown that AMCEs are sensitive to the choice of the reference group when more than two groups are compared. MMs do not suffer from this limitation. Nevertheless, they are interpreted in the same way as AMCEs in cases where respondents are forced to choose between two alternative options, which is the case in our experiment. In a nutshell, MMs are the mean outcome across all appearances of a particular conjoint feature level, averaging across all other features. For conjoint experiments structured like ours, MMs of 0.5 are the general average effect. Statistically significant effects above 0.5 show that the feature increases, and effects below 0.5 decrease the favorability of a package.

4. Analysis: Covid-19 and Democratic Policies

In this section, we investigate whether there are any differences in the effect of undemocratic policies being included in the survey experiment's policy packages depending on our independent variables. In the first step of our analysis, we ask whether the extent to which someone is affected by Covid-19 affects their receptiveness to effective but illiberal measures. As noted in Section 2, we assess health and economic effects separately. For ease of reading, we contrast only those who feel *not at all* or *very much* affected by Covid-19 in the visual representation of the interactions.

For completeness, we present the main effects of the four policies on general package selection in Figure A1 (see Supplementary File). It shows that the tracking app and isolation of vulnerable people have similarly

negative effects on package selection as their inclusion decreases the probability by about 15 percentage points. Including the "snitching" policy also has a clear negative effect (–9%), while "effectiveness over constitutionality" has no statistically significant effect. Furthermore, Figures A4a and A4b of the Supplementary File show the effect for all three levels of affectedness (*not*, *somewhat*, and *very affected*).

Figure 1 shows the extent to which respondents feeling affected in their health or their economic well-being react regarding support for the policies included in the experimental government's policy packages to combat Covid-19. In general, we find that the inclusion of one of the (less democratic) effectiveness-based measures makes them less likely to be selected by respondents. However, there is little variation among respondents with different perceptions of Covid-19's impact. The left panel of Figure 1 shows this for respondents who feel affected in their health. We see little difference in the negative effects of including a tracking app and forced isolation policies. Only the idea that effectiveness matters more than constitutionality has consistently no effect. From another perspective, however, violating this most liberal of democratic principles does not elicit a significant negative reaction either. This is surprising, given that we would expect to see a defence of democratic institutions in a long-established democratic society. However, feeling affected in one's health does matter for accepting the policy designed to punish non-compliance and even encourage people to snitch on each other. Those feeling very affected by Covid-19 in their health see this policy as unproblematic.

The right-hand panel in Figure 1 shows that feeling affected in one's economic situation also minimally affects respondents' reaction to our experiment. Again, the only minor difference we note concerns the measure of reporting non-compliance, although it is here that those who feel unaffected show the least concern about this policy. An explanation may be that this group fears being targeted later and tries to avert this. However,

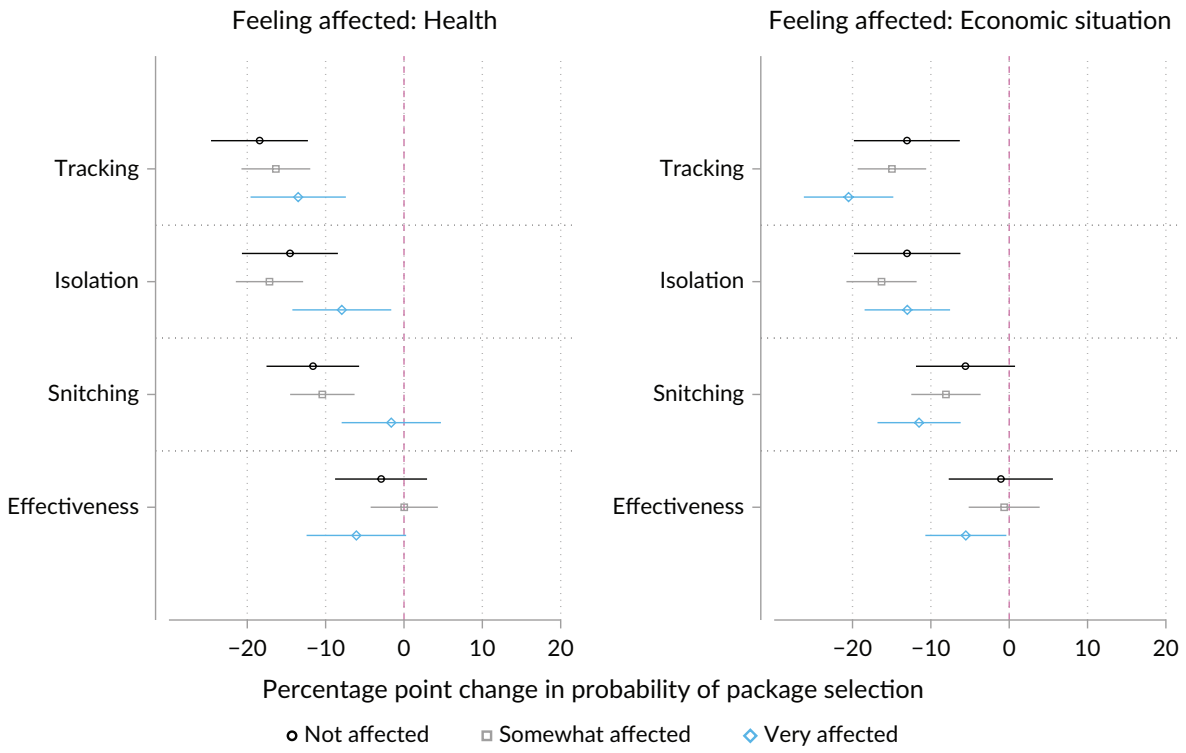

Figure 1. AMCE for package selection among different levels of feeling affected in own health and economic situation.

overall, we need to reject our hypotheses H1a and H1b that feeling affected by the Covid-19 pandemic has an independent effect on the choice of democratic or illiberal policies. Of course, feelings of being affected could still influence other variables.

This finding is interesting because it rules out, relatively speaking, the least "political" variable included in this analysis, which we based on the rational premise that those who suffered were the most likely to seek remedy by any means possible. However, it is still possible that feeling affected by Covid-19 interacts with other causal variables by either strengthening or weakening their effect.

Turning to our attitudinal hypotheses, we investigate our second hypothesis that respondents with authoritarian values are generally more open to the idea of illiberal policies to fight Covid-19. Figure 2 tests this hypothesis in general by comparing the AMCEs among those with authoritarian and non-authoritarian (or liberal) values. It shows the hypothesized difference, albeit only for illiberal persecution of non-compliance and the appreciation of effectiveness over constitutionality. Thus, we only find partial evidence for H2a, as authoritarian values only make a difference if the rule of law is threatened.

Figure 3 shows the MMs when we interact authoritarian values with feeling affected in health (left) and in respondents' economic situation (right). It confirms that the former moderates the latter's effect (H2b). Both parts of the figure indicate that among those who do not feel affected by Covid-19, respondents with liberal values react significantly more negatively to illiberal policies than respondents with authoritarian values. This gap is particularly strong among those who do not feel affected in their health.

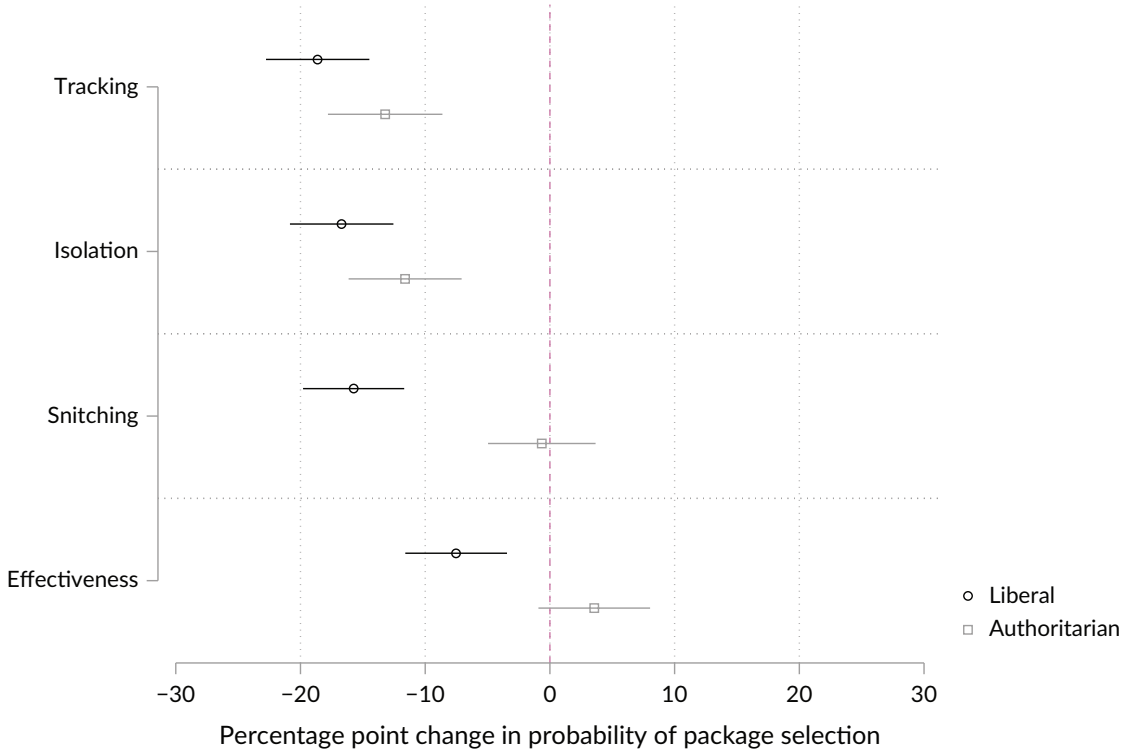

Figure 2. AMCE for package selection among respondents with authoritarian and liberal values.

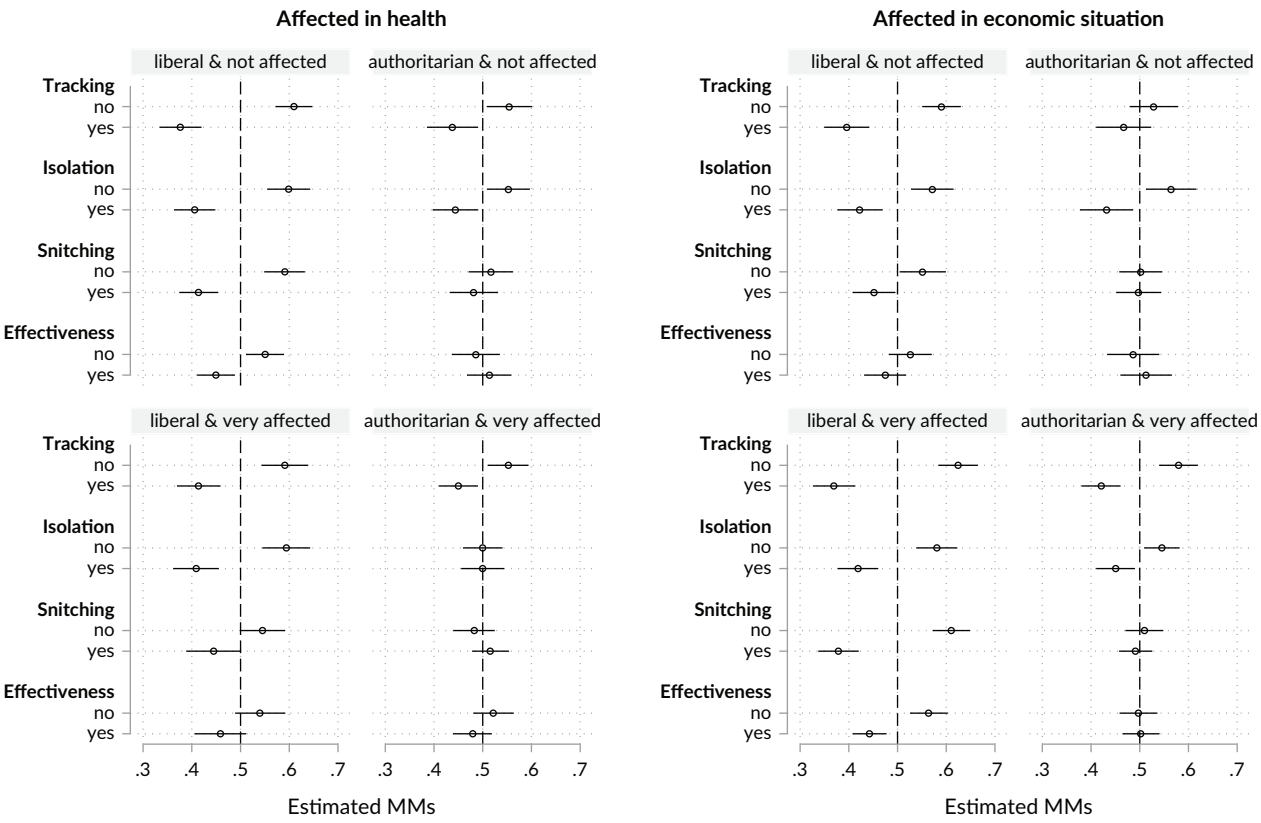

Figure 3. MMs for package selection among respondents with authoritarian and liberal values and different levels feeling affected in own health and economic situation.

The differences among those who feel very affected in their health reveal a more complex picture. Those with liberal values still strongly reject the tracking app and enforced isolation. Yet, neither the illiberal persecution of non-compliance nor the unconstitutionality of the measures results in the rejection of policy packages. However, only the tracking app elicits a negative reaction among highly affected respondents with authoritarian values. At the same time, the illiberal persecution of non-compliance increases the likelihood of package selection (albeit not significantly).

This gap is even more pronounced among those who feel very affected by Covid-19 in their economic situation. Those with liberal values reject all levels of illiberal policies, while those with authoritarian values mainly reject the app. Here again, the likely explanation is self-interest in the sense that those feeling affected may see themselves as the potential targets of measures that digitally provide authorities with information. Thus, we find evidence that authoritarian values moderate the effect of feeling affected in one's health.

Next, we analyze the effect of trust in government. Figure 4 shows the differences between respondents who trust and do not trust the government, testing H3a. We see that those not trusting the government are much less likely to choose measures that include the tracking app or the stricter law and order policy against non-compliance. Most striking, however, is that unconstitutional measures are negative for those who do not trust the government but are irrelevant for those who do trust it. This supports our hypothesis H3a.

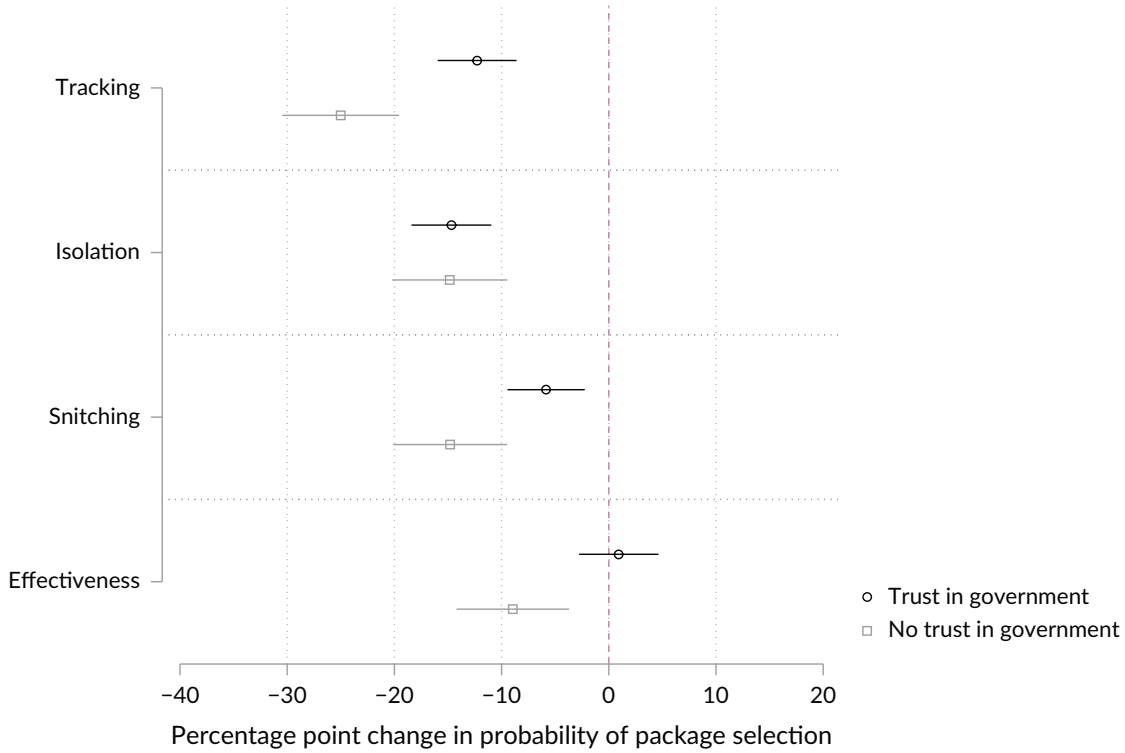

Figure 4. AMCE for package selection among different levels of trust in government.

Figure 5 shows how trust in government interacts with feeling affected in one's health and economic situation. The left-hand panel of Figure 5 confirms that for those respondents not feeling affected in their health, trust in the government makes them more supportive of the illiberal policy proposals. However, the lower two lines in each policy show a more complex picture among the group of very affected respondents. For those impacted by Covid-19, there was no difference between those trusting and distrusting the government regarding the tracking app and trading constitutionality for effectiveness. However, among the very affected, only those who trust the government reject the forced isolation policy, while only those who distrust the government reject the illiberal persecution of non-compliance. Indeed, for those feeling very affected in their health and trusting the government, the illiberal persecution of non-compliance has a positive (albeit non-significant) effect on respondents' policy package selection. Thus, we have a first indication that trust indeed moderates the effect of feeling affected by Covid-19, yet not in a uniform way.

The right-hand panel of Figure 5 also shows that trust moderates the effect of feeling affected in one's economic situation. While we, again, find little difference between respondents who trust or distrust the government among those not feeling affected, there are differences within the group of the very affected. Those who trust and feel economically affected are less likely to reject a policy package because it includes a tracking app or the illiberal practice of citizens reporting non-compliance. In general, we find some moderating effect of trust in government, albeit only among those who feel very affected by Covid-19 and not for all policies.

