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Supporting and Rejecting Populist Parties in Western Europe

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ABSTRACT

Populist parties have established themselves across Western Europe, placed liberal democracy under stress, and are the subject of growing interest in research. Nevertheless, two areas have received almost no attention: who rejects rather than supports these parties, and does supporting/rejecting them relate to citizens' conceptions of democracy? This paper addresses this gap. By relying on a novel public opinion dataset of ten West European countries with a set of indicators for positive and negative partisanship, and various conceptions of democracy, we explore if those who "love" and "hate" populist parties share or differ in how they understand democracy. Findings include that those who like (dislike) populist parties give less (more) importance to liberal democracy and more (less) to direct democracy. Moreover, we reveal that those who reject both populist radical left and populist radical right parties tend to share the same understanding of democracy based on liberal and egalitarian values.

1 INTRODUCTION

Populist forces have established themselves across Western Europe. Because of their growing electoral presence and relevance, populist parties have been able to enter government in countries as diverse as Austria, Finland, Greece, Italy, Norway, Spain, and Switzerland. Moreover, polls show that the COVID-19 pandemic is not necessarily affecting their levels of electoral support. It is, thus, not far-fetched to suggest that populist forces – and their supporters – are here to stay. The increasing political weight of populist parties across Western Europe has led to a proliferation

of studies. In broad terms, we can identify two main areas of research.

On the one hand, studies focus on the support for populist forces. For instance, scholars have shown that while populist electorates are united to some extent, constituencies with very different socio-demographic and socio-political characteristics support right- and left-wing populist parties (Rooduijn 2018; Van Hauwaert/van Kessel 2018; van Kessel et al. 2021). On the other hand, studies center on the impact of populist forces on the political system. Here, previous research reveals that populist parties embody alternative conceptions of democracy that contradict fundamental liberal principles and norms, challenging the post-war consensus on what democracy means and how it should work in Western Europe (Akerman et al. 2016; Katsambekis/Kiopkiolis 2019; March 2011; Mudde 2007). In summary, we have increasing knowledge about who supports populist parties, as well as the ways in which these parties – both in government and in opposition – are affecting democracy.

Despite this increasing body of literature on populist parties in Western Europe, two topics have received very little attention so far. Most studies analyze support for populist forces but give little attention to why citizens might reject them. In other words, we have almost no knowledge about those who dislike populist forces. Additionally, some recent studies highlight that populist citizens are dissatisfied democrats, but we know

nothing about the actual conceptions of democracy held by those who support or reject populist parties. This paper seeks to address these two research gaps by examining a novel survey dataset from ten West European countries. We reveal not only the proportion of voters who “love” (positive partisanship) and “hate” (negative partisanship) populist parties of different kinds but also analyze to what extent citizens’ notions of democracy relate to liking or disliking populist parties. Our analysis shows that right- and left-wing populist supporters internalize very different democratic models, while those who reject both populist radical left and populist radical right parties tend to share the same understanding of democracy: One that is based on both liberal and egalitarian values.

This paper is divided into four parts. First, we develop a theoretical argument that highlights the relevance and novelty of studying positive/negative partisanship towards populist parties as a dependent variable and citizens’ conceptions of democracy as the main independent variable. We subsequently discuss our study’s research design. The next section shows the empirical analyses and discusses their broader implications. We finally offer a summary of the main findings and set out the future research agenda related to the link between citizens’ conceptions of democracy and liking/disliking populist parties.

2 POPULIST SUPPORT AND (LIBERAL) DEMOCRACY

Within political science literature, there is a growing convergence towards an ideational interpretation of populism (Hawkins et al. 2018; Mudde/Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). According to this approach, populism is a set of ideas that not only portrays society as divided between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” but also defends popular sovereignty at any cost. Conceptualized in this way,

there is little doubt that populism maintains a difficult relationship with liberal democracy (Mudde 2004; Mudde/Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Plattner 2010). The latter is a regime based on the principles of popular sovereignty and majority rule and, at the same time, characterized by the existence of independent institutions that limit the self-determination of the demos (e.g. protection of minorities and delegation of power to non-majoritarian entities). By raising the question of “who controls the controllers” (Dahl 1989), populism is usually at odds with those independent institutions since they can breach both majority rule and popular sovereignty, implying that the ultimate political authority is vested in unelected entities rather than “the people” (Rovira Kaltwasser 2014). Seen in this light, populism is not authoritarian per se. After all, populism plays by the democratic rules of the game, while it nonetheless can end up subverting the liberal democratic regime from within (Canovan 1999).

Because of this intricate relationship between populism and liberal democracy, academics and pundits alike are paying increasing attention to the rise of populist forces, which – in turn – combine the populist set of ideas with a “host ideology” to promote political projects that are appealing to larger sections of the electorate. Across Europe, these populist forces adopt one of two host ideologies. Right-wing populist parties tend to advance a nativist interpretation of “the pure people”. In contrast, left-wing populist parties tend to develop a socialist interpretation of “the pure people” (Mudde/Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). While each subtype presents a substantially different meaning of who belongs (and who does not) to “the pure people” and “corrupt elite”, they share the same critical conception of the *liberal* democratic regime.

In fact, several studies examine these differences and similarities between left- and right-wing populist supporters. Rooduijn (2018), for example,

shows that populist electorates in Western Europe are quite heterogeneous, and therefore we should be careful about talking about “the” populist voter (Rooduijn et al. 2017; Rooduijn/Bru-goon 2018). Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018) further demonstrate that populist supporters are democratically dissatisfied citizens with high levels of populist attitudes but with quite dissimilar views on issues related to immigration and socioeconomic inequality (c. f. van Kessel et al. 2021; Zanotti et al. 2021). Similarly, Rovira Kaltwasser, Vehrkamp, and Wratil (2019) find that populist supporters have both high levels of populist attitudes and tend to be Eurosceptic, while they nonetheless adopt contrasting positions on the economic and cultural-political axes. Recent studies find similar observations when examining populist citizens rather than populist supporters (Rovira Kaltwasser/Van Hauwaert 2020; Van Hauwaert et al. 2019).

Despite our increasing knowledge of populism in Western Europe and the individual-level explanations for their support, there remain important unanswered questions in this extensive body of literature. On the one hand, scholars have primarily focused on similarities and differences between populist supporters while overlooking what unites and distinguishes those who dislike populist parties. On the other hand, there are almost no studies examining if citizens’ democratic conceptions influence support for populist forces of different kinds. We briefly explain the relevance of these two avenues of research below, highlighting positive and negative partisanship, as well as citizen conceptions of democracy.

3 POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PARTISANSHIP TOWARDS POPULIST FORCES

Ever since the 1960s, “The American Voter” has been a classic reference in political science because it demonstrates that partisan identification

is one of the most important – if not the most significant – variables that explain vote choice (Campbell et al. 1960). It prompted an immense body of literature about the influence of partisan identities in electoral and political behavior. Less well known, however, is that “The American Voter” argues that, to study partisanship correctly, you have to look at both its positive and negative dimensions. After all, voters might vote for a specific party not only and necessarily because they like this party but also because they dislike its alternative(s). Curiously, most research ignores this relevant distinction, and party identification became mostly understood as a positive construct. As Medeiros and Noël (2013) rightly point out, negative party identification is the forgotten side of partisanship – and a crucial dimension when it comes to understanding electoral and political behavior. Negative evaluations and feelings can be more powerful than positive ones, particularly because people tend to give more weight to bad than good experiences and information (Baumeister et al. 2001; Huddy et al. 2015).

