

## RESEARCH NOTE



# Populist Citizens in four European Countries: Widespread Dissatisfaction goes with Contradictory but Pro-democratic Regime Preferences

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## Abstract

Are populist citizens a threat to democracy? Some philosophers view populism and democracy as irreconcilable conceptions of governing. Another line of thought describes populism as useful democratic corrective. Drawing on nationally representative surveys from four European countries, this study investigates how European populist citizens think about democracy. Descriptive analyses reveal that populist worldviews only weakly predict how people think about democracy. On average, populist and non-populist citizens aspire to similar kinds of political systems and both endorse liberal-democratic institutions. Yet, populists and non-populists differ in the degree to which they hold inconsistent beliefs. Citizens with populist outlook more frequently express contradictory demands that political institutions cannot possibly deliver. Based on these findings, we conclude that most populist citizens do not pursue an elaborate anti-democratic conception of governing. Rather, the widespread dissatisfaction among populists may create an indeterminate openness for institutional change that political elites could steer in different directions.

## Zusammenfassung

Sind populistische BürgerInnen eine Gefahr für die Demokratie? Einige PhilosophInnen betrachten Populismus und Demokratie als unvereinbare Regierungskonzepte. Eine andere Perspektive beschreibt Populismus als potenziell nützliches demokratisches Korrektiv. Die Studie verwendet repräsentative Umfragen aus vier europäischen Ländern, um zu untersuchen wie populistische BürgerInnen über Demokratie denken. Deskriptive Analysen zeigen, dass eine populistische Weltsicht nur schwach vorhersagt, wie Menschen über Demokratie denken. Im Durchschnitt streben

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populistische und nicht-populistische BürgerInnen nach ähnlichen Regierungssystemen und beide Gruppen unterstützen liberal-demokratische Institutionen. Jedoch unterscheiden sich populistische und nicht-populistische BürgerInnen im Ausmaß inkonsistenter politischer Ideen. BürgerInnen mit populistischer Weltsicht äußern häufiger widersprüchliche Anforderungen an die Politik, die von der Politik nicht erfüllbar sind. Auf Grundlage dieser Befunde schlussfolgern wir, dass die meisten populistischen BürgerInnen keine elaborierte anti-demokratische Agenda verfolgen. Vielmehr könnte die unter PopulistInnen weit verbreitete Unzufriedenheit eine unbestimmte Offenheit zu intentionellem Wandeln hervorbringen, die politische Eliten in verschiedene Richtungen steuern könnten.

### Résumé

Les citoyens populistes sont-ils une menace pour la démocratie? Certains philosophes considèrent le populisme et la démocratie comme des conceptions irréconciliables du gouvernement. Une autre ligne de pensée décrit le populisme comme un correctif démocratique utile. S'appuyant sur des enquêtes nationales représentatives de quatre pays européens, cette étude examine comment les citoyens populistes européens pensent de la démocratie. Les analyses descriptives révèlent que les visions du monde populistes ne prédisent que faiblement ce que les gens pensent de la démocratie. En moyenne, les citoyens populistes et non populistes aspirent à des types similaires de systèmes politiques et approuvent tous deux les institutions libérales-démocratiques. Pourtant, les populistes et les non-populistes diffèrent dans la mesure où ils ont des croyances incohérentes, car les citoyens aux perspectives populistes expriment plus fréquemment des demandes contradictoires que les institutions politiques ne peuvent absolument pas satisfaire. Sur la base de ces résultats, nous concluons que la plupart des citoyens populistes ne poursuivent pas une conception antidémocratique élaborée du gouvernement. Au contraire, le mécontentement généralisé des populistes peut créer une ouverture indéterminée au changement institutionnel que les élites politiques pourraient orienter dans différentes directions.

### KEYWORDS

Populism, democratic backsliding, Switzerland, Germany, conceptions of democracy

## INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracies are inconceivable without a citizenry that supports the idea and practice of self-governance. In light of the current wave of autocratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), scholars increasingly investigate what kind of political system ordinary citizens want and whether they endorse the principles that underpin the Western model of liberal-democratic governance.