Again, a possible explanation is that those feeling affected by Covid-19 see themselves as potential targets of government action. People who do not trust the government do not want to have their movements tracked, which is a rational position under the circumstances. Other measures seem more designed to enforce existing

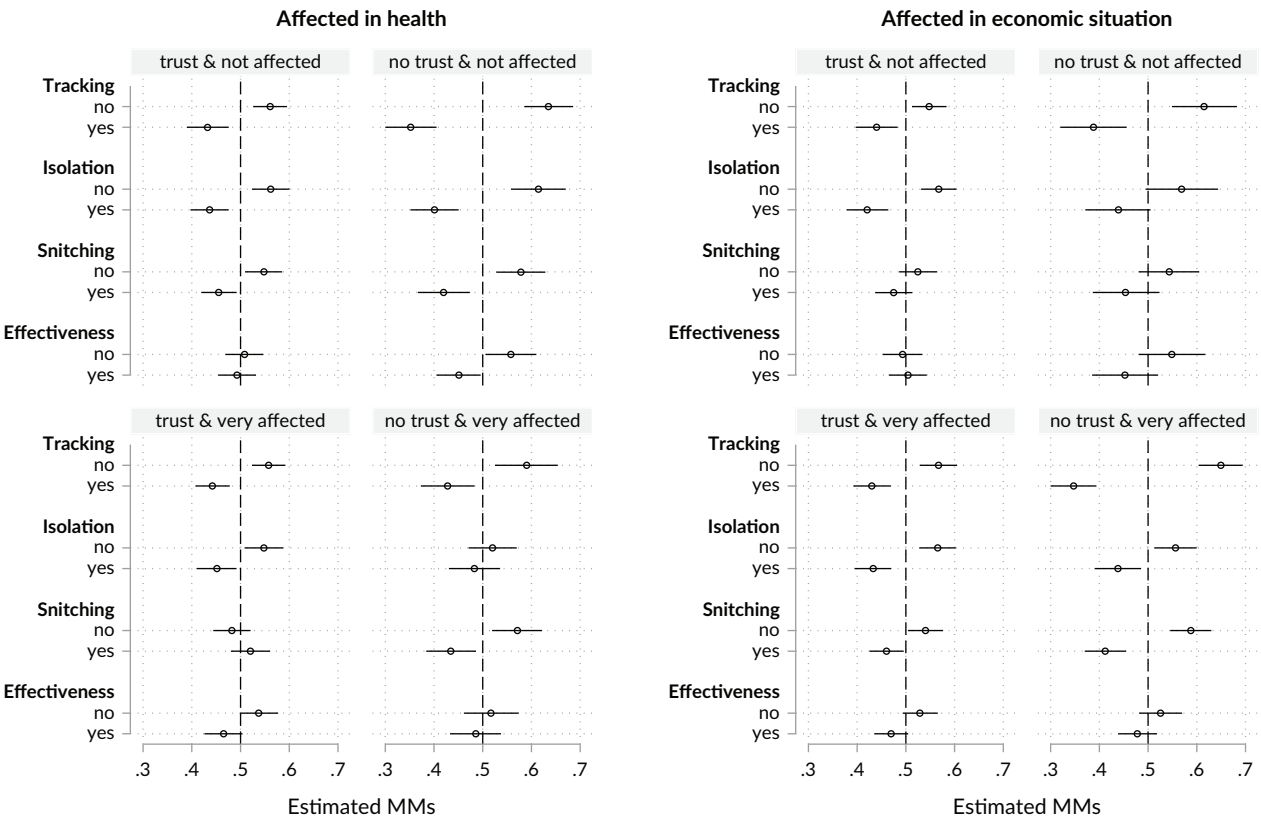

Figure 5. MMs for package selection among different levels of trust in government and feeling affected in own health and economic situation.

rules, thereby improving order, protection, and stability, which seem to be more acceptable choices. Thus, it is not a general principle but self-interest that may be driving the evaluation of these measures.

5. Conclusion

What happens if the most effective response to a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic calls for sacrificing liberal rights and civil liberties? More specifically, what liberal or illiberal measures do citizens support when they feel particularly affected by the crisis in their health or their economic well-being? Our study investigates this question, using Austrian survey data collected at a very opportune time: during the early stages of the pandemic. At this point, respondents had been affected by the first wave of the pandemic and were facing concerns about their lives and livelihoods. However, entrenched partisan divisions and specific political narratives about the pandemic and its remedies had not fully emerged. This means that when we asked respondents to evaluate hypothetical policies that involved trading away liberal principles for greater effectiveness in mitigating Covid-19, we were not measuring partisanship, views on vaccinations, or attitudes toward conspiracy theories. As these other political factors had yet to emerge, the time point of our survey provides a unique opportunity to investigate the effect of a global crisis without confounding other developments.

The first general finding conveys a clear positive message: at no point did our Austrian respondents significantly and positively support the illiberal and undemocratic policies that we had proposed in our

survey experiment. Most emphatically, they rejected the proposal to enforce a tracking app. While this is arguably the least illiberal policy offered, it is also the most realistic measure as such devices existed and were being used. With all other policies, individuals may tell themselves that that policy, however problematic, does not necessarily apply to them personally.

Finding that this policy was most opposed suggests that when respondents vividly understand the negative consequences for their own freedom, they are more likely to oppose such policies. This interpretation is supported by the fact that respondents were generally weakest on the most abstract but most consequential policy measure of valuing effectiveness over constitutionality. Arguably, when a vague principle like "the Constitution" is compromised for a tangible benefit, respondents may not grasp the full consequences for themselves and their community.

Contrary to our expectations, feeling affected by the pandemic alone makes little difference to respondents' willingness to adopt illiberal or anti-democratic policies. We see differences only when we factor in trust in government and authoritarian values, as our respondents are less likely to resist illiberal and anti-democratic policies if they are affected and if they are also authoritarian or distrustful of the government. Consequently, a crisis alone does not make individuals willing to sacrifice freedoms or democratic principles for effective policies. This leads to the conclusion that while we cannot derive a general threat to democracy from a global health pandemic or similar crisis, we must pay close attention to political attitudes. This is particularly relevant as governments consider responses to other global crises, such as climate change, that have widespread impacts on individuals' livelihoods and lifestyles, and as we seek to understand the reactions in terms of support from segments of the public. What makes our findings so important is the fact that we have few opportunities to measure people's political responses, especially in the context of a crisis, when people's beliefs are arguably most tested before entrenched political discourses, party platforms, and consolidated narratives emerge and shape the way people evaluate policy proposals.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data will be made available on AUSSDA—The Austrian Social Science Data Archive: https://aussda.at.

Supplementary Material

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

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Affective Polarization Among Radical-Right Supporters: Dislike Differentiation and Democratic Support

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Abstract

Partisan affective polarization describes the extent to which different partisans like or dislike each other. In Europe, affective dislike is strongest towards the radical-right, as mainstream voters tend to hold particularly negative affect towards radical-right supporters. This is an important pattern given the recent high levels of support for radical-right parties, for example in the Netherlands, France, and Italy. However, the perspective of radical-right supporters themselves has been largely neglected in existing work. To remedy this, we examine how radical-right supporters feel towards supporters of mainstream parties. We develop a new concept, dislike differentiation, which refers to the extent to which radical-right supporters differentiate in the dislike they harbor towards mainstream parties. We use two new studies that sampled 2,628 radical-right supporters in nine European polities. We find that some supporters reject all mainstream parties, whereas others follow more typical patterns of political competition along ideological lines. Dislike differentiation among radical-right supporters is linked to key socio-political phenomena, including party attachment, ideological extremism, satisfaction with democracy, and political tolerance. By creating a novel typology combining out-party dislike and dislike differentiation, we show that anti-system radical-right supporters, characterized by high out-party dislike and low dislike differentiation, are the least supportive of democracy. By centering our analysis on those voters that receive and radiate the highest levels of negative affect, we advance knowledge on what fosters polarized attitudes and intolerance in Europe's multiparty systems in times when the electoral popularity of the radical-right is surging.

Keywords

affective polarization; comparative design; democratic support; patterns of affect; radical-right supporters

1. Introduction

Affective polarization first became a concern in the United States, where scholars noted the increasing dislike that Republicans and Democrats feel towards each other (Iyengar et al., 2012). In the United States, affective distance runs right through the center of the political system. Many European multiparty systems can instead be divided into three affective camps: a center-left, center-right, and radical-right block (Bantel, 2023; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). This reflects the tripolar nature of many party systems (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). The pole of radical-right supporters, however, clearly stands apart from the rest: Radical-right parties are not only uniquely disliked within multiparty systems, but also exhibit the most dislike vis-à-vis mainstream parties (Gidron et al., 2019; Harteveld et al., 2022; Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). This has been labelled as a case of radical-right exceptionalism (Gidron et al., 2023; Harteveld, 2021).

At the same time, our understanding of these patterns of interpartisan affect concerning the radical-right is still rudimentary (with, as key contributions, Gidron et al., 2019, 2023; Harteveld et al., 2022; Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020). Existing studies have focused on the sentiments of mainstream voters towards radical-right voters, treating the latter as one group. Previous research has however found that radical-right supporters are ideologically diverse (Lancaster, 2020), but no research has so far examined whether the same holds true for affective polarization. Therefore, it remains less clear to what extent radical-right supporters distinguish between different out-parties when exhibiting negative affect, and whether radical-right voters themselves vary in the extent they differentiate between mainstream parties.

Understanding this exceptional position of the radical-right within patterns of interpartisan affect as well as potential differences within the group of radical-right voters in European party systems has taken on even greater importance in recent years, given the great popularity of radical-right-wing parties in many countries. In Italy, the Netherlands, and Hungary, the radical-right is in government, while in Flanders, Germany, and Sweden they have reached unprecedented levels of support. Even countries such as Portugal, which so far had no significant radical-right party, have seen one emerge in recent elections.

While radical-right parties in Europe share some defining traits such as populism, nativism, anti-immigration, anti-Islamic stances, and Euroscepticism (Mudde, 2007), they differ substantially in how they relate to mainstream (right-wing) parties. In some countries, the radical-right constitutes a clearly demarcated, separate ideological block, such as in France and Germany. In other countries, such as Italy, the radical-right perceives itself (and often is perceived) as simply more right-wing than the mainstream right. Moreover, in some countries, the radical-right is excluded from coalition formation, whereas it has been in government in others (Russo & Schulze Brock, 2024). However, we do not know whether these patterns of elite cooperation are mirrored by how radical-right voters think of other partisans.

In this article, we focus on radical-right supporters and their affect towards mainstream party supporters by making use of data from two new studies on radical-right supporters in nine polities in Western, Northern, and Southern Europe (N = 2,628). Our analyses are structured as follows: First, we present cross-country differences in the affective patterns exhibited by radical-right supporters and show that some countries fit a tripolar pattern, while others follow a more proximity-based logic. Second, based on these findings, we present a new concept called dislike differentiation, which refers to the difference between radical-right

supporters' dislike score towards the center-left and the center-right. A model explaining variation in dislike differentiation reveals that radical-right supporters differentiate more in their dislike towards the mainstream party blocks if they show higher levels of party attachment, political engagement, and ideological extremism. Finally, we examine the potential consequences of dislike differentiation on democratic systems by looking at satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and political tolerance. Here, we introduce a novel typology, which classifies radical-right supporters based on their level of out-party dislike and dislike differentiation. We find that those radical-right supporters who strongly dislike out-parties and do not differentiate between mainstream out-parties are the least supportive of democracy.

Our main contribution lies in developing and applying the concept of dislike differentiation, which opens up the black box of radical-right supporters. We show that radical-right supporters are not a homogeneous group. Instead, they differ strongly in how much they dislike other parties in general, but also in the extent to which they differentiate in terms of the dislike they exhibit towards the mainstream parties. We argue that dislike differentiation is a characteristic of radical-right voters that is important in understanding the heterogeneity of radical-right support and the potential consequences of their surging electoral popularity. Anti-system radical-right supporters, characterized by high average out-party dislike and low dislike differentiation, are strongly disenchanted by politics and hold more populist attitudes. While we also show that many supporters of the radical-right are politically nuanced and are still—to some extent—supportive of democracy, some radical-right supporters could pose a threat to democratic societies. Future research should set out to examine ways in which we can both ensure that such attitudes do not become more widespread and encourage those with concerning stances to become more supportive of democratic norms.

2. Patterns of Affect Among Radical-Right Supporters

Extensive research has examined the characteristics of radical-right supporters. One strand of research has studied the socio-demographic aspects of this voter group, focusing for instance on their gender, class background, or education levels (Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018; Rydgren, 2007). Another strand of research has examined the attitudes these voters hold. Radical-right voters stand out in terms of their anti-immigration, nationalist, and Eurosceptic attitudes (Aichholzer et al., 2014; Arzheimer, 2018). They also tend to hold stances that are more skeptical of democracy and political elites than many other voters (Ivarsflaten, 2008). Overall, this research has concluded that radical-right supporters form their own, unique pole within electoral competition in Europe (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018), even if the precise patterns of characteristics and attitudes vary across contexts.

Previous findings about radical-right supporters imply that there are two ways in which these voters relate to mainstream parties, that is, which level of affect they feel towards other partisans. As radical-right supporters hold anti-elite, anti-system attitudes (Aichholzer et al., 2014; Ivarsflaten, 2008), they should feel distant from and dislike all mainstream parties and their supporters more or less equally. Note that this rejection could be strengthened by mainstream party supporters themselves, who often strongly dislike the radical-right (Harteveld et al., 2022). This might subsequently be reciprocated by radical-right supporters. Overall, there are good reasons to expect radical-right supporters to exhibit similar levels of negative affect towards all mainstream party supporters.

However, radical-right supporters may also differentiate their affect towards different groups of mainstream party supporters. Hence, they could exhibit what we call dislike differentiation. Radical-right parties tend to be ideologically more proximate to the mainstream right. As these voters also hold more authoritarian, culturally conservative positions, radical-right party supporters should dislike these parties and their supporters less (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). This is supported by data on voter transitions: radical-right voters get more support from previous mainstream right voters than from mainstream left voters (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021).

Beyond ideological proximity, governing together could also influence patterns of affect. Coalition membership decreases dislike between supporters of those coalition partners (Ekholm et al., 2022; Gidron et al., 2023; Hahm et al., 2024; Horne et al., 2023; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023). When radical-right parties enter government, such as in Austria or Italy, this is almost always together with parties on the center-right. Radical-right parties also tend to support minority governments on the center-right, such as in the Netherlands and Sweden.

Given that both patterns—i.e., universal dislike for mainstream parties and dislike differentiation—are plausible, it is likely that individual radical-right supporters will vary in terms of how much they differentiate between mainstream parties. Some radical-right supporters may therefore dislike all mainstream parties and their supporters, while others will have more nuanced patterns of affect.

So far, no research looks at whether or why radical-right supporters differ in their affect towards mainstream parties. Existing work has tried to explain the role of radical-right support in shaping affective polarization by providing party-dyad descriptive statistics or looking at country or political-system differences. As a result, within-group differences are usually not examined. We remedy this by examining the factors that predict to what extent radical-right supporters differentiate in the dislike they hold towards the two mainstream party blocks. Therefore, we aim to explain why certain radical-right supporters display higher levels of dislike differentiation than others.

We examine three reasons why levels of dislike differentiation may differ among radical-right supporters: party attachment, political engagement, and ideological extremism. First, it could be that radical-right supporters differentiate less when they have stronger political identities (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). The more salient partisan identities are, the less party supporters will differentiate between competitors: opponents will be lumped together to form a uniform out-group. However, such dynamics are actually rare in multiparty systems (Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023). Instead, strong partisans tend to divide competitors into allies and foes, based on ideological overlap and potential governing arrangements. Moreover, it is likely that those with stronger identities may also have more information about the dynamics of party competition and thus a more nuanced understanding of how ideologically distant different out-parties are. Empirically, we examine the impact of in-party affect, prior voting for the radical-right, and negative partisan identities.

Second, those who are more politically engaged should differentiate more between mainstream parties. We expect such voters to understand political differences between mainstream parties better and to develop a more nuanced understanding of whose support is needed to govern (Boonen et al., 2017). Empirically, we assess political engagement using the general salience of politics and a measure of political involvement (Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022).

The third factor, ideological extremism, is based on similar theoretical considerations. We expect that more extreme supporters should also differentiate more between mainstream parties. This is because such voters are likely to have more consistent political beliefs (Zwicker et al., 2020), to be more politically sophisticated, and also to understand ideological differences between parties better (Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2003). Thus, we hypothesize:

> H(predictors): Party attachment, political engagement, and ideological extremism are associated with higher levels of dislike differentiation.

3. Dislike Differentiation, Out-Party Dislike, and Their Consequences

One reason why dislike differentiation is important is because it could have an impact on how radical-right voters relate to the political system more generally. Hence, a low level of dislike differentiation could have negative consequences for a democratic society. Dislike differentiation is likely to be associated with lower levels of key measures of democratic support. As noted in Section 2, a low level of dislike differentiation is likely reflective of anti-elite, anti-system attitudes, where only the radical party is seen as "good." Moreover, those who differentiate little are likely to have low political engagement and sophistication.

However, it is also important to distinguish between types of voters who fail to see differences between mainstream parties. Some radical-right supporters will on average dislike out-partisans and see them as identical, so they will see the mainstream competitors as similar and dislikable. This combination of low differentiation with high levels of dislike is most concerning. Such individuals dislike out-partisans and see them as one homogeneous out-group, and they may feel particularly distant from mainstream political competition and the current political system. This group would be especially troubling if it encompassed a large number of voters.

In contrast, some radical-right supporters will couple low differentiation with indifference: while they see the mainstream out-parties as similar, they do not hold them in particularly low regard. Such individuals may be rather disengaged and uninterested, rather than actively dissatisfied with the democratic system.

To assess whether dislike differentiation and out-party dislike matter for key democratic outcomes, we examine their association with three outcome variables, namely satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and political tolerance. These items convey different levels of democratic support. Satisfaction with democracy taps into a more diffuse evaluation of regime performance, while political trust reflects one's confidence in regime institutions, capturing a more specific form of democratic support (Norris, 2011). Similarly, political tolerance is also considered an essential facet of citizens' democratic norms (Bjånesøy et al., 2023; Gibson, 2006). This results in the following overarching hypothesis:

> H(consequences): Low dislike differentiation and high out-party dislike are associated with less satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and political tolerance.

4. Data and Methods

We triangulate two novel datasets using online access panels collected from February to August 2023 in nine European multiparty systems, which together sampled 2,628 radical-right supporters (see Appendix A.1 in the Supplementary File for the number of radical-right supporters per country). The first survey spans nine polities in Western, Northern, and Southern Europe (N_{RR} = 1,405), consisting initially of nationally representative samples of 1,000 respondents per country. Quotas were implemented for age, gender, education, and region at the NUTS2 or NUTS3 level. The second dataset covers Austria, Flanders, Germany, and Spain (N_{RR} = 1,223) and also contains a survey experiment; for the present study, we only use respondents from the control group to prevent any treatment effect from influencing our results. The data triangulation thus allows us to capture the attitudes of radical-right supporters in diverse societal and political contexts.

Supporters of the radical-right are selected through a question on prospective vote intention, i.e., the party for which the respondent intends to vote if elections were to be held soon. The reason we consider voting intention a more reliable measure of party sympathies than past vote choice is twofold: with increasing time since the last elections, party sympathies may shift, and vote recall questions are quite unreliable when elections did not take place recently (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2016). Indeed, at the time of data collection, many of the sampled countries were either in the middle or towards the end of the election cycle. Nevertheless, we use the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) to replicate our findings using previous voting behavior rather than vote intention to identify party supporters.