Regardless of this initial oversight, recent political science research does pay increasing attention to negative party identification. Scholarship from the USA has been at the forefront of this development. This is unsurprising, as the USA is characterized by a bi-partisan political system with increasing levels of (affective) polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019; Iyengar/Krupenkin 2018). While positive preference for one party increasingly leads to a negative preference for the alternative, the electoral behavior of independents is driven more and more by negative rather than positive evaluations towards one of the two existing political parties (Abramowitz/Webster 2016, 2018; Bankert 2020; Iyengar et al. 2019). Another interesting example can be found in Latin America. Despite its very fragmented party system, Brazil has seen the emergence of one strong party (the center-left *Partido dos Trabalhadores* or Workers’ Party), which increasingly polarizes and instigates

political contestation between its supporters and detractors (Samuels/Zucco 2018). In fact, empirical studies examining Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 rise to power show that negative partisanship towards the Workers' Party was one of the most important explanations of his electoral success (Fuks et al. 2021; Rennó 2020).

However, when it comes to studying Western Europe, scholars have paid almost no attention to the role of negative partisanship.¹ To a certain extent, this is quite intriguing, because the empirical evidence reveals that fewer and fewer West European citizens identify positively towards political parties (Bartonolini/Mair 1990; Mair 2013, Van Hauwaert 2015), and we could – in consequence – easily hypothesize increasing levels and relevance of negative partisanship as an explanation for electoral and political behavior. While this may be the case for traditional party families, it does not by default translate to populist parties in Western Europe. Two observations guide our expectations in this regard. First, the transformation of West European party systems has contributed to the emergence and consolidation of populist forces (Kriesi 2014; Mair 2002). At least for populist radical right parties, we also know their electorates are surprisingly loyal (Voogd/Dassonneville 2020). We, therefore, expect to see relatively high levels of positive partisanship towards populist parties, most notably radical right ones. Second, populist parties systematically challenge the electoral dominance of traditional parties and put the status quo under stress (Rueda 2005). They are not just seen as “outsiders”, but a structural strain on and perhaps even a threat to the democratic system (Huber/Schimpf 2016, 2017). This would lead us to expect relatively high levels of negative partisanship towards populist parties.

¹ Among the few exceptions with a comparative focus, Spoon and Kanthak (2019) examine the relationship between negative partisanship and satisfaction with democracy, while Mayer (2017) examines how negative partisanship affects voting behavior.

Yet, we have very limited knowledge about the extent to which voters in Western Europe like and dislike these parties. To the best of our knowledge, only one study examines positive and negative partisanship in Western Europe with a specific emphasis on populist forces. Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser (2021) show that large portions of national electorates both like and dislike populist radical right parties. The study further finds that voters who tend to dislike populist radical right parties have a clear affinity for the democratic regime and its liberal democratic implementation.

Our study builds on this contribution. Most notably, we explore levels of positive and negative partisanship towards populist parties across Western Europe altogether, as well as towards populist radical left and populist radical right parties separately. Drawing from these insights, we then set out to explore the characteristics of these partisans. After all, an important question remains: To what extent do these positive and negative partisans hold similar or different conceptions of democracy?

4 CITIZENS' CONCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY AND SUPPORTING/REJECTING POPULIST FORCES

There is no scarcity of empirical studies on support for populist forces across Western Europe. Two important findings stand out from this body of literature. First, research shows that anti-immigration sentiments are key drivers of right-wing populist support (Dunn 2015; Ivarsflaten 2008; van der Brug et al. 2000). While populist attitudes, conservative values, and authoritarian positions also matter, nativism is the key individual-level predictor for support for right-wing populist parties (Mudde 2007). Second, studies demonstrate that left-wing populist support is primarily explained by left-wing economic policy preferences, such as state intervention in the economy (Gomez

et al. 2016; Ramiro 2016). Secondary explanations include the endorsement of egalitarian values (Mouffe 2018), such as gender equality and liberal values, as well as populist sentiments (Marcos-Marne et al. 2020; Marcos-Marne et al. 2021). These empirical findings suggest that it might be inaccurate to speak of “the” populist voter, as the group tends to make up different constituencies exhibiting dissimilar positions on several of the issues that structure political contestation (Rooduijn 2018). Not by chance, scholars consider left- and right-wing populist forces as two different subtypes of populism (Mudde/Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

Despite their idiosyncratic nature, we should not forget that populist supporters effectively share and articulate a *populist* critique against the establishment and the liberal democratic model. The very fact that – despite crucial ideological differences – populist supporters endorse populist attitudes reveals they have a difficult relationship with democracy. Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018) find that populist supporters across Europe not only share high levels of populist attitudes but are generally dissatisfied with democracy. Additionally, Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2020) show that populist citizens across Europe and Latin America share one very important similarity: They support democracy as a regime but are dissatisfied with democratic functioning in practice. That means populist citizens are not, by definition, authoritarian. Rather, they want to promote reforms with the aim of “democratizing democracy”.

This observation, however, comes with important constraints. Most importantly, extant research highlights that abstract support for democracy, or so-called “diffuse support” (Easton 1975: 444), is a problematic indicator to measure the extent to which citizens consider (liberal) democracy as “the only game in town” (Carlin/Singer 2011; Ceka/Magalhães, forthcoming; Linz/Stepan 1996:

15; Schedler/Sarsfield 2007; Ulbricht 2018). As Canache (2012: 1133) has correctly pointed out, “the adoption of norms, practices, and institutions that delineate the liberal architecture of current democratic systems does not imply that *all* citizens in every nation *exclusively* endorse a liberal view” (*italics* in original). Moreover, we know that democratic regime support is not only very stable (Magalhães 2014) but also greatly dependent on its effectiveness (Dahlberg/Holmberg 2014; Klingemann 1999) and performance (Curini et al. 2012; Wagner et al. 2009).

This measurement issue is particularly relevant for the analysis of populist supporters across Europe, considering there is increasing empirical evidence about the ways in which populist actors pose a threat to the liberal democratic regime (Huber/Schimpf 2016; 2017) and, in some cases, can even lead to a process of democratic breakdown (Ruth 2018). In that regard, it is important to understand the democratic conceptions of populist supporters in much more detail. Differently put, even though it is clear that populist citizens adhere to democracy as a regime type and support it in an abstract sense, we know relatively little about which specific aspects of democracy populist supporters endorse or reject in more concrete terms. We simply do not know what kind of democracy populist supporters have in mind. Considering their overall levels of discontent (Barr 2009; Rooduijn et al. 2016; Van Hauwaert/van Kessel 2018), it is important to understand *why* populist supporters are dissatisfied with democracy. This study, therefore, explores the relationship between different conceptions of democracy and positive partisanship towards populist forces.