A number of recent studies point to the rise of populist ideas as a potential threat to the attitudinal foundations of liberal democracies (Diamond, 2020; Kriesi, 2020). Conceptual analyses of the basic tenets of populist ideology suggest an incompatibility between populism and liberal democracy as the populist notion of a general will of a homogeneous populace arguably contradicts democratic principles of compromise, tolerance and fair elections (Müller, 2021; Pappas, 2019; Urbinati, 2019). Yet, because political attitudes are usually not vital for managing everyday life, ordinary citizens might be more tolerant than political philosophers of logical inconsistencies. As a consequence, the web of political ideas held by ordinary citizens may not abide by the prescriptions of conceptual coherence and some citizens who endorse the populist ideology may at the same time also support the democratic idea. Moreover, in making up their minds about democracy citizens could follow cues from populist parties who proclaim to restore or realize ‘real democracy’ (Manow, 2020). These mechanisms facilitate the co-occurrence of seemingly irreconcilable populist and pro-democratic ideas in the belief systems of ordinary citizens. To understand whether populist citizens support democracy and the principles of liberal democracy in particular, this study investigates the regime preferences of ordinary citizens with a populist worldview and how they compare to non-populists.

In doing so, we build on recent studies on the democratic attitudes of populist citizens (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2019; Zanotti & Rama, 2021; Zaslove et al., 2021). We extend this research by drawing on high quality samples with a comprehensive set of outcome measures. Specifically, we use probability-based nationally representative survey samples from four European countries with information on the respondents' satisfaction with democracy, a validated scale on populist attitudes and items on different components of democratic governance that also allow exploring the internal consistency of regime preferences.

Comparing perspectives extracted from the literature (Canovan, 1999; Diamond, 2020; Kriesi, 2020; Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Pappas, 2019; Plattner, 2009; Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2019; Urbinati, 2019; Zaslove et al., 2021), we find some evidence in line with a description of populists as dissatisfied democrats. Populist and non-populist citizens do not differ fundamentally in the kind of democracy they want. What distinguishes these groups is that populist citizens exhibit more internally contradictory preferences that democracy cannot possibly fulfill.

## POPULIST CITIZENS AND DEMOCRACY

In this study, we conceive of populist attitudes as a thin ideology that “*considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (...) of the people*” (Mudde, 2004, p. 54). An emerging consensus in the literature on populism at the individual level conceptualizes populist attitudes as an attitudinal syndrome comprised of multiple components (e.g. anti-elitist attitudes, support for popular sovereignty, perception of the population as homogeneous, Schulz et al. (2017)). Consequently, we can speak of citizens as populists if they endorse all of populism's constituent components above a particular threshold (Wuttke et al., 2020). Understood in such a way, we can ask whether populist citizens differ from non-populist citizens in their political attitudes.

Ordinary citizens, for good reasons, do not spend much of their time carefully thinking about the complexities of political life. From a political expert perspective, the belief systems of ordinary citizens thus do not always look well-ordered and consistent (Althaus, 2006). Against this backdrop, there is not much reason to expect strong links between a thin ideology such as populist attitudes and positions on everyday political issues (see Appendix 1). Yet, attitudes towards democracy may be a most likely case for links with populist ideology because both the populist and the democratic idea center on the relationship between the people and elites.

At the heart of democracy lies the notion of popular sovereignty (Rhoden, 2013). Democracy manifests in many ways but one variant of democracy is the combination of popular self-rule with liberal principles

such as minority rights or the rule of law (Diamond, 2020). We can thus distinguish the abstract and often ambiguous notion of democracy and that of its subtype, liberal democracy. With these conceptual clarifications in mind, we can extract from the scholarly literature two perspectives on how populism at the individual level relates to citizens' orientation towards democracy and its liberal variant.

One perspective views the relationship between populism and democracy in its broader sense as potentially fruitful (Canovan, 1999; Kriesi, 2020; Manow, 2020). This is because both the democratic idea and populist rhetoric place great importance on the role of the people in political decision-making (Mudde, 2004). Scholars with this perspective consider populism and democracy not as inherently antithetical. To the contrary, they argue that populist resurgences arise from democratic impulses (Manow, 2020).