Classification as radical-right is based on ParlGov's "right-wing" party family category. Radical-right parties included here are FPÖ (Austria), Vlaams Belang (Flanders), Rassemblement National (France), AfD (Germany), Danmarksdemokraterne, Dansk Folkeparti, and Nye Borgerlige (Denmark), Vox (Spain), Fratelli d'Italia and Lega (Italy), Forum voor Democratie, JA21 and PVV (Netherlands), and Chega (Portugal). Whereas the sample in the first survey is representative at the national level, it may not be representative of radical-right supporters in particular. Similarly, the second survey specifically targeted radical-right supporters, but oversampled hard-to-reach populations in the early stages of data collection, namely younger, male, and less well-educated respondents. However, as polling results change rapidly in many countries, implementing strict quotas for radical-right supporters is not possible. We present the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics as well as their past voting behavior in Appendix A.2 (in the Supplementary File).

The main variable of interest (affective dislike) is measured by asking respondents to what extent they like or dislike specific political parties, the question most commonly used to capture affective polarization (Röllicke, 2023; Vanagt, 2024). We subsequently examine the dislike scores for the main (as in largest) center-left and center-right parties. In our samples, the main party on the center-left and center-right were respectively the (largest) social-democratic party and either the Christian-democratic or (right-)liberal party, depending on which party held more seats in parliament: SPÖ and ÖVP (Austria), Vooruit and N-VA (Flanders), Parti Socialiste and Renaissance (France), SPD and CDU (Germany), Socialdemokratiet and Venstre (Denmark), PSOE and PP (Spain), Partito Democratico and Forza Italia (Italy), PVDA and VVD (Netherlands), and PS and PDD/PSD (Portugal).

We excluded the radical left as we are interested in attitudes towards the mainstream. Moreover, the radical left does not play a significant role in most of the polities we examine here. We focus on the largest mainstream

parties as the affect towards these will capture the most relevant patterns of affect in multiparty systems. While radical-right supporters will probably feel even more distant from green and left-liberal parties than from the main center-left party, we want to assess the gap between the central poles of the ideological divide.

Our new measure (dislike differentiation) takes the absolute difference between the dislike score towards the center-left and the center-right. Thus, a score of zero implies that the center-left and center-right ideological blocks/parties are (dis)liked equally. We find that most radical-right supporters like the center-right more than the center-left, though 16.5% of respondents like the center-left more. This group does not contain a disproportionate number of speeders and does not differ substantially in age, gender, or education. In the Supplementary File, we report robustness checks using two alternative operationalizations: a positive measure which recodes the respondents who like the center-left more than the center-right as zero (Appendix A.3 in the Supplementary File) and a measure which removes respondents who like the center-left more (Appendix A.4 in the Supplementary File). The results are very similar to those of the absolute measure presented in the results section.

We subsequently examine whether satisfaction with democracy, political trust (as the average trust towards parliament, politicians, and political parties), and public political tolerance are associated with dislike differentiation and out-party dislike of radical-right supporters. The question on political tolerance is adapted from Bjånesøy et al. (2023) and asks to what extent respondents would allow a party to rent a local community building to hold a meeting for its members and supporters. This allows us to examine respondents' absolute level of political tolerance towards the mainstream parties as a whole, and the center-right and center-left separately. In addition, as argued by Tilley et al. (2024), researchers should also take into account respondents' base level of political tolerance. To measure individuals' gap in tolerance or the tolerance they exhibit towards their in-party vis-à-vis an out-party, we subtract the level of tolerance towards the center-right or center-left from the radical-right. We find that a very small minority of respondents display more tolerance towards the out-party than the in-party (3.9% for the gap in tolerance towards the center-left and 4.4% for the center-right). As we are interested in whether party supporters display less tolerance towards the out-party than the in-party, we merge these respondents with those that attributed equal tolerance towards both parties. A correlation matrix of the outcome variables is included in Appendix A.5, while descriptive statistics are shown in Appendix A.6 (in the Supplementary File). As could be expected, political tolerance towards the center-right is higher than towards the center-left, but their averages lie above the midpoint in both cases. Conversely, average levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust fall below the midpoint.

We run linear regression models with sample fixed effects and robust standard errors. Continuous variables are standardized. All analyses control for several political variables as well as age, gender, and education level (operationalized as primary/secondary vs. tertiary education). Political predictors include (a) in-party like, (b) the salience of one's political identity, which probes to what extent respondents' political convictions and beliefs determine who they are as a person, (c) political involvement, measured with a scale adapted from Krupnikov and Ryan (2022), and (d) ideological extremism, captured by recoding one's ideological left-right placement to the distance from the midpoint. In analyses using the first survey, we also include previous vote choice and negative partisanship, based on the two-item scale of Mayer and Russo (2024).

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

To understand radical-right supporters' dislike of mainstream parties, we first show the absolute levels of affective dislike radical-right supporters display towards each ideological block. We rescale the intensity of negative affect from their original Likert scales to 0–1, where higher values signify greater dislike. In Figure 1, we see that dislike towards both ideological camps is negatively skewed, but towards the center-left much more so. That said, some respondents also display (relatively) low levels of dislike towards the mainstream blocks.

Second, we examine to what extent dislike differentiation arises across countries by looking at how average affect differs towards each ideological camp. Results are presented in Figure 2. In-party negative affect unsurprisingly stays within the low range of 0.10 to 0.25. Affective dislike towards center-left parties is high but does not vary immensely across countries (0.69 in Flanders to 0.90 in Spain). Conversely, affect towards center-right parties differs substantially, ranging from 0.39 in Italy to 0.81 in France. For reference, in our full datasets which include mainstream party supporters, we find that dislike from mainstream party supporters towards the radical-right ranges from 0.73 (Flanders) to 0.88 (Germany). As such, the radical-right seems to receive similar levels of negative affect from the mainstream as they radiate towards the center-left.

A pattern thus emerges: radical-right supporters clearly differ across countries in the extent to which they differentiate between the center-left and center-right. We can use these country-level patterns to distinguish between two overall patterns of affective dislike. If dislike differentiation is low, then the system can be characterized as tripolar, with radical-right holding an exceptional place by radiating high levels of

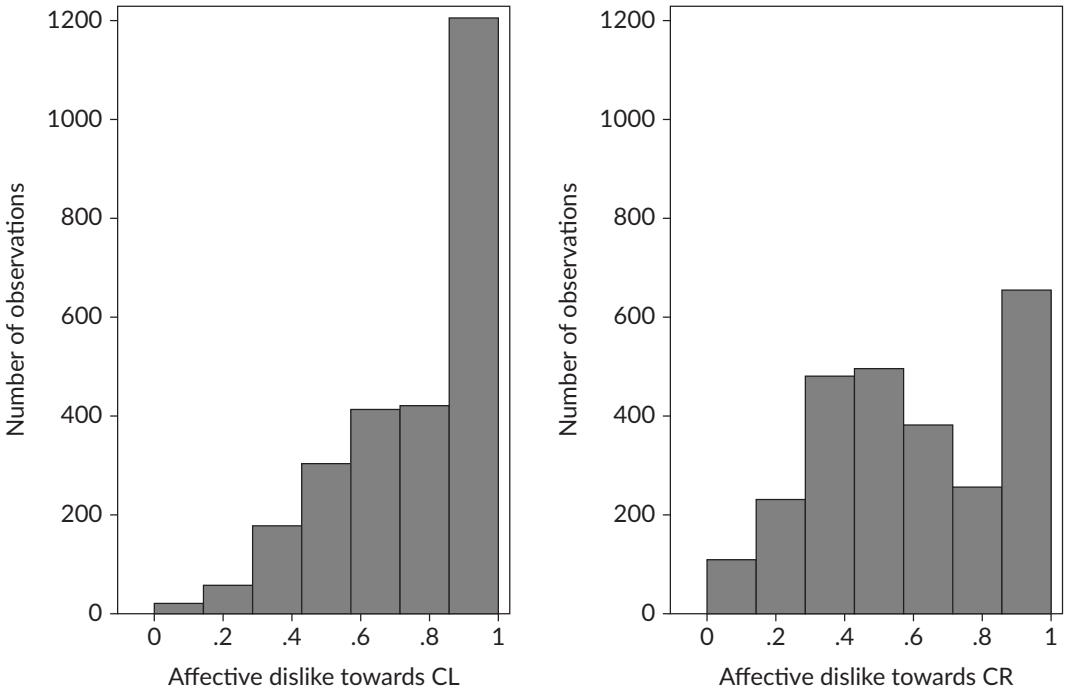

Figure 1. Attitudes of radical-right supporters towards the center-left and center-right. Notes: CL = center-left party; CR = center-right party.

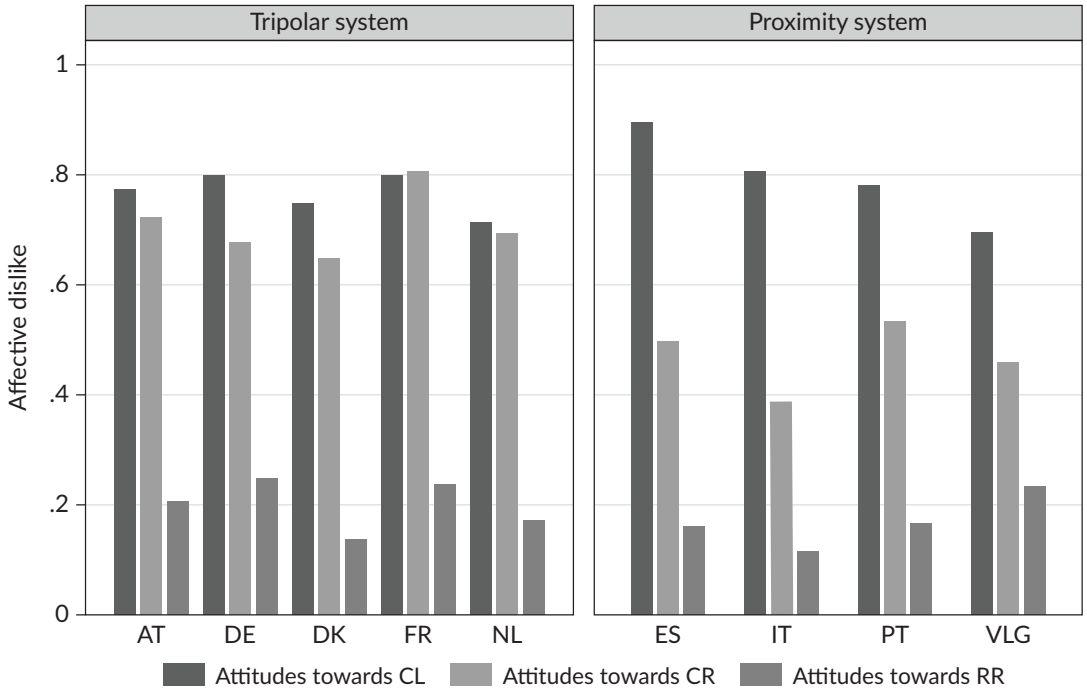

Figure 2. Attitudes of radical-right supporters towards the center-left, center-right, and radical-right ideological blocks. Notes: CL = center-left party; CR = center-right party; RR = radical-right party/parties.

dislike towards both mainstream blocks (Bantel, 2023; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). France and the Netherlands fit this pattern well. In contrast, if dislike differentiation is high, there is a more typical, proximity-based pattern of political competition, where dislike increases with increased ideological distance (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). Spain and Italy, for example, follow such a pattern. Similar patterns are found if we disaggregate the two samples (Appendix A.7 in the Supplementary File) or analyze CSES data (Appendix A.8 in the Supplementary File).

5.2. Explaining Dislike Differentiation

Next, we examine whether radical-right supporters differentiate more: when they show greater sympathy towards their in-party, voted for a radical-right party in the previous election, and exhibit stronger negative partisan identities; when they place a higher salience on politics or are more politically involved; and when they are more ideologically extreme.

Figure 3 shows the results for the predictors available in both samples. More strongly liking one's in-party is associated with significantly and substantially more dislike differentiation ($\beta = 0.14$; $p < 0.001$). Political salience and ideological extremism are also statistically significantly associated with higher dislike differentiation ($\beta = 0.06$–0.08; $p < 0.01$). Political involvement, on the other hand, is not statistically significantly associated with dislike differentiation ($p > 0.05$).

For the predictors of previous vote choice and negative partisanship, we only examine data from the first (larger) survey. Results are displayed in Figure 4. A respondent who voted for the center-right party in the last elections differentiates significantly more between the mainstream parties compared to one who previously

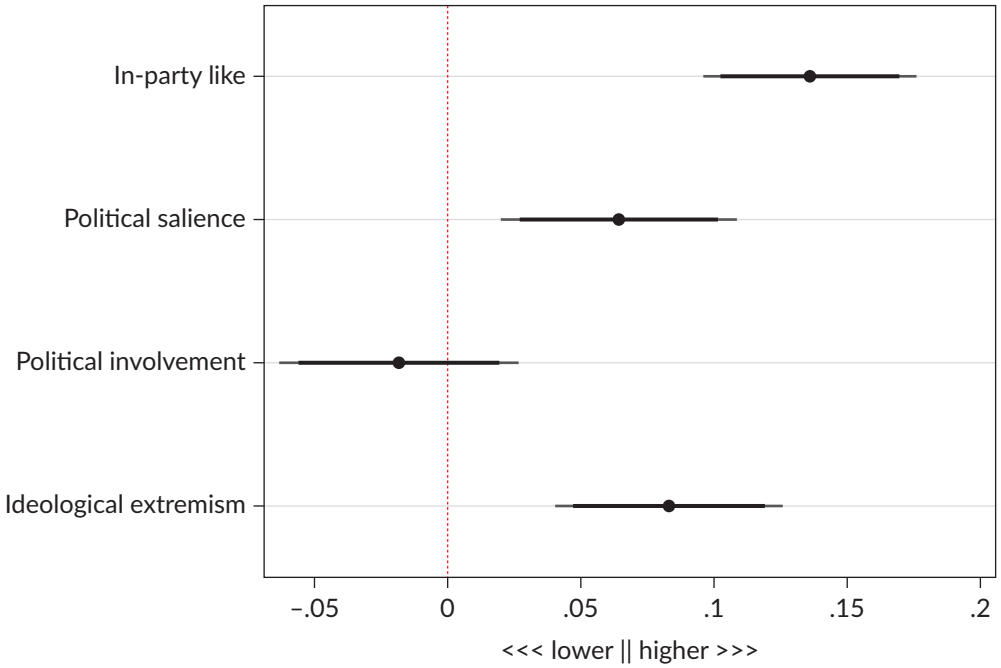

Figure 3. Dislike differentiation: Predictors in the full sample. Notes: Linear regressions include standardized coefficients with sample fixed effects and robust standard errors; full regression results can be found in Table A7 in Appendix A.9 of the Supplementary File.

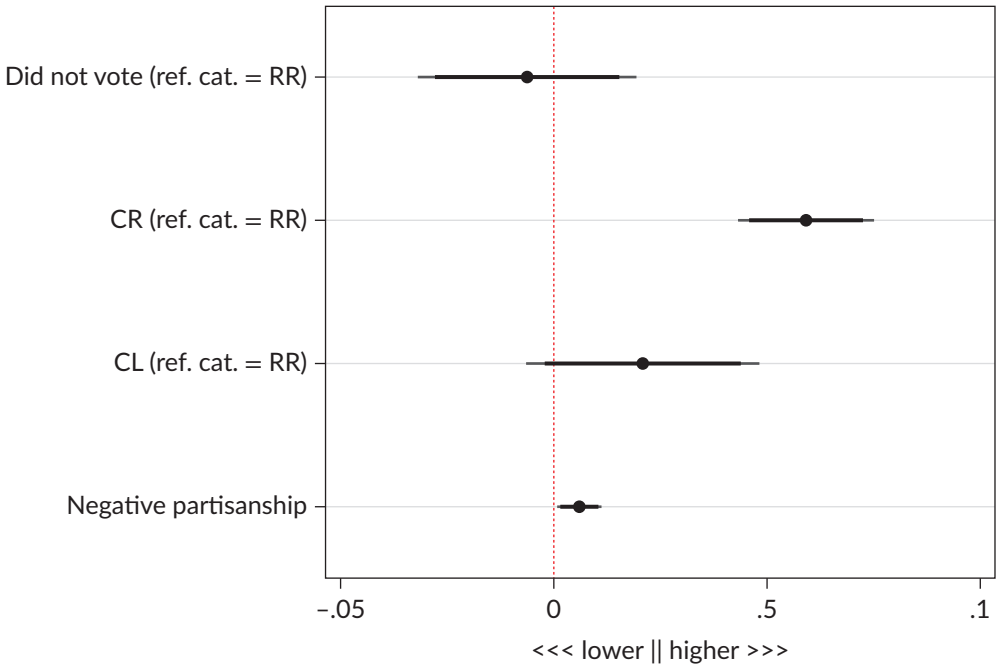

Figure 4. Dislike differentiation: Predictors in the large sample. Notes: Linear regressions include standardized coefficients with sample fixed effects and robust standard errors; full regression results can be found in Table A8 in Appendix A.9 in the Supplementary File; CL = center-left party; CR = center-right party; RR = radical-right party/parties.

voted for the radical-right ($p < 0.001$), with a difference of 0.59 standard deviations (SD). This suggests that more entrenched radical-right supporters will spread their dislike more diffusely. Conversely, respondents who previously abstained from voting or voted for the center-left do not significantly differ from those who voted for the radical-right ($p > 0.05$). In line with in-party-like, higher levels of negative partisanship correspond to higher levels of dislike differentiation ($\beta = 0.06$; $p < 0.05$).

5.3. Consequences of Dislike Differentiation and Out-Party Dislike

We now turn to the consequences of dislike differentiation. Whereas previous research has solely focused on out-party dislike, we posit that to understand affective polarization for radical-right supporters, one also needs to examine to what extent these supporters differentiate in their dislike towards mainstream parties. Hence, we combine our measure of dislike differentiation with out-party dislike to create a 2 × 2 typology for high and low levels of each variable. The correlation between dislike differentiation (absolute score) and out-party dislike towards mainstream parties is not very high at $r = 0.29$ ($p < 0.001$). To provide meaningful names to each of the four categories of our typology, we replicate our predictor analyses for out-party dislike, presented in Appendix A.10 (in the Supplementary File). Table 1 presents an overview of the results of our main predictors on both out-party dislike and dislike differentiation.

High out-party dislike and high dislike differentiation are predicted by high levels of party attachment and ideological extremism. These supporters likely are the most typical group that is associated with the radical-right, which we term the extreme ideologues. High out-party dislike and low dislike differentiation, on the other hand, are predicted by low political engagement and having previously voted for the radical-right. Therefore, we believe this group is best characterized as anti-system, in that they are disconnected from the rest of the political system. Low out-party dislike and high dislike differentiation are interestingly predicted by high levels of political salience and/or involvement and having previously voted for a mainstream party, particularly for the center-right. These radical-right supporters may thus be newer voters of the radical-right and, importantly, highly value politics and are strongly engaged. Whereas previous literature has found that political engagement leads to higher levels of affective polarization for mainstream party supporters, the opposite seems to be true for the radical-right. Hence, we term them the moderate ideologues. Finally, low dislike and low differentiation are associated with low alignment with the radical-right party and low ideological extremism, which is why we term this group the non-committed. This leads us to formulate the typology shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Predictors of out-party dislike and dislike differentiation.

