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Do populist parties promote direct democracy? An empirical assessment in 29 countries in the last two decades

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ABSTRACT

Populism is often associated with direct democracy. However, empirical support for this connection remains limited. Analysing a unique dataset on national referendums across 29 countries, this study challenges the presumption that populists are more inclined to advocate for referendums. Surprisingly, populists exhibit this tendency primarily when in opposition. Despite the increasing inclusion of populist parties in coalition governments, their impact on facilitating national-level direct democracy is more complex than anticipated. Utilising V-DEM data over 30 years, we find that populists prima facie enhance the use of direct democracy. However, this effect is contingent on contextual factors, such as party system institutionalisation and the democracy's age, indicating a nuanced relationship between populism and direct democratic practices.

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Populism; direct democracy; referendums; participation; populist parties; Europe

Introduction

Do populist parties promote direct democracy? Do they fulfil their promises of more direct democracy once in government? Our paper aims to provide empirical answers to these important research questions by investigating 'supply-side' manifestations of the link between populist parties and referendums. Previous research has largely focussed on 'demand-side' manifestations, by investigating attitudes towards the use of direct democracy among populist parties and their voters (Gherghina & Pilet, 2020). Other studies, on the other hand, have looked more widely at the crucial relevance of political parties' stances on referendum topics (Hornig, 2011, Vospernik, 2018) and at intra-party democracy, or the possibility of party members to influence internal decision-making through direct democratic processes and deliberation (Hornig, 2023). In this paper, we are interested in studying the real-world behaviour of populist parties and whether their access to government affects the use of direct democratic instruments in a country. These are increasingly important questions given the unprecedented electoral success and growing access to government of European populist parties during the last decade (Vittori, 2022).

From a theoretical standpoint, populism is connected to direct democracy via its core ideological component of 'people-centrism' (Mudde, 2004), or the idea that politics

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should reflect the general will of the people, which is framed as a homogenous (and non-conflictual) entity. Not surprisingly, from a demand-side perspective, items measuring populist attitudes among voters either explicitly (Schulz et al., 2018) or implicitly (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2018) mention direct democracy as the preferred decision-making procedure. Although the link between people-centrism and direct democracy has been questioned by other scholars (Gherghina & Pilet, 2021), several analyses have shown either positive or mixed support for the hypothesis that citizens with 'populist attitudes' or that populist party voters tend to prefer direct democracy (Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Pauwels, 2014; Rooduijn, 2018; Trüdinger & Bächtiger, 2023). Studies carried out in several Western European countries have shown that support for referendums is stronger among citizens scoring higher on populist attitudes, even when controlling for several confounding factors, such as stealth democratic attitudes (Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Trüdinger & Bächtiger, 2023; Werner & Jacobs, 2022).

Supply-side analyses focussing on the role of political parties in promoting direct democracy are far less common. When it comes to *internal* party dynamics, some studies demonstrated that populist parties, such Alternative for Germany, are living up to their promise of 'practicing grassroots democracy' (Höhne, 2023) while others demonstrated that they gravitate more towards personalised leadership than towards intra-party democracy (Böhmelt et al., 2022). When it comes to the promotion of direct democracy among the electorate, a recent comparative analysis of more than 800 European party manifestos demonstrated that while populist parties advocate the use of referendums to a greater extent than non-populist parties, less than half (45%) of the populist parties identified made a positive reference to referendums (Gherghina & Pilet, 2020). However, we still know very little about the *actual* use as opposed to intended use of direct democracy among the wider public by populist parties. How often have populist parties initiated or supported national referenda and how have they facilitated the use of direct democracy once in government?

Firstly, while the use of national referenda has grown worldwide (Altman, 2011; LeDuc, 2003; Qvortrup, 2014; Scarrow, 2001) and the analyses of referenda held in European countries are now abundant (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Gallagher & Uleri, 2006; Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020; Qvortrup, 2016), we still do not know whether populist parties play a role in effectively promoting the use of direct democracy tools. A study of national referendums in European countries between 2000 and 2019 concluded that populists make limited use of referendums compared to non-populists and that the association between populists and direct democracy is more the result of cherry-picking (Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020), but this study was limited to government-initiated referendums only. To determine whether populist parties make greater use of referendums than non-populist parties, we collected data on all government- and citizen-initiated national referenda in European democracies between 2000 and 2022.

Second, while the literature on populist parties in government has focused on the impact of those parties on the qualities of democracy (Vittori, 2022), on their impact in the policy-making in different policy fields (e.g. Akkerman & De Lange, 2012; Biard, 2019), or on the functioning of different models of democracy (Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023), we still do not know whether populists have delivered on their promise of more direct democracy once in government. On one hand, it seems plausible that, given their emphasis on an unmediated relationship between the general will and policy

outcomes (Caramani, 2017), populist parties will do everything in their power to facilitate the use of direct democratic tools. On the other hand, if promoting direct democracy is merely a front for advancing their policy agendas or increasing their popularity and visibility among the electorate, populist parties may shy away from their initial promise of direct democracy once in government. Furthermore, the impact of populist parties in government on direct democracy may depend on their specific role in government (e.g. major or junior coalition partner) or on the specific tools at hand (e.g. top-down or bottom-up referendums). To test these claims, we compiled data on the access of populist parties to government and linked this to data on the use of direct democracy, covering all European democracies between 1990 and 2020.

First, we show that 39% of all 103 national-level referendums held in European countries between 2000 and 2022 might be labelled as 'populist' in that they were either initiated or supported by political parties identified as populist. Second, we find that the inclusion of populist parties in government boosts the utilisation of direct democratic instruments, but more so citizen-initiated than elite-initiated instruments. However, this finding may be driven by the instrumentalization of direct democracy by governing populist parties in newer democracies. Finally, we show that it is especially when populists are major (as opposed to junior or external) coalition partners that an increase in the utilisation of direct democracy can be observed.

