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## **CHAPTER 8**

### **POPULISM AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF DEMOCRACY**

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#### **Abstract**

The advancement of populism has led to a vivid discussion of its corrective or threatening potential for representative democracy. The impact of populism may depend, however, on the particular vision populist voters hold of democracy. Using questions from the European Social Survey (2012) that aim at measuring the population's understanding of the concept of democracy, this paper explores whether populist voters differ significantly from non-populist voters in their understanding of democracy. The results suggest that European populists are not less likely to conceive of democracy in terms of electoral competition or liberal checks and balances. Rather, they are more likely to add elements of direct democracy, government transparency, and enhanced welfare state to those standard elements of democratic competition and strongly endorse democratic responsiveness by parties in office as public opinion shifts. Yet, the data also show that populist voters reject the protection of minority rights, are less satisfied with democracy than non-populist voters, and are less committed to democracy itself as an important ideal.

The growing interest in populism has led to a vivid discussion of its potential for positive and negative consequences for democracy. While ideational scholars point to populism's potential of being a threat to democracy as populist leaders may undermine institutional checks and balances and threaten minority rights if elected (see introduction), some authors point to the corrective quality populism may have in empowering the "silent majority", traditionally underrepresented groups or segments of society that feel alienated from politics (Canovan 1999, Ivaldi 2021, Kriesi 2014, Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, Voogd and Dassonneville 2020). Research so far has focused predominantly on system-level consequences of populist actors, albeit yielding mixed results for their impact on democratic representation, turnout, or individual liberties (e.g. Carlin and Van Hauwaert, this volume, Huber and Schimpf 2017, Huber and Ruth 2017, Ruth and Hawkins 2017, Splitter 2018). We argue that we can gain further insights into the ability of populists to transform and shape modern democracies by exploring how their supporters understand democracy. Put differently, the corrective or threatening potential of populism may depend on the particular vision of democracy populist voters espouse, which in turn is likely to determine their willingness to accept the curtailing of core elements of democracy or their interest in pushing for democracy-enhancing reforms.

Indeed, conceptual discussions of populism are closely linked to theoretical discussions of democracy. Conceiving populism as a distinct set of ideas about the nature of political competition, the ideational approach, as defined in the introduction to this volume, reminds us that "for many citizens and politicians [populism] captures sincerely held views that are defensible from a philosophical standpoint" (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 536). Previous research has shown that these populist beliefs are fairly widespread among the public (e.g. Andreadis et al. 2018, Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020). And while the populist public appears to be

characterized by a high level of dissatisfaction with, but a general support for democracy (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020), we know relatively little about populist voters' conception of democracy.

Yet, we believe the core elements of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and the antagonistic, Manichean worldview embodied in an antagonistic relationship between the “virtuous people” and the “corrupt elite” (e.g., Hawkins 2009, 2010; Mudde 2004; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019) are likely to lend themselves to a specific vision of democracy. Although the exact nature of “the people” and “the elite” will be context-dependent, “all forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation of and appeal to “the people”” (Canovan 1981: 294), and “speak and behave as if democracy meant the power of the people and only the power of the people” (Mény and Surel, 2002: 9). It is precisely the appeal to the people as a homogenous group and the ultimate sovereign, hence, as decision-making authority, which lies at the heart of debates on the tension between models of democracy and populism (Canovan 1999, Mény and Surel, 2002, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; 2014; Urbinati, 2019). The appeal to “the people” does not render populism illiberal or undemocratic *per se* (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). However, the emphasis on people-centrism as unmediated popular sovereignty, it is argued, may provide a fertile breeding ground for anti-pluralist tendencies, the erosion of representative democracy, and the chipping away at fundamental core elements of liberal democracy. If one true unified will of the people exists, not only are intermediary actors, and checks and balances deemed unnecessary, but divergent opinions and voices also are muted. Instead, appeals to people-centrism may be consistent with visions of democracy based on majoritarian impulses and the enacting of deliberative or direct democracy.

We use questions from the European Social Survey (2012) that aim at measuring the population's understanding of the concept of democracy to explore whether populist voters differ significantly from non-populist voters regarding their support for core characteristics of different models of democracy. As populism emphasizes the immediate political expression of the popular will, we expect a shared outlook among supporters of populist parties that stresses the prevalence of the majority principle, particularly when rooted in popular empowerment vis-à-vis the political elite. We have less clear expectations, however, about whether populists will necessarily reject core elements of democracy like elections that can be marshalled for both liberal and majoritarian views of democracy.

Our results suggest that European populists, at least at the time of the survey, reject the protection of minority rights but were not necessarily less likely to conceive of democracy in terms of electoral competition or liberal checks and balances. Instead, populists are more likely to add elements of direct democracy, government transparency, and enhanced welfare state to those standard elements of democratic competition. They also strongly endorse democratic responsiveness by parties in office as public opinion shifts. These are consistent with populism's defence of people-centered politics aimed at enacting the general will of the public. Yet our data also suggest that populist voters are less satisfied with democracy than non-populist voters and are less committed to democracy itself as an important ideal. Thus, inasmuch as populists are involved in debates about democracy, they are likely to engage in corrective acts that seek to empower the broader public; but these same voters may be willing to endorse non-democratic steps by populist parties as a further corrective if the system is not sufficiently responsive to their concerns.