The most prominent voice in this camp is probably that of Margeret Canovan who argued that scholars must “*think seriously about the populist claim to democratic legitimacy*” (Canovan, 1999, p. 2). In Canovan's understanding, populism has a redemptive nature that is based on the “*aim (...) to cash in democracy's promise of power to the people*” by “*voicing popular grievances and opinions systematically ignored by governments, mainstream parties and the media*”. This line of reasoning connects to arguments which see populist attitudes as emanating from criticism of democracy's current flaws such as representational deficits (Kriesi, 2020, p. 246; Manow, 2020). According to this perspective, populist attitudes are best described as evaluative sentiments on the performance of the democratic process. In terms of hypotheses and observable implications, in this view the only ramification of populist ideology for regime preferences is the goal to strengthen popular sovereignty by transferring power from the elites to the people.

In part, evidence supports that populist citizens think about democracy in such a way. Survey data from Europe and Latin America show higher levels of dissatisfaction among populists with the practice of democracy in their respective countries (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2019). The evidence is also in line with the proposition that populist citizens endorse democracy at similar levels compared to the rest of the population (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2019; Zaslove et al., 2021). In particular, citizens with a populist worldview support direct forms of democracy as a means to increase responsiveness of the political system (Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Zaslove et al., 2021). Summarizing these findings, Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert (2019) adopt a term from political culture research for citizens who criticize democratic practices while supporting democracy's principles (Klingemann, 2014) and characterize populists as “*dissatisfied democrats*” (p. 13).

Still, these findings provide no conclusive evidence on the question of whether populist citizens pose a threat to democracy. All studies rely on indicators of support for democracy as a generic concept. Survey responses on abstract terms such as “*democracy*” have limited value if respondents do not understand the concept they were asked about (Inglehart, 2003). Populist citizens might have clear but overly narrow understandings of democracy. Considering both generic support (Wuttke, 2022) for democracy as well as specific support for the principles and procedures that underpin democracy and its liberal variant is needed because some scholarly work suggests that populist citizens support the basic democratic principle of popular sovereignty while rejecting the liberal variant of democracy that is widely adopted in the West (Pappas, 2019).

The proposition that populism is incompatible with liberal democracy rests on the argument that populist and pluralist ideas push into different directions on important questions of institutional design (Plattner, 2009). Some components of populism — a Manichean view on society which divides the world between good and evil and belief in the homogeneity of a people (Mudde, 2004)— are thought to contradict pluralist principles that are central to liberal democracy such as compromise between societal groups, minority protection or the acceptance of defeat in democratic elections (Pappas, 2019). From this perspective the populist ideology is not merely an evaluative sentiment on democracy's current working. Instead, populism is seen as a configuration of beliefs about political governance that is incompatible with the ideational building blocks of liberal-democratic constitutions.

The most prominent voice in this line of thought is from Nadia Urbinati who penned a systematic treatise of the relationship between populism and democracy (Urbinati, 2019). She conceives of populism as a regime of unmediated representation. In this system, all obstacles that prevent the

populists in government from embodying the will of the people will be removed. As politics of partiality, populism ultimately disfigures the rule of law and division of powers. Such a system has no place for liberal institutions such as checks and balances or minority rights. And because populists do not recognize other interests competing for power as legitimate, in a populist system elections no longer serve to regulate group conflict but merely function as plebiscites. Against this backdrop, citizens who fully endorse the populist ideology could be expected to support this kind of democratic minimalism that rejects core components of *liberal* democracy. When having to choose between pluralist principles such as the protection of minorities and procedures that allow for the popular will to have its way, populist citizens would prefer the latter over the former. In terms of hypotheses and observable implications, in this view populist citizens should be expected to expose attitudes that are decidedly opposed to institutions and processes that constitute liberal democracy.

