

Do populist parties support referendums? A comparative analysis of election manifestos in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Earlier research refers to populist parties as being advocates of a greater use of referendum. Yet, there has been no large-scale systematic test of this claim. This article addresses this gap in the literature and tests the relationship between populism and greater use for referendums in party manifestos. It analyzes 824 manifestos of 187 populist and non-populist parties in 27 Member States of the European Union between 1994 and 2018. We test if populist parties are virtually all in favor of a greater use of referendums and whether they would talk about referendums much more than non-populist parties.

1. Introduction

One of the common definitions of populism considers it a “thin-centered 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* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2007, p. 23). Populists would propose a model of government that increases the power of the people, while reducing the role of elected elites that should be held at check. This conception has been translated for many authors into demands for a democratic regime in which the instruments of direct democracy would play a central role. According to Mudde (2007, p. 152), “virtually all populist radical right parties call for its (referendum’s) introduction or increased use”. As more recent studies explain “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, Akkerman and Zaslove, 2018, p. 520).

Building on this, research has been published over recent years examining whether there was indeed a link between populism and public support for direct democracy. We do not seek to engage with this debate. Instead, we suggest going back to a central claim made by Mudde. Scholars refer to examples of populist parties being advocates of a greater use of referendum (Bowler et al., 2017; Mohrenberg, Huber and Freyburg, 2019). Yet, there has been no large-scale systematic test of this claim. This article addresses this gap in the literature and tests the

relationship between populism and greater use for referendums in party manifestos. It analyzes the manifestos of populist and non-populist parties in 27 Member States of the European Union between 1994 and 2018.

The next section outlines our theoretical expectations and formulates two testable hypotheses. Next, we briefly present our cases and data. The fourth section includes the analysis and interpretation of results. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of findings for the study of populism and referendums.

2. Theoretical expectations

According to many authors, contemporary populism articulates two core ideas: populism is people-centric and anti-elitist (Mudde, 2004; Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove, 2014). The people-centrism of populism is also stressed by various other scholars. For Meny and Surel (2002, p. 9) “populist movements speak and behave as if democracy meant the power of the people and only the power of the people”. Canovan (1999, p. 10) connects it to a redemptive vision of democracy that populists defend and for which “The people are the only source of legitimate authority, and salvation is promised as and when they take charge of their own lives”. Therefore, democracy should allow “direct, unmediated expression of the people’s will” (Canovan, 1999, p. 13).

Several authors derived from these elements that populism would be associated to a model of government in which referendums would be a central instrument as the “closest institutional arrangement in which an

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unmediated people's will is expressed" (Caramani, 2017, p. 62) as well as an efficient way of keeping the elite under scrutiny. Consequently, over recent years, we have observed several studies that have recently connected populist attitudes among citizens and support for a greater use of referendums. Their findings indeed indicate that populist attitudes in the public are positively associated with the support for referendums either in terms of use or in terms of providing them a more decisive role in the decision-making process. Evidence comes from the Netherlands (Jacobs, Akkerman and Zaslove, 2018; Zaslove et al., 2020), a comparison of France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK (Mohrenberg et al., 2019), and of 17 European countries (Rose and Wessels, 2020). Another approach has been proposed by authors such as Bowler et al. (2017) or Rooduijn (2018) who study voters of populist parties to see whether they are more supportive of referendums than the rest of the electorate. Their findings are more mixed. Bowler et al. (2017) did not find that voters of radical right populist parties in Canada, Australia and New Zealand were more in favor of referendums than other voters. Studying the electorates of 15 European populist parties, Rooduijn (2018) found that support for referendum was only discriminating populist voters in a few countries. Part of the explanation could be found in a study of Dutch citizens that shows that populist parties attract citizens with populist attitudes but also some with rather elitist views on democracy (Akkerman et al., 2014).

Such contrasting findings regarding populist voters' attitudes towards referendums demonstrate the necessity to verify empirically the claim that populism and support for direct democracy are always closely associated. It is what we propose in this article, but we shift the focus to political parties. Surprisingly, no study to our knowledge has ever tested empirically for a great number of parties and across several countries whether populist parties are indeed promoting direct democracy. We propose to do it here and to develop two main hypotheses. The first one is directly derived from Mudde's claim that (2007, p. 152), "virtually all populist radical right parties call for its (referendum's) introduction or increased use". If the claim is right, we would observe it by analyzing manifestos of populist parties.

H1. All populist parties are in favor of a greater use of referendums.

Yet, other parties may also promote direct democracy. In particular, green parties have also been historically pushing for a greater use of referendums (van Haute, 2016). However, over recent years, it has appeared that green parties were shifting towards the promotion of other logics of citizens' participation to policy-making such as participatory and deliberative democracy. By contrast, according to the literature, direct democracy is not just a way to make citizens participate. It lies at the very core of the model of government populist promote. It connects to the core dimensions of people-centrism and anti-elitism. Therefore, we would not only expect populist parties to call for a greater use of referendums. We would expect the issue to be more salient for them than for non-populist parties. Our second hypothesis would therefore be that populist parties are the ones making most claims among all parties in favor of a greater use of referendums.

H2. Support for a greater use of referendums is stronger within populist parties than within non-populist parties.

3. Cases and data

The analysis includes party manifestos in 27 Member States of the European Union (EU) between 1994 and 2018.¹ The starting point in each country differs because our point of reference is the moment when referendums started being politicized in that country. For example, the starting point for Austria is 1999 because that is the first time when a

political party mentioned the referendum. We look for the election manifestos of all parties represented in the national parliaments. We use the database of the Comparative Manifesto Project in which we search for the key word "referendum(s)" and its local declinations² in the national languages. We do not search for other mechanisms related to direct or participatory democracy because there are different understandings of these concepts across countries. For example, for "direct democracy" political parties use a great variety of procedures ranging from citizens' involvement in decision-making in a vague form to initiatives or even recalls. Instead, the meaning of "referendum" is quite straightforward.