The opposite exercise is more intricate. This is not only because there are almost no studies on negative partisanship towards populist forces, but – perhaps more importantly – because studies on negative partisanship emphasize it is not simply the opposite of positive partisanship

(Bankert 2020). It is a separate and distinct concept, meaning that hating one party does not automatically imply love for another party. This argument is particularly true in multi-party systems, where citizens have many political parties to choose from (Rose/Mishler 1998). With that in mind, we only present very tentative expectations about the potential linkage between negative partisanship towards populist forces and citizens' conceptions of democracy. Drawing from extant literature, we expect that populist supporters are united in their skepticism of the basic principles of liberal democracy (Mudde 2004, 2007). At the same time, they also tend to prefer more direct popular participation as an alternative mode of decision-making because this more directly represents the will of the people and can be used to challenge the corrupt elite (Heinisch/Wegscheider 2020; Jacobs et al. 2018; Mudde 2007; Pauwels 2014; Zaslove et al. 2021).

Overall, we expect those with positive and negative partisanship towards populist forces to differ in their conceptions of democracy. While extant scholarship remains relatively silent about the theoretical foundations that might underpin these differences, we are nonetheless able to formulate two notable differences. First, we expect those who reject populist forces to back the typical liberal understanding of democracy we observe across Western Europe. Second, we expect populist supporters to hold more skeptical interpretations of liberal democracy while promoting an alternative and more direct implementation. In this regard, we set out to examine if and how populist supporters challenge the post-war consensus of what democracy means across Western Europe.

5 DATA AND METHOD

Our study explores the relationship between citizens' conceptions of democracy and positive/negative partisanship towards populist parties. To do so, we rely on survey data from ten West European countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.² National samples are representative of the respective eligible population for the 2019 European Parliament elections and have been stratified according to official socio-demographic distributions (age, gender, education, region) using census data provided by Eurostat. These countries represent the historical, economic, regional, and political diversity of Western Europe and include both established prototypical and more recently successful populist parties. In addition, the country selection allows for variance in the type of populist parties, as well as their governmental and opposition status.

5.1 POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PARTISANSHIP TOWARDS POPULIST PARTIES

We draw on *The PopuList* to distinguish whether a party is populist or not while also further differentiating between left- and right-wing populist parties (Rooduijn et al. 2019). Table 1 provides an overview of populist parties in our sample countries and a further differentiation of whether they can be considered left or right. The only case that is difficult to classify based on a left-right typology is the Italian "Five Star Movement" (M5S). Therefore, we exclude this party from our analysis after exploring differences and similarities between left- and right-wing populism.

² The survey was conducted online by YouGov in January 2019 on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Table 1: Classification of political parties

Country	Non-Populist Parties	Populist Parties	
		Left-wing populist	Right-wing populist
Austria	ÖVP, SPÖ, GRÜNE, NEOS, JETZT, others	-	FPÖ
Denmark	Alternativet, KF, EL, LA, RV, S, SF, V, others	-	DF
France	EELV, LREM/MoDem/Agir, LR, PS, UDI, others	FI	RN
Germany	CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, GRÜNE, others	DIE LINKE	AfD
Greece	KINAL, ND, others	KKE, Syriza	XA
Italy	PD, FI, others	M5S*	
		-	Fdi, LN
Netherlands	CDA, CU, D66, GL, PvdA, VVD, others	SP	FvD, PVV
Spain	Bildu, C's, ERC, EAJ-PNV, PP, PSOE, PDeCAT, others	Podemos	VOX
Sweden	C, KD, L, MP, M, S, V, others	-	SD
UK	Cons, Greens, Labour, LibDem, DUP, SNP, Plaid Cymru, others	-	UKIP

Notes: Classification based on the PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2019). We include KKE and XA (Greece) as populist parties since both have a populism score of more than 7.5 according to the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey 2018 (Meijers / Zaslove 2020, 2021), while we exclude FI (Italy) as a populist party applying the same threshold. *M5S (Italy) only included as a populist party.

While the classification of populist parties is relatively straightforward, assessing partisanship towards them is more complex, considering there is no formal or standardized measurement. This is not necessarily problematic, however, since distinctive measurements can function differently in specific contexts (e.g. two-party versus multi-party systems) and can help to illuminate different intensities of partisanship (e.g. strong vs. weak). Overall, scholars rely on one of two approaches to measure partisanship: Either they adopt the feeling thermometer/sympathy approach where voters indicate how much they dis/like political parties (Richardson 1991), or they employ a group-identity approach where voters declare for which parties they would (never) vote (Rose/Mishler 1998; Samuels/Zucco 2018). While both approaches have merit, we rely on the group-identity approach for two interrelated reasons – one is pragmatic, and the other is conceptual. First, we are interested in getting information about those

who have strong feelings towards populist forces, and therefore whether they would never (always) vote for these parties is a good proxy to measure rejection (approval). Second, given that we conceptualize partisanship as a stable psychological dis/affection for a specific political party (Campbell et al. 1960; Meléndez/Rovira Kaltwasser 2019, 2021), a measurement tapping into positive or negative evaluations of a populist party is particularly relevant.

We henceforth rely on the question asking how likely it is that respondents cast their vote for a particular party. The variable contains a four-point scale, ranging from “would definitely not vote” (1) to “would definitely vote” (4). Additionally, we also consider the complexity of European electoral arenas by measuring the variable in three electoral arenas: The European Parliament, the national parliament, and the regional parliament (or local government in those cases that a

regional parliament does not exist). We subsequently operationalize populist partisanship as follows. Positive partisans are those who respond that they “would rather” or “definitely vote” for the populist party in all three elections. Negative partisans are those who respond that they “would rather” or “definitely not vote” for the populist party in all three elections. This particular approach captures positive and negative partisans across consistent party preferences, i. e. those who like or dislike the populist party in all three electoral arenas simultaneously.

5.2 CONCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Drawing from the debate of how democracy *should* be conceptualized (Dahl 1989), and similar to the 2012 European Social Survey (Ferrín/Kriesi 2016), our survey includes 12 items that identify citizens’ conceptions of democracy across Europe (see Table 2). Respondents were asked, on an eleven-point scale from “not at all important” (0) to “very important” (10), how important they consider certain elements of democracy.

Table 2 presents an exploratory factor analysis of these 12 democracy indicators to examine which are the concepts of democracy identified by citizens. The results show that all items are structured into four factors. The first factor includes characteristics of the electoral *and* liberal dimensions of democracy. This might be considered surprising, as the academic debate typically separates electoral and liberal components of democracy. But it is clear that European citizens do not make this conceptual distinction. As the factor analysis reveals, the survey items that seek to measure these two regime types are seen as a singular democratic concept. The second factor includes an egalitarian conception of democracy. Perhaps also surprising, the minority rights item (typically considered an indicator of liberal democracy) aligns with the social democracy items. This suggests that, from the perspective of

European citizens, egalitarian democracy is not only about providing social protection (economic issues) but also about respecting minorities (cultural issues). The third factor measures the preference for direct democratic measures, such as referendums and impeachment procedures. The fourth factor includes preferences for authoritarian forms of rule. We use factor scores to measure support for each dimension, with higher scores indicating higher support.