	Average out-party dislike	Dislike differentiation
In-party like	+	+
Negative partisanship	+	+
Voted for radical-right	+	–
Voted for central-right	–	+
Political salience	–	+
Political involvement	–	n.s.
Ideological extremism	+	+

Notes: (+) indicates that the results for the predictor were significantly and positively associated with the outcome variable; (–) indicates a significant, but negative association; whereas (n.s.) indicates a result that is not statistically significant.

Table 2. Radical-right supporters: 2 × 2 typology.

		Dislike differentiation	
		Low	High
Average out-party dislike	Low	non-committed	moderate ideologues
	High	anti-system	extreme ideologues

We regress our typology on three key facets of democratic support: satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and political tolerance. We do not compute linear interaction terms as our models would suffer from severe interpolation, as there are relatively few observations with both low levels of out-party dislike and high levels of dislike differentiation. This leads to areas without or with limited common support, which in turn leads to misspecification and estimates that are "model dependent and fragile" (Hainmueller et al., 2019, p. 181). Instead, we differentiate between high and low levels of dislike differentiation and out-party dislike by cutting out-party dislike at the middle value of 0.5 and dislike differentiation at the value of 0.2. This value of 0.2 corresponds to differentiating between the two mainstream ideological blocks by 2 points on an 11-point Likert scale, which we deem a sensible cut-off point to distinguish between low and high levels of differentiation. We also test alternative cut-off values by cutting at the mean, which for out-party dislike leads to a cut-off value of 0.7, and the same cut-off value of 0.2 for dislike differentiation. Doing so yields similar results (see Appendix A.12 in the Supplementary File).

Figure 5 presents predicted values for our outcome variables for each group in the typology, based on a series of linear regression models. Non-committed radical-right supporters are clearly the most supportive of democracy, whereas moderate ideologues are significantly less satisfied with democracy and exhibit less political trust ($p < 0.05$). Political tolerance towards the mainstream as a whole and the center-left does not differ between moderate ideologues and the non-committed ($p > 0.05$), but moderate ideologues display significantly higher levels of political tolerance towards the center-right ($p < 0.05$), which might be explained by the fact that they are more likely to have voted for the radical-right in the past. The results for the gap in political tolerance also uncover an interesting pattern. The anti-system radical-right supporters have a significantly larger gap in their political tolerance compared to the moderate and extreme ideologues and the non-committed ($p < 0.05$). That is, they are—relatively speaking—less tolerant towards both mainstream parties vis-à-vis their in-party than all other radical-right supporters.

While moderate ideologues and the non-committed are thus relatively similar, the level of democratic support held by anti-system and extreme ideological radical-right supporters deviate substantially from both these groups, with anti-system supporters standing out in particular. Compared to the non-committed, falling into the anti-system group is associated with a 0.89 SD decrease in satisfaction with democracy, 0.95 SD decrease in political trust, and 0.53–0.61 SD decrease in political tolerance ($p < 0.001$), as well as a 0.59–0.76 SD increase in the gap in political tolerance. Extreme ideologues exhibit significantly lower levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust than the non-committed ($p < 0.001$), but their absolute political tolerance towards the center-right is not significantly different ($p > 0.05$). Absolute political tolerance towards the center-left aside, the anti-system group differs significantly from the extreme ideologues across all our outcome variables ($p < 0.05$): they are less satisfied with democracy and show lower levels of political trust and political tolerance, as well as increased levels of political intolerance towards both mainstream parties vis-à-vis their in-party. Radical-right supporters in the anti-system category, therefore, seem to hold attitudes that are consistently detrimental to democracy and are geared

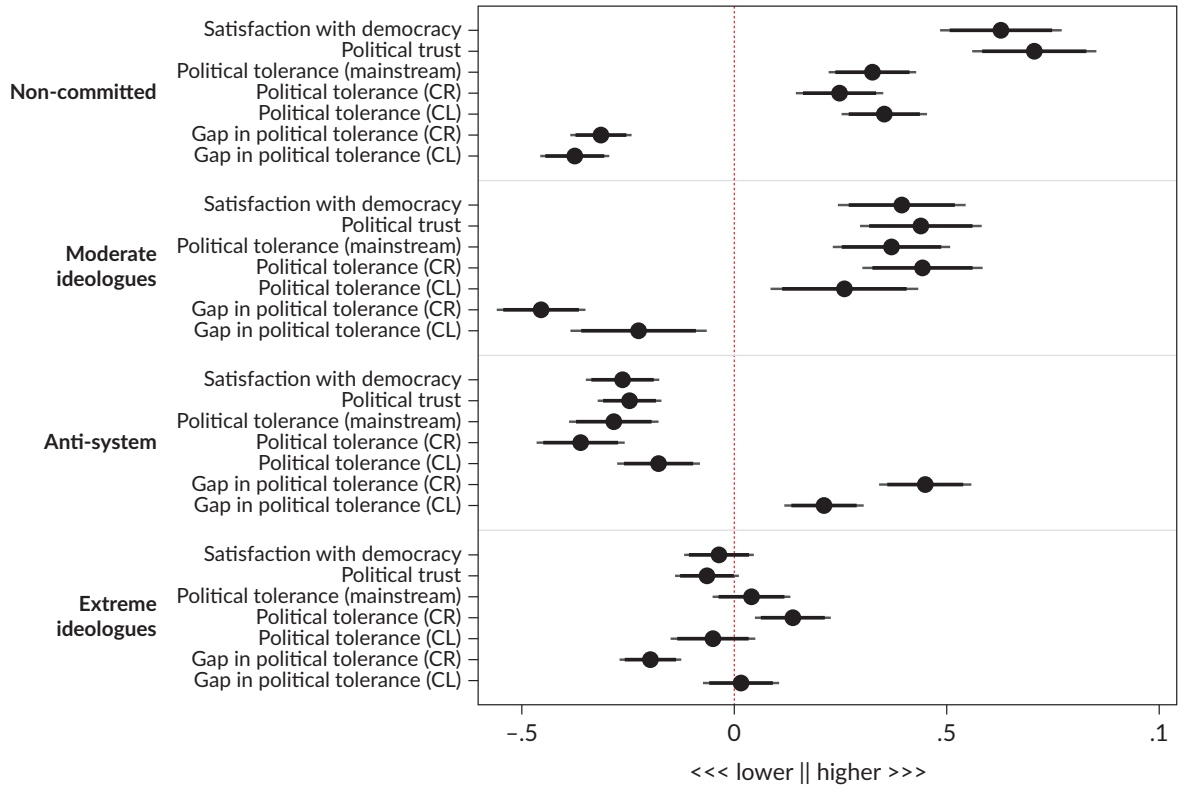

Figure 5. Consequences: 2 × 2 typology. Notes: Cut-off value for out-party dislike: > 0.50; cut-off value for dislike differentiation: > 0.2; linear regressions include standardized coefficients with sample fixed effects and robust standard errors; full regression results can be found in Tables A11, A12, A13, and A14 in Appendix A.11 in the Supplementary File; CL = center-left party; CR = center-right party; RR = radical-right party/parties.

towards the entire electorate, not just the ideologically distant. We also run models for both measures separately and report them in Appendix A.13 (in the Supplementary File), which reveals that high out-party dislike and low dislike differentiation are positively associated with these negative outcomes for democracy, even when they are included as separate measures.

Next, we examine the relationship between our novel 2x2 typology and populist attitudes. To measure populist attitudes, we use the item battery on attitudes towards elites available in Module 5 of the CSES (N_{RR} = 2,780), commonly employed in the literature on populism. However, we follow the recommendation by Castanho Silva et al. (2020) and drop the item on the desirability of having a strong leader in government. This leaves us with six items, which load well onto one latent construct (α = 0.73). We transform these items into an additive index. As shown in Table 3, the non-committed and moderate ideologues hold the least populist attitudes.

Table 3. Populist attitudes: 2 × 2 typology.

	Mean	95%-CI
Non-committed	3.32	3.23–3.40
Moderate ideologues	3.37	3.30–3.43
Extreme ideologues	3.65	3.61–3.69
Anti-system	3.70	3.64–3.75

Note: Populist attitudes are measured using a six-item additive index, which ranges from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating a *high* level of populism.

Extreme ideologues are in comparison characterized by significantly stronger populist attitudes, as are the anti-system radical-right supporters ($p < 0.05$). The latter are even more populist than the former, although the difference is not statistically significant. Thus, our 2 × 2 typology also seems—at least in part—to tap into the intensity of populist attitudes held by these different groups of radical-right supporters.

To add greater external validity to our study, we replicate all our analyses for the predictors of dislike differentiation and consequences of our 2x2 typology using Modules 1–5 of the CSES (N_{RR} = 7,479). The results are consistent with our previous findings. More details are provided in Appendix A.14 in the Supplementary File.

5.4. Country Differences

When we break down our typology per country, we uncover several interesting patterns. Table 4 contains the proportion of each of the typology's categories per country. It is important to remember that these frequencies are highly dependent on the chosen cut-off value and should therefore only be interpreted in relation to the other countries presented here.

Quite intuitively, almost all countries in which a higher share of radical-right supporters is anti-system are tripolar systems. In Austria, Germany, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands, the plurality of radical-right supporters are anti-system, while in Flanders, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, the plurality are extreme ideologues. Interestingly, except in Flanders, the second most numerous group in each country is the other group which radiates high levels of average out-party dislike. This is consistent with previous findings that the radical-right radiates the most dislike (Harteveld et al., 2022), independently of whether they differentiate or not.

The perceived ideological similarity of the mainstream parties may contribute to the relative prevalence of these categories in each country, which we can assess using parties' perceived ideology as measured in our smaller dataset. Indeed, we find that the ideological gap between the two mainstream parties as perceived by radical-right supporters is on average much larger in proximity systems (0.36 in Flanders and 0.50 in Spain

Table 4. Proportions per country: 2 × 2 typology.

	Typology: Radical-right supporters			
Country	non-committed	moderate ideologues	anti-system	extreme ideologues
AT	11	7	52	31
DE	14	7	54	25
DK	16	7	41	36
ES	7	10	23	60
FR	6	5	65	24
IT	16	17	12	54
NL	13	14	47	26
PT	16	12	31	40
VLG	28	16	21	34
Total	14	10	39	37

Notes: Percentages reflect the proportion of each category within each country; cut-off value for out-party dislike: > 0.50; cut-off value for dislike differentiation: > 0.2.

on a 0–1 scale) than in tripolar systems (0.17 in Germany and 0.26 for Austria). At the individual level, dislike differentiation is also strongly correlated with perceived ideological distance between mainstream parties ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$). Citizens who differentiate more in terms of their dislike towards mainstream parties also differentiate more in terms of ideology, more closely aligning them with a proximity system. However, as the correlation is still far from perfect, other (contextual) factors play an important role as well.

We find that Flanders is the only proximity system that enforces a strict cordon sanitaire and is the only case in which the second largest portion of radical-right voters is non-committed. This could reflect the interplay between the party offer and voter perceptions. In Flanders, the radical-right party Vlaams Belang and the main right-wing party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) are the result of the split of Volksunie (Beyens et al., 2017). Hence, they are characterized by a certain permeability and shared goals (e.g., regarding immigration policies; Van Haute et al., 2018). It is reasonable to assume that voters switch from one party to another according to factors such as N-VA's government performance. This would explain not only the fact that Flanders falls into the proximity systems despite being a country enforcing a cordon sanitaire but also the particularly high share of non-committed radical-right supporters.

France, on the other hand, nicely fits the expectation of a country enforcing political exclusion on the radical-right (N. Mayer, 2018). It features the highest proportion of antisystem radical-right voters and the lowest share for the two categories of low out-party dislike (non-committed and moderate ideologues). Germany, which also systematically excludes the radical-right, follows a slightly milder, but quite similar pattern, with a higher share of non-committed voters. Austria is the country with the third-highest proportion of anti-system voters, which can be understood in the context of the FPÖ's successful populist communication strategy. The FPÖ strongly focuses on portraying the other parties as a unified bloc, which could have reasonably led to suppressing dislike differentiation among their supporters.

Denmark and the Netherlands are also typically tripolar despite not subjecting their radical-right parties to formal political exclusion. However, in both countries, mainstream-right parties dealt with the radical-right parties quite inconsistently, enforcing de facto political exclusion (see, e.g., Russo & Schulze Brock, 2024) that influenced the way radical-right voters perceive the mainstream right.

The two countries with the highest proportion of extreme ideologues are Spain and Italy. These countries are characterized by prominent divisions between clearly identifiable right and left ideological blocks, which could help radical-right voters differentiate between the mainstream parties. What sets Italy aside is its particularly low share of anti-system radical-right voters and the high share of moderate ideologues. This pattern could be reasonably ascribed to the highly mainstream nature of the radical-right in Italy (Custodi, 2023). Finally, Portugal is characterized by the highest share of antisystem radical-right supporters among the proximity system countries. As the radical-right party Chega is still relatively new (Carvalho, 2023), however, attitudes between voters and among the radical-right could still shift considerably in the future.

6. Conclusion

In the past few years, the scholarly interest generated by affective polarization in Europe has led to significant insights into the way partisan affect is articulated across different countries. One feature that characterizes affective polarization in multiparty systems is the important role that the radical-right plays in driving negative

affect (Harteveld et al., 2022). However, considering all radical-right supporters as a homogeneous block might hamper our understanding of affective polarization. In this article, we aimed to fill this gap by investigating the different shapes that affective polarization can take among radical-right supporters.

Our empirical results concerning affective polarization among radical-right supporters make two significant contributions that help tackle the challenges to liberal democracies discussed in the editorial of this thematic issue (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2024). First, many radical-right supporters do not uniformly dislike mainstream parties, instead, they differentiate between them. We call this phenomenon dislike differentiation. We find that radical-right supporters who are more politically engaged actually exhibit less out-party dislike and more dislike differentiation.

Second, this more nuanced way to examine partisan affect can be used to better understand the implications of affective polarization for contemporary democracies. By crossing dislike differentiation with out-party dislike, we propose a typology of radical-right supporters: non-committed; anti-system; and moderate and extreme ideologues. While non-committed and moderate ideologues seem to pose little threat to democracy, the other two types to a larger extent challenge at least two principles fundamental to democracy: a certain level of contentment with the system and the willingness to tolerate other political actors. The anti-system radical-right supporters, in particular, constitute a cause for concern, as they seem the most disillusioned with the political system. On top of showing all the characteristics of voters who differentiate less, they are substantially less satisfied with democracy and trustful of political institutions, display less political tolerance towards mainstream parties, and hold more populist attitudes than other radical-right supporters.

The internal composition of the radical-right supporters also varies considerably across country contexts. By examining dislike differentiation, we can assess whether a political system is tripolar (with three distinct ideological blocs and the radical-right holding a unique place) or proximity-based (with higher levels of dislike as ideological distance increases). In some countries, radical-right supporters dislike the mainstream ideological blocks equally, whereas in others they radiate less negative affect towards the center-right. Extreme ideologues constitute more than half of the radical-right supporters in Spain and Italy—two countries marked by the presence of two sharp ideological blocs, clearly inviting high levels of differentiation between left and right. Anti-system voters, on the other hand, are more prevalent in Austria, Germany, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands—five countries with strong and long-established radical-right parties, despite the differences between them in terms of cooperation with the mainstream right parties.

These cross-country differences raise the question of what generates a sizeable presence of non-differentiating radical-right supporters. The structure of political competition and the potential for normalization of radical actors may play a role here, namely through the prevailing democratic norms concerning coalition co-membership versus strict exclusion (Harteveld et al., 2022; Horne et al., 2023). Moreover, radical-right electoral success may potentially either dampen or deepen affective dislike between blocks (Bantel, 2023; Harteveld et al., 2022). Future research should explore which contextual factors create conditions under which affective polarization among radical-right supporters endangers democracy.

This study comes with a number of limitations. First, the three datasets which this study drew from were all cross-sectional. As such, this study uncovers certain patterns and associations that exist in the data. Future experimental research could look into examining these relationships causally and over time.

Second, future research could examine alternative senders and receivers of dislike. In terms of the receiver, we only focused on the main party within each ideological block. Future research could further expand the analysis to include other parties within each ideological block, such as the liberal and green parties. In terms of the sender, voters from other parties likely also differentiate in their out-group dislike. Our framework could also be applied to understand patterns of dislike differentiation among supporters of other parties.

Third, the forms of democratic support in this study did not include more diffuse measures of democratic support such as support for democratic ideals including freedom of expression and equality of participation. Future research could, therefore, explore additional aspects of democratic norms and attitudes and to what extent they are shaped by dislike differentiation.

Finally, surveys may fail to reach more moderate or discreet radical-right supporters, particularly in contexts where voting for the radical-right is viewed as socially undesirable. However, according to this logic, one would expect to find fewer non-committed and moderate ideologues in Germany and Flanders, two countries that enforce a strict cordon sanitaire, but this is not the case. Similarly, in Austria, France, and Spain, where either a large share of the electorate votes for the radical-right or the radical-right has been in local governments (or both), we should then expect to find many moderate radical-right supporters, but we do not. Thus, there are reasons to believe that this concern is at least partially unfounded here, which leaves us confident that our results also hold for the entire radical-right electorate.

In sum, we contribute to the scholarly debate on which kinds of radical-right supporters and which forms of affective polarization constitute a potential threat to contemporary democracies. Our findings show that radical-right supporters are far from being a monolithic homogeneous group. When out-party dislike is high, differentiating between more centrist opponents can partially mitigate the negative consequences brought forth by intense dislike. Conversely, when high out-party dislike is coupled with low dislike differentiation, we find that these radical-right supporters hold highly populist and anti-elitist attitudes, more so than other radical-right supporters. It is now of paramount importance to understand how these citizens can be involved in politics once again and how their democratic attitudes can be strengthened, especially in times when the electoral popularity of the radical-right is surging.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Replication files are available at: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YK4N9

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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Left Behind Economically or Politically? Economic Grievances, Representation, and Populist Attitudes

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Abstract

Research on the relationship between discontent and populist attitudes abounds. However, whether this discontent arises in response to economic grievances or a perceived lack of representation remains understudied. While previous research has considered both as independent factors, we assume their interaction drives populist attitudes. We argue that deprivation and sentiments of being left behind exacerbate the feeling that one's policy positions are not recognized and represented in politics. To test this claim empirically, we draw on recent data from the German Longitudinal Election Study of 2021. We combine egocentric and sociotropic indicators of being left behind and interact these with the perceived distance of one's own policy positions to the positions of the opposition and government parties represented in parliament. We find that both perceptions of personal and societal deprivation, as well as a greater perceived distance from the government, are associated with populist attitudes. Furthermore, we find that the effect of distance from the government is contingent on someone's economic position, albeit the direction of the interaction effect contradicts our initial expectations: The effect of perceived ideological distance from the government on populist attitudes is primarily reinforced among those who are better off rather than for those who struggle economically. This implies that populist attitudes ought to be addressed depending on the source of discontent rather than treating populism as a general expression of indiscriminate protest. Our analysis contributes to understanding the various origins of populist attitudes and to developing possible ways of mitigation.