## Data

We explore these questions through the 6<sup>th</sup> wave of the European Social Survey (ESS) because it contains a unique battery of questions about how citizens view democracy (see Ferrin and Kriesi 2016). It was conducted between 2012 and 2013 in 29 European countries, which provides us with a variety of populist actors in and outside of government and different ideological leanings.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, respondents were asked about a series of traits that might be associated with democracy. Some of them reflect the standard procedural minimum (free and fair elections, the opposition and media being able to criticize the government), others reflect more liberal concerns around checks and balances via the courts, while others build on definitions of democracy that emphasize deliberation, direct democracy, or welfare policies that reduce inequality. For each of these traits, respondents were asked to judge on a 10-point scale whether it was important or not for democracy in general.<sup>2</sup> Answers to these questions help specify what citizens think of and associate with democracy. Our goal is to see if supporters of populist parties systematically differ in how they define democracy.

In our analysis, we focus on the elements that we think best match classical definitions of democracy (for an overview see Table 1). First, we look at three questions that tap into the procedural minimum definition of *electoral democracy* which emphasizes fair elections and protections of civil liberties that allow citizens to criticize the government and to organize against

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<sup>1</sup> The survey methodology and sample design varies by country, but interviews were conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes. See [https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round6/survey/ESS6\\_data\\_documentation\\_report\\_e02\\_4.pdf](https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round6/survey/ESS6_data_documentation_report_e02_4.pdf) for a description of the sample methodologies.

<sup>2</sup> The prompt for this question was “Now some questions about democracy. Later on I will ask you about how democracy is working in [country]. First, however, I want you to think instead about how important you think different things are for democracy in general. There are no right or wrong answers so please just tell me what you think.” And “And still thinking generally rather than about [country], how important do you think it is for democracy in general...” The endpoints were 0-“Not at all important for democracy in general” and 10-“Extremely important for democracy in general”.

it. Second, we look at elements of *liberal democracy* that can block majoritarian impulses, namely the judicial review of government decisions and the protection of minority rights. Third, we include a question that taps into norms about having an engaged citizenry as well as potentially having citizens engage in *deliberative democracy* by talking with each other about the political process. Fourth, we use two questions that focus on *social/economic definitions of democracy* instead of political procedures, equating democracy with social and economic equality. Finally, we include two questions that relate more directly to the governmental decision-making process. One of these is focused on *increasing transparency* and on governments engaging in dialogue by explaining their decisions to voters. The other question aims at the procedures of *direct democracy*. While the first can be understood as a mechanism of accountability to the public, the second one particularly highlights citizens as the ultimate sovereign.

(Table 1 about here)

Each of these questions is coded such that high values represent a belief that citizens think that this element is important. While large numbers of people deem most of these issues as important to democracy, we observe a significant variation (Table 2).<sup>3</sup> Governments explaining themselves to the public is the most frequently cited criterion, followed by electoral competition, strong courts, and taking steps to fight poverty.

(Table 2 about here)

The survey also asked respondents to weigh various tradeoffs about different forms of democracy and to state which one is best for democracy. Of the three answering categories

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<sup>3</sup> The data in Table 2 is only for the countries where Huber and Ruth (2017) coded populist parties (see footnote 6).

provided, two always contrasted opposite positions, while the third can be understood as a neutral point, giving respondents the possibility of stating it would depend on the circumstances (see Appendix 1 for exact question wording). Specifically, respondents were asked about the tradeoff of allowing free expression of extreme political views versus preventing such expression, the opposing views of considering governments as being responsive to the public's opinion versus the government acting as a trustee, and the preference for single-party versus coalition government (full question wording are in Appendix 1). From these variables we generated measures of *allowing extreme views*, *governments should follow the public*, and *prefers a coalition government* by placing the "it depends" options between the two endpoints of each question.<sup>4</sup> More than 70 percent of respondents said that people should be free to express extreme views and that the government should follow the public while 65 percent of respondents preferred coalition government to single-party government.

The empirical question we examine with these various questions about what democracy means and how it is best managed is whether populist voters differ in their views from non-populist voters. In the absence of questions about latent populist attitudes, we model each of these traits as a function of whether a voter supported a specific populist party in the previous national election. We code voter choices as populist if they voted for a party that Huber and Ruth (2017) classified as populist using the ideational definition of populism.<sup>56</sup> All other parties are coded as non-populist except for those who said that they voted for a party that was not on the list provided to them

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<sup>4</sup> In Appendix 2 we model these variables as categorical variables using multinomial logit and the substantive conclusions about the attitudes of populist voters are the same.

<sup>5</sup> The countries that Huber and Ruth (2017) coded includes 24 European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK) that contain 33 populist parties.

<sup>6</sup> In our analyses, the Italian 5-star movements emerged as a divergent case and an influential observation. We thus include a dummy variable for this party in the analyses that follow.

(which we designate as a separate category because we cannot know if those other parties are populist or not).<sup>7</sup> We therefore use voters' choices to code their "voter revealed populism" in a similar way as Baker and Greene (2011), Wiesehomeier and Doyle (2013) and Carlin et al. (2015) use voters' choices to code voters' "revealed leftism." Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018) find that populist attitudes are strong predictors of populist party support, which validates our approach.