Using this logic, we have been able to detect the first election year with at least one party mentioning referendums in its manifesto. We started from there and then examined systematically all party manifestos from all parliamentary parties. The manifestos were read and coded. It was done by the authors in those countries for which they master the national language. In the other countries, the authors worked with local national experts – PhD or postdocs. They were asked to identify the parts of party manifestos mentioning referendums and to translate them into English. The translated parts were then read and coded by the authors. First, the manifestos were coded in four categories relative to the use of referendums: 1) no reference to referendums, 2) neutral reference to referendums, 3) in favor of referendum and 4) against referendum.³ Neutral references are those that refer to the concept but make no claim about whether they support or oppose the use of referendums. For example, the 2008 manifesto of the Spanish PSOE refers to the referendum about the Constitutional Treaty "The new Treaty, which we undertake to ratify – (...) the draft European Constitution approved in a referendum by the Spanish citizens – is one more step in the process of European integration but not its final point". Another example comes from the 2011 manifesto of the Left Bloc in Portugal: "In these elections, voting is as simple as in a referendum". Statements in favor of referendums reflect positive attitudes of political parties to adopt or enhance the use of referendums either in a general or specific way. One example comes from the 1994 of the Socialist Party (SP) in the Netherlands that explicitly argues in favor of citizen-initiated referendums: "Citizens should have the right to call a referendum by filing in a public petition". An example of anti-referendum statement is illustrated by the 2008 manifesto of the Slovenian People's Party in which the high costs of separate referendums are outlined in several places "Referendums are scattered throughout the year, resulting in high costs to organize them" or "the costs incurred by calling an individual referendum are high".

In total, our analysis covers 811 party manifestos out of which 157 belong to populist parties and 654 to non-populist parties. The list of populist parties is taken from the PopuList project. Building on earlier research we have added two parties to the list of the PopuList project: PTB-PVDA in Belgium (Pauwels, 2014) and SNP in the UK (Heinisch et al., 2019). We do not consider as populists the Citizens for European

² For example, we also search for references to 'consultation Populaire/volksraadpleging' in Belgium, to 'volksabstimmung in Austria and Germany, or to 'plebiscito' in Spain and Italy.

³ There are two instances in which a political party makes both an anti-referendum and a pro-referendum statement in the same manifesto: the People's Party – Reformists in Croatia (2014) and the Conservative Party in the UK (2017). In both instances, the positive claims are for a greater use of referendums in general, and the negative ones are against one specific referendum (a new referendum on Scottish independence and a referendum on the competences of the executive in Croatia). As a consequence, in order not to count those parties twice in our analyses, we treat the two parties as belonging to the category of speaking in favor of referendums.

¹ We exclude Malta from the analysis because none of its parties made any reference to referendums in none of the election manifestos.

Development of Bulgaria (Ganev, 2018). Each party manifesto⁴ was coded by one of the authors, and then the coding was revised by the other author. In case of disagreement, the two authors discussed the appropriate coding.⁵

4. Analysis and results

Our analysis starts with the testing of H1 in which we seek to understand whether all populist parties are in favor of a greater use of referendums. We therefore only consider manifestos of populist parties. The unit of analysis is the election manifesto. Fig. 1 reports the distribution of populist party manifestos according to their content. It shows that out of the 157 manifestos belonging to populist actors only 84 include references to referendums. Among those manifestos with references to referendums, most of them are in favor of greater use of referendums, but roughly one fifth is neutral. This aggregate picture allows nuancing the statement according to which all populists strive for greater use of referendums. More than half of the manifestos published by populist parties in Europe either do not refer to referendums (46%) or do it in a neutral manner (9%), without making any substantive claim about them.

Nevertheless, it provides some empirical support for H1. This distribution indicates that no manifesto of populist parties includes claims opposing the use of referendums. Also, when the populists mention referendums, they are usually in favor of its use and build substantive arguments around them. For example, in 2002 the Association for the Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia calls for the introduction of national referendums on tax issues and insists that local referendums should become part of the “natural law”. Similarly, in their 2014 manifesto the Patriotic Front - NFSB and VMRO in Bulgaria explicitly states that the use of mineral resources and the building of new religious building must happen only after regional or national referendums.

Next, we zoom in by examining only the 72 populist manifestos that contain positive references about referendums. Fig. 2 depicts the number of claims for a greater use of referendums for each populist manifesto. The horizontal axis includes the number of times a manifesto

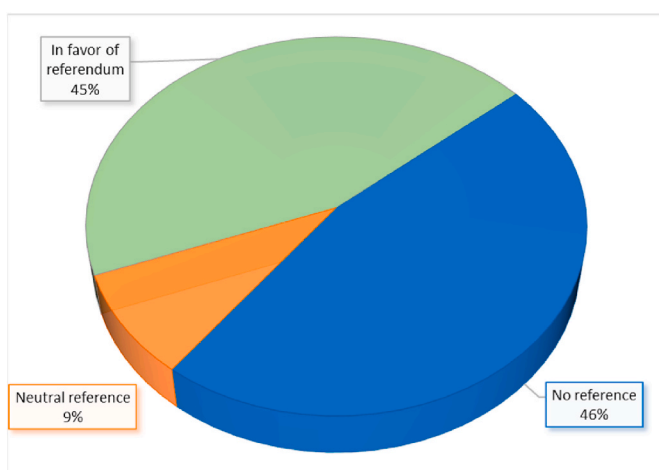


Fig. 1. Position towards referendum in populist parties' manifestos (N = 157).