Populism and direct democracy: the supply side

One of the most cited definitions of populism elaborated by Cas Mudde states that populism is a 'thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus the "corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people' (2004: 562). Referendums may provide a useful medium for translating the general will of the people into policy outcomes, without the intermediation of political agents who may manipulate it, which is why there exists an intimate connection between populism and direct democracy (Vittori, 2017). As argued by Caramani '[t]he distinctive feature of populism is the direct and continuous mobilisation of the people either institutionally through – typically – direct votes such as plebiscites or via noninstitutional channels (polls, new social media, acclamation, etc.)' (2017, p. 63). In line with this theory, Welp (2022, p. 39) considers that the theory of populist democracy is based, among other factors, on 'the preference given to direct democracy (at least in the narrative)'. On a more strategic level, referenda enable party elites to circumvent traditional decision-making arenas, i.e. the Parliament, by going directly to the people. Hence, they are especially appealing to populist parties frustrated by their exclusion from traditional representative mechanisms (Canovan, 1981; Mény & Surel, 2002; Rojon & Rijken, 2020). For these reasons, it seems logical to expect that populist parties would promote the use of direct democracy among the wider public. However, does this theoretical link exist at the empirical level? The very first example of a populist party in the late XIXth Century, the People's Party in the US, insisted in its programmes on the expansion of direct democratic instruments. However, as suggested by Ware (2002), this insistence was not a specificity of populist parties, as other non-populist parties and actors advocated the use of direct democracy tools. More recent literature provides mixed evidence on the emphasis of populist parties on

direct democracy. Rooduijn (2014) found that five out of six European and Latin American populist parties analysed in his study insisted on direct democracy. Mény and Surel's book (2002) provides several examples of radical-right (e.g. FPÖ) and non-radical-right (e.g. Italy of Values) populist parties promoting direct democracy. In their comprehensive analysis of more than 800 European party manifestos drafted between 1994 and 2018, Gherghina and Pilet (2021) find that of the 157 *populist* party manifestos identified, 45% make a positive reference to the use of referendums, while 9% are neutral and the remaining 46% are silent. When contrasting populist and non-populist parties, the authors find that the proportion of manifestos making positive claims about referendums is indeed higher among populist than non-populist parties. Nonetheless, the authors warn that while they talk less about referendums, non-populist parties do not explicitly oppose them. Secondly, '[i]n many countries the share of claims from populist parties about referendums account for less than half of all claims made about referendums' (Gherghina & Pilet, 2021, p. 7). These findings are also corroborated by two recent studies: Piccolino and Puleo (2023) in their work on 29 European countries have shown that populist parties are positively inclined toward direct democracy. Bedock et al. (2023) reach similar conclusions in their study on populist radical right parties in four countries.

Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical claims and empirical findings presented in the previous paragraphs, we propose a set of hypotheses on the use of direct democracy by populist political parties. Firstly, we have argued that one of the key characteristics of populism is its willingness to establish a direct link between the (homogenous) people and the decisions to be implemented (Weyland, 2001). This implies that the main tool within democratic polities allowing citizens to directly express their opinions on specific issues, i.e. the referendum, is preferred by populist actors. Our first expectation is that, given the potential of direct democracy for enforcing the unmediated general will, populist parties will have been more often involved in initiating and supporting national referendums than non-populist parties.

> H1: Regardless of their status in government or in opposition, populist parties have been more active in the use of national referenda than non-populist parties.

We specified in our first hypothesis that the government/opposition status of the parties does not influence how populist political parties use direct democracy. To the best of our knowledge, the literature in this regard has not proposed, so far, any specific test for the distinction between populist parties in government and in opposition. We advance, therefore, two alternative hypotheses. On the one hand, we might hypothesise that, since populist parties are responsive toward their electorate as much as other parties (Plescia et al., 2019, Werner & Giebler, 2019), once in government populist parties will deliver on their promise of more direct democracy by facilitating the use of these tools. As recently noted by Piccolino and Puleo (2023), populist parties – and namely, radical right populist parties, the most common type of populist party– tend to propose an ultra-majoritarian view of democracy, whereby the majority of citizens should be directly involved in the decision-making. Moreover, populist parties are on average more inclined toward direct democracy, as it is the majority of the European electorate (Rojon & Rijken,

2020). For that reason, by easing direct democracy, populist parties can claim credit for an issue appreciated by their electorate and other non-populist voters (Bedock, 2017). Thus, we might expect that these parties favour direct democracy-oriented reforms. Being in government in this regard provides these parties with greater leverage for changing the rules of the game in their favour.

H2a: the inclusion of populist parties in government has a positive effect on the rules governing the use of direct democracy in a country.

On the other hand, it might be that populist parties fail to follow through on their promises for more direct democracy once they enter government (Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020). They may have supported these tools not for ideological, but for strategic or instrumental reasons. Underlying their advocacy of referendums and initiatives might be the 'real' motivations of (a) pushing forward their specific policy goals; (b) increasing their popularity and visibility; or (c) destabilising the ruling elite. Previous research has pointed to the instrumental motivations for supporting referendums (Werner, 2020) and also shown, for example, that radical right-wing voters are less supportive of direct democracy when their representatives are better represented in legislative institutions (Rojon & Rijken, 2020). In line with the argument that populist parties promote direct democracy for instrumental as opposed to ideological reasons, one might expect that referenda are mainly used by populist parties in opposition, seeking to put their issues on the agenda or destabilise the elite. A more comprehensive overview of the citizens' initiative (Setälä & Schiller, 2012), for example, has shown that this instrument has been mainly used by parties in opposition, than by parties in government. Another reason for not following through on their promise of more direct democracy might be the need for greater pragmatism and efficiency once entering government. For example, previous research has shown that Green parties, which have historically promoted the expansion of direct democracy, reconsidered their participatory, and therefore rather slow, decision-making procedures once entering government (Van Haute, 2016). Recent findings in four European countries show that populist radical right parties do not prioritise direct democracy reforms once in government (Bedock et al., 2023). This trend is also confirmed for other Latin American countries (Welp, 2022), in which the narrative of direct democracy proposed by populist parties, was not accompanied by a greater citizens' involvement in the decision-making. Thus, it might be the case that direct democracy is more appealing to populist parties in opposition than to those in a position of power. For these reasons we might expect that populist political parties do not push for more direct democracy once in government.