We include several control variables to control for the possibility that populist parties may simply channel a broader dissatisfaction with the democratic process and thus attract a motley crew of disaffected citizens. While we exclude non-eligible voters from the analysis, we account for politically disaffected citizens by including voters who abstained from voting, who cast a blank or invalid vote, who don't remember who they voted for, who refused to say who they voted for, or who did not answer the question in the initial analysis. We designate each of these types of non-voters via a dummy variable. In addition, we include a variable that measures *trust in politicians*<sup>8</sup> and add dummy variables for whether the respondent voted for *the incumbent chief executive* or for *another cabinet party* in case government opponents are more supportive of non-majoritarian democracy.<sup>9</sup> We follow Bowler and Donovan (2019) and also control for broader social disaffection. We therefore include a question about a respondent's perception of their *place in society*<sup>10</sup>, and whether they believed they were part of a *group discriminated against*<sup>11</sup>. On the

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<sup>7</sup> We follow this strategy recognizing that there could be some small parties that Huber and Ruth did not evaluate as populist or not. By coding all excluded cases as non-populist we generate a conservative test of the argument that populists are different from the general public.

<sup>8</sup> Measured on a scale from 0-10, where 10 is most trusting of politicians.

<sup>9</sup> All members of the Swiss Federal Council are coded as cabinet members.

<sup>10</sup> Measured on a scale from 0-10, where 0 denotes bottom and 10 top.

<sup>11</sup> Measured as a dichotomous variable. This covers discrimination based on race, nationality, religion, ethnic group, age, disability, among others.

other hand, we control for respondents' *political interest*<sup>12</sup> and *political participation*<sup>13</sup> because politically interested and engaged individuals are more likely to say that all of these traits are important.

In addition, we control for demographic variables. We control for the respondent's *wealth* with a measure of their (within country) income decile<sup>14</sup>, the respondent's *education level*,<sup>15</sup> *gender*,<sup>16</sup> and *age*.<sup>17</sup> We also include the respondent's ideology by using dummies for being on the right or the left of the scale or for not responding to the scale to not lose non-respondents.<sup>18</sup> Finally, we add dummy variables to control for differences across countries. We estimate the models of what traits are important using OLS regression, weighting each country to account for its population size such that the results capture the attitudes of the average populist voter and non-populist voter in the region while clustering the standard errors at the country level because party-systems will be the same inside each country.<sup>19</sup> We use a similar specification for the questions

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<sup>12</sup> How interested would you say you are in politics – are you... Very interested, Quite interested, Hardly interested, Not at all interested. High values represent high values of interest.

<sup>13</sup> We build a 7-item index that includes contacting a politician, signing petitions, working for a party, working for another association, protesting, wearing a badge or sticker, boycotting.

<sup>14</sup> Income deciles were coded by the ESS (hinctnta) from country-specific income categories and are coded such that high values represent higher wealth.

<sup>15</sup> Education also accounts for arguments of higher cognitive mobilization. The education variable was generated by the ESS (eisced) and codes respondents by the ISCED classification if the last education they completed. Higher values represent higher education. 1 ES-ISCED I (less than lower secondary), 2 ES-ISCED II (lower secondary), 3 ES-ISCED IIIb (lower tier upper secondary), 4 ES-ISCED IIIa (upper tier upper secondary), 5 ES-ISCED IV (advanced vocational, sub-degree), 6 ES-ISCED V1 (lower tertiary education, BA level), 7 ES-ISCED V2 (higher tertiary education, >= MA level).

<sup>16</sup> Male=0, female=1

<sup>17</sup> Dummy variables by age decade to allow for non-linear effects.

<sup>18</sup> In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right? Dummy variables for left (0-3), right (7-10), and don't know/blank, with center (4-6) left as the reference category.

<sup>19</sup> While we analyze each dimension separately, in other analyses we looked at whether there were clusters of support profiles such that respondents thought that some elements of democracy were important and not others. Our analysis suggests that populist party supporters tended to cluster in attitude profiles that emphasized the combination of direct democracy and the reduction of poverty and inequality but then were heterogenous with regards to how they viewed the other elements of democracy. Because these inferences do not differ substantially from those reported below we have focused on the analysis of each indicator separately.

asking voters to tradeoff different forms of democracy only those three-point variables are treated as ordered scales.

### **What Do Populists Say is Important for Democracy?**

We start by looking at whether populists differ from the rest of the electorate in how they conceive of democracy. The results in Table 3 suggest that, controlling for levels of political alienation, governing status, and demographics, populists generally define democracy in many of the same ways that other voters do. For example, populists are just as likely to agree that “democracy” should consist of free and fair elections, having protections for the rights of the media and the opposition to criticize the government, and endorse courts as checks on the executive as are those that voted for non-populist parties (models 1-4). Finally, they are not more likely than other voters to endorse a deliberative vision of democracy whereby citizens must talk to each other (model 6) or more likely to say that governments fighting poverty is an important element of democracy (model 9).

(Table 3 about here)

Yet, there are a few ways in which populists understand democracy differently from other voters. For example, European populists are significantly less likely to say that the protection of minority rights is important for democracy (model 5). While right-leaning populists do not significantly differ from supporters of non-populist conservative parties, left populists and centrist populists are significantly less likely to say that democracy should entail protections for minority rights than are supporters of non-populist parties with similar ideologies.<sup>20</sup> But while populists do

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<sup>20</sup> See Table 5 below.

not endorse the protection of minority rights, they do generally endorse expanded efforts to provide welfare. In particular, populists are significantly more likely than other voters to say that governments' responsibility for fighting inequality is an essential element of democracy (model 10).