5.3 CONTROL VARIABLES

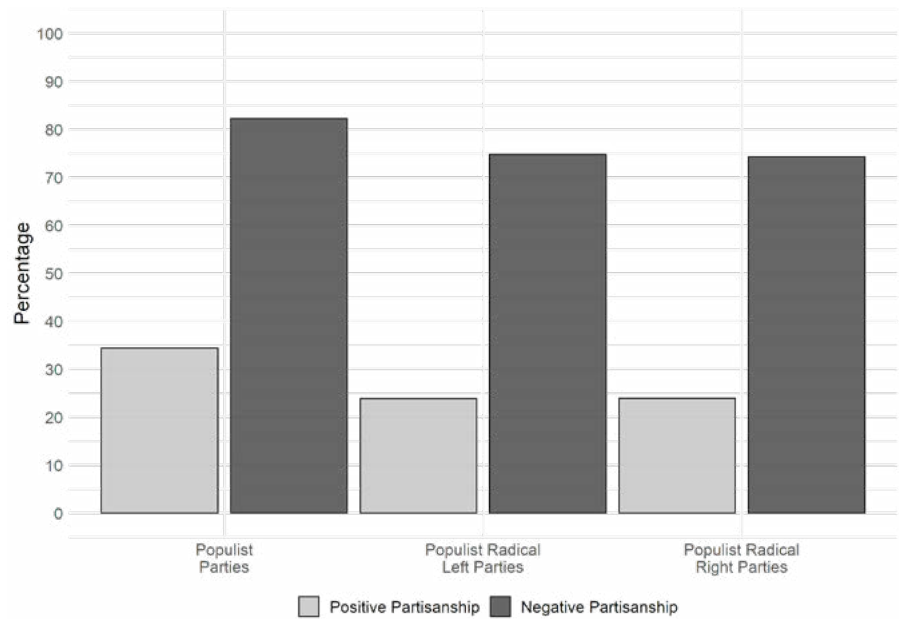
While we explore the direct impact of conceptions of democracy on both negative and positive partisanship towards populist parties, our analysis also accounts for a number of controls. As a prime explanation of populist support, we include a populist attitudes scale (Van Hauwaert et al. 2020). We also approximate respondents’ “host ideologies” by including various scales that capture specific economic, cultural, and migration-related preferences. Higher values mean economically liberal, culturally conservative, and anti-immigrant positions. We further use an eleven-point scale to measure the left-right self-placement, and we also use an item that taps into Euroscepticism, measured by the respondent’s rejection of their country’s membership of the European Union. We include separate indicators of democratic satisfaction and political interest. Finally, we include a range of socio-demographic controls, like age, gender (0 = male; 1 = female), and education. We refer to section B and Tables 5 to 9 in the supplementary materials for further details on the question wordings, factor analyses, and descriptive statistics of all these control variables.

Table 2: Measuring Citizens' Conceptions of Democracy

Theoretical Dimension	How important do you think it is for democracy in general...	Empirical Factors			
		1	2	3	4
Liberal democracy	...that national elections are free and fair?	.65	.26	.15	-.14
	...that opposition parties are free to criticize the government?	.76	.11	.04	-.13
	...that everyone is free to express their political views?	.66	.25	.20	-.12
	...that the courts are able to stop the government acting beyond its authority?	.51	.23	.19	.03
	...that the media are free to criticize the government?	.75	.13	.08	-.09
Egalitarian democracy	...that the government protects all citizens against poverty?	.25	.73	.19	.02
	...that the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels?	.12	.68	.19	.06
	...that the rights of minorities groups are protected?	.33	.50	-.01	.09
Direct democracy	...that citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums?	.15	.15	.79	.12
	...that citizens can directly remove an elected politician from office by calling for an impeachment referendum?	.22	.16	.66	.15
Authoritarianism	...that the government is led by a leader who is not accountable to parliament?	-.22	.05	.22	.41
	...that the army takes power if the governments is incompetent?	-.09	-.04	.10	.99
Explained Variance		21%	13%	11%	10%
Eigenvalue		2.56	1.52	1.29	1.25
Cronbachs alpha		.82	.71	.75	.61
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)		.84			
Respondents (N)		16,707			

Notes: Results are from a minimum residual factor analysis with orthogonal rotation ("varimax"). See section A in the supplementary materials for a detailed discussion.

Figure 1: Positive and negative partisanship towards populist parties across Western Europe
 Notes: Percentages do not add to 100 because individuals in countries with more than one populist party can have both positive and negative partisanship. Percentages for partisanship towards populist radical left parties refer only to countries with these parties in parliament (France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, and Spain), while percentages for partisanship towards populist radical right parties allude to the ten countries included in the analysis since in all of them one can find at least one populist radical right party.



6 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 presents how many people across our sample exhibit positive and negative partisanship towards populist parties across Western Europe. It reveals that the number of voters with an aversion to populist parties (more than 80%) clearly outweighs those who like them (about 35%). It is, therefore, not far-fetched to suggest that populist parties have an apparent electoral ceiling. That is, they face an uphill battle to expand their electoral base beyond their core constituencies (Meléndez/Rovira Kaltwasser 2021).

6.1 PARTISANSHIP TOWARDS POPULIST PARTIES

We further explore the observations from Figure 1 and scrutinize the origins of both electorates by conducting a multivariate analysis that examines how these two groups differ (or resemble each other) in terms of their interpretations of democracy. In what follows, we first explore partisanship towards populist parties as a whole and then towards left- and right-wing populist parties

separately. In that regard, Figure 2 examines those who like and dislike populist parties. As highlighted in our theoretical section, we have general expectations about the relationship between citizens' democratic conceptions and their approval or rejection of populist parties.

Each conception of democracy returns an interesting finding. First, positive partisanship for populist parties relates negatively to liberal democracy, while negative partisanship relates positively to liberal democracy. It is, thus, clear that feelings towards liberal democracy serve as a key distinction between those who "hate" and "love" populist parties. Differently put, those who identify with populist parties tend to have a certain disdain for decision-making by elected representatives and judicial control of political decisions. While we know that populism has a complicated relationship with liberal democracy on a conceptual and party-political level (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Rummens 2017; Huber/Ruth 2017), we now also demonstrate that citizens who identify with populist parties are weary of liberal democracy.

