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Referendums, for Populists Only? Why Populist Parties Favour Referendums and How Other Parties Respond.

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Referendums, for Populists Only? Why Populist Parties Favour Referendums and How Other Parties Respond

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Abstract

Populists are generally known as supporters of referendums and several populist parties have promoted direct democracy in recent years. To deepen our understanding of the populism-referendum link, this study analyses how populist parties in Austria, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands defend a greater use of referendums and how their non-populist counterparts respond to this populist call for referendums. An analysis of election manifestos shows that populist parties justify their referendum support by characterizing referendums as a purely democratic ideal, by presenting it as an alternative to decision-making by ‘bad’ political elites or by promoting referendums as a tool to realise their preferred policy decisions. Populist referendum support is thus related to people-centrism and anti-elitism, as elements of a populist ideology, but also to strategic considerations. These lines of argument are used by both populists on the right and the left, but anti-elitism is particularly prominent in manifestos of radical right-wing populist parties. Populists are not the only supporters of direct democracy – however, there is no evidence that non-populist parties did become more favourable towards referendums to adapt to the populist call for a greater referendum use.

Keywords: referendums, direct democracy, populism, populist parties, election manifestos

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum in 2016, in which a majority of the British people voted to leave the European Union, right-wing populist leaders across Europe called for similar referendums in their countries. In France, Marine Le Pen, leader and then presidential candidate of Front National, declared that she would hold an in-out referendum on the country's EU membership if she would become elected as President.¹ Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), responded to the Brexit vote by Twitter: "Hurrah for the British! Now it is our turn. Time for a Dutch referendum!"²

Referendums are a form of direct democracy and are very prominent in current debates about democratic reform. Although multiple definitions of referendums exist and referendums in practice could come in many guises, Butler and Ranney (1994: 1) provided a straightforward description of a referendum: "in a referendum, a mass electorate votes on some public issues" (Butler and Ranney 1994: 1). Or, as Suksi (1993: 5) defines a referendum in a very similar way: "the referendum can be defined as a vote by the people in which every voter has the right to vote on a particular issue". It is not new or surprisingly that populists support referendums, as it has been considered as an important feature of a populist ideology (Bowler et al., 2017; Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Hollander, 2016). Support for referendums could be traced back to the American Populist Party in the 1890s, one of the earliest occurrences of populism in modern democracies (Bowler et al., 2017: 3; Canovan, 1999: 12). According to Mudde (2007: 152), the instrument of a referendum has now support of virtually all populist radical right parties in Europe. There is evidence that other populist parties favour the instrument too (Vittori, 2017: 157).

With recent electoral successes of populist parties in Europe, this study takes a closer look at this populism-referendum link and aims to deepen our understanding of referendum support of populist parties. The study discusses why populists favour referendums and explores whether and how populist parties, differentiating between (radical) right-wing and left-wing populist parties, discuss referendums in their manifestos.

In addition, this contribution will reflect upon the attitudes of non-populist parties towards referendums. Although some might consider referendums as a "populist weapon", referendum support is not restricted to populists. Moreover, some argue that in the so-called current "populist Zeitgeist" mainstream parties have adopted and copied the rhetoric and policies of their populist challengers (Mudde, 2004: 562-563). Several studies have shown that non-

¹Chrisafis, A. (2016, 24 June). European far right hails Brexit vote. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com> .

²Wilders, G. (2016, 23 June). *Hurrah for the British! Now it is our turn. Time for a Dutch referendum! #ByeByeEU* [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/746199016128421889>.

populist parties use the rhetoric and policies of populist parties, e.g. in the fields of immigration policies (Van Spanje, 2010) and welfare policies (Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016). In line with these studies, this study investigates whether and how non-populist parties do respond to the referendum support of populists.

The central questions of the study therefore read as: “(1) *how do populist parties justified their support for referendums and; (2) how do non-populist parties respond to these populist call for referendums?*”

Both populism and referendums have become important features of contemporary politics. Populist parties are on the rise and become an important political force all over Europe (Akkerman et al., 2016; Mudde, 2004). With recent referendums as the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom or the Dutch referendum about the Ukraine-EU Association agreement, the debate about the usefulness of referendums intensifies, while several studies suggest that the number of referendums has increased over the last decades (Altman, 2017; Qvortrup, 2017). Populism and referendums are suggested to be intertwined concepts and there has been an increased interest into the relationship between populism and referendums (e.g. Bowler et al., 2017; Canovan, 1999). This study will add to the understanding of the populism-referendum link by an in-depth analysis of whether and how populist parties defend the use of referendums and how non-populist parties deal with the issue of referendums in the current ‘populist Zeitgeist’.