Finally, populists consistently endorse elements that promote greater emphasis on the popular will and public involvement in democracy. For example, populists are significantly more likely to say that public referendums on policy decisions are important elements of democracy (model 7). Then, populists are significantly more likely to argue that government transparency is an important element of democracy (model 8). This ex-post explanation of decision-making to the public should empower the public as a check on government action.<sup>21</sup>

Supporters of populist parties, therefore, emerge with a unique profile that sets them apart from others, voters and non-voters, particularly when it comes to direct democracy, inequality, and minority rights. Yet it also has to be pointed out that for most of the questions regarding electoral and deliberative democracy, the political gap that emerges around definitions of democracy is not between populists and non-populists but between voters and those who abstained or cast a blank or null vote. These non-voters are consistently less likely than both populists and non-populist voters to say that elections, opposition or media criticism of the government, or deliberative discussions between voters are important elements of democracy.

A similar pattern emerges when we look at the questions the ESS asked about how respondents view various tradeoffs within democracy (Table 4). Populists do not differ from other voters in their support for single-party government (model 3). Nor are populists either more vocal

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<sup>21</sup> While the support for referenda is not unique to populists, it is certainly most pronounced. For example, untrusting respondents also favor referenda. And while respondents who consider themselves being part of a discriminated group also endorse direct democracy, but more strongly endorse other elements of checks and balances, such as protections for the rights of the media and opposition parties to criticize the government, and judicial review.

in their defense of extremist views nor are they less likely to endorse the protection of free speech (model 2). Yet where populists differ from others, voters and non-voters, is in their endorsement of government responsiveness to the public's opinion, a conviction they share with respondents with low trust in politicians. While 69 percent of non-populist voters say that the government should change its planned policies in response to what most people think instead of sticking to its announced plans, over 78 percent of populists say the government should follow the public.

(Table 4 about here)

In sum, supporters of populist parties are just as likely as non-populist voters to define democracy in terms of electoral procedures. However, populists' understanding of democracy seems to chime with the specific populist vision of democracy rooted in the notion of popular power, an understanding of the people as sovereign, and thus the importance of the popular will. Yet, supporters of populist parties seem not to object to institutions of checks and balances such as the courts or the media. In this sense, populism could very well function as a corrective to the malfunctioning of representative democracy, albeit the emphasis on referendums as a means to give people the final say entails the danger of its usage in order to bypass precisely representative institutions and thus intermediaries. In addition, for subscribers of a liberal vision of democracy, the diminished importance given to minority rights is particularly worrisome. In this regard, the emphasis on majority rule and disregard for minority rights in combination with an interpretation of democracy in terms of economic equality might open the possibility for an exclusionary understanding of such redistributive policy measures.

## Do All Populists Agree on What is Important for Democracy?

The previous analysis pooled all populist parties together, yet this leaves open the possibility that there are significant differences within populists whereby right populists understand and define democracy differently than left populists do. To evaluate this possibility, we have coded all valid votes in the dataset according to the ideology of the party. For parties that were included in the 2010 or 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015, Polk et al. 2017), we started with their coding in the 2010 survey (when possible) or the 2014 survey if they were not in the 2010 sample. Other parties were then coded based on a review of party descriptions in the ESS codebook, Wikipedia, and other sources. Based on these sources, we initially coded parties into 5 ideological blocks (left, center-left, center, center-right, and right).<sup>22</sup> However, there are sufficiently few populist parties in this sample that we combined the center-left parties with leftist parties and center-right parties with the right ones and created a 6-fold classification of parties based on their broad ideology and their use of populism or not.

Using these data, we then model the degree of agreement that populists have with the various statements about the essential elements of democracy about which populists significantly differed from non-populists (minority rights, the usage of referendum, government transparency, and taking steps to reduce inequality) using the same general specification as in Table 3.<sup>23</sup> We also model agreement with the statement that governments should change their policies to follow public opinion. Because the comparison is across voters with different ideological leanings, non-respondents and non-voters are excluded from the analysis. We then test whether there are

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<sup>22</sup> On the 0-10 scale, 0-2.25 was coded as left, 2.25 to 3.99 as center-left, 4-5.99 as center, 6-7.74 as center-right, and 7.75-10 as right.

<sup>23</sup> Respondents' self-positioning on the left-right scale is excluded to avoid collinearity with the party ideology.

significant differences in the attitudes about democracy between voters who supported populist parties with different ideological leanings.<sup>24</sup>

Table 5 reports the results of *F*-tests of whether the estimated attitudes of populist party supporters differed across ideological lines. The first row tests whether the three groups – left, center, and right – are different from each other. Because there are relatively few populist parties and thus the confidence intervals for the populist party estimations are quite wide, we look at whether voters' estimated positions are different at even the  $p < 0.10$  level. Because there are relatively few centrist populist parties, in the second row we test whether left populists and right populists have similar views of the element of democracy in question.

(Table 5 about here)

In two instances, significant differences among populist voters with respect to the definition of democracy emerge. The first is over the issue of reducing inequality. Right-populist voters are less likely to say that democracy includes government acting to reduce inequality than left-populists are (Figure 1). Yet while right populists are less likely to consider fighting inequality an important part of democracy than left populists are, they are substantially more likely to prioritize fighting inequality than right-non populist voters are. The other difference among populists occurs on the question of whether the government should follow public opinion or stick to its preferred policies. Right-populist voters are slightly more likely to say that the government should follow the public than left-populists are (Figure 2). Nevertheless, once more we find the largest gap between right-populist voters and right-non-populist voters, with the latter being much less likely to endorse following the public.