Whereas one perspective considers populist attitudes as reflective of evaluative sentiments about the current working of democracy, the other perspective takes populism on the individual level seriously as a coherent system of ideas about institutional design. Both these perspectives are not necessarily antidotes as their expectations focus on different beliefs. We consider it an open empirical questions whether the populist belief system is best characterized by diffuse dissatisfaction or whether populists express specific demands for a new kind of political regime that departs from democracy as currently practiced.

Few studies have thoroughly examined what kind of democracy populist citizens want. One study (Zanotti & Rama, 2021) suggests populists are more willing to give up basic liberal-democratic principles such as non-interference of the executive with the judiciary, but it is based on a sample of only 76 students at a UK elite university. A more comprehensive study on Austria and Germany with representative samples provides mixed evidence (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020), showing modest correlations between populist attitudes and anti-pluralist attitudes and no correlation with majoritarian process preferences. However, it lacks a validated measure of populist attitudes and instead relied on proxy indicators. Hence, we do not know with great certainty whether or not, and to what extent, populist citizens really support the erosion of liberal democracy.

## DATA

To explore how populist citizens think about democracy, we use survey data on Switzerland, France, Germany and the UK from the NCCR Democratic Governance and Citizenship Survey that was kindly made available by the original authors (Kübler et al., 2019). One feature of the data is the probability-based random sampling procedure. In Switzerland, a sampling frame of the Federal Office for Statistics was used (response rate: 48%). In France (RR: 51%), Germany (RR: 20%) and the UK (RR: 11%), respondents were recruited via telephone using dual frame sampling. Compared to commonly used convenience panels, these more laborious procedures provide samples that are not comprised of professional survey respondents and better approximate the attitudes of the general population. Respondents were incentivized to participate with 10€/£/CHF. Respondents with access to the internet were surveyed online, others via mail. Data was collected between September and November 2015. Hence, the survey was fielded before the Brexit referendum campaign in the UK and during the 2015 refugee crisis.

The survey includes the validated and widely used populist attitudes scale by Schulz et al. (2017), which conceptualizes populism at the individual level as comprised of three components: anti-elitism, support for popular sovereignty and a perception of the population as homogeneous (see Appendix 2). Based on the understanding of populist attitudes as an attitudinal syndrome which is present if and only if all of its constituent elements are present (Wuttke et al., 2020), we operationalize populist attitudes with necessary conditions. We first averaged the indicators for each component of populist attitudes and then categorized respondents as populists if they, on average, expressed (strong) agreement with all three components (i.e., have a score higher than 4 on all subdimensions each of which represent the means of 5-point scale items).

One noticeable feature of this scale is that —unlike other populist attitudes scales (Wuttke et al., 2020)— it measures support for popular sovereignty with indicators on attitudes towards referenda. It is therefore a limitation of this study that attitudes towards one aspect of a conception of democracy are incorporated into the measure itself (also see Mohrenberg et al. (2019)).

To measure democracy-related attitudes, we rely on three groups of indicators, all using 11-point scales. We assess *satisfaction with democracy* with the item “*On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in country?*” (see Appendix 3 for results at the local and provincial level).

Two types of survey questions illuminate respondents' conceptions of democracy. One measure captures what respondents consider essential components of a democratic system. Table 1 shows question wordings and the expected differences in attitudes between populists and non-populists as derived from the two perspectives. Both perspectives on populists' conceptions of democracy have in common the proposition that populists emphasize the goal of giving power to the people. Yet, if populism is mainly about diffuse dissatisfaction, the populist citizens do not have distinct opinions on specific procedural questions. But if populists pursue a consistent set of ideas on political representation that revolves around removing barriers between the leader and the popular will, then populist citizens should oppose institutions —such as courts— which constrain the democratically chosen leader.

Because institutional design involves trade-offs, a second measure assesses regime preferences with a pair of items that query agreement with two conflicting conceptions of an ideal political system (Table 2). If populists are merely dissatisfied democrats, there is no reason to expect systematic differences between populist citizens and the rest of the population on questions of institutional design. Yet, if populists follow a specific regime conception, we do expect such differences in procedural preferences. Specifically, if they had to pick between a constitution that constrains popular sovereignty (for the sake of minority protection) and a constitution that allows for unrestricted popular sovereignty, populist citizens would choose the latter.