Keywords

democracy; deprivation; grievances; populist attitudes; representation

1. Introduction

The rise of populist parties in Europe challenges traditional party competition and threatens liberal democracy (Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), which has spurred research into the causes of this development. Notably, research on populism has shifted its focus from the supply side to the demand side of politics as scholars seek to explain why people support populist parties and hold populist attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Schulz et al., 2018). In this vein, populist attitudes are conceived in ideational terms as a set of beliefs—i.e., anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a Manichean view on politics as a moral struggle between the good people and the corrupt elite (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde, 2004). Populist attitudes have been shown to be fairly widespread in the general population yet often remain dormant unless activated through political mobilization (Hawkins et al., 2020). Even though populist attitudes lack the stability of a trait that would consistently influence other concepts, there is a small core of people for whom "populism is a (permanent) way to view the world" (Schimpf et al., 2023, p. 11).

Given the challenge that populism poses to liberal democracy, recent research has increasingly focused on the causes of populist views among citizens. While extensive research acknowledges the significance of economic and political marginalization for adopting populist beliefs, the exact mechanisms through which these experiences translate into populist attitudes remain a point of contention. However, since populist politicians and parties use their rhetoric to mobilize disenchanted citizens in particular, it is important to examine the specific causes and related mechanisms of populist attitudes.

The central objective of this article is to examine the role of economic and political grievances in forming populist attitudes. Recent research suggests that, in addition to individuals' socio-economic status and experiences of deprivation, economic views regarding society (Giebler et al., 2021) and a lack of societal recognition of one's economic needs are important drivers of populist attitudes (Steiner et al., 2023). Another line of research suggests that (the perception of) a lack of political representation leads citizens to see themselves as politically disregarded and, therefore, to adopt populist attitudes (Castanho Silva & Wratil, 2023; Huber et al., 2023). While we take into account the individual role of these factors, we propose a novel argument in this article by combining these two strands of research and seek to reconcile models of economic grievance with political perspectives on populist attitudes. Specifically, we posit that grievances and a sense of being politically overlooked interplay to increase populist attitudes: The experience of economic deprivation and being left behind should reinforce the feeling that one's own policy positions are not considered and represented in politics.

To test our hypotheses, we employ data from the German Longitudinal Election Study ahead of the 2021 German national election. This dataset is particularly appropriate due to Germany's unique political landscape, which has seen both left-wing and right-wing populist parties gain significant traction, activating populist attitudes among citizens (Hawkins et al., 2020). Our findings indicate a significant but complex interaction between economic grievances and political discontent about representation regarding populist attitudes. In line with current research, we find that, in addition to egocentric motivations linked to experiences of economic deprivation, sociotropic attitudes about the state of society also drive populist attitudes. Furthermore, we find that individuals who perceive themselves as ideologically more distant from the government tend to hold stronger populist attitudes and that this effect is independent of the specific policy dimension. What is crucial for our argument, however, is that the perception of societal grievances

does not amplify this effect; rather, it depends on individuals' economic situation. Yet contrary to our expectations, the effect of ideological distance from the government on populist attitudes is not reinforced by lower but by higher income. These insights suggest that, while fostering inclusivity and political representation is vital, these strategies alone may not fully mitigate the rise of populism. The findings thus shed new light on the psychological mechanisms of the relationship between economic grievances, representation, and populist attitudes.

2. Theoretical Discussion

The predominant explanatory approaches for populist attitudes center around socio-cultural and economic grievances in conjunction with emotional pre-dispositions, and citizens' views regarding political representation itself. In the following, we will briefly discuss these individual perspectives before turning to the main theoretical argument about the interaction of economic and political grievances, through which we seek to reconcile two of the most prominent explanations.

2.1. Economic and Cultural Grievances

Traditional mass-society explanations of populism tend to focus on structural societal change as a trigger of social disintegration, which increases individuals' susceptibility to populism, and especially to populist charismatic leaders (Laclau, 2005). However, while traditional approaches stress the role of populism as a provider of a unifying identity and understand populism as an essential element of democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), explanations embedded in modernization theory suggest that values and value change are at the heart of the appeal that populism holds. In this vein, scholars have argued that authoritarian views can explain the support for right-wing populism among the working class (Betz, 1994). Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that a cultural backlash against progressive values plays a significant role in fostering populist sentiments and that this backlash is strongest among those who feel their traditional values and national identity to be undermined.

While the distinction between economic and cultural grievances is a key feature of the literature on the resurgence of right-wing populism (Mudde, 2007), the "losers of globalization" thesis highlights the overlap between the two theories. Perceived economic grievances often stem from inequality, economic injustice, and the impacts of globalization, which can fuel a sense of disenfranchisement and "resentment" among individuals (Betz, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2012). Furthermore, economic transformations lead to economic anxieties that are exacerbated by the perception of cultural threats related to multiculturalism and immigration (Oesch, 2008). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) hence argue that, while economic factors create a fertile ground for populism to gain traction, the cultural framing of economic anxieties often provides a potent narrative for mobilization.

However, while strongly associated with nativist views and voting for right-wing populist parties (Rydgren, 2007), the causal link between economic grievances and populist attitudes remains contested (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Empirical evidence regarding the effect of personal economic deprivation on populist attitudes and populist vote choice has largely been mixed, as the unemployed and left-behind tend to be more likely to abstain rather than being staunch supporters of populist actors (Norris, 2005; however, see Arzheimer, 2009). Although economic deprivation and discontent—not just with politics but also with

social life in general—are often closely linked to populist attitudes (Spruyt et al., 2016), surprisingly little is known about the mechanisms linking economic fears to populism.

Recent research has, however, suggested that it is essential to distinguish and disentangle the effects of egocentric and sociotropic attitudes with regard to deprivation. In addition to personal economic hardship, perceptions regarding the state of the economy and the general state of society, i.e., sociotropic attitudes, also appear to play an important role (Giebler et al., 2021; Rico & Anduiza, 2019). In other words, populist sentiments arise not only from personal grievances but also in response to broader societal issues. However, recent findings also suggest that cognitive capacities and emotional pre-dispositions amplify the effect of economic attitudes on both populist vote choice and populist attitudes (Magni, 2017; Rico et al., 2017, 2020; Verner et al., 2023).

2.2. Political Representation

A second strand of literature regards populism through a rational choice lens, borrowing from economic theories of democracy and spatial voting (Downs, 1957). Scholars who take this route contend that populist attitudes arise in response to (perceived) failures of representation; that is, the inability or unwillingness of political elites to serve and fulfill their constituents' interests. This approach regards citizens' discontent with representation and disenchantment with representative democracy (Canovan, 1999) as a critical element fueling the emergence of populist actors. Compared to the cultural and economic grievance models, which often revolve around the individual, the strength of the political approach lies in highlighting the interaction between demand-side and supply-side causes of populism. In this light, the rise of populism reflects a growing tension in democracies, where the challenges of effective governance clash with increasing demands for responsiveness to and empowerment of "the people" (Bardi et al., 2017; Mair, 2014, pp. 581–596).

While political conditions play a key role in this reading of populism, recent research has also highlighted that how resilient or receptive citizens are to populist mobilization is a function of their specific notions of democracy and expectations of democratic representation in the first place (Wegscheider et al., 2023). Contextual elements such as high corruption levels create an environment conducive to the emergence of populist attitudes (Busby et al., 2018), and Castanho Silva and Wratil (2023) demonstrate that failures in party representation can elicit populist attitudes in citizens who would otherwise not exhibit such tendencies. Similarly, Huber et al. (2023) find that general policy discontent drives populist attitudes more so than any specific policy preferences on their own. In line with these findings, dissatisfaction with politics and democracy more generally is interpreted as a consequence of a (perceived) lack of political representation (see also Spruyt et al., 2016). The extent to which individuals adopt and act on populist attitudes is thus deeply intertwined with the political landscape, including the performance of governing parties and the presence of populist actors who mobilize around these attitudes (Hameleers et al., 2021; Hawkins et al., 2020). However, individuals' own expectations of democratic rule (Fölsch et al., 2024; Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023) alongside their personal predispositions critically moderate the impact of such contextual factors on populist attitudes.

2.3. Hypotheses

Taken together, it is particularly disaffection with the political system that consistently matches the profile of "the populist citizen." In contrast, the socio-demographic characteristics of citizens who hold populist attitudes are relatively heterogeneous across regions and across left-wing and right-wing manifestations of populism (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020; see also Schimpf et al., 2023 on the (in)stability of populist attitudes on the individual level). However, while unemployment and objective indicators of economic deprivation appear to be related to the degree to which people adopt populist views, their views regarding society's general and economic state also exhibit a specific relationship with populist attitudes. This indicates that, besides objective measures of economic circumstances, subjective perceptions of economic deprivation at the societal level significantly drive populist sentiments. We, therefore, expect both individuals' income and discontent with the state of society to impact populist attitudes:

H1: Experiences of personal economic deprivation increase populist attitudes (*egocentric discontent*).

H2: Discontent with the economic state of society increases populist attitudes (*sociotropic discontent*).

Sentiments of social exclusion and of "feeling left behind" (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020) are prominent explanatory factors in the literature on populist attitudes. In particular, status-based identity threats play a major role in forming populist attitudes. Most importantly, these explanations view economic and social factors as interacting rather than competing explanations (Manunta et al., 2022). While research has traditionally drawn on income satisfaction, social status, and labor market skills to operationalize deprivation, more recent survey-based studies trace the roots of feelings of deprivation and argue that it is a "lack of societal [and political] recognition" (Steiner et al., 2023, p. 114) more so than any substantive measure of deprivation that explains why people adopt populist attitudes. According to Steiner et al. (2023), populist attitudes originate not only from income dissatisfaction and social conservatism but also from experiencing a lack of recognition related to these issues. Although their study acknowledges the direct effects of factors of deprivation, it also underscores the importance of the moderating role of experiences of lack of societal recognition in forming populist attitudes. This insight resonates with the literature on populist citizens, highlighting the heterogeneity in characteristics and substantive policy preferences of populist voters, suggesting that political alienation and sentiments of not being heard are key unifying elements (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020).

Building on this research, we thus argue that a lack of *political* recognition and dissatisfaction with political representation is a key factor that can reconcile the grievance model with political approaches to populism. While recent research has shown that personal ideological closeness to the government affects people's perceived policy responsiveness (Hillen et al., 2024) and that elite–citizen policy congruency matters for individuals' satisfaction with democracy (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016), the specific mechanism that links this dimension to populist attitudes remains under-examined. We argue that populist attitudes should be understood as a consequence of the perception that one's own policy positions are not adequately represented by the government or in parliament. As a baseline, we thus posit that ideological distance from the government, as a measure of lack of political recognition, effectively increases populist attitudes:

H3: Greater ideological distance from the government increases populist attitudes (*ideological distance*).

More specifically, we contend that experiences of personal and societal deprivation exacerbate this baseline effect of ideological distance on populist attitudes. This is because those who suffer from economic deprivation tend to adhere more strongly to populist attitudes and, hence, respond more sensitively to populist mobilization (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Rico & Anduiza, 2019). Individuals will thus feel greater dissatisfaction with seemingly non-responsive government policies when they simultaneously struggle to make ends meet. We assume this interaction effect holds for personal and societal economic conditions:

> H4: Experiences of personal economic deprivation moderate the effect of ideological distance from the government on populist attitudes—The effect of distance on populist attitudes is stronger among those who are economically left behind (*egocentric moderation*).

> H5: Discontent with the economic state of society moderates the effect of ideological distance from the government on populist attitudes—The effect of distance on populist attitudes is stronger among those who perceive societal injustice (*sociotropic moderation*).

3. Research Design

3.1. Data and Case Selection

To test our hypotheses, we draw on the German Longitudinal Election Study cross-section ahead of the 2021 German national election (Roßteutscher et al., 2023), with a sample size of around $N = 4{,}000$. The case of Germany is particularly well-suited for our endeavor. Its party system has historically been considered a "laggard" by international standards, given the long-running weakness of populist actors (Fawzi et al., 2017). While Die Linke, often labeled as a left-wing populist party, secured its position in the national parliament following reunification in 1990, the national ascent of right-wing populism and rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) did not occur until 2013 (Berbuir et al., 2015). Since then, the AfD underwent a considerable transition (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Betz & Habersack, 2019) and is today a modern populist radical right party. The German case thus promises valuable insights into the phenomenon of populist attitudes among voters, as left-wing and, particularly so, right-wing populism has gained traction in the German party landscape.

3.2. Measurement of Populist Attitudes

Utilizing the populism scale of Akkerman et al. (2014), we conduct a confirmatory factor analysis to arrive at a combined measure of populist attitudes. The confirmatory factor analysis results in Table A.1 in the Supplementary File indicate high internal coherence, in line with Akkerman et al. (2014). Likewise, in agreement with previous empirical studies, we find populist attitudes to be fairly "widespread attitudes among ordinary citizens" (Hawkins et al., 2018, p. iii) and approximately normally distributed with a mean of 0.57 on the continuous 0 to 1 scale and a slightly higher tail towards the right end—see Figure A.1 in the Supplementary File for the distribution of populist attitudes within our sample.

3.3. Measurement of Independent Variables

As one of the main independent variables, we draw on respondents' net household income across 13 categories to assess their economic situation ("Please indicate what the monthly net income of your household is? This refers to the amount that you have left after taxes and social security"; d63), which we rescale to range between 0 and 1 to facilitate interpretation. In addition, we draw on respondents' assessment of social justice with respect to society at large ("Thinking about the state of German society, how fair or unfair is it overall?"; q100), which we consider a suitable proxy for sociotropic concerns as a result of perceived societal deprivation. We use this indicator to tap into sociotropic attitudes and to gauge the interaction between societal views and ideological distance from the government.

Another key element of our models relates to the perceived ideological distance between the government parties on one hand and oneself on the other. To construct this variable, we utilize respondents' assessment of parties' left–right placement (q35b-f) and their own self-placement along the same 11-point left–right scale (q37). For this measure, we focus on the absolute spatial difference between the respondent and their closest party in the government coalition (i.e., minimum distance). For instance, if a respondent self-identifies as a 5 and assigns the scores of 3 (SPD), 6 (CDU), and 8 (CSU) to the grand coalition in office at the time of data collection, the absolute distance would be calculated as $|5 - 6| = 1$. As we show in Figure A.2 in the Supplementary File, there is a low to moderate correlation between our main independent and dependent variables.

Lastly, we draw on two positional issues to tap into respondents' socio-economic ("And what position do you take on taxes and social services?"; q40) and socio-cultural left–right positions ("And what position do you take on immigration for foreigners?"; q43). Responses were measured along an 11-point scale in both cases and ranged from "Lower taxes and fewer social services" to "More social services and higher taxes" and "Facilitate immigration for foreigners" to "Restrict immigration of foreigners," respectively. These economic and cultural policy scales serve as an alternative measure of ideological distance. As demonstrated in Table 1, results remain stable irrespective of which dimension is used (i.e., general left–right, economic, or cultural).

We additionally control for age, gender, education (high or low education as indicated by somebody's attainment of a university entrance qualification), regional differences (East or West Germany), and political interest. Table A.2 in the Supplementary File shows descriptive statistics of all variables.

4. Results

Turning to the empirical test of our hypotheses, we run a series of regression models (models 1–3) to gauge the absolute effects of personal deprivation, societal deprivation, and ideological distance from the government, which are summarized in Table 1. In line with our expectations, we find that higher household income leads to lower populist attitudes and that egocentric deprivation thus plays an important role (H1). Furthermore, we find that the perception of social injustice as a proxy for social deprivation has a strong positive influence on populist attitudes. Thus, sociotropic deprivation is also important for explaining populist attitudes (H2). Regarding the role of political dissatisfaction resulting from a perceived ideological distance, we find that greater distance from the government increases populist attitudes, while this is not the case for distance from the opposition (H3).

Table 1. The absolute and interaction effects of personal/societal deprivation and distance from government.

	Dependent variable: Populist attitudes				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Household net income	−0.07*** (0.01)	−0.08*** (0.01)	−0.07*** (0.01)	−0.11*** (0.02)	
Injustice society	0.19*** (0.02)	0.17*** (0.02)	0.18*** (0.02)		0.22*** (0.02)
LR distance government	0.06** (0.02)			−0.03 (0.06)	0.16** (0.06)
LR distance opposition	0.04 (0.03)			0.04 (0.03)	0.05* (0.03)
Econ. distance government		0.08*** (0.02)			
Econ. distance opposition		−0.01 (0.02)			
Cult. distance government			0.10*** (0.01)		
Cult. distance opposition			−0.04* (0.02)		
Age	0.0003 (0.0002)	0.0003 (0.0002)	0.0003 (0.0002)	0.0001 (0.0002)	0.0003* (0.0002)
Female	−0.02** (0.01)	−0.02** (0.01)	−0.02** (0.01)	−0.01* (0.01)	−0.02*** (0.01)
Education	−0.21*** (0.02)	−0.22*** (0.02)	−0.20*** (0.02)	−0.23*** (0.02)	−0.18*** (0.02)
East Germany	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Political interest	−0.08*** (0.01)	−0.08*** (0.01)	−0.07*** (0.01)	−0.07*** (0.01)	−0.09*** (0.01)
Satisfaction with democracy	−0.31*** (0.01)	−0.32*** (0.01)	−0.29*** (0.01)	−0.36*** (0.01)	−0.31*** (0.01)
Income × LR distance government				0.22* (0.10)	
Injustice society × LR distance government					−0.13 (0.08)
Constant	0.80*** (0.02)	0.83*** (0.02)	0.79*** (0.02)	0.96*** (0.02)	0.74*** (0.02)
Observations	3,708	3,517	3,716	3,723	4,183
R^2	0.36	0.37	0.37	0.33	0.35
Adjusted R^2	0.36	0.37	0.37	0.33	0.35
Residual Std. Error	0.16 (df = 3,697)	0.16 (df = 3,506)	0.16 (df = 3,705)	0.16 (df = 3,712)	0.16 (df = 4,172)

Notes: OLS regression estimates (Std. Error in parentheses); * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; LR = left–right.

To interpret the results substantively, we visualized the main effects of our analysis. Figure 1 displays the primary effects, i.e., predicted values of personal and societal deprivation alongside ideological distance from the government on populist attitudes; this figure is based on model 1 in Table 1. The significant coefficients for

personal deprivation suggest that experiences of economic hardship on the individual level modestly increase populist attitudes. While citizens with a low household net income score an average of 0.6 on the populist attitudes scale, people with a high household income score just above 0.5, which is significantly below the average of 0.57. This finding aligns well with our theoretical expectations that personal economic struggles directly contribute to feelings of disenfranchisement, which in turn fuel populist leanings.