H2b: the inclusion of populist parties in government has a negative effect on the rules governing the use of direct democracy in a country.

However, the impact of populist political parties in government on direct democracy might depend on the specific tools at hand or on the specific role of the political parties in government. Starting first with the tools, it seems plausible to expect that populist parties place greater emphasis on government-initiated referendums since these instruments embody a more majoritarian view of citizens' participation, in which direct vertical accountability between the people and the decision-maker overcomes intermediation (by political parties or the Parliament) (Barr, 2009). Since populist radical right

parties are those who are more often than other populist parties involved in government (Vittori, 2022) and since they champion a plebiscitarian vision of direct democracy, in contrast to a more pluralist, bottom-up conception of direct democracy, embodied for example by Green parties (Rüdig & Sajuria, 2020), we might expect that populist prefer government initiated-referendums and that, once in government, they act to enhance the majoritarian top-down form of direct democracy more than the participatory bottom-up one. Furthermore, easing the use of citizen-initiated referenda may open the door to external challenges, even more so than easing the use of government-initiated referenda which could serve more of a legitimating purpose.

> H3: the inclusion of populist parties in government has a negative effect on the rules governing the use of citizen-initiated or bottom-up direct democracy in a country.

Finally, we also acknowledge that in most European countries there exist different government statuses: it is not the same for a populist party to provide external support to a coalition government led by non-populist parties (such as the Dutch Freedom Party in 2011), being included as a junior partner in government (such as PiS in Poland in 2002) or being the major partner in the government of a coalition government, which includes non-populist parties (or heading a single-party government) (such as *Fidesz* in Hungary). Our argument, thus, is that parties in general, and populist parties in our case, have more room for manoeuvre to implement their preferred policy when they are majoritarian in a coalition government (or when they govern alone), compared to other cases when they are minoritarian: for that reason, we expect that, compared to when they are not in government, the higher is the governmental status of the populist parties, the more populist parties promote direct democracy. A potential counter-argument, in line with the aforementioned rationale that referenda are more appealing to those with less access to power, e.g. in opposition, is that populist parties are more likely to request a referendum when they are junior coalition partners. However, calling for a referendum without the support a major coalition partner might jeopardise one's position in government or the stability of the coalition. Therefore, we argue that:

> H4: the participation of populist parties in government a major actor has a positive effect on the rules governing the use of citizen-initiated or bottom-up direct democracy in a country.

Data and methods

To investigate whether populist parties have been more active in the use of national referendums than non-populist parties (H1), we compiled information on all 103 national-level referendums taking place in 29 European democracies between 2000 and 2022. Although the same countries were used for testing all hypotheses, only 25 out of the 29 countries held at least one national referendum between 2000 and 2022 and only 12 out of 25 held a national referendum that was either initiated or supported by a populist party. The time span of the data-set on all national-level referenda is limited to the last two decades for two reasons. First, because it was not always possible to find information on the initiators or the supporters of referenda held in 90s. Second, because many of the referenda held in the 90s related to the democratic transition of Eastern European countries, i.e. referenda on the constitution or on privatizations. For testing hypotheses H2-H4, which focus on the

legislative changes, rather than on actual referenda, we extended the time span to include the 1990s. By doing this, we allow for more variation in the status of populist parties in government, as this was a period when these parties were for the most part excluded from government, but not entirely (Vittori, 2022).

To determine whether a national-level referendum was populist, we searched for newspaper articles, academic literature, country reports and policy briefs that mention the political parties or actors proposing or supporting the referendum. More specifically, we coded the referendum as populist if we could find evidence that a populist party or one of its leading members (a) initiated the petition for a referendum; (b) proposed or voted in favour of holding the referendum in parliament; or (c) expressed public support for holding the referendum or for the outcome intended by its proponents in the media. While recognising that voting in favour of or expressing public support for a referendum does not equate to the 'use' of direct democracy' we still consider these actions as evidence of promoting the use of referenda. First, because it was not always possible to find information on the specific party or person who initiated the referendum and, second, because only considering the latter might underestimate the link to populist. For example, although the Brexit Referendum was initiated by the David Cameron, the populist UK Independence Party played a leading role in the campaign. Similarly, to Gherghina and Silagadze (2020), referendums initiated or supported by multiple parties were still coded as populist if only one of these parties was populist. Populist political parties were identified based on a classification by the academics and journalists of the Popu-List initiative (www.popu-list.org). The Popu-List is the most comprehensive list of populist parties in Europe and includes far-right, far left and non-radical populist parties. We also relied on the populist classification of top-down referendums by Gherghina and Silagadze (2020) but extended their work by including bottom-up referendums, such as the citizens' initiative and citizens' veto, in our analyses.