Note that the pair of survey questions represents logical opposites. Hence, in a consistently ordered belief system, high levels on one item will go along with low agreement with the counter-item. This

**TABLE 1** What respondents consider important elements of democracy.

Label	Question wording	Regime conception	Dissatisfied democrats
Responsiveness	Political decisions address the concerns of citizens	▲	▲
Popular Sovereignty	Citizens have the final say on the most important political issues, e.g. through referendum	▲	▲
Rule of law	Courts are able to prevent the government from acting beyond its authority	▼	■

Notes: ▲/▼ denotes expected stronger/weaker endorsement among populists compared to non-populists as derived from the respective perspectives. ■ denote no expected differences. Question wording: “How important are the following aspects for a successful democracy?”

**TABLE 2** Trade-offs in regime conceptions.

Label	Question wording	Regime conception	Dissatisfied democrats
Unrestricted sovereignty	Citizens should have the right to vote on any constitutional clause, even if this leads to the abolishment or limitation of constitutional safeguards such as certain minority rights.	▲	■
Constitutional safeguards	The constitution should guarantee certain constitutional safeguards that cannot be abolished by a popular vote, such as certain minority rights.	▼	■

Notes: ▲/▼ denotes expected stronger/weaker endorsement among populists compared to non-populists as derived from the respective perspectives. ■ denote no expected differences. Question wording: “Often democracy is a compromise. Please tell us what you think about the following statements. To what extent do you agree or disagree? Again, there is no right or wrong answer, so please just indicate what you think.”

setup allows us to assess whether respondents acknowledge trade-offs in institutional design or whether they hold inconsistent belief systems.

## RESULTS

Table 3 gives an overview of the distribution of populist ideas and their underlying components in the European societies under investigation. Populist citizens are in the minority in all four countries. Their share varies from 4.9% in Germany to 18% in the UK. Inspecting the subdimensions more closely shows widespread support for popular sovereignty and anti-elitism. Perceiving society as a homogeneous whole is less widespread except in the UK which contributes to the higher overall share of populists there. So, knowing the distribution of the main concept, how does populism at the individual level relate to orientations towards democracy?

Figure 1 reports respondents' satisfaction with democracy at various political levels (with a white line denoting group means). In line with the image of populists as discontent citizens, populist citizens (blue curve) in Germany, France and Switzerland are more dissatisfied with how democracy works than other citizens (red). A closer inspection shows that disparities are most pronounced in Germany where populist citizens show an average satisfaction with democracy in their country of 3.92 on an eleven point scale compared to 5.73 for non-populists. The difference corresponds to an effect size of Cohen's  $d = 0.77$ . In practical terms, this difference amounts to a probability of 70% that a populist citizen is more dissatisfied with democracy at the national level than a non-populist citizen. Political disaffection thus markedly distinguishes these two subpopulations in Germany. The difference is less pronounced in France and Switzerland and entirely absent in the United Kingdom. While country differences may reflect the indicator's sensitivity to evaluations of government behavior in that specific context, on balance, in three out of four countries the data supports the notion of populist citizens as particularly disenchanting with democratic politics.

Figure 2 zooms in on citizens' conceptions of democracy. A majority of both populist and non-populist citizens considers it an essential element of democracy to give the people the final word in important decisions (*popular sovereignty*). Yet, agreement is even stronger among populist citizens, reflecting the fact that popular sovereignty is a core principle of populist attitudes. Interestingly, on

TABLE 3 Descriptives.

Characteristic	CH, N = 914	GER, N = 1,111	France, N = 1,310	UK, N = 977
<b>Populists</b>				
Non_Populist	847 (94%)	1,053 (95%)	925 (91%)	800 (82%)
Populist	54 (6%)	54 (5%)	95 (9%)	173 (18%)
<b>Anti-elitism</b>				
Mean	3.1	3.6	4.1	3.8
SD	1.0	1.1	1.0	0.9
<b>Popular sovereignty</b>				
Mean	3.7	3.3	3.7	3.8
SD	1.1	1.3	1.2	1.0
<b>Homogeneity</b>				
Mean	2.9	2.5	2.7	3.4
SD	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.8

Note: Scale of the subdimensions ranges from 1–5.