⁴ In some parts of the analysis, we use only some of these manifestos. For example, when we only compare populist parties among themselves, or when we only study those parties that have at least one reference to referendum in their manifesto.

⁵ No statistical test of intercoder reliability was formally calculated as the two authors worked in direct relationship on the coding.

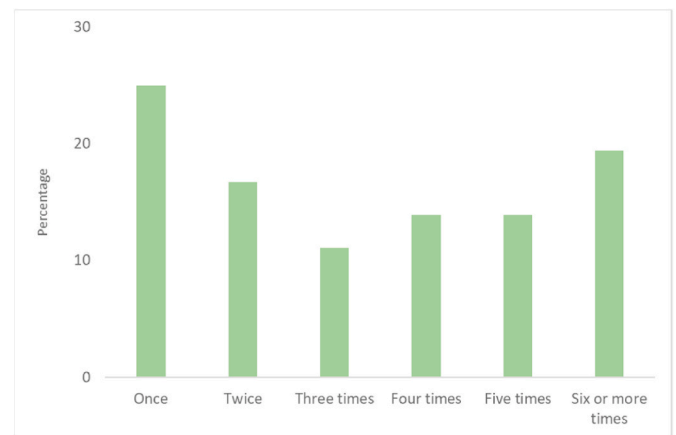


Fig. 2. Number of positive references to referendums in populist manifestos (N = 72).

refers to referendums (count variable), while the vertical axis includes the percentages. The distribution indicates that even when populists are in favor of referendums, there is much variation in the extent to which they express it. One quarter of the populist manifestos make only one reference about greater use of referendums. That is the largest category and includes parties such as the Progress Party in Denmark (2011), Slovenian National Party (2011), Freedom Party of Austria (2013), or National Front in France (2017). In more than half of the manifestos covered by our analysis populist political parties make maximum three references to greater use of referendums (a sum of the first three columns).

At the same time, there are quite a few parties that talk a lot about referendums, with six or more references about greater use in their manifestos (e.g. Jobbik in 2010 and 2014, UKIP in 2015, France Insoumise in 2017, Five Star Movement in 2018). For several populist parties, the salience of referendum in the election manifesto – calculated by the number of references to referendum in one manifesto - changes from one election to the other. For example, Order and Justice in Lithuania makes one reference in its 2004 manifesto, three in 2008, two in 2012 and back to one in 2016.

Let us now briefly turn to how the support for referendums varies over time among populist parties. Since Mudde's claim in 2007 the number of populist parties increased significantly. New populist parties have appeared or gained parliamentary representation, especially on the left-side of the political spectrum (e.g. Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, PTB-PVDA in Belgium). The debates about referendums have changed in nature and broadened over time. In the 1990s and 2000s, referendums were much about international affairs (including EU accession and treaties) or constitutional matters. In the last decade, many referendums in Europe are about postmaterialist issues (Silagadze and Gherghina, 2019).

Consequently, it is relevant to see whether populist parties' claims for greater use of referendums evolved over time. We use the same 72 manifestos that we used in Fig. 2 and we look at the total number of references to referendum made every year in the manifestos of populist parties. Fig. 3 shows that number of claims for a greater use of referendums grew over time in the election manifestos of populist parties. There is a visible increase since 2007 that can be explained in two ways. First, there are more populist parties running in elections. We calculate the share of populist parties out of the total number of parties running in each election covered by our dataset. When comparing the pre- and post-2007 periods, there are on average 15.9% (standard error 2.25) populist parties running before 2007 and 21.7% (standard error 1.48) populist parties after 2007 across all 27 countries. Second, there are particular contexts in which more parties – both populist and non-populist - discuss about referendums. For example, the 2014 Scottish Independence, 2016

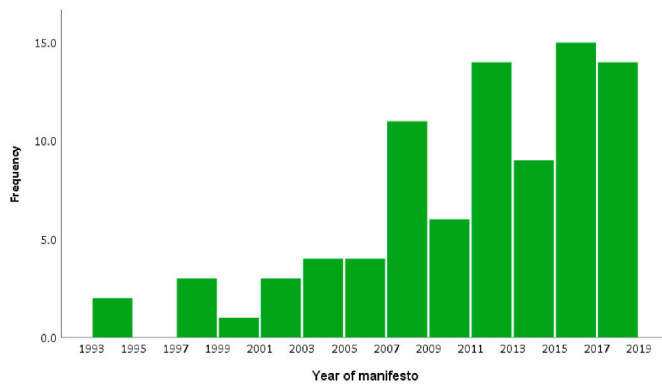


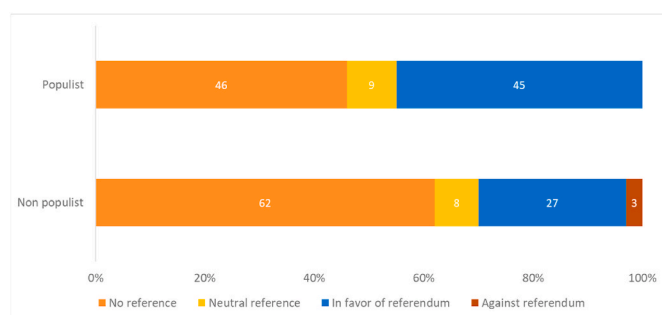
Fig. 3. Total number of positive references to referendums in populist manifestos per year (N = 72).