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<sup>24</sup> The full results of the models are available in Appendix 2

### **Figure 1: Predicted Belief that Reducing Inequality is Important for Democracy by Vote Choice**

<Figure 1>

Estimated via OLS, point estimates with 95% CI

### **Figure 2: Predicted Belief that the Government Should Follow the Public by Vote Choice**

<Figure 2>

Estimated via ordered logit, point estimates with 95% CI

If we turn to the elements of democracy where populists and non-populists disagreed, we see that there is little difference between populists of different ideologies. There are no significant differences over whether minority rights should be protected, governments should explain their decisions to voters, or over the importance of direct democracy. In other words, supporters of populist parties, regardless of their ideology, share a common understanding of democracy rooted in the people as sovereign and a majoritarian principle.

The data in Table 5 also show how populist voters differ from voters who voted for non-populist parties with similar ideological profiles, which explains why the gaps between populists and non-populists in Table 3 emerge. For example, populists on average were less likely to say that the protection of minority rights was an important element of democracy. Yet we see in Table 5 that this is primarily driven by left-populist and center-populist voters being less likely to emphasize minority rights than non-populist voters are while there is no difference between right-populist voters and other right-party voters in how they view this topic. This contrasts with higher levels of support for governments explaining their decisions or for governments reducing differences in income levels between populists and non-populists among populists being driven by

populists on the right being much more supportive of such measures than non-populist rightists. Thus, while right populists are just as likely to reject minority rights as an essential element of democracy as other rightist voters are, they are much more accepting of government transparency and expanded welfare efforts than are voters with otherwise similar ideological leanings.

The aspect of democracy that shows the most consistent differences between populists and non-populists continues to be over whether referenda are important for democracy. Among non-populist parties, support for direct democracy is higher among voters on the left than on the right or center, so the confidence intervals for the estimated voters' attitudes on the left overlap (Figure 3). Yet the difference in support for referendums between non-populists and populists on the left approaches statistical significance at conventional levels ( $p=0.074$ ). Most importantly, there is little difference between populists on either ideological side. Put differently, across ideologies, populist voters tend to support direct democracy more than other voters do.

### **Figure 3: Predicted Belief that Referenda are Important for Democracy by Vote Choice**

<Figure 3>

Estimated via OLS, point estimates with 95% CI

### **How Do Populists Evaluate Democracy?**

Our results suggest that while Europe's populists generally view electoral and liberal democracy the same way that non-populists do, they are more likely to endorse a social democratic and participatory form of democracy as well, especially once their ideology is controlled for. But how do populists evaluate democracy in general? In Table 6 we model measures of specific and diffuse support for democracy, looking at whether (1) citizens are satisfied with democracy in their

country and (2) citizens believe that it is important to live in a democracy. Both of these variables are coded on a 10-point scale with high values representing support for democracy.

(Table 6 about here)

On average, citizens across Europe do not appear to be very satisfied with democracy. However, even when we control for the fact that most populist voters did not support a winning party and are less trusting of politicians, populists are significantly less likely to be satisfied with democracy than non-populist voters (model 1).<sup>25</sup> Dissatisfaction with democracy is universal among populists across the ideological spectrum. While there is quite a bit of variation among left populists in how satisfied with democracy they are, left populists are less satisfied with democracy than left non-populists are at the  $p < 0.10$  level (Figure 4). Center populists and right populists, on the other hand, are more consistently dissatisfied with democracy and are also significantly less satisfied with democracy than voters who supported comparable non-populist parties.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Figure 4: Predicted Level of Democratic Satisfaction by Vote Choice**

<Figure 4>

Estimated via OLS, point estimates with 95% CI

In contrast, the belief that it is important to live in a democracy seems to be more consolidated across European citizens. Yet, similar patterns do emerge. Again, populist voters are

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<sup>25</sup> Supporters of populists who were elected to the executive or to the cabinet are more satisfied with democracy than populists whose parties did not win executive power, but supporters of populist executives are less supportive of democracy than are supporters of non-populist executives.

<sup>26</sup> While in results we don't present here we find that individuals who are less satisfied with democracy are more likely to say that direct democracy is an important part of democracy, we find that even when democratic satisfaction is added as a control, populists are more likely to endorse direct democracy. Populist support for direct democracy thus seems to combine their dissatisfaction with existing democratic practices and a norm of people empowerment.

significantly less likely than other voters to support this assertion (model 2) and as before, this lack of support for democracy is widespread among populists with different ideological leanings (Figure 5). The major cause of the difference between populists and non-populists is driven, however, by a rejection of democracy by left-populist voters because while right-populists do not place as much importance on living in a democracy as does the average voter, supporters of the non-populist right also are more likely to express indifference about democracy.

### **Figure 5: Predicted Belief that Democracy is Important by Vote Choice**

<Figure 5>

Estimated via OLS, point estimates with 95% CI

### **Conclusion**

Our chapter is the first to explore on a large scale the question of whether populist voters have a distinctively different understanding of democracy vis-à-vis other citizens that can be considered as a specific populist idea of democracy. Our results suggest they do. Shaped by populist ideas as spelled out in the theoretical framework of this book, supporters of populist parties strongly support a vision of democracy that is linked to the importance of people-centrism, as particularly embodied by means of referendums. The emphasis put on direct democracy is in line with findings from case studies on populist voters (Pauwels 2014). At the same time, our analysis shows that populists are not more or less likely than non-populists to consider part and parcel of democracy checks and balances in the form of criticism of the government, be it by opposition parties or the media, or the power of courts to control the government. Populist voters generally seek to add additional modes of participation and welfare policies to the definition of democracy without removing other elements of democratic representation.