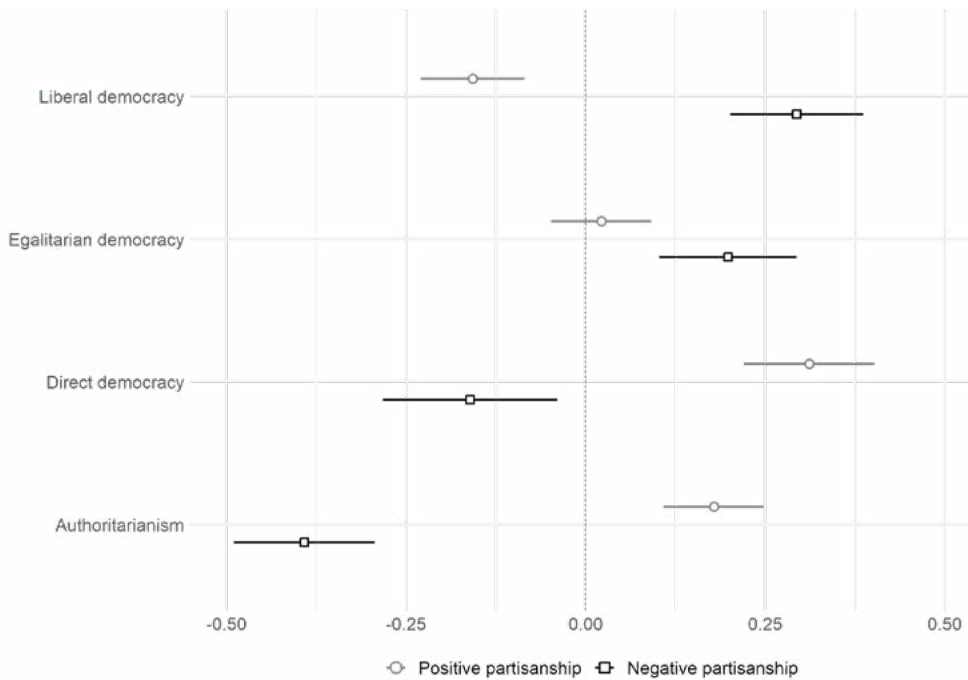


Figure 2: Explaining positive and negative partisanship towards populist parties
Notes: Plot shows standardized coefficients with 95% confidence intervals from logistic regression models with country-fixed effects. Full models are reported in Table 10 of the supplementary materials.

The results related to egalitarian democracy are less clear-cut. While Figure 2 suggests there is no necessary relationship between egalitarian democracy and populist partisanship, we find that those who reject populist parties have an apparent affinity towards egalitarian democracy. Several scholars posit that social democracy in Europe might be retrenching (Benedetto et al. 2020), however, it remains widely entrenched across the various West European countries we include in our analysis. Therefore, this observation is perhaps not all that surprising. Nonetheless, it is something worth exploring in more detail, most notably by disaggregating the type of populist parties that people might reject. We come back to this later.

Figure 2 also clearly highlights that those who “love” and “hate” populist parties significantly differ in their views towards direct democracy. More precisely, those who positively identify with populist parties are very supportive of direct democratic tools, while those with negative partisanship rather oppose a more direct democratic form. While the populist desire for more direct democracy is widely established in the literature, both theoretically (Canovan 1999; Mudde

2004) and empirically (Jacobs et al. 2018; Mohrenberg et al. 2021), the hostility to direct democracy by those who reject populist parties is novel. This is certainly in part due to the increasing affinity towards elitism and technocratic solutions among more mainstream electorates (Bertsou/Pastorella 2017; Bertsou/Caramani 2020; Heyne/Costa Lobo 2021). It further puts into perspective some of the recent findings related to supposed tensions between the existing processes of representative democracy and reformist calls for a more participatory form of democracy (Dalton et al. 2001). At least those citizens rejecting populist forces might, after all, not give that much importance to more opportunities for involvement in the political process.

A final takeaway from Figure 2 is that those with negative partisanship towards populist parties have a significantly less authoritarian conception of democracy than their counterparts. Differently put, the more (less) important authoritarian conceptions of democracy are for a person, the less (more) they tend to dislike populist parties. This, in and of itself, is not surprising. Despite some rather crude claims hinting at deconsolidation,

following a supposed tendency of European electorates to be (or rather, become) more authoritarian (Foa/Mounk 2016, 2017), there appears to be no real prevalence towards authoritarian interpretations of democracy among the broader electoral cohorts who reject populist parties (Alexander/Welzel 2017; Welzel 2021).

6.2 DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN LEFT- AND RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES

Considering the heterogeneity within the populist party family, Figures 3 and 4 further distinguish both forms of partisanship for populist radical left and populist radical right parties, respectively. This allows us to get a more fine-grained sense of the differences and similarities in conceptions of democracy between these electorates.

Figure 3 shows positive and negative partisanship towards populist radical left parties. Unsurprisingly, those who “love” populist radical left parties give less importance to liberal democracy and more importance to direct democracy. That is, citizens with positive partisanship towards populist radical left parties tend to be critical of the principles of liberal democracy while favoring the inclusion of the people in the political decision-making process over constitutional controls. At the same time, those who “hate” populist radical left parties have the opposite profile: They tend to give more importance to liberal democracy and less importance to direct democracy. Considering that both of those democratic components relate very strongly to populism and not directly to the host ideology, it is not surprising that this is similar to what we found in Figure 2.

Much more surprising, however, is that we find no significant relationship between the importance of egalitarian democracy and liking or disliking populist radical left parties. Even more astonishing, positive and negative partisans of populist radical left parties do not appear to differ in

terms of promoting equality for underprivileged groups. While we did not expect a concrete relationship between populist radical left partisanship and the importance of authoritarianism, we do confirm that people who “hate” populist radical left parties give less importance to this construct. We can make sense of this if we consider that most populist parties – even left-wing ones – have a relatively narrow governance hierarchy with strong, or at least clearly identified or visible, leadership.

Figure 4 shows the results for positive and negative partisanship towards populist radical right parties. Much like our previous observations (see Figures 2 and 3), we find that those who dislike populist radical right parties give more importance to liberal democracy and less to direct democracy. We also find that those positively identifying with populist radical right parties are less likely to find liberal democracy important and likely to advocate for more direct democracy. This is a common finding among candidates and parties from the populist radical right, but we know much less about the eventual translation to its electoral base. Interestingly, our findings reveal that at the mass level there seems to be a clear connection between supporting (rejecting) direct democracy and identifying positively (negatively) with the populist radical right.

Figure 4 further teaches us that those who “hate” populist radical right parties give much more prominence to the inclusion and empowerment of economically and socially disadvantaged groups. As we already highlighted, this is something that probably stems from the longstanding tradition of social democracy across Europe. Those who “love” populist radical right parties find egalitarian democracy much less important, perhaps because they equate (or conflate) social and nativist interpretations of inequality. Indeed, populist radical right party identifiers tend to be more authoritarian in their worldview (Van Hauwaert/van