To test the remaining hypotheses, on whether populist parties facilitate the use of direct democracy once in government and whether populist parties facilitate the use of citizen-initiated direct democracy in particular, we use the Varieties of Democracy dataset (V-DEM, version 11.1) (Coppedge et al., 2021). V-DEM collects data on the institutional performance of countries from most regions of the world, based on the evaluations of at least 5 country experts per country-year. In addition to rating the performance of countries on elections, participation, egalitarianism and deliberation, V-DEM includes four sub-indexes measuring direct democracy and the way it is implemented in each country. These four indexes capture the easiness/difficulty to promote different direct democracy tools: popular initiatives (v2xdd_i_ci), popular referendums (v2xdd_i_rf), obligatory referendums (v2xdd_i_or) and plebiscites (v2xdd_i_pl).[1] In our study we only analysed the first three types of instruments, as plebiscites are relatively uncommon in modern democracies and are more often used by autocratic regimes (Penades & Velasco, 2022). More specifically, each of the indexes used in this study is a combination of indicators measuring respectively the ease of triggering (i.e. initiation), the ease of approval, and how consequential the vote is if approved (Altman, 2017). The indexes do not include in their measurement the frequency of the referendums, and for that reason, they are not related to the number of referendums promoted in each country, but to how easy or difficult is to promote the direct democracy instruments. In the Appendix we report the definition of each index, for the specific components of the

indexes see Coppedge et al. (2021). The ease of initiation is measured by the existence of the direct democracy tool and, when considering popular initiatives and referendums, the number of signatures needed, and the time-limits to circulate the signatures. Ease of approval is measured by participation and approval quorum, and supermajority. Finally, the consequentiality of the vote is measured by the legal status of the decision made and the frequency with which direct popular votes have been held in the past (Altman, 2017). Details about the computation of the index can be found in Altman (2017).

Based on our theoretical framework, we expect that the three indexes should vary depending on whether a populist party is in government or not. Our focal predictors, therefore, are the presence of populist parties in government and their role in government. In the first set of models, we introduce a dummy variable distinguishing between populist parties in government (= 1) and those in opposition (= 0). In the second set of models, we also include a categorical variable capturing the populist party's role in government: providing external support, junior coalition partner, or major coalition partner.[2] As above, we code the presence of populist parties in government using the Popu-list (www.popu-list.org).

To this focal predictor, we add controls related to each country's institutional settings and economic performance. The first set of variables includes the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) (Gallagher, 2019) to control for the fractionalisation of party systems. We expect that, everything else being equal, more fractionalised party systems are less inclined toward direct democracy, as the ideological spectrum in each country should be better represented in the parliament (and, thus, parties have less incentive to promote direct democratic tools). Indeed, previous research has shown that support for direct democracy is generally higher in countries with fewer political parties (Bessen, 2020). Secondly, we include a variable to measure the institutionalisation of party systems, measured as 'the process by which the patterns of interaction among political parties become routine, predictable and stable over time' (Casal-Bértoa, 2021). The idea is that, everything else being equal, in more institutionalised party systems, parties have fewer incentives to use direct democracy and find it more difficult to change the legal framework to incentivize the use of direct democratic tools. We also include the age of democracy (and age of democracy squared in the robustness checks analyses) as a further control for the institutionalisation of party systems (Boix et al., 2013), as the consolidation of democracy further disincentivizes populist parties from using direct democracy or making their use easier.

Our V-DEM dataset covers thirty years and twenty-nine countries: we begin our analysis from 1990 to include Eastern European countries while also ensuring variation in the presence of populist parties in government. As shown by Vittori (2022), the presence of populist parties in government has steadily grown from 1990 onwards[3]: while governments with populist parties in the nineties were more an exception than a rule (the most known cases being the FPÖ in Austria and Forza Italia and Lega Nord in Italy), in the following two decades the presence of populist parties became much more frequent. In the last decade only, when looking at the country-year combination, populist parties were included in the government in almost 50% of cases. To sum up, our dataset has a panel structure in which we code the presence of populist parties in government for each year in each country. That is why we estimate our models with a linear panel model technique. For each model, we run Hausman tests to select the most appropriate model between random- and fixed-effects models.

Results

Populist parties and national-level referenda

We begin by describing the results of data we compiled on all 103 national referendums held in 29 European countries between 2000 and 2022. As shown in Table 1, we identified 37 populist referendums, representing just over one-third of all national referendums (see Appendix for the full list of referenda and votes for the same period). It is worth noting, however, that only considering referenda for which information about the exact party or person who initiated the referendum was available (as opposed to also including those that were approved or supported by a populist party), reduces the number of populist referenda to 10. While Figure 1 presents the absolute numbers of (non)populist referendums per year, Figure 2 presents the (non)populist referendums as a proportion of the total number of referendums per year. These figures demonstrate a slight upwards trend in the occurrence of populist referendums, with the exception of a few years where relatively fewer referendums were held (such as during the COVID-19 Pandemic). Therefore, although the descriptive results do not confirm that populist parties play a

Table 1. National referendums in Europe initiated or supported by populist parties (2000–2022).