This study will answer the above questions by a qualitative analysis of election manifestos of populist and non-populist parties in Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Germany and the Netherlands between 2000 and 2017. The outline of the study will be as follows. Firstly, the concept of populism will be discussed, followed by an elaboration about the populism-referendum link and an explanation of the research design. In the remaining, it will be shown how populist parties present referendums in their manifestos and how their mainstream and non-populist counterparts do – these findings lead to a conclusion and a discussion.

2. Defining populism

To study populism, one should first define populism, as the concept has been very debated. In the large amount of populism literature, there are several approaches to define the concept. Populism has been regarded as a type of party organisation, a political style, a discourse and an ideology (see e.g.: Mudde, 2004 and 2013; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Rooduijn et al., 2014). Nevertheless, some consensus evolved around Mudde’s (2004) minimum definition of populism as an ideology and this definition has become widely used in populism research. Mudde (2004: 543) defines populism as “*a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the*

corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people". Crucial in Mudde's minimal concept of populism is the distinction between the 'people' and the 'elite', whereby populists worship the 'good' people and criticize the 'bad' elite. As populism is a "thin-centred" ideology, populists can adhere to other major ideologies, either on the right or the left side of the political spectre (Rooduijn et al., 2014: 564). Some scholars consider critique on outsiders (e.g. immigrants or minorities) as an additional part of populism. Most others, however, regard such a stance as an element of (radical) right-wing populism and not of populism *per se* (see: Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015: 4-5; Rooduijn et al., 2014: 564).

Using Mudde's concept of populism has several advantages as it is closely related to most other definitions of populism in both the European and American context and it can be easily applied in empirical research across the globe (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013: 9). Furthermore, the minimum definition is broad enough to include all major forms of populism but narrow enough to exclude non-populist phenomena (Mudde, 2013: 3).

3. Referendums and the 'populist Zeitgeist'

Populists do generally favour a greater use of referendums. Referendums fit with the multiple elements of Mudde's (2004) conceptualization of a populist ideology, as referendums provide populists a tool to give power back to the people and as a means to challenge the corrupt elite and to reduce the power of the elite (see also Jacobs et al., 2018). Irrespective of local or ideological differences between populist parties, they claim that democracy has been stolen by corrupt elites from the sovereign 'people'. Populist parties regard the politicians and institutions with suspicion and criticize how contemporary democracies work. As an alternative, populists present themselves as the "true democrats", who will restore the people's sovereign rule and who will make politics an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. To achieve this, populists suggest introducing more tools of direct democracy, such as referendums (see e.g.: Bowler et al., 2017; Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Hollander, 2016; Rooduijn, 2017).

Various research has shown that populist parties in general and especially right-wing populist parties are favouring referendums (Bowler et al., 2017; Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn, 2014). There has been limited scholarly attention for referendum support among populist parties that are not (radical) right. An exception is Vittori (2017), who studied ideological traits of populism among the Italian *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Five-star Movement, M5S) and the Spanish *Podemos*. Both were found to be supportive of fostering direct participation of the 'people' in decision-making, for instance via referendums (Vittori, 2017: 157).

How do non-populist parties respond to the populist referendum call? It should first be noted that support for referendums is not limited to populism. Referendum support is strongly situated among the left side of politics (Michels, 2009: 72). A favourable stance towards referendums has explicitly been associated with parties with post-materialist values, such as most Green and progressive parties.³ Referendums are congruent with post-materialism as they are seen as a way to promote individual participation in politics, to limit the power of authorities and to provide minorities a tool to influence decision-making (Jacobs, 2011: 33-35; Hollander, 2016: 58-59). Next to ideological motives, parties could have strategic reasons to push for referendums (Jacobs, 2011: 214-216; Hollander, 2016: 274-275).