Brexit, the 2016 referendum in the Netherlands about Ukraine or the 2017 Catalan independence brought specific sentences in the manifestos. The evidence presented later in this paper (Fig. 5, Table 2 and Table 3) substantiates both explanations and indicates that on average populists do not differ considerably from non-populists in their references to referendums, and the approach of individual parties is relatively stable over time.

The evidence presented so far brings only limited empirical support to H1. It is true that no populist parties stand clearly against referendums. And whenever populists refer to referendums, four out of five times they call for a greater use of referendums. This happens more intensely after 2005. But the extent of claims in favor of referendums vary greatly (Fig. 2). More importantly, and in contradiction to H1, we also see that almost half of the populist parties say nothing about referendums, which is a relevant finding especially for the authors who wish to establish a deterministic relationship between populists and referendums.

4.1. Populist vs. non-populist parties

We test now whether populist parties support referendums more than the non-populist parties (H2). We proceed in two steps. First, we look at each election manifesto published and examine whether it is coded as a manifesto that does not talk at all about referendum, that mentions referendum but remain neutral about its use, that supports a greater use of referendum, or that it negative about referendum. The unit of analysis is the election manifesto and we compare manifestos of populist and of non-populist parties. The expectation is that among non-populist parties we will find fewer election manifestos that support referendums. And indeed, in Fig. 4, we see that non-populist parties have a higher percentage of manifestos that make no reference to referendums compared to the manifestos of populist parties (62% vs. 46%).



Note: 665 non-populists and 159 populists.

Fig. 4. Position towards referendums in election manifestos of populist and non-populist parties (N = 824). Note: 665 non-populists and 159 populists.

The Mann-Whitney Test confirms the existence of an important difference between the non-populists and populists. Its value is 42632.50 that indicates a higher sum of ranks for the non-populist category (they have more manifestos with no reference to referendums). The Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed), is 0.00, which is evidence that the distribution of references to manifestos is different in the two groups of parties. In parallel, in Fig. 4, we might also observe that the smaller share of manifestos supporting referendums among non-populist parties is mostly explained by the greater share of manifestos with no reference at all to referendum (62% of all manifestos of non-populist parties). And, although it remains marginal, we also observe 3% of all manifestos of non-populist parties that contain a negative reference to referendums, a position that was completely absent in manifestos of populist parties.

However, if we consider only those election manifestos of non-populist parties that refer at least once to referendums, we see that in the vast majority (70%) they do it on a positive note,⁶ i.e. they ask for greater use of referendums. This is where they resemble greatly the populists although the percentage of manifestos of the latter speaking in favor of referendums was somewhat higher (8 out of 10). Yet, the main difference between the election manifestos of the two types of parties is the existence of claims against referendums in election manifestos of non-populists. Such manifestos that stand against referendums remain rare. It could be explained by the concept of act-contingent motivations (Reed and Thies, 2001), which refers to situations in which it would be extremely hard for any party to stand publicly against a reform that appears more democratic among the electorate. Reed and Thies initially applied the concept to electoral reforms in Japan in the 1900s but it could certainly be expanded to referendums that are widely supported by voters in most European countries (Schuck and de Vreese, 2015).

Nevertheless, we find 3% of all manifestos of non-populist parties, while there was none for the populist parties. The exact content of these claims against referendum varies greatly. For example, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) in the Netherlands explicitly argues in its 2017 manifesto that it is against any type of referendum at any level because of its over-simplification that such a practice entails both in terms of the question and of the problem subjected to voting. The 2017 manifesto of the Green Left in the same country argues in favor of deliberation legislation to replace the referendum. In its 2011 manifesto, Positive Slovenia speaks about restricting the use of referendums to those initiated by citizens and with a very high participation quorum compared to the legal requirements in place at the time. The following countries include election manifestos with negative references to referendums: Italy and Spain (each one election manifesto), UK (two), Slovenia (four) and the Netherlands (10).

This distribution provides limited empirical support for H2 because many non-populist parties in Europe are also very much in favor of a greater use of referendums and very few oppose it. To complement this observation, we run bivariate and multivariate analyses with two dependent variables: 1) the positive tone of the manifestos and 2) the number of references to referendums. The two dependent variables are positively and significantly correlated (Table 1). For the first dependent variable, we code 1 all those manifestos in which referendums are promoted/encouraged and 0 all other instances (neutral or against). The number of references to referendums – our second dependent variable – is a count variable. We have two categories of independent variables: four party level variables and two country level variables. The party level variables are measured as follows: populists are coded 1 and non-populists 0; age of the party is calculated at the time of the manifesto; incumbency is coded 1 for party in government and 0 for party in opposition at the time of election; the number of terms in office is a count variable reflecting the prior experience in government of the party. The country level variables are: the existence of one referendum one year

⁶ This share is calculated out of those 32% manifestos in which non-populists refer to referendums.

before, the same year or one year after the election manifesto is coded dichotomously as 0 for absence and for existence of such a referendum⁷; the constitutional structure is an augmented index that accounts for five indicators (federalism, parliamentary government, proportional representation, bicameralism and frequent referendums). This indicator was meant to gauge the systemic constraints for referendums and data comes from [Armingeon et al. \(2021\)](#).

The binary and ordinal logistic regression models are run with country clustered robust standard errors due to low independence of cases and country level measurement of the last variable. We also ran models with fixed country effects but their results do not differ substantially from what we report in this paper ([Appendix 1](#)). Compared to the models that we report, the model fit is better and the effect size of populist parties on the frequency of references to referendums is somewhat stronger and remains statistically significant.