Country	Date	Topic	Status in Gov	Justification
Bulgaria	27/01/2013	Nuclear power	opposition	Supported by Ataka
Bulgaria	25/10/2015	Electronic voting	major	Supported by GERB & IMRO
Bulgaria	06/11/2016	Electoral reform	major	Supported by Ataka
Croatia	01/12/2013	Same-sex marriage	opposition	Supported by HDSSB
Greece	05/07/2015	Eurozone bailout	major	Initiated by Syriza & ANEL
Hungary	12/04/2003	EU membership	opposition	Supported by Fidesz
Hungary	09/03/2008	Healthcare & education fees	opposition	Initiated by Fidesz
Hungary	02/10/2016	EU migrant quota	major	Initiated by Fidesz
Hungary	03/04/2022	LGBTQ education	major	Initiated by Fidesz
Ireland	27/10/2011	Judicial reform	opposition	Supported by Sinn Féin
Ireland	10/11/2012	Children protection	opposition	Supported by Sinn Féin
Ireland	04/10/2013	Parliamentary reform	opposition	Supported by Sinn Féin
Ireland	22/05/2015	Same-sex marriage	opposition	Supported by Sinn Féin
Ireland	18/09/2018	Abortion	opposition	Supported by Sinn Féin
Ireland	27/11/2018	Blasphemy	opposition	Supported by Sinn Féin
Ireland	11/06/2019	Divorce	opposition	Supported by Sinn Féin
Italy	07/10/2001	Regional devolution	main	See Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020
Italy	26/06/2006	Constitutional reform	opposition	See Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020
Italy	22/06/2009	Electoral reform	main	Supported by PdL
Italy	17/04/2016	Oil and gas drilling	opposition	Supported by FI, LN, M5S & FdI
Italy	21/09/2020	Number of MPs	major	Proposed by M5S
Italy	12/06/2022	Judicial reform	major	Proposed by LN
Latvia	23/07/2011	Dissolution of parliament	opposition	Initiated by Reform Party
Netherlands	06/04/2016	EU-Ukraine association	opposition	Initiated by FvD
Netherlands	21/03/2018	Wiretapping powers	opposition	Supported by PVV
Poland	06/09/2015	Parliamentary reform	major	Supported by Kukiz' 15
Romania	25/11/2007	2-round electoral system	opposition	See Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020
Romania	22/11/2009	Parliamentary reform	opposition	See Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020
Romania	06/10/2018	Same-sex marriage	opposition	Supported by PRU and PRM
Slovenia	17/06/2001	IVF	opposition	See Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020
Slovenia	04/04/2004	Minority rights	opposition	Supported by SDS
Slovenia	12/12/2010	Public broadcasting	opposition	See Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020
Slovenia	05/06/2011	Pensions & irregular work	opposition	See Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020
Slovenia	08/06/2014	Data protection	opposition	Initiated by SDS
Slovenia	27/11/2022	Public broadcasting	major	Initiated by SDS
United Kingdom	05/05/2011	Alternative vote	opposition	Supported by UKIP
United Kingdom	23/06/2016	Brexit	opposition	Supported by UKIP

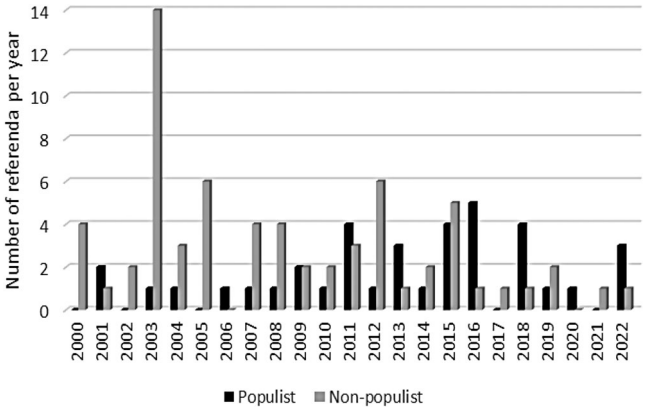

Figure 1. Absolute numbers of populist and non-populist referendums per year (2000–2020). Source: own elaboration.

greater role in initiating and supporting national referendums than non-populist parties (H1), they do show that populist parties play an active role, which appears to be increasing over the years (especially if one only considers the populist-triggered ones, almost all of which were held after 2010). These findings differ from those of Gherghina and Silagadze (2020), who only analysed top-down referendums.

Table 1 also shows that the majority of populist referendums identified (26 out of 37) were initiated by a populist party in opposition. Only in Hungary, Bulgaria, Italy, Slovenia, Poland, and Greece do we find examples of populist referendums that were initiated by a populist party in government. When broadening our analysis of the descriptive results to the total sample of both populist and non-populist national referendums held between 2000 and 2022 (see Figure 3), we also find that the majority (72%) of these were held when the populist political party was in opposition. The descriptive results therefore suggest, in line with H2, that the inclusion of populist political parties in government does not lead to an increase in direct democracy (at least when it comes to the occurrence

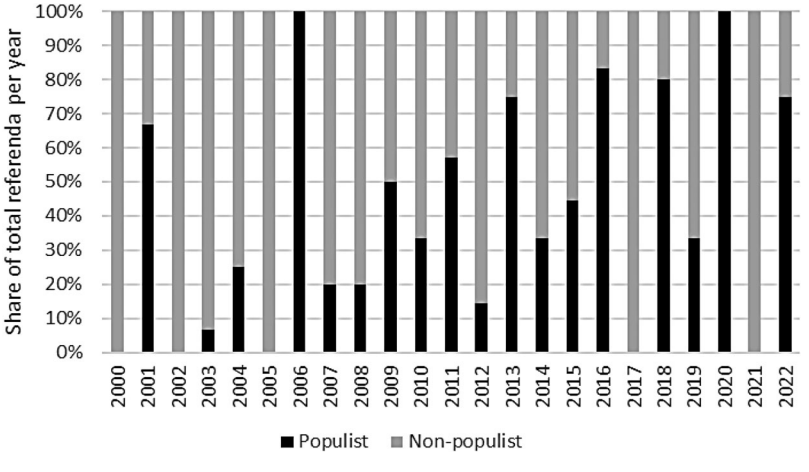

Figure 2. Share of populist referendums per year (2000–2020). Source: own elaboration.

of national-level referenda). Furthermore, Figure 3 shows that a greater proportion of national referendums were held when the populist party played a major role in the governing coalition as opposed to when the party played a minor role or provided only external support. This finding provides a first support of our claim that the status of the populist party within government matters for the use of direct democracy (H4). However, our expectations regarding the participation of the populist party in government will be tested more systematically in the following sections, using the V-Dem data, which take into consideration the rules and regulations governing the use of direct democracy.