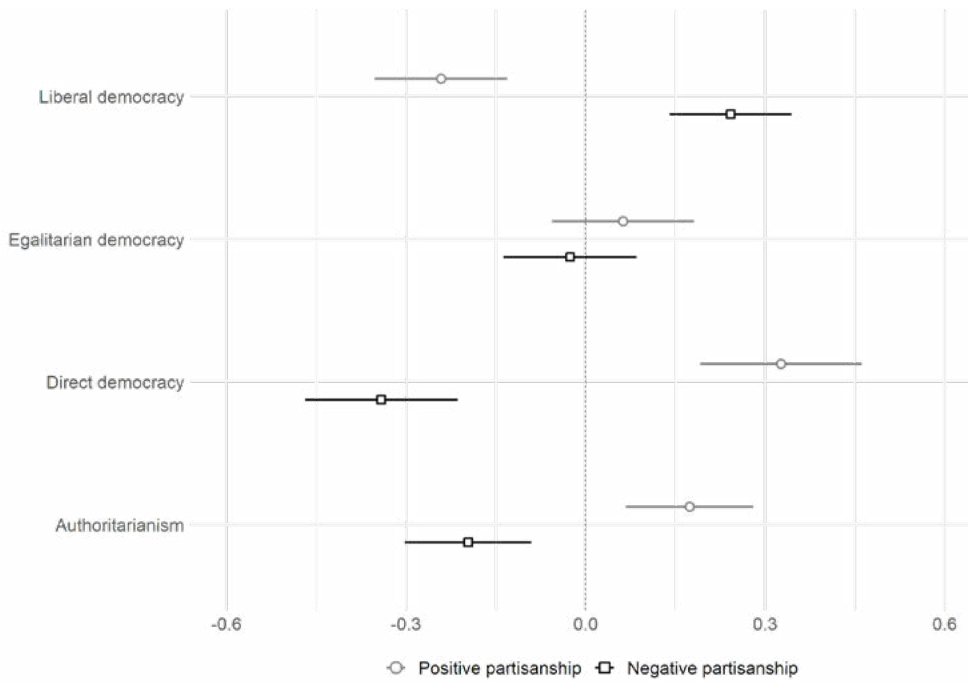


Figure 3: Explaining positive and negative partisanship towards left-wing populist parties

Notes: Plot shows standardized coefficients with 95% confidence intervals from logistic regression models with country-fixed effects. Full models are reported in Table 10 of the supplementary materials.

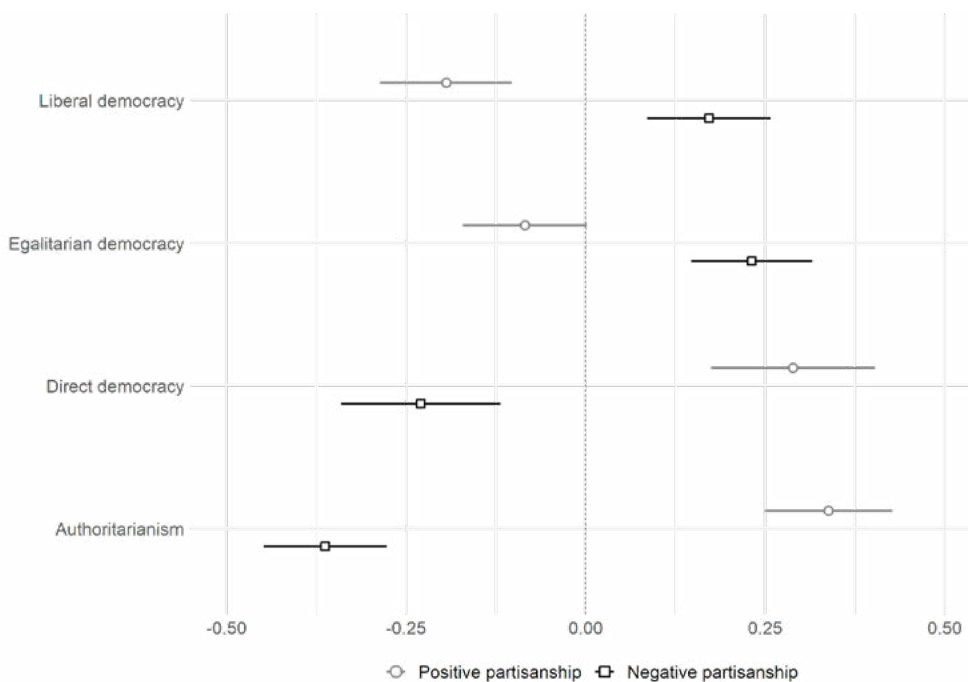


Figure 4: Explaining positive and negative partisanship towards right-wing populist parties

Notes: Plot shows standardized coefficients with 95% confidence intervals from logistic regression models with country-fixed effects. Full models are reported in Table 10 of the supplementary materials.

Kessel 2018). Figure 4 further supports this, as we find evidence that those who “love” populist radical right parties tend to give more importance to authoritarian interpretations of democracy, which includes a preference for strong and decisive leadership. By contrast, citizens who “hate” right-wing populist parties are much less authoritarian in their outlook.

7 CONCLUSION

Despite increasing academic interest in populist parties across Western Europe, two issues have received limited attention so far: negative partisanship towards these parties and the extent to which those who support/reject them defend different concepts of democracy. By analyzing a novel survey dataset for ten Western European

countries, we seek to address both research gaps. In fact, we have been able to present rich empirical evidence about the ways in which positive/negative partisanship towards populist forces (of different kinds) are linked to the defense of four different regime types: liberal democracy, egalitarian democracy, direct democracy, and authoritarianism. In summary, the most important findings are threefold.

First, Western European citizens advance an understanding of democracy that is not identical to the concept of democracy that is normally present in the academic debate. While scholars usually distinguish between electoral and liberal democracy, voters in Western Europe consider these two concepts as only one regime type. In addition, seen through the eyes of citizens, minority rights are part of an egalitarian model of democracy that fosters a better integration of underprivileged sectors. This means that Western European voters consider that an egalitarian democracy is a regime type characterized by the protection of both socioeconomic and sociocultural principles.

Second, those who hold negative partisanship towards populist parties in general and towards populist radical left- and populist radical right forces in particular are at odds with direct democracy. Moreover, those who hold positive partisanship towards populist parties in general and towards left- and right-wing populist forces in particular are in favor of direct democracy. This is an unexpected finding, which reveals that endorsing direct democracy mechanisms is linked to supporting/rejecting populist forces. Future studies should investigate this relationship in more detail, something that is probably linked to the emphasis that populist forces give to respecting popular sovereignty at any cost and their usual demand to undertake referendums to give voice to the “silent majority”.

Third, citizens who hold negative partisanship towards populist parties in general and towards populist radical left and populist radical right forces in particular are at odds with authoritarianism. At the same time, those who support populist radical left and populist radical right advocate very different models of democracy, while those who reject both populist radical left and populist radical right tend to share the same understanding of democracy: one that is based on both liberal and egalitarian values. In our opinion, these empirical findings can be interpreted as a sign of democratic resilience because rejecting populist parties of different kinds is directly related to being opposed to an authoritarian regime as well as defending liberal and egalitarian values that are normally associated with the post-war consensus on what democracy means and how it should work in Western Europe.

Before concluding, we would like to emphasize that studies on negative partisanship are still in their infancy in Western Europe. Given that the number of people who positively identify with political parties is clearly diminishing across the region, future research on negative partisanship can shed light on the ways in which voters relate to political parties currently. This means that we need more analyses and new data on positive/negative partisanship in Western Europe. Particularly interesting in this regard would be the development of longitudinal data in order to examine the stability of negative partisanship towards populist parties. For instance, one could think that by forming a government coalition with mainstream parties, populist parties can increase their legitimacy and therefore reduce levels of negative partisanship. However, it is not clear if once populist forces have access to office, those who have a positive identity towards populist parties would change their understandings of democracy. To answer this type of question, it is crucial to have longitudinal data on positive/negative partisanship and citizens' conceptions of democracy.