We start with the bivariate correlations (see [Table 1](#), columns 2 and 4). First, the results indicate a weak positive correlation (0.13, statistically significant at 0.05 – see column 1) between being a manifesto authored by a populist party and a positive tone of the manifesto regarding referendums (also reflected in [Fig. 4](#)). Populist parties appear to publish more often manifestos containing claims for a greater use of referendum but the difference from manifestos of non-populist parties is not very large. The existence of a referendum within one year before or after the manifesto correlates negatively and statistically significant with the tone of references to referendum. This means that political parties refer positively to referendums when these are not organized around the moment of the manifesto. All other variables correlate weakly with the tone of references to referendums, but none of the coefficients are statistically significant. The results indicate that parties that are new, in opposition, with less experience in government, and coming from countries with a more permissive constitutional structure are to a limited extent more favorable to referendums.

Secondly, election manifestos of populist parties contain more references to referendums compared to non-populists: a correlation coefficient of 0.22, statistically significant at 0.01. These two findings are connected. Manifestos with positive references to referendums also contain more references overall to this instrument of direct democracy, compared to parties that speak neutrally or oppose them (positive correlation of 0.23, statistically significant). The age of the party and the constitutional structure are not correlated with the references to referendum, while the parties in opposition, those with scarce presence in government, and those with manifestos written around the organization of a referendum speak only slightly more than the other parties about referendums. None of the correlations is statistically significant.

These findings indicate that populism is the only one that correlates with both the tone and frequency of references to referendums. This is strengthened when controlling for the other factors in the multivariate regression models (see [Table 1](#), columns 3 and 5 columns). We observe that being a populist has a positive and strong effect on both the tone and the number of references to referendums, statistically significant in both cases. None of the controls has a strong or significant effect on both the tone and frequency of references to referendums. Referendums organized around the time of the manifesto have strong and negative effect on the tone (parties are more positive towards referendums when these are not in sight) but it has very limited effect, not statistically significant, on the frequency of references to referendums. All this evidence indicates that populists make more references to referendums compared to

⁷ We use one year before and after the election manifesto to avoid counting the same referendum twice. Most countries have regular elections after four years and if we count the referendum within two years from the manifesto, the latter could be a point of reference for two different manifestos. To avoid counting twice with our measure, we code 0 the 2017 UK manifestos because although they are one year after the Brexit referendum, the latter was coded 1 for the 2015 UK manifestos.

Table 1

Bivariate correlations and logistic regressions (N = 336).

	Tone of references to referendums		Frequency of references to referendum	
	Correlation	Binary logistic regression (ORs)	Correlation	Ordinal logistic regression (ORs)
Populists	0.13*	2.36* (0.90)	0.22**	2.42** (0.66)
Tone of references			0.23**	
Frequency of references	0.23**			
Age of the party	-0.04	0.99 (0.01)	-0.03	1.00 (0.01)
Incumbency	-0.09	0.59 (0.17)	-0.05	0.98 (0.28)
Terms in office	-0.08	1.06 (0.04)	-0.10	0.97 (0.04)
Referendums in country	-0.20**	0.37** (0.12)	0.06	1.19 (0.34)
Constitutional structure	-0.06	0.93 (0.05)	0.01	0.96 (0.06)
Pseudo R ²		0.06		0.02

Notes: Correlation coefficients are non-parametric (Spearman).

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

non-populists, which brings additional support for [H2](#).

The next step in the analysis is to turn to a country level analysis for a more fine-grained testing of the hypotheses. Rather than comparing populist and non-populist parties across all European countries, we would rather contrast their attitudes towards referendums within countries. The goal is to evaluate whether we observe that populist parties in each country tend to be more in favor of referendums than non-populist parties (both in the tone of their manifesto and the number of claims they make about referendum). There is at least one populist party identified in every country investigated here. For this analysis we use the number of manifestos in which there is at least one reference to referendums (336). In [Fig. 5](#), we calculate the percentage of references to referendums done by populists relative to the total number of references to referendums in all election manifestos analyzed in that country. The greater the share, the more populist parties dominate the debates on referendum in the country by having manifestos that talk much more about referendum than non-populist parties.

The results indicate that there is great variation across countries. There are five countries in which all references to referendums belong exclusively to non populists: Cyprus, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal and Romania. It means that in these five countries, the populist parties make no reference to referendums in their election manifestos. Instead, claims for a greater use of referendums come from non-populist parties. In other countries, populist parties make references to referendums but overall the majority of claims about referendums are made by non-populist parties. The only two exceptions are Bulgaria and Lithuania. In other words, [Fig. 5](#) indicates that populist parties do not dominate debates on referendum in most European countries.

[Table 2](#) shows the average tone used by non-populist and populist parties towards referendums in 336 party manifestos. We code as 0 all references that are neutral or against referendums and as 1 all references that are in favor of referendums. The percentage is calculated at country level as the sum of scores divided by the number of occurrences. For example, in Austria the populist parties make 11 references in favor of the referendum out of 13 total references, which results in a score of 0.85. The scores of 1.00 indicate that there are only positive references to referendums. The Levene's Test for the Equality of Variances has a value of 8.36, statistically significant at the 0.01 level, which means that the variances in the groups of non-populist and populist parties are not equal. The value of the *t*-Test 0.24, not statistically significant ($p = 0.82$). These results indicate that the average tone of the references in party manifestoes does not differ significantly between the groups of non-populist and populist parties.