As the populism literature suggest, electoral successes of the populist parties could be one of the reasons for other non-populist parties to adapt to the rhetoric and policy positions of populist challengers (e.g. Mudde, 2004). Mudde (2004: 542) argued that “today populist discourse has become mainstream in the politics of western democracies”. In this “populist Zeitgeist”, mainstream politicians use populist rhetoric in an attempt to counter the rise of populist parties (Mudde, 2004: 551). The claim has been nuanced by Rooduijn et al. (2014: 569-571), who did not find any evidence that mainstream parties have made more populist statements in their manifestos over the last two decades. Other studies however suggest that non-populist parties adapt their policy positions to those of populists, for instance in the fields of migration policies or welfare policies (Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016; Van Spanje, 2010). How non-populist parties deal with the populist support for referendums, remains largely unknown.

4. Methods, cases and data

To understand how populist parties defend the use of referendums, this study conducts a qualitative analysis of the election manifestos of (former) populist parties in Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Germany and the Netherlands between 2000 and 2017. Manifestos are often used as a major source to study policy positions of political parties (Laver & Garry, 2000: 619). Using manifestos for empirical research has several advantages. Manifestos are seen as authoritative documents which give a clear overview of the ideas of a party at a given moment in time. Furthermore, they are well-suited for comparative research, because they are reasonably comparable both between countries and over time (Rooduijn et al., 2014: 566).

³For the concept of post-materialism, see the work of Ronald Inglehart (e.g.: Welzel & Inglehart, 2005). Post-materialism is linked with liberty values, such as public self-expression and participation, and idealist goals, such as living in an unpolluted environment or living in a humane society (Welzel & Inglehart, 2005: 90-91). Pure postmaterialist parties hardly ever exist in practice. Post-materialism has sometimes been associated with ecologism, but not all green parties are postmaterialist *per se*. Furthermore, the Dutch social liberal D66 has been considered as a prototypical postmaterialist party, but the party is not a traditional green party (Jacobs, 2011: 34).

Although the populism-referendum link is studied for four countries, the sample of above countries includes a large variety of populist parties: populist (radical) right-wing and left-wing parties, long-established, new and former populist parties, populists with government experience and populists in long-term opposition. Parties were selected as they are generally considered as prototypical ‘populist’ in the populism literature (see e.g. Hakhverdian & Koop, 2007; Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn, 2017; Rooduijn et al., 2014; Pauwels, 2014; Van Kessel, 2015). The manifestos of the following parties have been studied: the *Alliance for the Future of Austria* (BZÖ/Bündnis Zukunft Österreich) and the *Freedom Party of Austria* (FPÖ/Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) in Austria, *Flemish Interest/Flemish Bloc* (VB, Vlaams Belang) and *List Dedecker* (LDD, Lijst Dedecker) in Belgium, *Alternative for Germany* (AfD, Alternative für Deutschland) and *The Left/PDS* (Die Linke/Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus) in Germany and *List Pim Fortuyn* (LPF/Lijst Pim Fortuyn), the *Party for Freedom* (PVV/Partij voor de Vrijheid) and the *Socialist Party* (SP/Socialistische Partij) in the Netherlands.⁴ Most of these parties are classified as ‘populist radical right’ – with the exception of the Left/PDS and the SP, which are populist (radical) left, and the LDD and LPF, which are considered to be ‘neoliberal populist parties’ instead of populist radical right parties (see e.g.: Pauwels, 2010; Rooduijn, 2017). Manifestos were browsed through and relevant passages that discussed “referendums”, “direct democracy” and related terms were closely read. These fragments were coded and collected together in a single file to get an overview of how these parties discuss the use of referendums and which arguments they use to defend their positions towards referendums.

To consider the views of non-populist parties towards referendums, the manifestos of other main parties in these four countries since 2000 have been analysed as well. For Dutch political parties, parliamentary voting behaviour between the 1990s and 2010s with regard to the introduction of binding referendums was available and has been used as an additional source.⁵ On a reflective note, distinguishing populist and non-populist parties is practical and helpful, but it should be noted that such a binary distinction is not always straightforward and some classifications have been debated (Van Kessel, 2015: 69-70). In this study, this is the case for the Dutch SP and the Flemish N-VA (New Flemish Alliance / Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie): these

⁴Most manifestos were retrieved from the Manifesto Project Database (MPD). If documents were unavailable, the database of the Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties (DNPP/University of Groningen) and parties’ websites were used as complementary sources. Case selection was limited to parties that currently hold seats in parliament or that gained seats at least at two elections. The 2013 manifesto of the BZÖ could not be retrieved.