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APPENDIX

SECTION A: MEASURING CITIZENS' CONCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

To ensure validity and reliability in measuring citizens' conceptions of democracy, we applied the following procedure. As some respondents tend to answer without considering the content, leading to response bias, we first identify respondents with careless responses using the "careless" package in R (Wilhelm and Yentes 2020). Following the proposed procedure for calculating longstrings and Mahalanobis distance, we identify 1,746 respondents with careless respondents on the conceptions of democracy item-battery who are excluded from further analyses. As shown in Figure 5, parallel analysis suggests four factors and three components. To consider alternative results compared to our preferred four-factor solution, we conduct principal component factor analyses using three and five factors and compare them in terms of interpretability. Table 3 shows the results of the factor analysis for three factors and Table 4 for five factors.

The factor analysis using three factors shows that there are only small changes in the factor loading of the liberal and egalitarian dimensions of democracy. However, the items of direct democracy, as well as authoritarianism, fall into one factor. While from a theoretical perspective there is a common ground in both perspectives on democracy in that they reject the parliament as a key democratic institution, we argue that it is reasonable to conceptually separate the two dimensions. The results of the factor analysis using five factors correspond to the results with four factors for the egalitarian and direct dimensions of democracy and authoritarianism. Although the liberal dimension splits into two factors, it does not correspond to the theoretically expected distinctions between an electoral and a liberal dimension, since the item on rule of law forms a separate factor. Furthermore, combining the electoral and liberal dimensions within one factor seems to make more sense for reducing complexity. We are therefore confident that we chose the best theoretical and empirical solution using a factor analysis with four factors, as shown in Table 2.

Figure 5: Parallel Analysis Scree Plots

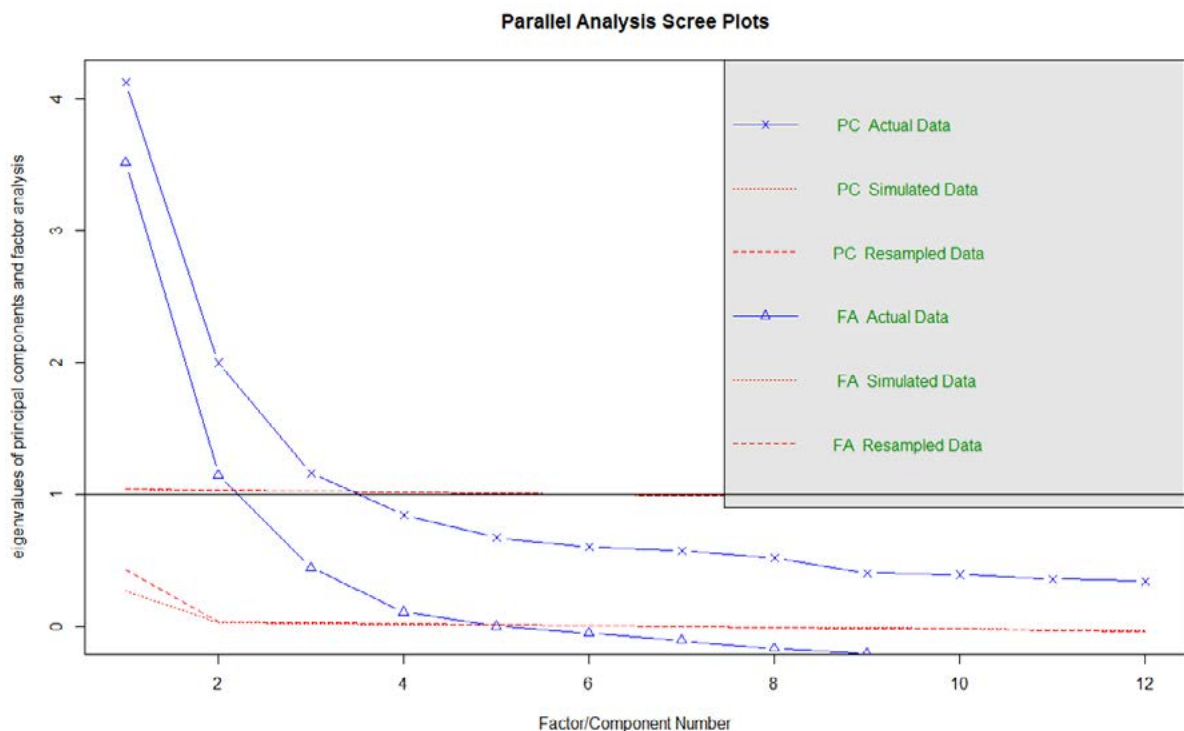


Table 3: Measuring citizens' conceptions of democracy (three factors)

Theoretical Dimension	How important do you think it is for democracy in general...	Empirical Dimension		
		1	2	3
Liberal democracy	...that national elections are free and fair?	.68	.28	-.02
	...that opposition parties are free to criticize the government?	.74	.14	-.11
	...that everyone is free to express their political views?	.69	.26	.03
	...that the courts are able to stop the government acting beyond its authority?	.51	.24	.14
	...that the media are free to criticize the government?	.73	.16	-.06
Egalitarian democracy	...that the government protects all citizens against poverty?	.26	.74	.14
	...that the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels?	.13	.68	.19
	...that the rights of minorities groups are protected?	.31	.52	-.10
Direct democracy	...that citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums?	.30	.17	.63
	...that citizens can directly remove an elected politician from office by calling for an impeachment referendum?	.35	.17	.62
Authoritarianism	...that the government is led by a leader who is not accountable to parliament?	-.25	.04	.49
	...that the army takes power if the governments is incompetent?	-.23	-.03	.51
Explained Variance		23%	13%	11%
Eigenvalue		2.80	1.59	1.38
Cronbachs alpha		.82	.71	.62
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)		.84		
Respondents (N)		16,707		

Notes: Results are from a minimum residual factor analysis with orthogonal rotation ('varimax').

Table 4: Measuring citizens' conceptions of democracy (five factors)

Theoretical Dimension	How important do you think it is for democracy in general...	Empirical Dimension				
		1	2	3	4	5
Liberal democracy	...that national elections are free and fair?	.50	.25	.14	-.12	.61
	...that opposition parties are free to criticize the government?	.76	.15	.07	-.16	.11
	...that everyone is free to express their political views?	.53	.25	.20	-.11	.44
	...that the courts are able to stop the government acting beyond its authority?	.45	.25	.20	.02	.17
	...that the media are free to criticize the government?	.77	.17	.11	-.12	.08
Egalitarian democracy	...that the government protects all citizens against poverty?	.18	.73	.19	.02	.15
	...that the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels?	.09	.69	.20	.06	.02
	...that the rights of minorities groups are protected?	.29	.52	.00	-.09	.12
Direct democracy	...that citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums?	.10	.16	.75	.13	.11
	...that citizens can directly remove an elected politician from office by calling for an impeachment referendum?	.19	.17	.70	.14	.04
Authoritarianism	...that the government is led by a leader who is not accountable to parliament?	-.22	.04	.20	.41	-.03
	...that the army takes power if the governments is incompetent?	-.05	-.04	.10	.99	-.07
Explained Variance		18%	13%	11%	11%	6%
Eigenvalue		2.13	1.58	1.31	1.26	0.67
Cronbachs alpha		.83	.71	.75	.61	-
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)		.84				
Respondents (N)		16,707				

Notes: Results are from a minimum residual factor analysis with orthogonal rotation ("varimax").