For a more nuanced analysis we ranked parties in each country based

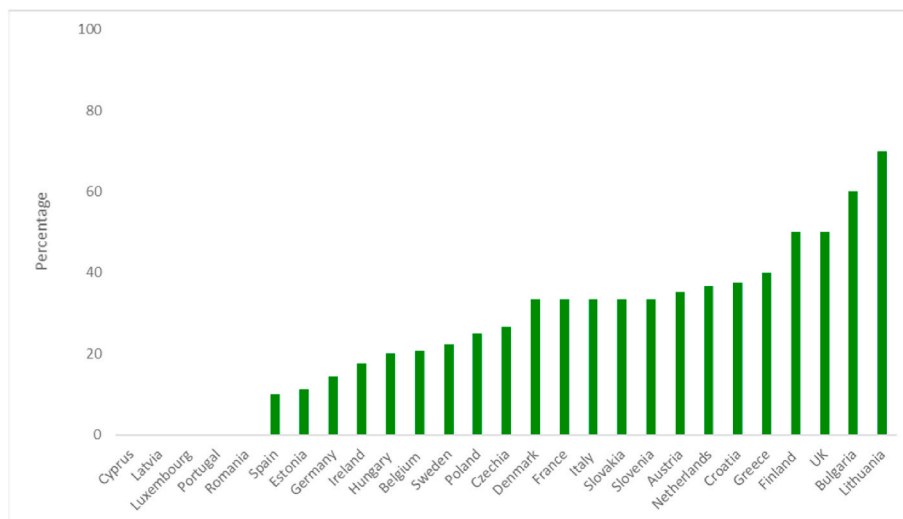


Fig. 5. The share of references to referendums by populists compared to the total number of references to referendum per country (Number of election manifestos covered = 336).

Table 2
The average tone about referendums in party manifestos (N = 336).

	Non populists	Populists
Austria	0.85	1.00
Belgium	0.83	0.67
Bulgaria	0.67	1.00
Croatia	0.71	0.75
Cyprus	0.40	0.00
Czechia	0.92	1.00
Denmark	0.80	1.00
Estonia	1.00	1.00
Finland	1.00	1.00
France	0.86	1.00
Germany	1.00	0.75
Greece	0.60	0.40
Hungary	0.90	0.67
Ireland	0.82	1.00
Italy	0.36	1.00
Latvia	1.00	0.00
Lithuania	0.30	0.78
Luxembourg	0.67	0.00
Netherlands	0.63	1.00
Poland	0.50	1.00
Portugal	0.73	0.00
Romania	1.00	0.00
Slovakia	0.83	1.00
Slovenia	0.27	0.33
Spain	0.78	1.00
Sweden	0.88	1.00
UK	0.47	0.88

on the number of references in favor of referendums made in their election manifestos. The analysis is conducted on 249 manifestos: 72 manifestos for populist parties and 177 for non-populist parties. We observe three configurations: countries in which the party that talks the most about referendum is a populist party, countries in which populists and non populists share the first position in terms of number of references to referendums, and countries in which non populist actors occupy the first position according to the number of references to referendums. The table reports the number of references to referendums corresponding to that first position within each country. The findings clearly indicate that in most countries the most talkative party about referendums is not a populist party. There are only four countries in which a populist party is the one making the highest number of references to referendums: Bulgaria, Slovenia, Lithuania, and the UK. And even in these four countries, the total number of references to referendums by

populist parties is quite limited (2 or 3).

In 11 countries, the top position is shared by non-populist and populist parties. This first position can range between one reference about referendums – as it happens in Denmark or Italy – to four (the Netherlands) or five (Austria). All the four countries used here as examples have a strong presence of populists in their contemporary party systems. In many instances, these populists are vocal about the use of referendums. For example, in 2018 the Five Star Movement advanced the idea of a referendum on the eurozone in Italy. In spite of this emphasis, the party refers to referendums only in one of its manifestos. Finally, in 12 countries, the election manifesto that contains the highest number of claims about referendums was produced by a non populist party. The number of such references varies from 1 like in Cyprus, Latvia or Romania to as many as 4 (Czechia or Spain) or 5 (Germany). This is the category of countries in which many Green or liberal parties stand high on referendums.

As a final step, we calculate the share of populists among all parties in each country using manifestos within the CMP. In Table 3 and Fig. 5, we looked at whether populist parties dominate the debates on referendums in the number of claims made about. Yet, it is harder to appear as dominant in an election were 6 or 7 parliamentary parties are analyzed, with only one populist party, than when there are only 4 parties (and therefore 4 election manifestos analyzed), with 2 populist parties. Fig. 6 tries to counter that problem by examining whether the share of all references made to referendums by populist parties is larger (or smaller) than the share of populist parties in the total number of parties studied in the country. For example, if a country had elections in

Table 3
The country distribution according to references to referendums (N = 249).

More populists		Equal		More non-populists	
Country	N	Country	N	Country	N
Bulgaria	2	Croatia	1	Cyprus	1
Slovenia	2	Denmark	1	Latvia	1
Lithuania	3	Finland	1	Romania	1
UK	3	Italy	1	Estonia	2
		Poland	1	Greece	2
		Slovakia	1	Luxembourg	2
		France	2	Belgium	3
		Hungary	2	Portugal	3
		Ireland	3	Sweden	3
		Netherlands	4	Czechia	4
		Austria	5	Spain	4
				Germany	5

2002, the CMP had 7 manifestos out of which 6 belonged to non-populists and one to a populist, the share of populists in that election is 14.28% ($1/7 \times 100$). We proceed like this with every election in that country and then compute the average of populist share in all elections *per* country. Next, we calculate the share of populists' references to referendums each country and we deduct from it the number calculated according to the procedures described above. For example, Germany has 14.3% of mentions about referendums made by populists and 23.65% share of populists in elections. The difference is -9.35% , which means that the populists in Germany refer less to referendums than what we would expect if all parties refer to it to the same extent. In other words, the sound made by populists in Germany about referendums is less loud than their electoral weight would imply.