⁵Again, MPD, DNPP and party websites were used as sources to access manifestos. Parties were selected which gained at least five percent of the vote share at two elections. Voting behaviour of parties in the *Tweede Kamer* (House of Representatives) was analysed with regard to a constitutional amendment for the provision of a corrective (and binding) referendum, which has been parliamentary discussed in 1995, 1997, 2013 and 2017. Data was collected from the official governmental website <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl>.

parties are difficult to pin down as either ‘populist’ or ‘non-populist’. Van Kessel (2015: 60) did not consider the SP as a populist party in his overview of populist parties in Europe, but acknowledges that it is a ‘borderline case’. As several other studies do label the SP as ‘populist’ (Hakhverdian & Koop, 2007; Rooduijn, 2017; Rooduijn et al., 2014; Pauwels, 2014), the party is included in the empirical analysis here. On the other hand, most literature does not consider the Flemish N-VA as populist. It has been argued that the party is not “a genuine populist party in view of its elitist characteristics and lack of appeal to the vox populi” (Pauwels, 2013, in: Van Kessel, 2015: 37) Therefore, the N-VA is neither classified as populist in this study.

5. Results (1): Populist parties and referendums⁶

In line with the expectations, Table 1 shows that all populist parties under study have expressed a favourable stance towards referendums at least in one of their manifestos since 2000. Referendum support is a recurring theme among populist parties in Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. To stress the importance of the instrument, the German AfD called the introduction of referendums at a national level a “non-negotiable issue for any coalition agreement”.

Although populist parties sometimes discuss referendums only in relation to particular issues, they mostly state to favour referendums in general. A few parties go even a step further and call for the introduction of a so-called people’s initiative that provide citizens the opportunity to initiate a direct vote about a certain issue by themselves.

The use of referendums however seems less salient for Flemish populist parties. Flemish Interest did not discuss referendums in its manifestos in the run to the elections in 2010 and 2014. Neither did LDD mention referendums at its last appearance during a national election in 2010. Nevertheless, both parties express referendum support in the run-up to the 2007 elections.

In their defence for a greater referendum use, three main lines or argument could be traced across populist parties. (1) Populist parties present the referendum as an ideal of pure democracy; (2) they combine support for referendums with critique upon political elites or (3) they prefer referendums about certain issues to push through their favoured policies. The first line of argument could be found among all populist parties that have been studied but is more strongly associated with the populist left SP and The Left. Referendum support of these parties is only slightly combined with anti-elitism. On the contrary, such a link between anti-elitism and referendum support is at the forefront in the manifestos of radical right-wing populist

⁶Quotes used in this section were originally in German or Dutch and are translated by the researcher.

parties. Finally, all populist parties – either radical right or not – link referendums to decision-making about issues that they find very important, such as EU affairs.

Table 1 | Populist parties and stances towards referendums in their manifestos

	t1	t2	t3	t4	t5	t6
Austria	2002	2006	2008	2013	2017	
<i>FPÖ</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	
<i>BZÖ</i>	---	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Yes</i>	--- ⁽¹⁾	---	
Belgium	2003	2007	2007	2014		
<i>VB</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>		
<i>LDD</i>	---	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	---		
Germany	2002	2005	2009	2013	2017	
<i>AfD</i>	---	---	---	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	
<i>The Left/PDS</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	
The Netherlands	2002	2003	2006	2010	2012	2017
<i>PVV</i>	---	---	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>LPF</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	---	---	---
<i>SP</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>

“Yes”= party support referendums on a national level, “Limited”= party calls for referendums, but only for specific issues or supports referendums on a national level, but with restrictions, “Not ment.”= party does not discuss referendums, “-”= party does not participate in election, ⁽¹⁾= Manifesto not available.