Populist parties and direct democracy

We start the second part of our analysis by assessing the effect of the presence of populists in government on our four measures of direct democracy from V-DEM, by running a series of bivariate regression models. The results of these analyses, displayed in Table 2, Models 1-3, suggest that, when considered alone, the presence of populist parties in government tends to facilitate the use of direct democracy tools. In particular, compared to situations in which populist parties are in opposition, populists in government have a positive effect on the popular initiative index ($b = 0.065$, $p < 0.05$), the popular referendum index ($b = 0.055$, $p < 0.05$), and the obligatory referendum index ($b = 0.062$, $p < 0.05$).

Overall, these findings seem to support the expectations that the inclusion of populist parties in government has a positive effect on the promotion of direct democracy, especially when it comes to bottom-up or citizen-initiated types. The results show that the type of direct democracy that is taken into account matters, and that not all direct-democracy tools are equally promoted by populist parties. These results are stable when we include the ENEP and the institutionalisation of the party systems as controls. As shown in Models 4-6, the presence of populist parties in government still has a positive and significant effect on the two citizen-initiated instruments of direct democracy (i.e.

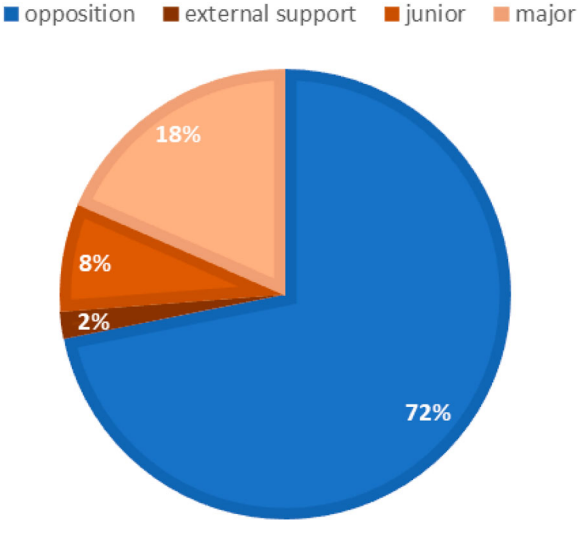

Figure 3. Distribution of all 103 national referendums by populist party government status. Source: own elaboration.

Table 2. Regression analysis. DVs: Direct democracy tools.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
	Citizens' initiative – FE	Referendum – RE	Obligatory referendum – RE	Citizens' initiative – FE	Referendum – FE	Obligatory referendum – RE	Citizens' initiative – FE	Referendum – FE	Obligatory referendum – RE
Populists in Government	0.065**	0.055***	0.062**	0.073**	0.056***	0.041	0.015	0.013	0.018
	(0.029)	(0.019)	(0.026)	(0.029)	(0.019)	(0.025)	(0.030)	(0.019)	(0.026)
ENEP				−0.030***	−0.011**	−0.054***	−0.018**	−0.002	−0.049***
				(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.007)
Institutionalisation				0.045	0.015	−0.131***	0.084***	0.044**	−0.117***
				(0.030)	(0.020)	(0.026)	(0.030)	(0.019)	(0.026)
Age of democracy							0.133***	0.101***	0.053***
							(0.021)	(0.014)	(0.018)
Constant		0.139**	0.354***			0.619***			0.416***
		(0.070)	(0.097)			(0.106)			(0.129)
Observations	855	855	855	855	855	855	855	855	855
R^2	0.006	0.010	0.007	0.027	0.016	0.092	0.074	0.078	0.101

Notes: FE = Fixed effects model, RE = Random effects model. The choice between the two models has been made using the Hausman Test function in R, phtest. *p, **p ***$p < 0.01$.

citizens' initiative index and popular referendum index), while the positive effect of populist parties in government on the obligatory referendum index disappears. As a final step, we include the age of democracy as an additional control. The results of this analysis, presented in Table 2, Models 7-9, undermine our previous findings. Indeed, the inclusion of the age of democracy wipes out any significant effect of the presence of populist parties in government on direct democracy. This is potentially explained by the greater utilisation of direct democratic mechanisms by governing populist parties in younger Eastern and Southern European democracies, such as Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovenia, Italy and Greece (Gherghina, 2019).

As for the effects of the controls included in our analyses, the results are mixed and only partially in line with our initial expectations. We found that (as expected) a higher number of parties is negatively associated with the citizens' initiative index and the obligatory referendum index, but it has no significant effect on the popular referendums. Looking at the institutionalisation index, we found, contrary to our expectations, that it has a positive and significant effect on the citizens' initiative and the referendum indexes, but a negative and significant effect on the obligatory referendum index. Finally, the age of democracy is consistently and positively associated with all three indexes of direct democracy considered in this study. Although this latter effect might appear surprising, a possible explanation could lie in a nonlinear relationship between the age of democracy and the use of direct democracy tools. On one hand, younger democracies (characterised by greater institutional fragility as well as a less established democratic political culture among citizens) might encourage the use of direct democracy instruments to stimulate participatory processes. As democratic institutions become more consolidated, the party system more institutionalised, and citizens' political culture more firmly anchored in democratic values, the use of direct democracy tools could decrease. However, it might then increase again within mature democracies, if these mature democracies face a legitimacy crises (marked, for example, by relatively low levels of participation): the use of direct democracy instruments could serve as a means to revitalise citizens' civic culture and counter alienation and dissatisfaction with democracy among voters. We tested this possible explanation in Models 1-3, Table 4A in the Appendix. The results, while in line with the main findings presented so far, do not provide any evidence of a curvilinear effect of the age of democracy.