SECTION B: MEASURING THE CONTROL VARIABLES

Table 5: Measuring populist attitudes

Item	Factor
The politicians in [country] need to follow the will of the people	.57
The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions	.67
The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people	.65
I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than by a specialized politician	.65
Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.	.70
What people call “compromises” in politics are really just selling out one’s principles	.62
The particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people	.72
Politicians always end up agreeing when it comes to protecting their privileges	.69
Explained Variance	44%
Eigenvalue	3.49
Cronbachs alpha	.86
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	.90
Respondents (N)	16,845

Notes: Results are from a minimum residual factor analysis.

Table 6: Measuring economic liberalism

Item	Factor
The government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for. People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves.	.69
People who are unemployed should have the right to refuse a job they do not want. People who are unemployed should have to take any job available or lose their unemployment benefits.	.62
Competition is harmful. It brings out the worst in people. Competition is good. It stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas.	.61
Government should increase taxes a lot and spend much more on social benefit and services. Government should decrease taxes a lot and spend much less on social benefits and services.	.51
Explained Variance	37%
Eigenvalue	1.50
Cronbachs alpha	.70
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	.74
Respondents (N)	18,483

Notes: Results are from a minimum residual factor analysis.

Table 7: Measuring cultural conservatism

Item	Factor
A woman can be fulfilled through her professional career. A woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled.	.49
A woman who does not want to have a child should be allowed to have a free and safe abortion. Abortion should not be allowed in any case.	.65
Homosexual couples should be able to adopt children Homosexual couples should not be allowed to adopt children under any circumstances.	.65
Explained Variance	36%
Eigenvalue	1.08
Cronbachs alpha	.62
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	.63
Respondents (N)	18,483

Notes: Results are from a minimum residual factor analysis.

Table 8: Measuring anti-immigration attitudes

Item	Factor
[Country] should no longer accept refugees coming from crisis areas.	.77
Despite the refugee crisis of recent years, migration is a good thing and [country] benefits from it. (reverse coded)	.71
Migrants should not have the same rights as others.	.66
Migrants should be able preserving their language and culture. (reverse coded)	.55
Explained Variance	46%
Eigenvalue	1.83
Cronbachs alpha	.77
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	.75
Respondents (N)	17,513

Notes: Results are from a minimum residual factor analysis.

Table 9: Descriptive statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Median	Min.	Max.
Dependent variables: Positive partisanship towards...						
...populist parties	16,776	0.34	0.48	0.00	0.00	1.00
...populist radical left parties	7,783	0.24	0.43	0.00	0.00	1.00
...populist radical right parties	16,414	0.24	0.43	0.00	0.00	1.00
Dependent variables: Negative partisanship towards...						
...populist parties	16,776	0.82	0.38	1.00	0.00	1.00
...populist radical left parties	7,783	0.75	0.43	1.00	0.00	1.00
...populist radical right parties	16,414	0.74	0.44	1.00	0.00	1.00
Independent variables: Conceptions of democracy						
Liberal democracy	14,377	-0.01	0.90	0.23	-4.57	1.74
Egalitarian democracy	14,377	-0.02	0.83	0.13	-3.98	1.77
Direct democracy	14,377	-0.02	0.85	0.14	-3.08	1.78
Authoritarianism	14,377	-0.00	0.98	-0.16	-1.50	2.43
Control variables:						
Populist attitudes	15,228	0.03	0.93	0.13	-3.59	1.36
Economic liberalism	18,483	0.00	0.84	-0.01	-2.24	1.78
Cultural conservatism	18,483	-0.00	0.80	-0.08	-1.03	2.19
Anti-immigration attitudes	16,971	0.00	0.89	0.01	-1.77	1.58
Euroscepticism	17,446	0.39	0.33	0.25	0.00	1.00
Democratic satisfaction	17,695	0.45	0.28	0.50	0.00	1.00
Left-right scale	16,182	0.50	0.25	0.50	0.00	1.00
Political interest	18,360	0.62	0.28	0.70	0.00	1.00
Education	18,483	0.58	0.21	0.50	0.00	1.00
Gender (female)	18,483	0.54	0.50	1.00	0.00	1.00
Age	18,483	0.30	0.15	0.31	0.00	1.00

Table 10: Explaining partisanship towards populist parties

	Populist parties		Populist radical left		Populist radical right	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
(Intercept)	-2.02***	0.83***	-0.08	-0.47*	-3.34***	2.14***
	(0.18)	(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.22)	(0.21)
Liberal democracy	-0.18***	0.33***	-0.28***	0.28***	-0.22***	0.19***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Egalitarian democracy	0.03	0.24***	0.08	-0.03	-0.10**	0.28***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Direct democracy	0.36***	-0.19***	0.38***	-0.40***	0.33***	-0.26***
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)
Authoritarianism	0.18***	-0.40***	0.17***	-0.20***	0.34***	-0.37***
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Populist attitudes	0.33***	-0.04	0.27***	-0.15**	0.20***	-0.07
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Economic liberalism	-0.20***	0.15***	-0.34***	0.42***	-0.05	0.09**
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Cultural conservatism	0.03	-0.32***	-0.06	0.01	0.29***	-0.42***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Anti-immigration	0.31***	-0.36***	-0.27***	0.28***	0.88***	-0.76***
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Euroscepticism	1.65***	-1.60***	0.62***	-0.66***	1.44***	-1.54***
	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.10)	(0.09)
Democratic satisfaction	0.36***	-0.93***	0.75***	-0.39**	-0.03	0.08
	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.11)
Left-right scale	0.33**	-0.20	-4.11***	3.79***	3.10***	-2.52***
	(0.10)	(0.14)	(0.17)	(0.16)	(0.13)	(0.13)
Political interest	1.15***	-0.35**	0.55***	-0.68***	0.76***	-0.73***
	(0.10)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.12)
Education	-0.09	0.32*	0.07	-0.08	0.07	0.04
	(0.11)	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.13)
Gender (female)	-0.35***	0.31***	-0.36***	0.31***	-0.34***	0.44***
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Age	-0.92***	1.96***	-1.09***	1.80***	-0.80***	1.26***
	(0.15)	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.19)
Country-fixed effects	X	X	X	X	X	X

	Populist parties		Populist radical left		Populist radical right	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
AIC	11439.55	6611.02	5852.24	6477.20	7583.34	8298.28
BIC	11622.83	6794.30	5984.82	6609.79	7766.16	8481.11
Log Likelihood	-5694.78	-3280.51	-2906.12	-3218.60	-3766.67	-4124.14
Deviance	12283.49	7158.30	6014.74	6506.70	8096.39	8810.91
Num. obs.	11284	11284	5592	5592	11082	11082
***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05.						

APPENDIX REFERENCES

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