The findings are presented in Fig. 6, which provides some empirical support for H2. In many countries, populist parties talk more about referendums than what they weight in the party system. In countries like Finland, Lithuania and Bulgaria, they dominate the debate over referendums when considering their weight. There are other countries where the share of claims made populist parties is relatively close to their electoral weight: Portugal, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Hungary and Slovakia. There are several countries, where non-populist parties dominate claims over referendums to an extent that exceeds their weight in the party system: Romania, Luxembourg, Germany, Latvia and Belgium.

Overall, regarding H2, we would conclude that findings provide mixed support. Populist parties are more often in favor of a greater use of referendums (compared to non-populists) and often they talk more about referendums relative to their weight in the party system. Yet, there are reasons to tone down the claim that populist parties are the main promoters of referendums in contemporary European democracies. First, the non-populist parties oppose referendums only occasionally and most non-populists also favor referendums. Second, populist parties are not the most vocal about referendums. In many countries the share of claims from populist parties about referendums account for less than half of all claims made. Third, there is much variation in how prominent populist parties are in debates about referendums. There are countries in which populist parties talk less about referendums than what their actual weight in the party system would imply, and there are also a good share of countries in which their voice is not louder than their actual electoral weight.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The goal of this article to offer the most comprehensive analysis so far of how populist party relate to referendums by examining 824 manifestos of 187 populist and non-populist parties across 27 European countries. On that basis, we can verify if populist parties are virtually all in favor of a greater use of referendums (H1) and whether their support for referendums would be more pronounced than among non-populist parties (H2). For the latter, we look at both the (positive) tone and frequency of references to referendums in the manifestos of populist and of non-populist parties.

Regarding H1, our findings do not fully confirm it. It is true that no manifesto from any populist party contains any claim against the use of referendums. However, overall manifestos of populist parties are almost equally split between manifestos making no reference at all to referendum (45%) and manifestos with no reference at all to referendums (46%). The size of this latter category is quite surprising considering how central the direct involvement of people in decision-making is considered in most theoretical accounts of populism. This element connects with findings regarding H2 that compares populist and non-populist parties. Many populist parties do not push strongly for referendums. They do not talk about it or make very few references to the idea. They also do not dominate the debate when compared to non-populist parties. A majority non-populist parties also support referendums and in several countries they are the ones making most claims about it. In that sense, it reflects what Taggart (2000, pp. 103–105) wrote two decades ago about the relationship between populism and direct democracy. He argued that while there is indeed a link between populism and referendums, as observed in the strong support for referendums by several populist parties, the relationship is not univocal. Populism is not only about the rule of the people but is also often connected in support for a strong leader. And for some populist parties, the later would prevail above the earlier. Referendums would then only be promoted when they can serve the leader in a plebiscitarian logic.

These findings have several implications for studies on the link between populism and direct democracy. It could lead to questioning whether direct democracy is really that central to populism as an ideology as several prominent authors on the topic claim. Referendums are considered as key instruments to translate institutionally the people-

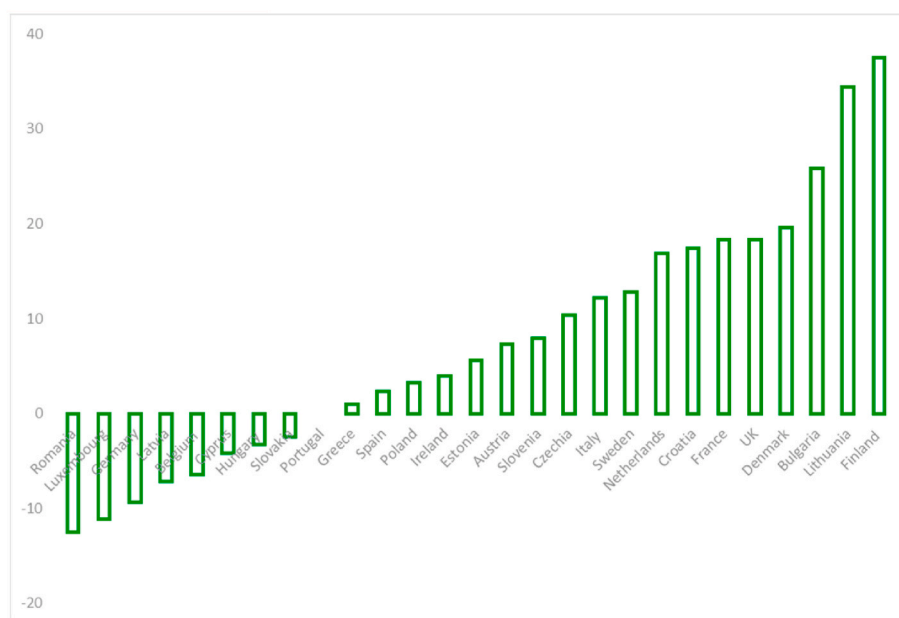


Fig. 6. Difference between the share of references to referendum made in populist election manifestos and the actual share of all manifestos coded in the country (N = 336 manifestos).

centric and anti-elitist claims (see [Mudde, 2007](#); [Caramani, 2017](#); [Jacobs, Akkerman and Zaslove, 2018](#)). Therefore, we may expect that for being qualified as a populist party, a party should be pushing for a greater use of referendums. Yet, our findings show something different. Only half of the populist parties covered by our analysis are supportive of referendums. One could question whether a strong and vocal support for referendum may not be a necessary condition for being classified as a populist party. Should that be the case, this would exclude in many instances parties that are generally considered as populists. Parties such as Flemish Interest in Belgium, Golden Dawn in Greece, Fidesz-MPP in Hungary or the Slovenian Democratic Party have made no positive reference to referendums in none of their manifestos between 1994 and 2018. It is unclear how to consider such parties that do not strive for the involvement of citizens through direct democracy. It is unclear whether to consider them populist or rather as anti-establishment or radical parties on the left/on the right.