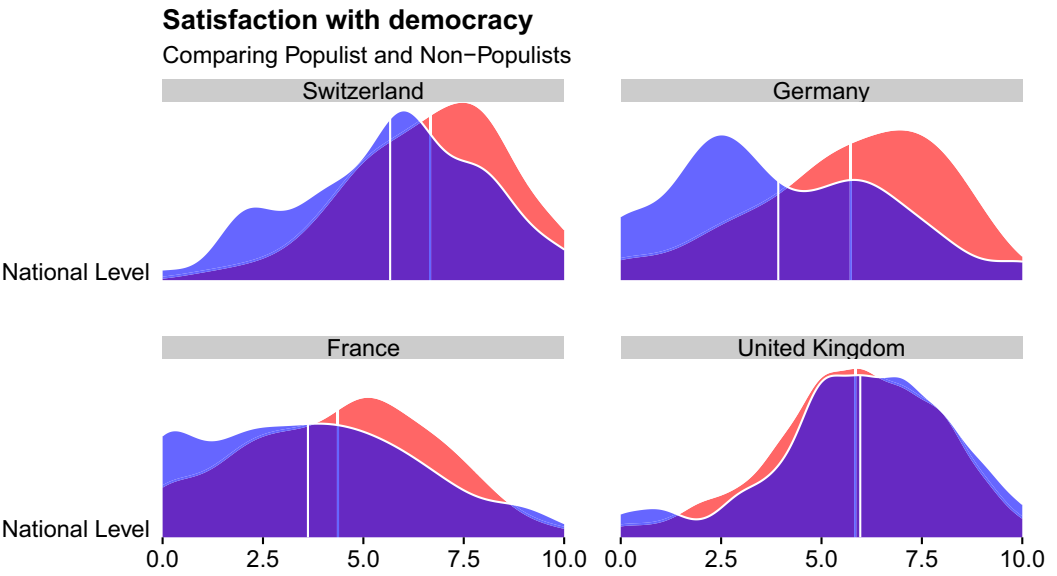


FIGURE 1 Satisfaction with democracy.