However, we also uncover a reluctance to consider the protection of minority rights as an important element of democracy. Thus, while our results suggest that populist conceptions of democracy might foster support for measures that may serve as correctives to some of democracy's shortcomings concerning inequality, the perceived lack of responsiveness and representation, the strong emphasis on popular sovereignty may open up the possibility of an exclusionary version of democracy. Maybe more worrying, we find that populists are not particularly enamored with living under a democratic regime itself. Indeed, recent research has confirmed that voters who are less satisfied with democracy as it is being practiced are more likely to turn to populist parties (Roccatò et al. 2020, van Kessel et al. 2021).

It is therefore conceivable that populist voters may wish to engage in corrective measures to empower the public when democracy is the only game in town, but they may be willing to weaken democracy itself when given the chance. In other words, as supporters of populist parties showcase a particular profile that emphasizes majoritarian principles in combination with a certain indifference towards minority rights and democracy in general, they may be more inclined to support a populist leader claiming to embody the will of the people, promising unmediated access to the workings of government, via (for instance) referendums. Thus, the core principles of populism, particularly the emphasis on people-centrism, may lead to the erosion of democratic institutions and a curtailing of pluralism, an effect that appears to be borne out by populists in power (Huber and Schimpf 2017; Spittler 2018; Urbinati, 2019, see also Castanho Silva et al. 2020 ).

The potential of threat, therefore, may very well reside in the willingness of populist supporters to maintain authoritarian leaders in the name of the popular will. However, given that supporters of populist parties do not seem to object generally to checks and balances, one important

avenue for safeguarding democratic institutions before populists enter governments may lie with the introduction of a combination of direct democracy measures alongside other forms of representative democracy instead of focusing solely on referendums as a panacea to the ills of representative democracy. Indeed, future research should explore not only how populists, but citizens in general, relate to other forms of direct democracy, a major lacuna in current studies. More fine-grained comparative studies on different forms of participatory tools and other measures of direct and deliberative democracy, such as citizens' assemblies, are needed to fully assess their corrective potential.

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**Table 1: Elements of Democracy Used**

<b>Elements of democracy</b>	<b>How important do you think it is for democracy in general</b>
Electoral democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...that national elections are free and fair?</li> <li>• ...that opposition parties are free to criticize the government?</li> <li>• ...that the media are free to criticize the government?<sup>27</sup></li> </ul>
Liberal democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...that the courts are able to stop the government acting beyond its authority?</li> <li>• ...that the rights of minority groups are protected?</li> </ul>
Deliberative democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...that voters discuss politics with people they know before deciding how to vote?</li> </ul>
Social/economic democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...that the government protects all citizens against poverty?</li> <li>• ... that the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels?</li> </ul>
Decision-making process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...that the government explains its decisions to voters?</li> <li>• ...that citizens have the final say on political issues by voting directly in referendums?</li> </ul>

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<sup>27</sup> Similar to the question about the courts below, this can also be understood as an item referring to checks and balances.

**Table 2: What Elements of Democracy Do Respondents Think Are Important for Democracy**

	Mean	Std. Err.
Governments explaining their decisions to voters	9.000	0.014
Free and fair elections	8.945	0.015
Courts being able to stop the government from acting beyond its authority	8.793	0.018
Governments protecting all citizens against poverty	8.758	0.016
Minority rights being protected	8.522	0.016
Opposition parties being free to criticize the government	8.256	0.019
Citizens having the final say via referendum	8.249	0.018
Governments reducing differences in income levels	8.160	0.019
The media being free to criticize the government	8.059	0.021
Voters discussing politics before they vote	7.431	0.021

**Table 3: Attitudes About Elements of Democracy by Previous Vote Choices**

Is this trait important for democracy?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Free and fair elections	Media Can Criticize	Opposition Parties Can Criticize	Courts Can Stop the Government from Exceeding its Authority	Minority Rights are Protected	Voters Discuss Politics	Referendum	Governments explain their decisions to voters	Governments protect all citizens against poverty	Governments reduce differences in income levels
Populist	-0.13 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.07)	0.04 (0.09)	0.08 (0.05)	-0.16* (0.06)	0.04 (0.14)	0.30** (0.09)	0.10** (0.03)	0.19 (0.10)	0.31** (0.08)
Abstained	-0.25*** (0.06)	0.02 (0.09)	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.12 (0.07)	-0.11 (0.08)	-0.17** (0.05)	-0.12 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.06)	0.02 (0.07)	0.00 (0.08)
Refused to Say How Voted	0.03 (0.05)	-0.09 (0.10)	-0.27** (0.09)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.19 (0.11)	-0.21* (0.09)	-0.00 (0.10)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.12* (0.04)	-0.01 (0.07)
Don't Know How Voted	-0.22*** (0.06)	-0.22 (0.16)	-0.27 (0.16)	-0.25** (0.08)	-0.10 (0.09)	-0.26 (0.17)	-0.22* (0.09)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.22* (0.08)	-0.22* (0.10)
Did Not Answer Voting Question	-0.70** (0.19)	0.07 (0.14)	-0.04 (0.18)	0.09 (0.05)	-0.09 (0.13)	-0.53*** (0.12)	-2.01** (0.66)	0.25 (0.15)	-0.08 (0.25)	0.13 (0.12)
Voted for "Other" Party	-0.10 (0.08)	0.11 (0.17)	-0.18 (0.16)	0.20 (0.24)	0.03 (0.18)	0.14 (0.13)	0.07 (0.14)	-0.28 (0.16)	-0.29 (0.20)	-0.53 (0.30)
Cast a Blank or Invalid Vote	-0.19** (0.06)	-0.39*** (0.08)	-0.25** (0.07)	-0.15 (0.09)	-0.36 (0.32)	-0.52*** (0.09)	-0.20 (0.21)	-0.26 (0.22)	-0.21 (0.10)	-0.11 (0.07)
Voted for the Chief Executive's Party	0.13* (0.05)	-0.17 (0.11)	-0.13* (0.05)	0.08 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.10 (0.09)	0.07 (0.04)	0.03 (0.06)	-0.12 (0.16)
Voted for A Cabinet Party	0.15* (0.07)	-0.06 (0.14)	-0.14 (0.09)	0.02 (0.10)	0.09 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.03 (0.08)	0.10** (0.03)	0.12 (0.06)	0.06 (0.11)
Political Interest	0.22*** (0.02)	0.26*** (0.03)	0.32*** (0.03)	0.09* (0.04)	0.16*** (0.03)	0.26*** (0.02)	0.07** (0.02)	0.16*** (0.03)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.02 (0.04)
Participation Index	0.09*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.09*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.03)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.05** (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)
Trusts Politicians	0.01 (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.04* (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)