Referendum support has been linked to democracy by the German The Left. In 2017, the party presented referendums as a democratic right for citizens. It stated: “*Democracy means more than voting for parliament every four years. We want to expand democracy: by giving more direct influence to citizens to make political decisions.*” The Dutch SP also referred to referendums in terms of its democratic values and qualities. For example, the party stated in 2017 that “*the direct participation and direct influence of people makes our democracy stronger and the decisions better*” and referred to referendums as a “right” of citizens. Such an attitude is not limited to populist parties on the left. In a similar vein, the Flemish LDD favoured

referendums in its 2007 manifesto by arguing that *“in a democracy, the people are the ultimate rulers, (...) they should decide for themselves”*.

Populist radical right parties defend referendums for its democratic value too, but further combine referendum support with a strong critique on political elites. For example, Flemish Interest criticizes in its 2007 manifesto the other so-called “democratic” parties that never have taken much effort to introduce a referendum, “despite of their nice promises”. The party argued: *“the parties in government can simply do what they want, quite often against their own election manifesto or promises. It is an open secret that the views of the ruling political class (...) are often very different from those of the people.”* According to Flemish Interest, referendums are therefore desirable and even necessary. Similarly, the Austrian FPÖ called in its 2013 manifesto for direct democracy “with no ifs and buts” as the party portrayed itself opposed to the then governing ÖVP and SPÖ that “exclude the people from direct participation in all real important issues”.

The German AfD and the Dutch PVV also combine referendum support with anti-elitism. The AfD presented referendums as a way to end “the illegal situation” in Germany, in which “a small and powerful political oligarchy of the existing political parties could decide instead of the people”. In 2010, the PVV called in its manifesto for more referendums as part of a radical democratization of the Netherlands “as the only way to break the dominances of the leftist elites”. According to the PVV, Dutch democracy was at that time facing “its largest crisis since its foundation under Thorbecke”. In an anti-elitist style, the party continued: *“there is a world of difference between what the Dutch people want and what the elites want. Whether it is about the climate theories of Al Gore, the mass immigration, Islamization, the European super state, development aid, art subsidies, tougher punishment; the citizens do have it right and the elites do not. Let it be clear: The PVV is on the side of the common man and woman. What we have to do is give power back to citizens.”*

Furthermore, populist parties linked referendums to issues that they find most important. As such, referendums are presented as an instrument to push through preferred policies or to create obstacles for policy changes that these parties oppose. Several right-wing populist parties, as the PVV or Flemish Interest, suggest to organize referendums to change the status quo in migration policies. Among the populist left, referendums are linked to other issues which are more closely related to their left-wing ideology. For example, The Left argues that citizens should have a direct say about privatization of public services via a referendum.

All of these parties propose referendums about EU-related issues. Both left-wing and right-wing populists favour direct votes about topics as EU treaties or the transfer of national responsibilities to an European level. In the beginning of the 2000s, the left-wing SP and the right-wing LPF suggested that citizens in the Netherlands should decide in a referendum about

the accession of new member states to the EU. A direct vote about a possible accession of Turkey to the EU has been suggested in the manifestos of BZÖ, Flemish Interest and the PVV. A referendum about a country's own membership is only explicitly discussed in the last manifesto of the AfD, while the Left is the only one of these populist parties that favours EU-wide referendums.

6. Results (2): The response to the populist referendum call

Tables 2-5 provide an overview of the stances towards referendums of populist parties and their non-populist counterparts in Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Germany and the Netherlands since 2000.

In general, Green parties are most supportive of referendums together with populist parties. This is in line with their post-materialist worldview and their positive attitude towards participatory and inclusive forms of politics (see e.g. Jacobs, 2011; Hollander, 2016). In all four countries, Greens have taken a favourable stance towards referendums, although they sometimes only support EU-wide referendums and the Dutch GreenLeft has changed its favourable stance into a neutral position towards referendums in its latest manifesto. Social democrats have also favoured referendums. However, the issue does not seem to be salient for the Austrian SPÖ, while the German SPD and the Dutch PvdA did not support referendums in the run-up to elections in 2017.

Referendum support is limited among Christian democratic parties. The use of referendums has not been discussed in the manifestos of German and Flemish Christian democrats, while the Dutch CDA have explicitly expressed its opposition towards referendums. The Austrian ÖVP is an exception: the party supports a greater use of referendums in general since 2012, while the party has favoured a national referendum in Austria about a possible Turkish EU membership before 2012.