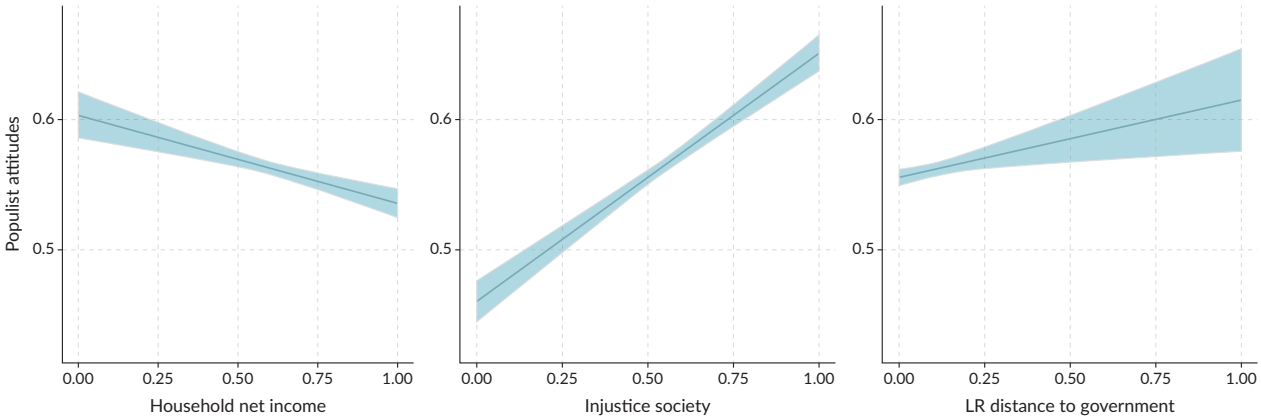

Figure 1. Main effects of personal/societal deprivation and distance to government, 95% confidence interval. Note: LR = left–right.

The more robust effect of societal deprivation underscores the substantial role of perceived economic injustices at a societal level in fostering populist attitudes. This suggests that, beyond personal circumstances, broader concerns about societal fairness and equity are potent drivers of populist sentiments. This aligns with the notion that individuals who perceive the economic state of society negatively are more likely to adopt populist views, reflecting broader sociotropic concerns. While both personal and societal deprivation display significant effects at $p < 0.001$, the effect size of concerns about the state of society is more than twice as large as that of being personally left behind. Accordingly, people who do not perceive any inequality in society have an average score of populist attitudes of around 0.45, while people who perceive strong societal inequality score well above 0.65.

Although smaller, the effect of ideological distance from the government is likewise significant at $p < 0.001$ and indicates that the greater the perceived ideological gap between individuals and the government, the stronger the inclination towards populist attitudes. Importantly, we find this result for the perceived distance on the left–right scale and also for the perceived distance on socio-economic and socio-cultural left–right positions (see models 2 and 3 in Table 1). This demonstrates that populist attitudes can arise independently of the policy issue. More generally, our findings support the notion that feelings of political alienation and lack of representation contribute to populist attitudes, suggesting that political disenfranchisement also plays a role in shaping such sentiments. On average, people who perceive a large political distance from the government score about 0.1 points higher on the populist attitudes scale.

We now investigate our main argument, namely that personal and societal deprivation amplify the impact of a (perceived) lack of political representation, as measured by ideological distance from the government (H4 and H5). As summarized in models 4 and 5 in Table 1, we run two further models to analyze the interaction effects between ideological distance and personal/societal deprivation, respectively. We find that the interaction

between income and distance to government is significant at $p < 0.05$ and positive, while the interaction between social injustice and distance to government is not significant. Accordingly, the effect of a perceived lack of representation on populist attitudes is reinforced by egocentric motivations but not by societal ones. Contrary to our assumption, however, the effect is not amplified by lower income but by higher income.

Figure 2 visualizes the interaction between personal deprivation and ideological distance from the government. The predicted values indicate that the effect of being ideologically distant from the government on populist attitudes is amplified among those who are personally better off (+1 standard deviation). On the other hand, the effect of ideological distance from the government also increases among people with below-average income (−1 standard deviation), albeit to a lesser extent and not to a statistically significant degree. This suggests the possibility of a ceiling effect for low-income respondents, whose populist attitudes are already relatively high, even if the representation gap is not evident.

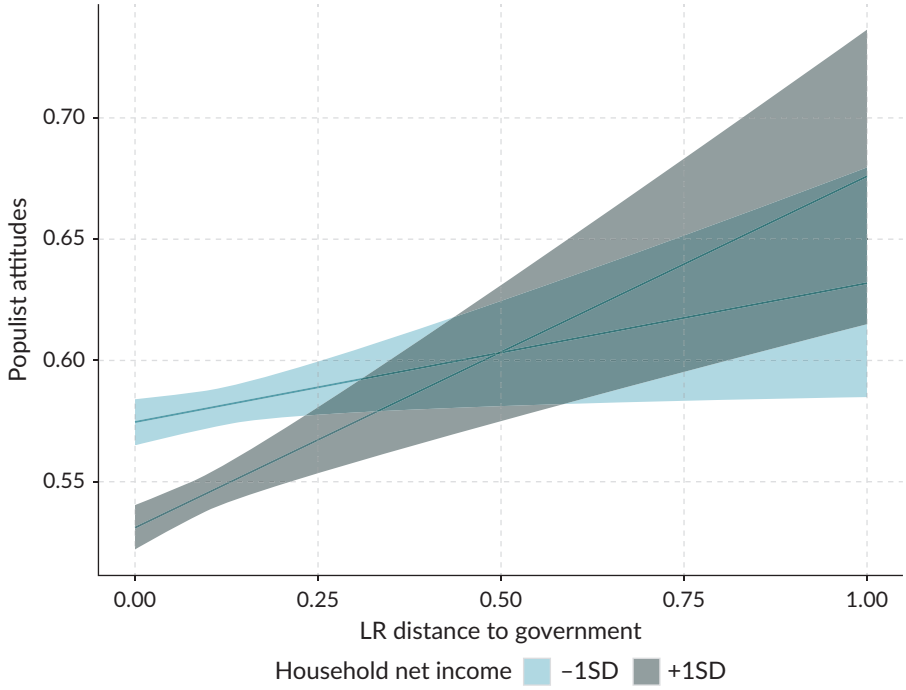

Figure 2. Interaction of personal and societal deprivation with distance to government, 95% confidence interval. Notes: LR = left–right; SD = standard deviation.

These results show that the causes of populist attitudes can vary depending on a person's economic situation. For those who find themselves in a good and secure economic situation, the baseline of populist attitudes is significantly lower and economic reasons seem to play only a minor role. Due to the secure economic situation and the low level of concern about one's own income, political factors become more relevant for developing populist views. Accordingly, the perceived distance to the government plays a substantial role, with political representation and being heard in policymaking becoming major concerns for those with a higher income. While political factors such as the feeling of being represented in and by the government's policy decisions also play a role for people on a low income, they do so to a lesser extent. We can, therefore, assume that the effects contribute equally to the development of populist attitudes, i.e., that both economic and political factors play a role and reinforce each other. Strikingly, this contrasts with the combination of the economic

state of society and ideological distance: Negative perceptions of the state of society as well as perceived ideological distance from the government influence populist attitudes—yet the two factors do not mutually reinforce or condition one another.

Our results, thus, indicate that personal economic conditions can amplify the negative effects of perceived political disenfranchisement, leading to a stronger inclination towards populist attitudes among those who are well-off. Importantly, this interaction underscores the role of economic safety in heightening sensitivity to perceived ideological discrepancies in political representation. Satisfaction with one's economic status and living conditions gives way to a stronger desire for political representation. This means that ideological stances and policy responsiveness matter more directly for somebody's views on political elites when such engagement with politics is affordable. While future research could investigate this relationship's causal and psychological mechanisms in greater detail, for instance, by using panel data, we interpret our results as a strong indication that economic concerns combined with political attitudes effectively fuel populist attitudes and political disillusionment.

5. Conclusion

This article has sought to examine the role of economic and political grievances in forming populist attitudes, investigating the interaction between these two factors. Even though a wealth of literature acknowledges the importance of economic and political marginalization, few studies have considered how the two sides mutually condition one another. Building on recent research, we distinguish between egocentric and sociotropic attitudes (Giebler et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2023) as well as perceptions of political representation (Castanho Silva & Wratil, 2023; Huber et al., 2023) and investigate the relative effect strengths of respondents' personal income condition, their attitudes towards the state of society, and their ideological distance to the government. Most importantly, we examine the main argument of whether and to what extent these two types of economic grievances reinforce the perception of a lack of political representation for the formation of populist attitudes.

Regarding their absolute effects, we find that sociotropic attitudes matter most when it comes to explaining why people adopt populist attitudes. However, someone's income and ideological distance from the government also contribute to higher populist attitudes. When it comes to their interaction, we find someone's personal income situation crucially moderates the effect of ideological distance—however, in a direction contrary to our argument. That is, while those who struggle to make ends meet may adhere more strongly to populist attitudes, the effect of distance from the government is reinforced above all among those who are not objectively threatened by economic grievances. Therefore, political representation is important for the emergence of populist attitudes, yet especially so for those with no or little financial concerns who can afford to develop political attitudes towards the government. This contributes to recent findings suggesting that perceptions of a lack of political representation leads citizens to see themselves as politically disregarded and adopt populist attitudes (Castanho Silva & Wratil, 2023; Huber et al., 2023). At the same time, it contradicts previous assumptions that economic and political grievances reinforce each other, thereby contributing to higher levels of populist attitudes. Our results thus help combine and reconcile the economic and political strands in explaining populist attitudes.

These findings bear significant theoretical and empirical implications for current and future research. They underscore the importance of seriously considering the diverse potential causes of populist attitudes rather than dismissing them as mere undirected protests. Depending on the source of discontent, different measures will be necessary for effective mitigation. The results indicate that focusing solely on cultural explanations while neglecting economic variables or treating economic deprivation and political factors as distinct obscures the interplay between these mechanisms. Economic hardship significantly contributes to political dissatisfaction and the rise of populist attitudes, yet political factors and perceptions of inadequate political representation are additional crucial contributors. Here, it is also important to note that political dissatisfaction because of a perceived ideological distance from the government contributes in particular to populist views among those who are not in a difficult economic situation and are therefore able to inform themselves more about politics and how their views are taken into account in the decision-making process.

Future research could use panel data to examine whether and to what extent these relationships change over time and are, thus, dependent on changing economic and political situations. On the one hand, the question arises as to whether an improvement or deterioration in the economic situation influences citizens' ability to engage with politics and, therefore, being more likely to appraise whether the existing government represented them well. On the other hand, it is possible to investigate whether populist attitudes change with different government constellations, e.g., after elections, and whether this is due to a change in the perception of political representation. This should lead to a change in the effect sizes and populist attitudes, and it might explain why populist attitudes are widespread in society despite different situations and backgrounds of citizens. Ultimately, our findings underscore the importance of following an integrated approach, considering the role of both economic and political marginalization in the rise of populism and its mitigation.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material and replication files for this article are available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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Emotion Narratives on the Political Culture of Radical Right Populist Parties in Portugal and Italy

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Abstract

The growth of radical right politics raises concerns about authoritarian and exclusionary scenarios, while populism is understood as a logic that articulates democratic demands and strengthens political engagement. There is a lack of research on the democratic views of radical right populism. Moreover, the burgeoning literature on these phenomena generally examines either the supply or demand side of politics, neglecting the narrative dimension that emerges from the two intertwining. This article aims to fill these gaps by using the heuristic of the "emotion narrative" that circulates between the supply and demand sides of radical right populist parties to examine their political culture. Assuming that populism creates social identities through the affective articulation of popular demands, focusing on the "narrative of emotions" (and not only on the narrative dimension of particular emotions) allows us to analyse how social and political objects, facts, ideas, and scenarios generate political culture. Through a mixed-methods comparative study of Portugal and Italy, this article assesses the emotion narratives of the parties Chega and Fratelli d'Italia. The dataset includes 14 semi-structured interviews with MPs and an original survey with 1,900 responses regarding political realities (on the democratic system, power structures, ethnic diversity, political history, and role of the media) and hypothetical scenarios (on authoritarianism, the rise of migration and diversity, anti-corruption, securitisation of the state, and expanded use of referendums). The emotion narratives of radical right populist political cultures engender democratic visions rooted in exclusionary identities with positive affection for centralism, authoritarianism, and securitisation of the state, as opposed to innovation and participation.

Keywords

authoritarianism; Chega; democracy; Fratelli d'Italia; participation; political emotions; political supply and demand; populist attitudes; radical right; securitisation

1. Introduction

Democratic erosion worldwide coincides with the rise of the far right, which includes the extreme and radical right. While the extreme right substantially rejects democracy, the radical right opposes liberal democracy in several fundamental aspects (Mudde, 2019, 2022). This trend must be understood in a world where 39.4% of the global population lives under authoritarian regimes and around 45.4% resides in (full [7.8%] or flawed [37.6%]) democratic states, while 15.2% lives in hybrid regimes, where formal democracy and authoritarianism are combined (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024). Democracies are dynamic and offer diverse resistances to authoritarian oppression and populist upsurges, impacting the persistence and balance of the different political cultures that characterise party systems (Vachudova, 2021). For example, the political crisis of the Italian "first republic" in the early nineties led to the dismantlement of existing political cultures and the formation of one with an ideology predominated by personalism and narrative (Pasquino, 2018).

Studied as political logic, populism shapes social identities and strengthens democratic agonistic engagement (Devenney, 2020; Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018; Palonen, 2020). It induces political cultures in which citizens monitor and criticise representatives (Kaltwasser & Hauwaert, 2020) or engage in participatory processes (Gianolla, 2017; Gianolla et al., 2024). How does this dynamic relate to the long-lasting understanding that populism is a spectre of democracy (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Arditi, 2004; Ionescu & Gellner, 1969; Kazin, 2017) or its shadow (Canovan, 1999; Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019)? What political culture, democratic vision, and democratic engagement do populisms entail? In order to answer these questions, political theorists have distinguished core from secondary populist characteristics. The former assesses populism as a democratic phenomenon, while the latter indicates that it may challenge pluralism, thus becoming exclusionary (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019). The literature on the interplay of populism and democracy is vast and expanding alongside the affective turn in political science (Aslanidis, 2020; Hoggett & Thompson, 2012), opening new paths of inquiry. Analysing populism as a logic (as opposed to an ideology) highlights that populists challenge existing feeling rules by narrating the crises of democratic sovereignty in order to mobilise and unite people against the (rational-bureaucratic) elite (Tietjen, 2023). Through emotion narratives around crisis and grievances, populism urges for change in political cultures by redefining sovereignty with a renewed sense of (inclusionary or exclusionary) belonging.

In fact, the discourse on the crisis of democracy is central to populism (Stavrakakis et al., 2018; Ungureanu & Serrano, 2018). It generates political disenchantment expressed through political grievances (Capelos et al., 2024; Ditto & Rodriguez, 2021; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Marcus, 2021), primarily relating to fear and anger. Research shows that crises' inspired grievances generate anger, rather than fear (Rico et al., 2017). However, the analysis of the emotional processes as complex mechanisms, rather than distinct emotions, identifies fear of insecurity and shame as the root of such anger (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Grievances emerge from individual discontent with social and political conditions, generating disaffection and aversion to migrants, as well as predicting radical right populism (RRP) support (Lindholm et al., 2024). Thus, grievances are inducive to psychological mechanisms, emerging from perceived individual marginalisation and loss of self-esteem regarding ideas and objects within the socio-political context (Capelos et al., 2022; Salmela & Capelos, 2021).

On the supply side of politics, frame analysis has been used to study the objects mobilised by RRP (Caiani & della Porta, 2011), while populist attitudes have been measured in relation to the demand side (Castanho Silva

et al., 2020). Although people with stronger populist attitudes do not downplay liberal democracy (Kaltwasser & Hauwaert, 2020; Wuttke et al., 2023), they do not necessarily make demands for greater participation (Ardag et al., 2020) and evidence shows RRP attitudes are conducive to authoritarian outlooks (Marcus et al., 2019). However, a research gap exists regarding the entanglement between supply-side framing and demand-side attitudes, which this article addresses through the perspective of emotions. Overcoming the dualism of reason and emotion in political analysis sheds light on democratic processes (Arias Maldonado, 2016; Bonansinga, 2020; Eklundh, 2020; Marcus, 2002). It also expands the understanding of populism beyond a superficial focus on emotionality as irrationality, exploring the impact of the narrative frames from which it rises (Caiani & della Porta, 2011; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2017).

The consolidated and growing literature on emotions in populism focuses on differentiating varieties of populisms (Caiani & Di Cocco, 2023), discourse and identification processes (Elçi, 2022; Homolar & Löfflmann, 2021; Kenny, 2017; Kotwas & Kubik, 2022; Löfflmann, 2022; van Prooijen et al., 2022), as well as political attitudes and behaviour (Abts & Baute, 2022; Rico, 2024; Verbalyte et al., 2024). Psychologists have extensively demonstrated that emotions are better understood as dynamic processes (Fogel et al., 1992; Kuppens, 2015; Kuppens & Verduyn, 2017; Scherer, 1982, 2009, 2022), with political emotions being necessary for political reasoning, deliberation, and behaviour (Marcus, 2002; Redlawsk, 2006). Moreover, political emotions are imbued in social and cultural practices (van Hemert et al., 2007), articulate party politics (Heaney, 2019; Wedeen, 2002), and shape political cultures (Ahmed, 2014). Political emotions emerge from socio-political discourse and are related to social identities (Goldenberg et al., 2016; Mackie & Smith, 2018). Politicians contribute to shaping the social imaginary in context-dependent discursive practices, creating new norms and normativity based on a representation of social actors as objects (Ahmed, 2004, 2014; Krzyżanowski, 2020). But these narratives are not merely top-down; they circulate in society. We aim to study the "emotion narratives" of RRP parties' political culture as they circulate between the supply and demand sides of politics in Portugal and Italy.

A comprehensive comparative approach should capture populism's ambivalence with respect to political culture, while observing the actor and context in relation to the diffusion of populist frames, as they shape political cultures (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). This article explores the emotion narratives of RRP parties, comparing Portugal and Italy, countries with several historical similarities and differences regarding RRP. In fact, Portugal has been a European exception to the rise of RRP until recently (da Silva & Salgado, 2018; Santana-Pereira & Cancela, 2020; Zúquete, 2022), while Italy is a country of multiple populisms, including RRP (Blokker & Anselmi, 2020). Portugal's lengthy colonial history and fascist Salazar dictatorship are more recent than Italy's colonial past and fascist Mussolini regime. Moreover, both countries experienced economic and social depression, as well as significant waves of emigration. These legacies shape similarities and differences that make the comparison of RRP emotion narratives very compelling. Chega was founded in 2019 by André Ventura and has since consolidated as the first—and only—RRP party in parliament, reflecting a shift in the country's political landscape. Achieving 18% vote share in the 2024 legislative elections, Chega consolidated as the third party in parliament and pressured the centre-right minority government, which refused to form a coalition. Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) was founded in 2012 by Giorgia Meloni, Ignazio La Russa, and Guido Crosetto. The party emerged within the evolution of the neofascist right that was present in parliament since the 1940s, joining government coalitions as a junior partner in the 1990s. In the 2022 legislative elections, FdI was the most voted party with 26% vote share, becoming the leading force of the right-wing governing coalition. Both parties are strongly identified with

their leaders and claim to strengthen popular participation by reforming representative sovereignty through increased state power, rather than participatory democratic innovations. Although they belong to different groups in the European Parliament and have slightly different positions, especially on international affairs, they share souverainist, conservative, and militarist ideologies.