So far, we have focused on the association between the presence of populist parties in government and direct democracy. While these analyses already provided some insights into the role of populist parties in promoting direct democracy, we are also aware that these analyses are somehow too broad, as they do not allow us to detect under what conditions populist parties in government incentivise direct democratic tools. In particular, we argue that the specific role of a populist party in government might influence the extent to which direct democratic instruments are utilised. For example, when populist parties hold more important positions within the government, such as being a major coalition partner, then they should be more able to direct the policy-making process (starting from the agenda-setting until the policy implementation). All this might result, as a consequence, in a stronger promotion of direct democracy tools, as the latter are hypothetically largely supported by populist parties. In other words, the direct involvement of citizens within the policy-making process might be stronger as long as populist parties in government hold stronger positions in government.

We tested these arguments related to H3 and H4 in the second set of regression analyses in Table 3, where we regressed the three indices of direct democracy on an independent variable which now contrasts populists in opposition (our baseline) with populist parties in government, distinguishing between those who simply provide external support to the government, those who are junior partners and those who are major partners. Once again, we build our models in bloc, by first running a simple regression model just including amongst the predictors our main variable of interest alone. We then plugged in controls for the ENEP and the institutionalisation of the party system, and, finally, for the age of democracy. Our simple regression (Table 3, Models 1-3) confirms our expectations: populist parties holding a major partner role in government tend to facilitate the use of all direct democracy tools analysed in this study. At the same time, there are no significant differences in terms of direct democracy between populists in opposition and populist parties providing external support or having a junior partner role.

Overall, these results remain substantially unaltered to the inclusion of controls for the ENEP and institutionalisation of the party system (Models 4-6): even when these two variables are included as controls, we find that populist parties in governments and holding a major partner role, promote direct democracy tools significantly more compared to when populist parties are in opposition. The only exception to this pattern concerns the obligatory referendum index: in this case, although the effect of the party role in government goes in the expected direction, it resulted to be non-significant from a statistical point of view (Model 6).

Once again, the same kind of difference does not emerge when contrasting populists in opposition with populist parties providing just external support or being minor partners within the government. This seems to suggest that direct democracy is not simply boosted when populist parties are in government. Rather, it is incentivised and reinforced only when populist parties in government are also the ones who in fact can shape the activities of the governments themselves. A potential explanation for why being a major partner boosts the utilisation of direct democracy even more is that populist parties are more confident they will be able to win the referendum when they are a key player in government.

However, when we include our control for the age of democracy, whose effect is positive and statistically significant in each model (Models 7-9), the picture becomes much more blurred. In particular, populist parties holding a major partner role reinforce the citizens' initiative index, but no longer the popular referendum index and the obligatory referendum index. However, it is worth noting that direct democratic tools can be used in both promotive and controlling ways (Hollander, 2019): populists in major government positions seek to involve citizens as a way of defending their policy goals while those in opposition seek to involve citizens as a way of challenging the government's decisions. By contrast, populist parties playing a minor role in government may have fewer incentives both to defend or challenge their major coalition partners.

Finally, looking at the other predictors, we found some confirmations of our expectations but also some unexpected results. On the one hand, we found that the higher the number of parties, the lower the citizens' initiative index and the obligatory referendum index, something that is in line with our initial expectations. On the other hand, we found that the institutionalisation of the party system has a positive and significant effect on the citizens' initiative index and the popular referendum index (something that is at odds with our

Table 3. Regression analysis. DVs: Direct democracy tools

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
	Citizens' initiative – FE	Referendum – FE	Obligatory referendum – FE	Citizens' initiative – FE	Referendum – RE	Obligatory referendum – FE	Citizens' initiative – FE	Referendum – RE	Obligatory referendum – RE
Populist in Government: External (ref. Opposition)	0.002	−0.018	0.019	0.038	−0.010	0.046	0.015	−0.024	0.035
	(0.083)	(0.054)	(0.075)	(0.082)	(0.054)	(0.072)	(0.081)	(0.052)	(0.072)
Populist in Government: Junior Partner (ref. Opposition)	0.007	0.034	0.048	0.010	0.035	0.051	−0.026	0.007	0.034
	(0.039)	(0.025)	(0.035)	(0.038)	(0.025)	(0.034)	(0.038)	(0.025)	(0.034)
Populist in Government: Major Partner (ref. Opposition)	0.149***	0.097***	0.089**	0.160***	0.102***	0.026	0.074*	0.034	−0.013
	(0.041)	(0.026)	(0.037)	(0.042)	(0.027)	(0.037)	(0.043)	(0.028)	(0.039)
ENEP				−0.027***	−0.009*	−0.055***	−0.018**	−0.002	−0.050***
				(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.007)
Institutionalisation				0.062**	0.011	−0.133***	0.093***	0.047**	−0.119***
				(0.030)	(0.019)	(0.027)	(0.030)	(0.020)	(0.027)
Age of democracy							0.126***	0.098***	0.057***
							(0.021)	(0.014)	(0.019)
Constant					0.184***			−0.158*	0.406***
					(0.070)			(0.087)	(0.122)
Observations	855	855	855	855	855	855	855	855	855
R^2	0.016	0.017	0.008	0.038	0.022	0.094	0.078	0.080	0.104

Notes: FE = Fixed effects model, RE = Random effects model. The choice between the two models has been made using the Hausman Test function in R, phtest. *p, **p, ***$p < 0.01$.

expectations), but a negative and significant effect on the obligatory referendum index (in line with our expectations). While we do not speculate on the possible reasons behind these patterns which connect our control variables with direct democracy, we recognise that these results require further investigation. In particular, from our perspective, more theoretical elaboration is needed to understand the connections between our control variables and the variety of indexes we used to analyse direct democracy.[4]

Going back, instead, to our main variables of interest, on the whole, our results provide mixed evidence. Results derived from our multivariate models seem to disconfirm the idea that populist parties promote *sic et simpliciter* direct democracy when they are in government. Indeed, when separating the specific role that parties have within each specific government (and, indirectly, their weight within each government), we found more nuanced results which are only partially in line with our expectations: only when populist parties are stronger within a government (i.e. when they are major partners), then the citizens' initiative was reinforced.