Table 2 | Political parties in Austria and stances towards referendums in their manifestos⁷

		2002	2006	2008	2013	2017
Populist parties						
<i>FPÖ</i>	<i>Right-wing</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>BZÖ</i>	<i>Right-wing</i>	<i>---</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>---⁽¹⁾</i>	<i>---</i>
Non-populist parties						
<i>ÖVP</i>	<i>Christian democrat</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>SPÖ</i>	<i>Social democratic</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>
<i>Grünen</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Only EU-wide</i>	<i>Only EU-wide</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>

“Yes”= party support referendums on a national level, “Limited”= party calls for referendums, but only for specific issues or supports referendums on a national level, but with restrictions, “Only EU-wide”= party calls solely for EU-wide referendums, “Not ment.”= party does not discuss referendums, “-”= party does not participate in election, ⁽¹⁾= Manifesto not available.

Among liberal parties, support for a referendum is diffused. The Flemish Open VLD proposed referendums in its 2007 manifesto, but the party did not discuss direct democracy in recent years. The German FDP has supported national and EU-wide referendums in past manifestos, but only discussed referendums on a local level in its manifesto for the 2017 elections. In the Netherlands, attitudes towards a referendum differ between the conservative liberal VVD and social liberal D66. The VVD is critical towards referendums and proposed the abolition of national referendum possibilities in its most recent manifesto. D66 has always been a main supporter of referendums in the Netherlands. In 2017, the party stated that it still ‘embraces’ the instrument of a referendum – however, D66 did explicitly not support a referendum about Dutch EU membership (a “Nexit” referendum) and argued that international treaties should be excluded from a referendum.

⁷FPÖ=Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, BZÖ=Bündnis Zukunft Österreich, ÖVP=Österreichische Volkspartei, SPÖ=Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs, Grünen=Die Grünen – Die Grüne Alternative

Table 3 | Political parties in Flanders and stances towards referendums in their manifestos⁸

		2003	2007	2010	2014
Populist parties					
<i>VB</i>	<i>Right-wing</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>
<i>LDD</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	---	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	---
Non-populist parties					
<i>N-VA</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	--- ⁽¹⁾	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>
<i>CD&V</i>	<i>Christian democrat</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>
<i>Open VLD</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>
<i>SP.a</i>	<i>Social democratic</i>	--- ⁽¹⁾	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>Groen</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>

“Yes”= party support referendums on a national level, “Not ment.”= party does not discuss referendums, “-”= party does not participate in election, ⁽¹⁾= Manifesto not available.

⁸VB=Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang, LDD=Lijst Dedecker, N-VA=Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, CD&V=Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams, Open VLD=Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten, SP.a=Socialistische Partij Anders, Groen=Groen!

Table 4 | Political parties in Germany and stances towards referendums in their manifestos⁹

		2002	2005	2009	2013	2017
Populist parties						
<i>AfD</i>	<i>Right-wing</i>	---	---	---	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>The L./PDS</i>	<i>Socialist</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
Non-populist parties						
<i>CDU/CSU</i>	<i>Christian democrat</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>
<i>FDP</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Only EU-wide</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Only local</i>
<i>SPD</i>	<i>Social democratic</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not ment.</i>
<i>Grünen</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>

“Yes”= party support referendums on a national level, “Limited”= party calls for referendums, but only for specific issues or supports referendums on a national level, but with restrictions, “Only EU-wide”= party calls solely for EU-wide referendums, “Only local”= party calls solely for local referendums, “Not ment.”= party does not discuss referendums, “-”= party does not participate in election.

The findings illustrate that referendums are not a populist ‘weapon’ per se, but are supported by Green parties and to some extent by several social democratic, Christian democratic and liberal parties as well. During the last elections in Belgium, the introduction of referendums was supported by the Greens and the social democratic SP.a, while not discussed by Flemish Interest. However, Dutch and German left-wing parties became less favourable towards referendums in recent years. In the Netherlands, D66, PvdA and GreenLeft changed their supportive attitude towards the instrument into a more reserved stance. Similarly, the German social democratic SPD has been in favour of introducing referendums on a national level until 2012, but the party did not discuss the referendum issue in its recent manifesto in 2017.