This article is guided by the question: What political culture is revealed from the analysis of the emotion narratives circulating between supply and demand sides of RRP parties in Portugal and Italy? This entails investigating RRP emotion narratives around the current processes within representative democracy and the alternative envisioned to strengthen the sovereignty of "the people." Through a mixed methodology, the article explores which emotions are "attached" (Ahmed, 2014) to objects, including democratic ideas and ideals, both on the supply and demand sides of politics. Empirical data were collected through an online survey (1,900 responses in total) during the most recent legislative election campaigns of both Italy (2022) and Portugal (2024). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with MPs representing Chega (6) and FdI (8). The following four sections are dedicated to reviewing the theoretical approach and justifying its relevance (Section 2), introducing the mixed-methods approach and design (Section 3), analysing how emotion narratives emerge within supply and demand sides of politics (Section 4), as well as discussing the emotion narratives on the political culture of RRP parties in Portugal and Italy (Section 5). Findings show that the emotion narratives of the RRP supply and demand sides align with ideas of centralised and empowered structures, emphasising exclusionary, authoritarian, and securitisation processes, rather than mechanisms of deliberation or more direct citizen involvement in decision-making.

2. Theoretical Approach

RRP emerged in Europe in the 1980s (Collovald, 2004; Hall, 1980, 2021; Taguieff, 1984), eventually dominating most countries (Mudde, 2019) when compared to the left variation. This process also resulted from the evolving dynamics of the European Union, particularly following the Maastricht Treaty, which introduced significant legislative changes concerning European integration and immigration (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). RRP has helped create political cultures characterised by an opportunistic relationship with liberalism, being critical of globalisation while appropriating it to support Islamophobic discourses. Moreover, these political cultures are associated with the defence of communitarian, monistic, and exclusionary societies (Zúquete, 2015). Investigating political emotions framed by the populist narratives allows for understanding the extent to which democratic ideas of populist supply and demand coincide, as well as the alternative view they build for a representative democracy.

Objects circulating in populist discourse are not reduced to those identified in the three dimensions of the (thin-centred) ideological definition (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist phenomena are ambivalent (Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2020; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2017; Mény & Surel, 2002; Wodak, 2015) and chameleonic (Taggart, 2000). Their political ideas, objects, and frames depend on context and opportunities. Populism thrives on polarised processes of collective identification with moral people opposing corrupt elites and the dangerous "Others," (re)generating social and political behaviour (Aslanidis, 2020). Considering populism as a logic also assumes that populist attitudes exist even in societies without a populist supply (Zúquete, 2022). Accepting that political emotions are constructed by the discourse recipient rather than the speaker (Alcántara-Plá, 2024) implies recognising that these attitudes emerge in the narrative contact of subject and objects, not in the objects themselves (Ahmed, 2014). Emotions become salient when an object

is perceived as personally significant, affecting the subject in relation to something they deeply care about: "We are afraid of something because it can hurt something else we care for, and we rejoice over something because it helps us with something else" (Alcántara-Plá, 2024, p. 5). Narratives define attachment to objects. The deeper object shapes a subject's emotional reactions to (shallow) objects that surface in public discourse. Objects can also be the ingroup or other social groups, as well as ideas and perceptions about them.

This article proposes emotion narrative as an original heuristic construct (leading to a thicker theorisation; Gianolla, 2024). Emotion narrative encompasses both positive and negative long-term emotions (Jasper, 2018) generated by conceptualisations of self and other regarding intergroup relations and social identity (Mackie & Smith, 2018). Emotion narratives emerge in relation to objects that may also be characterised by myths, values, objectives, desires, and expectations. They impact political behaviour as they apprise emotion within signifying practice, thus being entangled with cognition (Harding & Pribram, 2004) because political emotions are associated with the working structure of the mind (Marcus, 2021, 2023; Marcus et al., 2019). Emotions stick to objects and are generated in the relationship between subjects and objects (Ahmed, 2014). Therefore, the way objects are narrated generates attachment or aversion, activation or passivity, control or uncertainty in relation to the protection or perceived attainment of (deep) objects. Emotion narratives are thus characterised by (a) long-term (b) social-identity-related collective emotions that (c) emerge through a cognitive-affective narrative entangled with the protection of (deep) objects.

The notion of emotion narratives has been mobilised as an instrument to study the internal narrative of distinct emotions, investigating which narrative stands behind the appraisal of each emotion (Kleres, 2011; Lazarus, 2006; Sarbin, 2001). This approach is important, but does not focus on understanding the narrative of emotions that circulate in society. In contrast with this approach, the present article focuses on the (emotion) narratives at the social, not the psychological level. In other words, we study the "narrative of emotions" as opposed to the "narrative of the (distinct/specific) emotion." The emotions involved are both positive and negative. Although RRP is characterised by grievances and a sense of urgency around the crises that generate anger, fear, shame, and sadness, these are framed alongside pride, joy, (political) love, and admiration.

A final point is the operationalisation of emotion narratives, focusing on the relationship between two levels of objects: a "deep-object," identified as something valuable and vulnerable, and a "shallow-object," representing a threat (negative valence emotion) or an opportunity for protecting (positive valence emotion) the deep-object (Alcántara-Plá, 2024). This approach allows for studying the affective dimension of populist frames, as it identifies objects that are "in need of defending" from the "source of threat," and anticipated change (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2017, p. 112). This methodology was designed for a discourse analysis of emotions in political texts. In this article, we expand its use by analysing the resonance of deep- and shallow-objects in 14 semi-structured interviews from the supply side, along with survey data on the demand side. For this purpose, we framed those objects in 12 questions about political realities and 12 questions about hypothetical scenarios. The demand side is scrutinised by comparing emotional responses of voters and non-voters for the RRP parties studied. We thus identify emotions attached to specific objects, both on the supply and demand sides of RRP parties. This method provides insights into how emotional attachments are crafted to defend certain objects (characterised by values and goals), portraying other elements as threats or opportunities. The analytical focus is on the democratic system, power structures, ethnic diversity, political history, role of the media, authoritarianism, the rise of

migration and diversity, anti-corruption, securitisation of the state, and expanded use of referendums. As a result, this article sheds light on how the emotion narratives of RRP shape their political cultures and (un)democratic views.

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1. Sample and Data

This study adopts a mixed-method design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (duration 30–90 min) with RRP MPs representing the Chega (6) and FdI parties (8), referenced as E01, E02, E03, etc. Interviewees were composed of 3 women and 11 men (M = 53 years; SD = 12.15). A quantitative survey (N = 1,900 respondents; see Annex 1 in the Supplementary File for sample characterisation) was run during the electoral campaign of the most recent legislative elections, September 2022 in Italy and March 2024 in Portugal. The survey included 2 batteries of questions (12 items each). The first reflected political realities/facts (see Figures 2 and 3 in this article and Annexes 2 and 3 in the Supplementary File); the second concerned hypothetical political scenarios (see Figures 4 and 5 in this article and Annexes 4 and 5 in the Supplementary File). Responses were self-reported and delimited to a single option between eight emotions (pride, joy, love, admiration, shame, sadness, fear, and anger) or the option "other" (with the possibility to specify). These emotions were identified by adopting two emotions from each of the four quadrants in the Geneva Emotion Wheel, a validated instrument that distributes emotions by valence (positive vs. negative) and control/power (high vs. low; Scherer et al., 2013). Finally, within the sociodemographic questionnaire, the vote intention variable was operationalised by asking participants about their position from 0 ("I will definitely not vote for this party") to 10 ("I will definitely vote for this party") on each party in parliament. The survey also included an exclusionary populist attitude scale (undergoing psychometric validation; Mónico et al., 2024) with 12 items measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1-*completely disagree* to 7-*completely agree*), evaluating 4 dimensions (Figure 6) suggested by exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis: *anti-elitism* (4 items; Cronbach's alpha of .78 for Pt and .81 for It), *chauvinism* (3 items; α = .76 and .72), *anti-pluralism* (3 items; α = .80 and .87) and *people-centrism* (2 items; α = .63 and .70).

3.2. Procedures and Data Analysis

This study obtained ethical clearance by the Ethics Commission of the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra. Party MPs were recruited through direct contact or intermediation with press offices and interviewed by authors after signing an informed consent. An ISO-certified enterprise was contracted for survey data collection. Both samples were recruited through an approximation of a non-random "quota sampling" (Chaudhuri, 2019), according to census data in each country (Instituto Nacional de Estatística and Instituto Nazionale di Statistica) concerning gender, age, and education. The survey instructions included information on the aim of the study, completion instructions, and informed consent, which explained the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, guaranteeing confidentiality of data.

Party MPs' semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed using MAXQDA. Two researchers defined and tested the standardised coding procedures, which include: topics (coinciding with 10 topics of reality and scenario collected through the survey), deep-objects (valuable and vulnerable objects), shallow-objects (threat or opportunity for protecting the deep-object), and emotions (relationship between

deep- and shallow-objects). Emotions coding was restricted to the range of eight emotions offered to survey respondents and defined through the Geneva Emotion Wheel.

Survey data was analysed through the statistical software SPSS. In order to differentiate respondents in relation to party preference, a two-step cluster analysis using log-likelihood distance measurement and the Schwarz Bayesian criterion (Kent et al., 2014) was performed with the vote intention variable in Chega/FdI. A multivariate analysis of variance was subsequently conducted to test whether the two clusters in each country differ from each other regarding the four dimensions of populism. The assumptions for the reliable use of this test (Hair et al., 2008) were analysed. Pillai's Trace was used because it is a powerful statistical procedure, robust against modest violations of normality and equality of the covariance and variance matrix, Box's M = 49.51 (Pt) and 75.98 (It), $p < .001$.

Our dependent variable is emotion narratives as a latent construct. To operationalise it, we focus on the emotions that stick (Ahmed, 2014) to objects within the political culture of RRP parties. On the supply side, interviews with MPs were analysed through the discourse analysis of emotions (Alcántara-Plá, 2024). On the demand side, survey responses were focused on political realities/facts in Portugal and Italy concerning the democratic system (survey questions 1r, 2r, 4r); power structures (3r, 7r, 8r); ethnic diversity (5r, 6r, 9r); political history (7r, 10r, 12r); and the role of the media (11r). Moreover, we posed questions on hypothetical scenarios focused on authoritarianism (1s, 2s, 9s, 10s); the rise of migration and diversity (3s, 5s, 7s); anti-corruption (4s, 11s); securitisation of the state (6s, 8s); and expanded use of referendums (12s).

4. Results

4.1. Supply Side: Qualitative Interviews

In interviews, the MPs of Chega and FdI articulated their discourse on a limited range of deep-objects (Figure 1), such as identity (including religion, country's history, and traditions), homeland (including national interest and territory), liberty, security, authority, and family. However, these deep-object emotion

Figure 1. Qualitative discourse analysis of emotions in MP interviews: examples of deep- and shallow-objects.

narratives unveiled shallow-objects related to several focuses of the research, such as the democratic system, power structures, ethnic diversity and political history, rise of migration and diversity, as well as securitisation of the state. The arousal and control of the emotions vary more specifically in relation to context, sense of urgency, and agency attributed to the shallow-objects.

Emotion narratives partially overlap in both countries. Identity constitutes a relevant deep-object, associated to several shallow-objects. For instance, left-wing ideologies (related to the power structure and political system) and ethnic diversity/immigration constitute two shallow-objects. Fear, anger, sadness, and shame emerge as emotions in both cases, but also pride and admiration for what one's country can do for those identified as true refugees, or pride, joy, love, and admiration for the work of one's own party and its leader. In the following excerpt, identity is clearly defined as a vulnerable and valuable deep-object threatened by "the regime" (at the time, the socialist left), eliciting fear:

> For Portugal to be a better country, we have to change the regime….What has to continue is our national identity. So, it's our identity as a people, our identity as a nation. It's the recognition of our history. What has brought us to the 21st century, which is one of the things that sets us apart from the rest of the world today. (E06)

The left wing and its influences are perceived as presenting complex challenges to preserving the cultural fabric of society, which spans its historic past, traditions, religion, and popular culture. Left-wing ideologies and parties are viewed as totalitarian, corrupting the relationship between citizens and state through artificially imbued dependency and emotional attachment to subsistence schemes. This instigates sadness and anger. Interviewees assert that the country's democratic systems are undermined by state control of social, economic, cultural, and moral policies which fracture power structures and erode individual agency. Here, identity connects with the democratic system and social diversity:

> On the issue of sexism, racism, etc.: To begin with, the state also heavily subsidises organisations that promote this kind of discourse. So, I think that, in a way, we can also talk about welfare dependency in these spheres. And, on the other hand, it generates such a feeling of injustice that instead of wanting to work for the collective, for the common good, as they supposedly say, people always maintain their own little niches and, it seems to me…that this disunity and disintegration of the population is much more important than everyone cooperating for greater sustainability, greater cooperation, a state that is in fact fair, social. So, it doesn't necessarily translate into monetary dependence, but it does translate into emotional dependence. I'm glad we're talking about emotions, because in fact whoever frees me from racism and whoever frees me from structural sexism, whoever frees me from homophobia or….I'm not financially dependent, but I am emotionally dependent because the state is, for me, the great father. (E03)

Immigrant, Muslim, Black, and Roma people are shallow-objects considered as threats to the cultural integrity, social cohesion, and social order; however, interviewees disguised their speech with rhetoric of equality before the law. Emotional ambivalence is demonstrated by sadness towards all people obliged to migrate, but also by anger and fear in relation to those defined as "economic migrants." Beyond the cultural threat, migrants constitute a threat to the economic and political system, as the country cannot "contain" them all. Interviewees differentiate between them and "true refugees" (i.e., Ukrainians). When pressured to

explain the difference, even if they maintained that all people in real need (eligible for refugee status as opposed to "illegal" migrants) must be helped, they showed resistance to including other asylum seekers (i.e., from Syria or Ethiopia). Additionally, they demonstrated some fear, dismissing the argument with the impossibility of welcoming people beyond the physical capacity of each country:

> Ukrainian migrants are different because they are fleeing a war. Those fleeing war deserve our attention. We must help them regain the conditions to return home….Economic migrants aim to improve their conditions, which is understandable. However, we cannot accommodate everyone. There must be rules and limits, as established in the annual Flow Decree….Ukrainians are war refugees. And we have a duty to welcome them….Most of those arriving on boats are young men aged 20 to 40. This is a different type of situation; they cannot be considered refugees. (E08)

In relation to the power structure and democratic system, RRP MPs do not reject representative democracy. Instead, they want to reshape it in order to allow those in power to govern according to popular will, which is best represented by Chega and FdI. Their discourse does not envisage innovation, but proximity with the people. However, there are some differences in the analysis of both emotion narratives. These differences are related to the party history (shorter for Chega), structure (more consolidated for FdI), and orientation (stronger ideology for FdI), as well as country-based characteristics (political systems and stabilities). For example, FdI has a keener emotional attachment to territory, both as a symbolic place and as the material constituent of the nation. Democratic politics happen in the territory because that is where the supply side can survey, educate, and compensate the demand side of politics. Chega MPs have a more general narrative related to the people, while their aversion to the socialist elite is much stronger than that held by FdI MPs.

4.2. Demand Side: Quantitative Survey

In order to differentiate respondents in relation to party preference and to focus on the RRP parties studied, a cluster analysis defined two clusters with a good quality of discrimination (.9 and average silhouette), according to the vote intention for Chega ($N = 1{,}010$; 798 no-vote, 79%; 212 votes, 21%) and FdI ($N = 890$; 672 no-vote, 75.5%; 218 votes, 25.5%). The frequency of emotions for each reality or hypothetical scenario was analysed across the vote intention for Chega or FdI in relation to the political reality and hypothetical scenario (see Figures 2 and 4 in this article and Annexes 2–5 in the Supplementary File). To further elaborate on the emotions characterising the emotion narratives of these specific RRP parties, we focused the analysis on emotions with a differential above 5% between voters and non-voters. These are highlighted in Figures 3 and 5.

Comparing emotions quantitatively and focusing on the differential, more negative than positive emotions stand out in total (67 vs. 46, two occurrences of "other" disregarded in the analysis), for scenarios more so than realities (61 vs. 52), with Chega leading FdI voters (65 vs. 48). Considering emotions across realities, we observe twice the number of differential emotions in Chega when compared with FdI (35 vs. 17), but both parties share the prevalence for negative emotions (19 vs. 10) over positive (16 vs. 7). Comparing emotions across hypothetical scenarios, we observe almost the same number of differential emotions between Chega and FdI (30 vs. 31). For both parties, once again, the prevalence is for negative emotions (18 vs. 20) over positive (12 vs. 11).

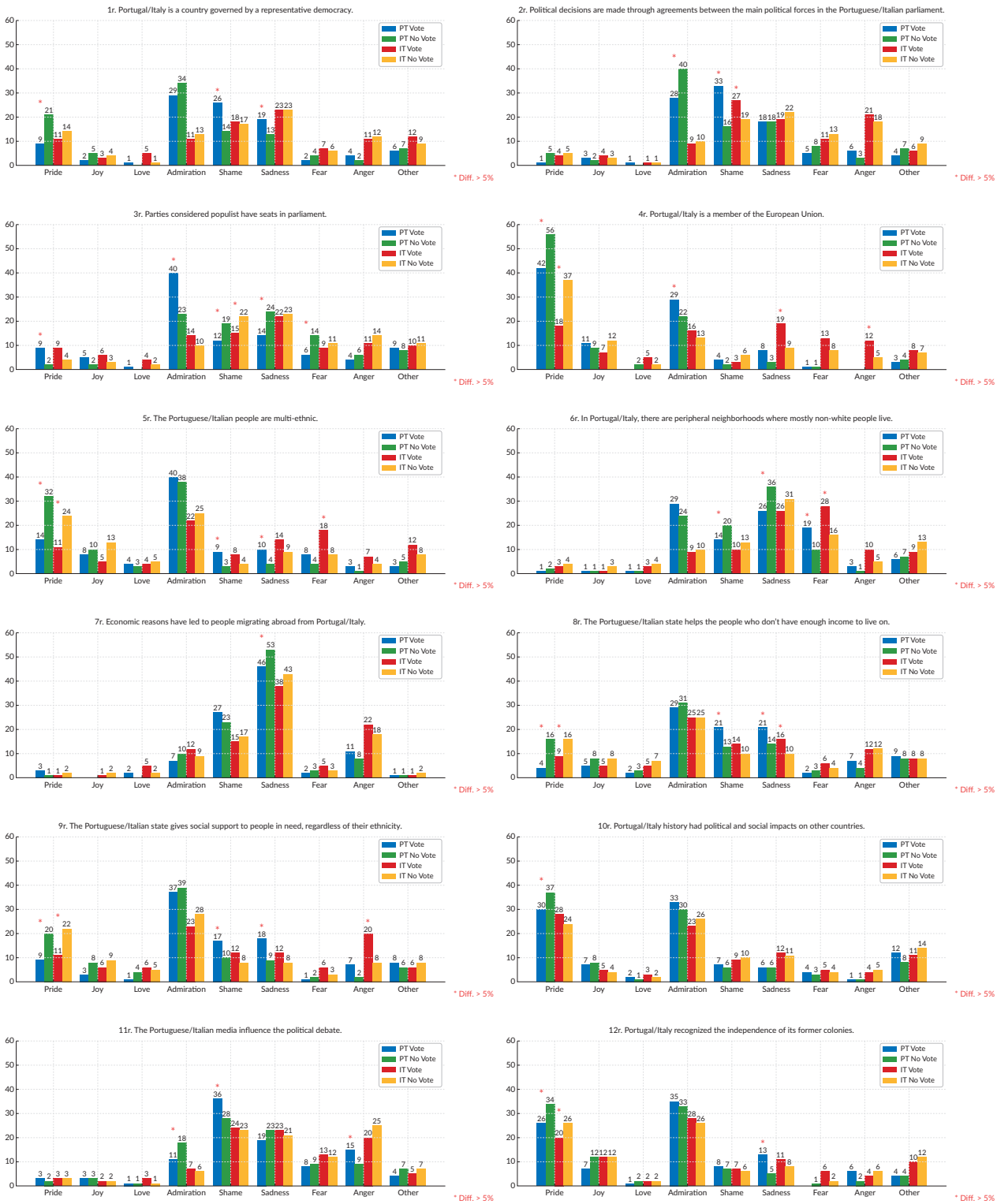

Figure 2. Survey items on political realities; percentage of responses for all emotions reported. Notes: Values rounded to the unit; difference above 5% between voters and non-voters of Chega and FdI indicated with asterisk.