Place in Society	0.03*	0.03	0.04	0.01	0.01	0.08***	0.02	0.01	-0.03	-0.04*
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Group is Discriminated Against	0.19*	0.24***	0.38***	0.07*	0.25***	0.16*	0.18***	0.16*	0.12*	0.02
	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Income Decile	0.03***	0.03**	0.04***	0.01	0.03**	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	-0.08***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Respondent is on the left (0-3)	0.14**	0.42***	0.30**	0.12	0.29***	0.21*	0.19**	0.13***	0.35***	0.55***
	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.01)	(0.06)	(0.09)
Respondent is on the right (7-10)	-0.03	-0.09	-0.03	-0.07	-0.13***	0.01	0.12*	0.01	-0.11*	-0.33***
	(0.07)	(0.11)	(0.07)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.08)
Respondent did not answer left-right question	0.15	0.14	0.11	0.20	0.07	0.19	0.16	0.05	0.23**	0.09
	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.10)
Education category	0.12***	0.13***	0.12***	0.06***	0.10***	0.06**	-0.08*	0.01	-0.07*	-0.09***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.01)
Female	-0.11**	-0.27***	-0.28***	-0.08	-0.02	-0.08	0.07	0.08*	0.12*	0.24***
	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Age 20-29	0.37**	0.30	0.84**	0.36*	0.27	0.13	0.39	0.28	0.22	-0.07
	(0.13)	(0.28)	(0.23)	(0.16)	(0.22)	(0.14)	(0.21)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.30)
Age 30-39	0.46**	0.45	0.86**	0.44***	0.32	0.26	0.38	0.22	0.35	0.15
	(0.15)	(0.30)	(0.28)	(0.10)	(0.25)	(0.16)	(0.21)	(0.18)	(0.17)	(0.23)
Age 40-49	0.54***	0.68*	1.17***	0.61***	0.49*	0.46*	0.47*	0.40*	0.51**	0.27
	(0.14)	(0.26)	(0.24)	(0.14)	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.21)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.20)
Age 50-59	0.46**	0.61	1.14***	0.39***	0.48*	0.47**	0.44*	0.41**	0.48**	0.42
	(0.13)	(0.32)	(0.25)	(0.09)	(0.20)	(0.16)	(0.17)	(0.14)	(0.16)	(0.24)
Age 60-69	0.54**	0.69*	1.19***	0.43***	0.47*	0.43**	0.33	0.41**	0.46*	0.37
	(0.16)	(0.30)	(0.25)	(0.11)	(0.20)	(0.15)	(0.17)	(0.15)	(0.17)	(0.23)
Age 70-79	0.55**	0.52	1.14***	0.18	0.25	0.21	0.18	0.33*	0.46*	0.41
	(0.19)	(0.32)	(0.28)	(0.11)	(0.21)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.13)	(0.17)	(0.23)
Age 80+	0.61**	0.43	1.07**	0.14	0.23	-0.06	0.16	0.32*	0.19	0.18
	(0.20)	(0.29)	(0.29)	(0.08)	(0.20)	(0.24)	(0.22)	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.22)
Constant	6.68***	5.90***	5.47***	7.57***	6.71***	5.41***	7.58***	7.95***	8.42***	8.38***
	(0.26)	(0.27)	(0.31)	(0.14)	(0.32)	(0.22)	(0.32)	(0.21)	(0.24)	(0.23)
Observations	31,719	31,682	31,507	31,108	31,477	31,418	31,492	31,757	31,781	31,642
R <sup>2</sup>	0.14	0.11	0.13	0.09	0.13	0.06	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.14

OLS regression, Robust standard errors in parentheses. Contains country dummy variables and a control for the 5-star movement.