Our findings also question whether being supportive of referendums is a sufficient condition to be labelled as a populist party. Even when populist parties call for a greater use of referendums, they do not appear to stand out. Most non-populist parties share the same position. Being pro-referendum appear to be mainstream nowadays across Europe. We can identify a series of non-populist parties (the Greens in France or in the Czech Republic, the Center Party in Estonia, the Red-Green Unity List in Denmark, NSR in Croatia, NEOS in Austria) that are very vocal, more than most populist parties, in their support for referendums.

The less obvious link between populism and support for referendum may also have implications beyond the categorization of political parties as populists or non-populists. It could open debates in the growing number of studies about populist attitudes among citizens. Many of them identified an association between holding populist attitudes and being in favor of more referendums ([Jacobs, Akkerman and Zaslove, 2018](#); [Mohrenberg, Huber and Freyburg, 2019](#); [Zaslove et al., 2020](#)). Corroborated with these studies, our results show that populist citizens are more in line with the dominant conceptualization of populism than many populist parties are. They also show that populist citizens are supportive of more referendums even if in several countries there are exposed to populist parties running for elections without being vocal about direct democracy.

Moreover, our results might also find echo in several studies on

voters of populist parties. A few authors have examined whether preferences for direct democracy are part of the issue-based motivations to cast a vote for a populist party ([Bowler et al., 2017](#); [Rooduijn, 2018](#)). And their findings have been rather mixed. For example, “(support for) ‘Referendum’ exerts a significant positive effect in only 1 out of the 12 cases under study. In all other cases the effects are not statistically significant” ([Rooduijn, 2018](#), p. 362). The weakness of the association could partly be related to the fact that several populist parties do not put great emphasis on referendums in their election manifestos.

Finally, our findings could also be used in relation to recent studies about populist parties in government. According to authors such as [Albertazzi and Mueller \(2013\)](#), populist parties in power have been more prone to call referendums and have promoted direct democracy as a core component of their model of government. Other authors bring evidence that mitigates such claims. For example, Fidesz-MPP in Hungary organized referendums as elite-driven instruments rather than as a people-driven tool to challenge elected elites: “direct democracy is primarily used (and controlled) by the political elite as a tool to mobilise their supporters. In this sense, direct democracy is ‘colonialised’ by the representative system and the political elite. Initiative proposals from outside the political elite have practically no chance of succeeding. Therefore, the control function of direct democracy is virtually non-existent” ([Pállinger, 2019](#), pp. 74–75). This description is in line with what [Taggart \(2000\)](#) argued about the complex relationship between populism and direct democracy in which the latter can also be for populists a tool to empower the leader rather than a people-centric instrument. Our findings are in line with a recent analysis about the M5S in Italy: once in government the party pushed for a greater use of referendums – and actually organized a referendum – but the actions of M5S ministers show that the main priorities of the party were elsewhere than in pushing for a more systematic use of referendums ([Vittori, 2020](#)). These accounts of populist parties in power invite, like our article, to more caution when considering that there is an automatic and specific link between populist parties and their support for direct democracy.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix 1. Logistic regressions with country fixed effects

	Tone of references to referendums Binary logistic regression (ORs)	Frequency of references to referendum Ordinal logistic regression (ORs)
Populists	3.51** (1.43)	3.29** (0.88)
Age of the party	0.99 (0.01)	1.00 (0.01)
Incumbency	0.75 (0.30)	1.17 (0.35)
Terms in office	1.03 (0.05)	0.99 (0.04)
Referendums in country	0.35** (0.13)	1.33 (0.37)
Constitutional structure	0.84 (0.17)	0.89 (0.11)
Belgium	0.71 (1.03)	2.06 (1.68)
Bulgaria	0.82 (1.18)	0.36 (0.22)
Croatia	0.18 (0.20)	0.95 (0.94)
Cyprus	0.07* (0.09)	0.58 (0.51)
Czechia	1.40 (1.92)	0.38 (0.27)
Denmark	0.96 (1.34)	0.24 (0.11)
Estonia	empty	0.29 (0.25)
Finland	empty	0.59 (0.59)
France	0.89 (1.25)	2.33 (1.75)
Germany	3.60 (5.17)	0.30 (0.24)
Greece	0.07* (0.08)	0.89 (0.61)
Hungary	0.52 (0.60)	3.47 (2.32)
Ireland	1.57 (1.68)	5.10* (3.44)
Italy	0.08* (0.08)	1.76 (1.19)
Latvia	empty	1.39 (0.01)
Lithuania	0.13* (0.12)	0.07** (0.05)
Luxembourg	0.29 (0.45)	1.66 (0.01)

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Netherlands	0.38 (0.33)	0.87 (0.45)
Poland	0.12 (0.13)	0.50 (0.43)
Portugal	0.32 (0.35)	1.63 (1.15)
Romania	empty	2.25 (2.65)
Slovakia	1.07 (1.49)	0.27 (0.24)
Slovenia	0.07** (0.07)	0.50 (0.33)
Spain	1.19 (1.23)	0.92 (0.58)
Sweden	0.96 (1.29)	0.65 (0.46)
UK	0.33 (0.32)	6.61** (4.13)
N	319	336
Pseudo R ²	0.20	0.11

Notes: The number of cases is lower for the tone of references because there are several empty observations.

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

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