Discussion

In this paper, we have tried to contribute to the literature on direct democracy and populism. While from a theoretical standpoint, populism is considered intimately related to direct democracy, empirical evidence so far did not find conclusive strong evidence supporting the idea that direct democracy is the most preferred decision-making process among populists. So far, evidence on the demand side has demonstrated that citizens with populist attitudes are more likely to support direct democracy. Evidence from the supply side is limited but seems to suggest that populist parties are favourable to direct democracy as well. Starting from this background, we tested whether populist parties do promote direct democracy: our results in this regard are mixed. Firstly, using a novel dataset, we detected which referenda in the last twenty years were initiated or supported by populist parties and we find that 39% of all nationwide referenda in 29 countries can be labelled as 'populist'. Most of the time, populist parties promote or support referendums when they are in opposition, rather than when in government, thus highlighting that direct democracy is an instrument to wage opposition for them and not a decision-making process they are willing to use no matter the circumstances. It is worth noting, however, that political parties may use direct democratic tools not for ideological reasons but as a result of the balance of power between actors in a political system or as a result of a calculation of the benefits of including (or not including) the wider public in the decision-making process (Welp, 2022). The goal of initiating or supporting a referendum could be to promote or prevent an issue from being presented, to avoid disunity in a party or governing coalition, to remove a controversial issue from the electoral agenda, or to bolster a party's legitimacy through a show of popular support for an issue. Given the diversity of motivations for calling a referendum, looking at how parties influence the rules governing the use of direct democracy may provide further insight into whether populist parties promote these instruments for ideological reasons (Rahat, 2009).

Populist parties might promote direct democracy also when in government, not by promoting or supporting referendums (something that they are unwilling to do), but by easing the condition of using direct-democracy tools. Using V-Dem data and covering 29

countries in the last three decades, we show that populists indeed facilitate the use of direct democracy and mainly those bottom-up initiatives that are directly promoted by citizens, rather than top-down elite-driven direct democracy. Still, this is true when parties hold a major role in government compared to when they are junior partners or provide external support to non-populist governments. Equally important, these effects are contextual, because when controlling for the age of the democracy the effect of populists in government in facilitating direct democracy is much more reduced. Overall, thus, our paper shows that the relationship between populism and direct democracy from the supply-side perspective is more nuanced than suggested by the theory. In this, we concur with Gherghina and Pilet (2021), whose analysis of the populist manifestos does not provide a straightforward picture either. Populists seem to sympathise with direct democracy: from time to time, they use it, but they do not strive for it – at least not more often than non-populist parties – and they are also prone to facilitate their usage when in government, yet with some important contextual caveats. Further research is nonetheless needed. Firstly, we need to understand the mechanism that leads parties to promote or support a referendum: is it because they believe in direct democracy as a process to allow the people to decide or because this is an instrument to gain visibility, avoid isolation and, ultimately, to wage opposition and influencing the decision-making? Secondly, when in government, what do populists exactly do to promote direct democracy? Do they remove the barriers to all types of participatory tools or do they just make it easier to call for a referendum? And, equally important, do they act after pledging to increase direct democracy tools in their manifestos or just because they want to show to their electorate that they want to include people in the decision-making? Finally, more efforts are needed to understand the internal dynamics *within* populist parties. On one hand, this includes assessing the extent to which populist parties, more than non-populist parties, implement intra-party democracy. On the other hand, it involves examining whether populist parties, more frequently than non-populist parties, tend to decide in favour of referendums.

Notes

1. V-dem groups these four indexes in four higher-order indexes, the citizen-initiated component of direct popular vote index (v2xdd_cic) and the top-down component of direct popular vote index (v2xdd_toc). The citizen-initiated component of direct popular vote index is the normalised average of the scores of both indices of citizen-initiated mechanism of direct democracy popular initiatives and referendums (v2xdd_i_ci and v2xdd_i_rf), while the latter is the normalised average of the scores of both indices of mechanism of direct democracy which are not citizen-initiated obligatory referendums and plebiscites (v2xdd_cic and v2xdd_toc). As we are interested in looking at the impact of populist in government on specific implementations of direct democracy, we will not use those higher-order indexes, but we stick to the main lower-order indexes.
2. In case there is more than one populist party in government we recode their presence in the government as follows: if two or more populist parties are all junior partners, we include them among the category "junior partner", if one populist party is a major partner and one or more than one is a junior partner, we consider the country as having a major partner in government.
3. In some cases, the data were not available from 1990: as a general rule, for countries that democratise after 1989 we start with the first elected government under the democratic rule. In total we have 887 observations. To further corroborate our findings, we re-run our

models by including the same timespan of the first part of the analyses (2000-2020). Overall, the results are robust, see Appendix, Robustness Checks.

4. As we did before, we also tested a possible non-linear effect of the age of democracy. The results of this analysis (depicted in Table 5A, in the Appendix) provide us with mixed evidence: on the one hand, we do not find any curvilinear effect of the age of democracy on the citizens' initiative index and the obligatory referendum index (respectively Models 1 and 3); on the other, there are (admittedly weak) signs of a non-linear effect on the referendum index (Model 2).

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