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05 (two tailed)

**Table 4: Attitudes About Tradeoffs Within democracy by Previous Vote Choice**

	(1) The Government Should Follow the Public	(2) People With Extreme Views Should Be Allowed to Express their Views	(3) Single Party Government is Preferable to Coalition Government
Populist	0.45*** (0.11)	0.00 (0.11)	0.06 (0.11)
Abstained	-0.11 (0.09)	-0.06 (0.07)	0.02 (0.14)
Refused to Say How Voted	-0.09 (0.08)	0.16 (0.11)	0.07 (0.14)
Don't Know How Voted	-0.02 (0.11)	0.02 (0.07)	0.23 (0.15)
Did Not Answer Voting Question	1.21 (0.97)	1.40 (0.85)	0.97** (0.33)
Voted for "Other" Party	0.01 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.09)	-0.20 (0.17)
Cast a Blank or Invalid Vote	-0.36 (0.33)	-0.28** (0.08)	0.18* (0.09)
Voted for the Chief Executive's Party	-0.35** (0.13)	0.00 (0.09)	0.24 (0.14)
Voted for A Cabinet Party	-0.10 (0.09)	0.02 (0.11)	-0.19* (0.08)
Political Interest	-0.15*** (0.04)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.04)
Participation Index	-0.01 (0.02)	0.03** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.02)
Trusts Politicians	-0.11*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.03 (0.02)
Place in Society	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.02)
Group is Discriminated Against	-0.07 (0.11)	-0.12 (0.12)	0.15 (0.09)

Education category	-0.10*** (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)
Income Decile	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01** (0.00)
Respondent is on the left (0-3)	0.18** (0.06)	0.06 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.11)
Respondent is on the right (7-10)	-0.12 (0.07)	0.08 (0.08)	0.22*** (0.06)
Respondent did not answer left-right question	0.06 (0.09)	-0.16 (0.11)	-0.11 (0.14)
Female	0.29*** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.17** (0.06)
Age 20-29	-0.10 (0.24)	-0.60** (0.20)	-0.06 (0.24)
Age 30-39	-0.31 (0.24)	-0.67*** (0.18)	-0.06 (0.23)
Age 40-49	-0.35 (0.20)	-0.62*** (0.14)	0.00 (0.28)
Age 50-59	-0.34 (0.23)	-0.56*** (0.17)	-0.01 (0.35)
Age 60-69	-0.45 (0.24)	-0.56** (0.19)	0.00 (0.26)
Age 70-79	-0.76*** (0.20)	-0.64*** (0.17)	-0.28 (0.38)
Age 80+	-0.61* (0.30)	-0.98*** (0.19)	-0.16 (0.32)
Observations	32,209	32,255	31,640

Ordered Logit, Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Contains country dummy variables and a control for the 5-star movement. Cutpoints excluded for space.

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05 (two-tailed)

**Table 5: Attitudes About Democracy by Populist Vote and By Ideology**

	Minority rights are protected	Public should have final say via referendum	Governments explain their decisions to voters	Governments reducing differences in income levels	The government should follow the public
Proposition being tested:					
(1) All populists are equal	1.28	0.32	1.04	3.27 <sup>°</sup>	7.69*
(2) Left Populist=Right Populist	2.49	0.21	0.71	5.75*	4.80*
(3) Left Non-Populists=Left Populist	3.29 <sup>°</sup>	4.07 <sup>°</sup>	1.04	2.40	1.44
(4) Center Non-Populists=Center Populist	6.15*	1.86	0.34	0.72	0.00
(5) Right Non-Populists=Right Populist	0.02	6.87*	19.29***	27.60***	25.12***
F-tests testing the equality of coefficients from the models in Appendix 2.					
<sup>°</sup> p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001 (two-tailed)					

**Table 6: Specific and Diffuse Support for Democracy by Previous Vote Choice**

	(1) Satisfaction with Democracy	(2) It is Important to Live in a Democracy
Populist	-0.52** (0.16)	-0.34** (0.09)
Abstained	-0.10 (0.13)	-0.32*** (0.05)
Refused to Say How Voted	0.04 (0.19)	0.01 (0.11)
Don't Know How Voted	-0.14 (0.15)	-0.31*** (0.06)
Did Not Answer Voting Question	-0.66** (0.21)	-1.11** (0.35)
Voted for "Other" Party	-0.29 (0.20)	-0.23 (0.19)
Cast a Blank or Invalid Vote	-0.26* (0.10)	-0.18** (0.05)
Voted for the Chief Executive's Party	0.41* (0.16)	0.13* (0.06)
Voted for A Cabinet Party	0.20* (0.09)	0.11 (0.08)
Political Interest	0.05 (0.06)	0.36*** (0.04)
Participation Index	-0.06** (0.02)	0.07* (0.03)
Trusts Politicians	0.43*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.01)
Place in Society	0.10*** (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)
Group is Discriminated Against	-0.44*** (0.11)	-0.01 (0.09)
Education category	0.04* (0.02)	0.13*** (0.02)
Income Decile	0.03* (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)
Respondent is on the left (0-3)	-0.17 (0.11)	0.14** (0.05)
Respondent is on the right (7-10)	0.12 (0.06)	0.08 (0.07)
Respondent did not answer left-right question	-0.39** (0.13)	-0.12 (0.15)
Female	-0.15** (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
Age 20-29	0.16 (0.26)	0.45 (0.29)

Age 30-39	0.20 (0.25)	0.46 (0.30)
Age 40-49	0.21 (0.23)	0.75** (0.26)
Age 50-59	0.08 (0.26)	0.60* (0.26)
Age 60-69	0.16 (0.29)	0.60* (0.29)
Age 70-79	0.30 (0.26)	0.76* (0.33)
Age 80+	0.34 (0.36)	0.80* (0.37)
Constant	2.82*** (0.33)	5.76*** (0.35)
Observations	31,520	31,754
R <sup>2</sup>	0.37	0.17

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OLS regression, Robust standard errors in parentheses. Contains country dummy variables and a control for the 5-star movement.

\*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05 (two tailed)

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