⁹AfD=Alternative für Deutschland, The L./PDS=Die Linke/Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus, CDU/CSU=Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands / Christlich-Soziale Union, FDP=Freie Demokratische Partei, SPD=Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, Grünen=Bündnis 90/Die Grünen

Table 5 | Political parties in the Netherlands and stances towards referendums in their manifestos¹⁰¹¹

		2002	2003	2006	2010	2012	2017
Populist parties							
<i>PVV</i>	<i>Right-wing</i>	---	---	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>LPF</i>	<i>Right-wing</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	---	---	---
<i>SP</i>	<i>Socialist</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
Non-populist parties							
<i>CDA</i>	<i>Christian democrat</i>	<i>Not m.</i>	<i>Not m.⁽¹⁾</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Not m.</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>VVD</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Not m.</i>	<i>Not m.</i>	<i>Not m.</i>	<i>Not m.</i>	<i>Not m.</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>D66</i>	<i>Progressive liberal</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Limited</i>
<i>PvdA</i>	<i>Social democratic</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
<i>GL</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not m.</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes.</i>	<i>Neutral</i>

“Yes”= party support referendums on a national level, “No”= party does not support referendums at all, “Limited”= party calls for referendums, but only for specific issues or supports referendums on a national level, but with restrictions, “Neutral”= party does mention referendums, but it is not explicitly in favour or against, “Not m.”= party does not discuss referendums, “-”= party does not participate in election, ⁽¹⁾= party re-used its 2002 manifesto.

7. Conclusion and discussion

As Mudde (2007: 192) has argued, referendums are a main feature of a populist democracy and the instrument has support of virtually all populist radical right parties in contemporary politics. In line with Mudde (2007), this study shows that a greater use of referendums has been supported by populist radical right parties in Austria, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, but also by other populist parties in these countries. Populists justify their referendum support by characterizing referendums as a purely democratic ideal and by presenting it as an alternative

¹⁰PVV=Partij voor de Vrijheid, LPF=Lijst Pim Fortuyn, SP=Socialistische Partij, CDA=Christen-Democratisch Appèl, VVD= Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, D66= Democraten 66, PvdA=Partij van de Arbeid, GL=GroenLinks

¹¹Findings are highly similar to Hollander (2016: 258), who studies the positions of Dutch parties towards referendums between 1967 and 2012.

to decision-making by ‘bad’ political elites. There are differences between left-wing and right-wing populist parties in their referendum support. Left-wing populist parties put more emphasis upon presenting referendums as a democratic ideal, while anti-elitism is more at the forefront of radical right populist parties. For both left-wing and right-wing populists, referendums are also promoted as a strategic tool to realise their preferred decisions.

Referendums are not supported by populists only, but also by other parties, most notably Green parties. In the light of the ‘populist Zeitgeist’ (Mudde, 2014), it is however remarkable that there is very limited evidence that non-populist parties became more supportive of referendums. On the contrary, the German social democratic SPD and several Dutch left-wing parties have been even less – or less outspokenly – supportive of referendums in recent years. It is not unlikely that experiences with referendums as the Brexit vote or the Dutch Ukraine referendum have resulted in a decline of referendum approval among left-wing and centre-left parties. For instance, the Dutch D66 explicitly opposed a ‘Nexit’ referendum in its latest manifesto. As radical right-wing populists also support referendums for anti-elitist and strategic purposes, this explains the increasing hesitance of left-wing and centre-left parties to referendums. Given the multi-faced nature of populist referendum support, these parties face the question whether these populist parties represent some welcoming allies in their referendum support or rather represent a different view on the values and purposes of referendums. Further research is however needed to examine whether the implications of this study hold beyond the scope of countries and to test above and other explanations for the (non-)response of mainstream parties to the referendum support of populist parties.

To end with, this study shows that populist parties are clearly strong supporters for referendums, but that their arguments for a greater referendum use are multi-faceted. For a thorough understanding of the populism-referendum link, this study argues that three aspects of populist support for referendums stand out. Populists provide democratic arguments for a greater use of referendums, but their referendum support could also be explained by anti-elitism and strategic considerations. The importance and prevalence of these different arguments largely depend upon the left-/right-wing position of populist parties. Populist support for referendums should thus not only be interpreted as a form of democratic idealism *per se*. In the hands of populists, referendums could *also* be a tool to challenge and criticize political elites *and* a tool to push through their preferred policies.

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