Figure 3. Survey items on political realities; percentage of responses for emotions with difference greater than 5% between voters and non-voters of Chega and/or FdI. Note: Difference above 5% between voters and non-voters of Chega and FdI indicated with asterisk.

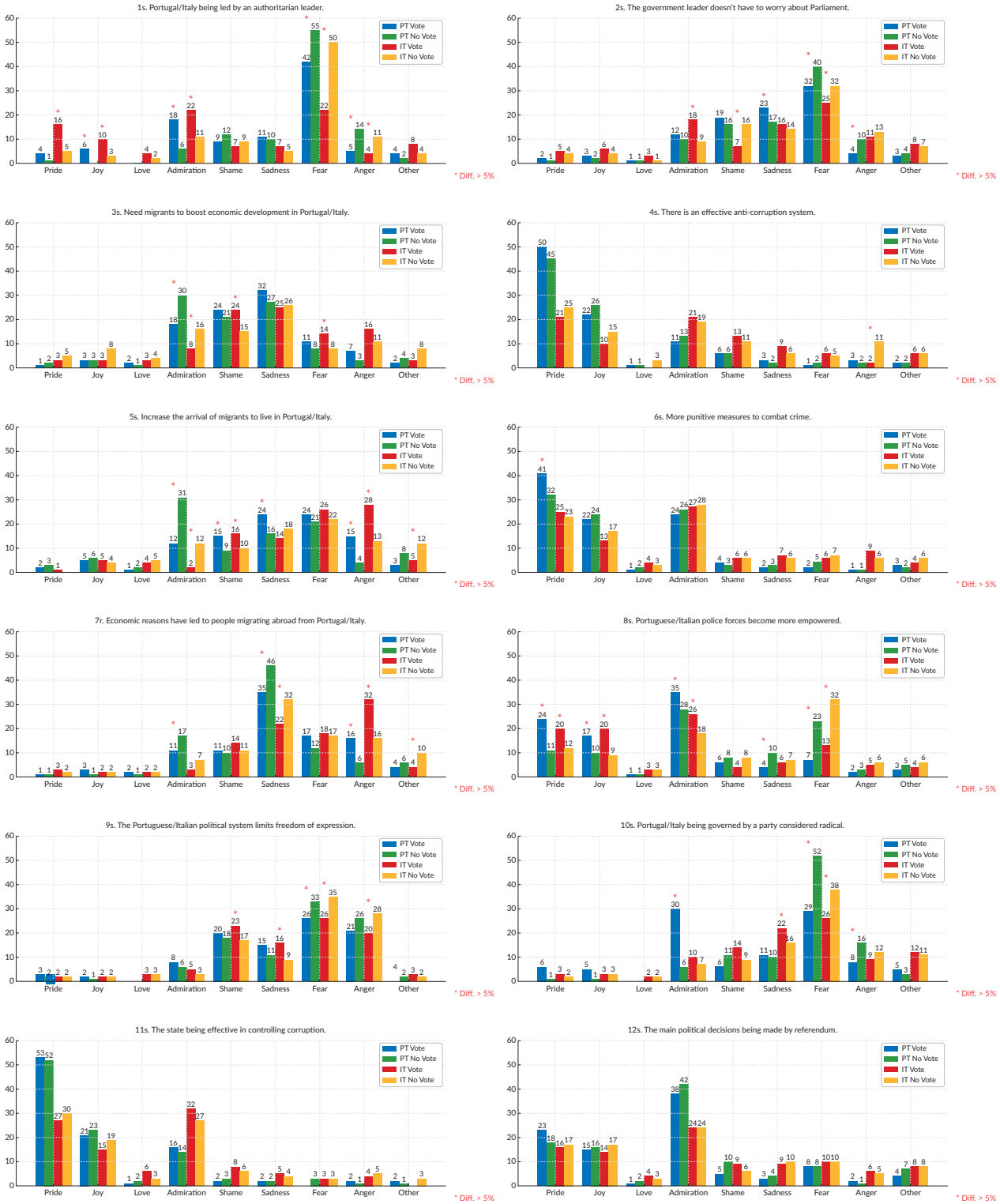

Figure 4. Survey items on hypothetical scenarios; percentage of responses for all emotions reported. Notes: Values rounded to the unit; difference above 5% between voters and non-voters of Chega and FdI indicated with asterisk.

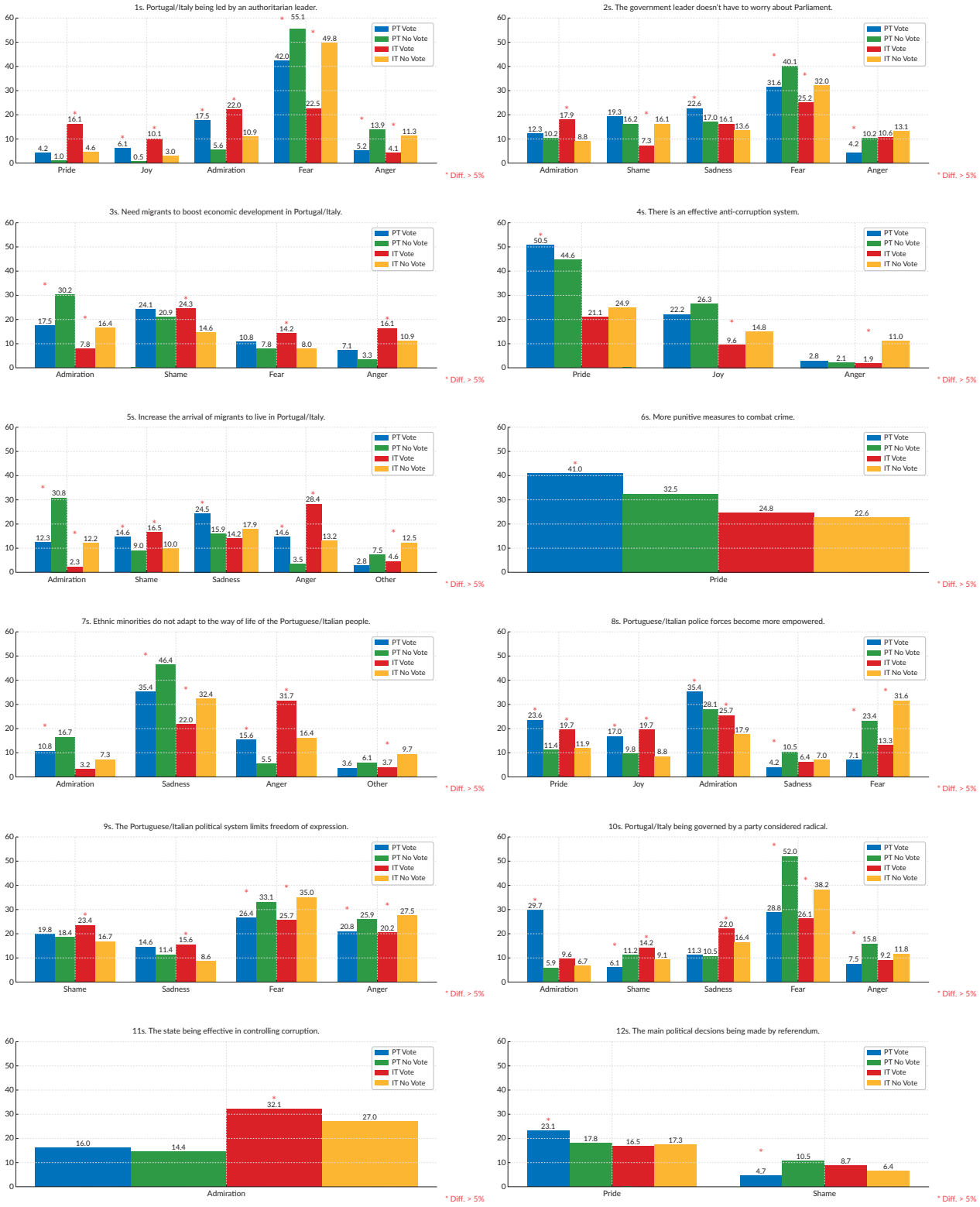

Figure 5. Survey items on hypothetical scenarios; percentage of responses for emotions with difference greater than 5% between voters and non-voters of Chega and/or FdI. Note: Difference above 5% between voters and non-voters of Chega and FdI indicated with asterisk.

When analysing realities in relation to the democratic system (1r, 2r, 4r), the variation is notable between voters and non-voters of RRP parties. Chega voters exhibit less pride and admiration, with more shame and sadness towards representative democracy, less admiration and more shame for parliamentary workings, as well as less pride and more admiration towards the EU. Fewer differences are observed with FdI voters relating to representative democracy. They have more shame for parliamentary works and stronger aversion to the EU, demonstrated by less joy alongside more sadness, fear, and anger. Concerning power structures (3r, 7r, 8r), having populist parties in the parliament constitutes more pride and admiration, accompanied by less shame, sadness, and fear for Chega voters, but more shame for FdI voters. Both party voters feel less pride, along with more shame and sadness in relation to state social welfare. With ethnic diversity (5r, 6r, 9r), both Chega and FdI voters demonstrate significantly less pride and sadness. Instead, they exhibit more fear towards the reality of belonging to a multi-ethnic society and for welfare provisions regardless of ethnic origin of the recipient, as well as more fear and less pride of peripheral non-white neighbourhoods. Chega voters also indicate more shame and sadness, while FdI voters show more anger. Political history (r10, r12) instils less pride for voters of both parties in relation to recognising the independence of former colonies. For Chega voters, there is also less joy and more sadness, while the external impact of Portugal's history generates less pride. Finally, the role of the media (r11) invokes less admiration, but rather, more shame and anger in Chega voters.

Examining scenarios focusing on authoritarianism (1s, 2s, 9s, 10s), the possibility of the country being ruled by an authoritarian leader evokes more joy and admiration with less fear and anger for voters of both parties. They also feel less fear of a leader who does not have to obey parliament, a radical government, or restricted freedom of expression. Chega voters show significantly more admiration, along with less shame, fear, and anger about radicalism in the government. Furthermore, they express more sadness and less anger about a leader irresponsive to the parliament, as well as more sadness and shame around restrictions on the freedom of expression. FdI voters indicate more pride for authoritarian leadership, more admiration and less shame for a leader irresponsive to government, more shame and sadness for limitations on the freedom of expression, as well as more sadness for government radicalism. Considering the rise of migration and diversity (3s, 5s, 7s), both parties' voters indicate less admiration around benefitting from migration and increased immigration, which also fosters more shame and anger, with less sadness and more anger when migrants fail to integrate. However, the increase in migration also generates more sadness for Chega voters, while the need for migrants for economic development incites more shame, fear, and anger in FdI voters. Anti-corruption (4s, 11s) is not an object mobilising many emotions for either party. Chega voters feel prouder of an effective anti-corruption system, which gives FdI voters less joy and anger, along with more admiration. In relation to the securitisation of the state, both parties' voters feel more pride, joy, and admiration, alongside less fear, than non-voters about strengthening the police. Chega voters also feel more admiration and pride for punitive measures. To conclude, the scenario that main political decisions are made by referendum (r12) only generates more pride and less shame in Chega voters.

The multivariate analysis of variance taking populism dimensions in function of Chega and FdI voters and non-voters showed a significant multivariate effect in the Portugal and Italy samples, Pillai's Trace = 0.127 and 0.125, $F = 36.45$ and 31.73, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.127$ and 0.125, respectively. For both countries, univariate tests (see estimated marginal means in Figure 6) showed statistically significant differences and effect sizes for the *anti-pluralism* dimension: $F(1.1008) = 139.95$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.122$ for Portugal; and $F(1.888) = 110.57$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.111$ for Italy; $p < 0.001$.

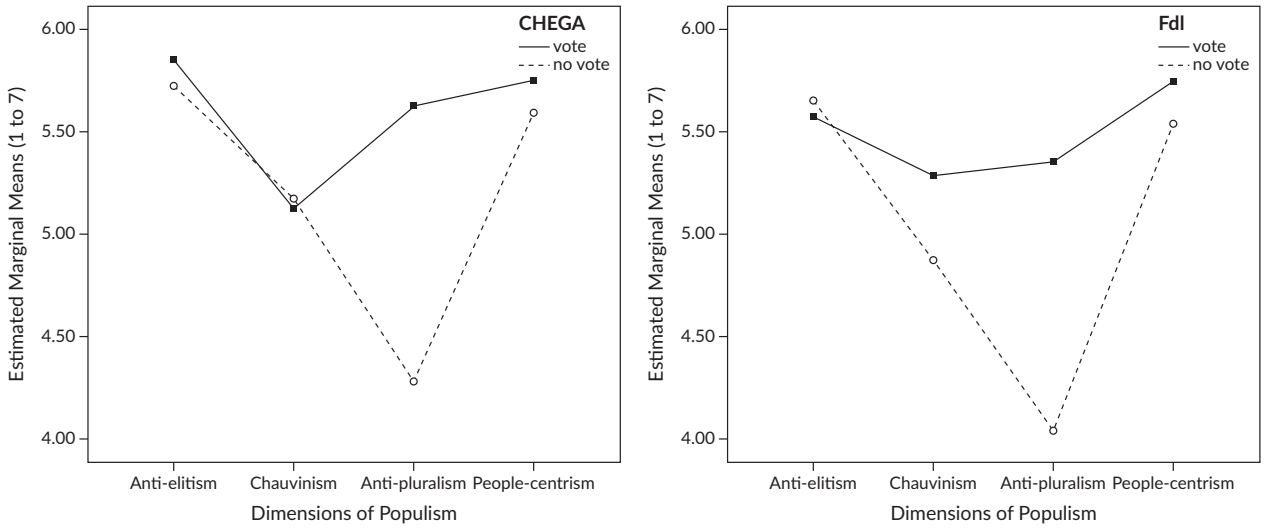

Figure 6. Dimensions of populism for Chega and FdI voters and non-voters.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The above findings suggest that the political culture of the RRP is highly consistent across Portugal and Italy. It produces a deep emotional divide within the electorate, characterised by contrasting perceptions of national identity and the role of out-groups in society. There are significant differences between the emotions expressed by Chega and FdI voters versus those expressed by non-voters, especially on issues of power structure (i.e., authoritarian scenario), multi-ethnicity, and immigration. RRP tends to centralise representative power; indeed, centralisation of power is on the agenda of both parties, while the use of participatory and direct democratic institutions is not central. The emotion narratives are polarising, with the political solutions envisaged by both the supply and demand sides appearing less inclusive, more nationalist-exclusionary, and culturally chauvinist. Both parties also recognised the weakness of the current political system in terms of securing executive power. They proudly emphasise that they work in the interest of the "nation." In their view, democratising the political system means strengthening the power of those who serve the interests of the people—as opposed to the (left-wing) elites who serve their own interests or those of globalist and foreign actors. The question of advancing democracy is therefore not about innovating the way people participate, but rather about how the people are represented and feel protected. Sadness and anger appear in MPs' discourses when they associate freedom or the nation with the state of the political system which is challenged by the shallow-object of the leftist elite. But pride emerges when they refer the opportunity constituted by their own party—and its political initiative—as shallow-object. Compared with FdI, Chega's emotion narrative is stronger in relation to reality than in the hypothetical scenario, suggesting that Chega, as a new party, is more hostile towards the current state of democracy. This dynamic may also be reflected in the projected governmental position of the FdI at the time of the data collection. As opposed to FdI, Chega was projected as a growing party, but unlikely to be part of a governmental coalition.

Confronted with factual political information, individuals inclined to vote for Chega show strong negative emotions towards democracy (less pride and admiration, more shame and sadness) and the welfare of undeserving others (less pride, more shame, sadness, and anger), while sympathising with authoritarian leadership perspectives (more admiration, less fear and anger). The negative entanglements with otherness are interpreted as responses to perceived shortcomings or threats within the current system.

The securitisation of the state also stands out, with the scenario analysis revealing more pride, joy, and admiration, shouldered with less sadness and fear around strengthening of the police. Chega voters also show sympathy for a radical government and a higher demand for anti-corruption measures. The sadness–pride axis underlines the complex struggle articulated by Chega and FdI MPs, characterised by a national pride deeply rooted in history, culture, and traditions, perceived as threatened not only by left-wing politics, but also by out-groups such as migrants and minorities. This perception shapes the political discourse and resonates strongly with their electorates. This emotional polarisation is further exacerbated by the rhetoric mobilised by MPs to frame an empathetic (sadness and anger for migrant's inhuman conditions) discourse within a human rights perspective, while highlighting the logistical and moral challenges posed by immigration. Immigration as a shallow-object of threat evokes anger when arguing that Portugal and Italy should accept anyone who adapts to the culture, customs, and rules of the country. Immigration also generates fear in the scenario of being an external force instigating cultural change. In fact, the demand side expresses negative emotions in relation to the fact that welfare can be abused by migrants, indicating that the security provided by the state is valuable and vulnerable. A critical attitude towards the media only emerges in Portugal, probably due to Chega's open hostility towards the traditional media and the "*cordon sanitaire*" that the party experiences.

This study has a number of limitations. Love never appears as a differential emotion, and, in the interviews, it mainly appears in Italy with respect to politics, home, and territory. This raises the relevant question regarding the discretionary nature of the choice provided in a specific list of emotions. If, from our theoretical perspective, there is no strong reason to focus on a certain number of basic emotions, we also assume that emotions can vary according to the context and the labels used for indicating responses. Furthermore, some of the variables in the analysis are tested with only one item (role of the media and expanded use of referendums). While further questions could be asked regarding the same variable, the balance between variables tested and survey items must be considered, which could lead to fewer variables being tested with more items. Overall, the discourse analysis of emotions, developed by Alcántara-Plá (2024) based on Ahmed (2014), proves to be an insightful analytical tool to explore the emotion narratives of political parties and further investigation is encouraged. The systematisation of information and the identification of deep-objects often goes beyond the written text and requires a very attentive contextual analysis. On this basis, this method allows for detecting implicit as well as explicit emotions, and for identifying deep-objects that circulate in the emotion narrative, although not explicit in all texts. This advantage appears particularly appropriate for the analysis of emotion narratives.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The research data are currently held at the authors' R&D centres (CES and CINEICC) and can be consulted upon request.

Supplementary Material

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

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