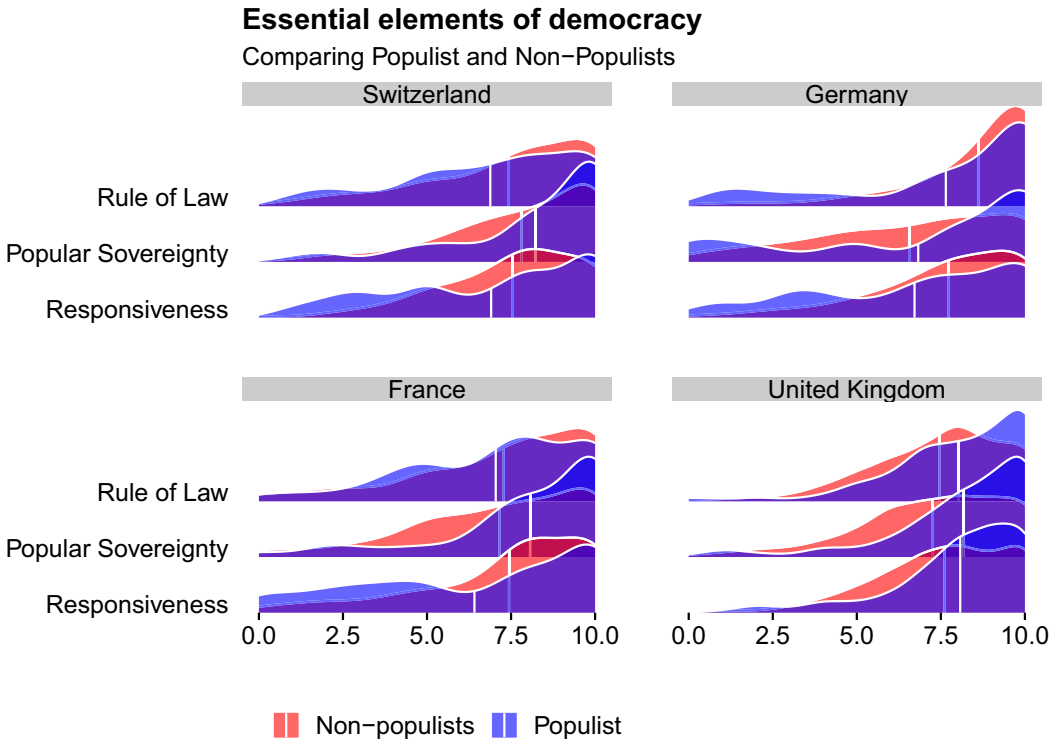
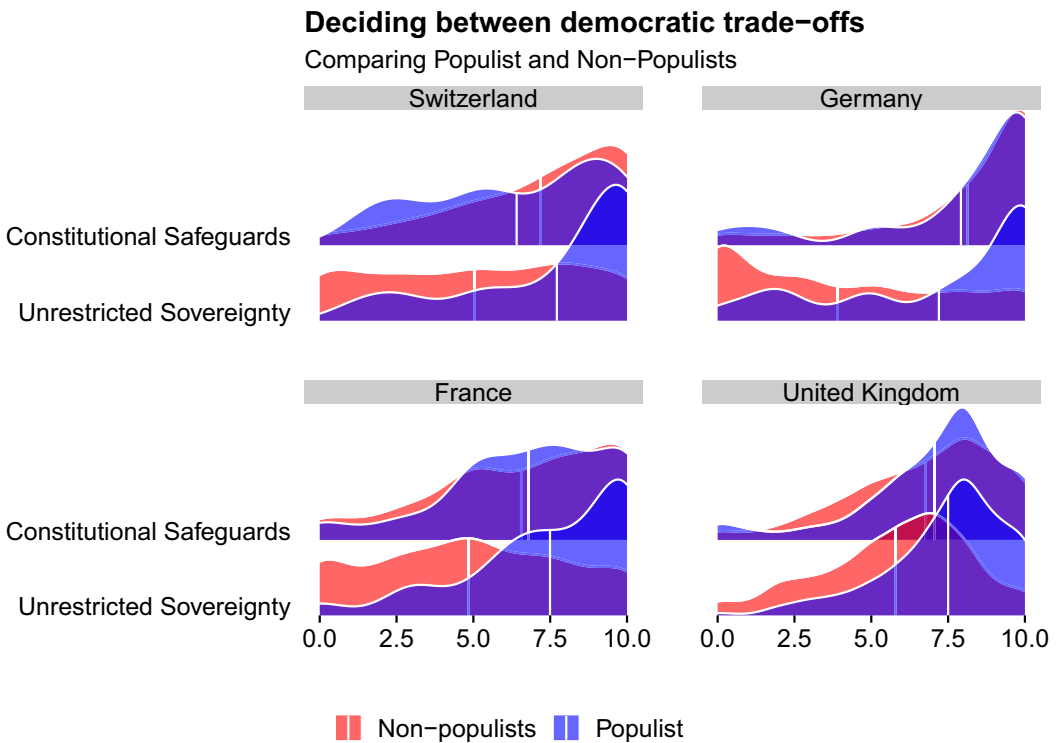


FIGURE 2 Conceptions of democracy.





**FIGURE 3** Trade-offs.

another question on the role of the people in a democracy, populists do not find it more important than others that political decisions address citizen concerns (*responsiveness*).<sup>1</sup>

In addition to central tendencies, variance is also worth mentioning. Within the group of populist citizens, we do not observe a particularly high degree of unanimity on conceptions of democracy. Hence, the fact that populist citizens share a populist worldview does not seem to imply a common understanding of how to constitute a democratic system.

To test whether populist citizens pursue an understanding of democracy that is incompatible with liberal democracy as practiced in the West, we examine populist support for the rule of law. Non-populist citizens in all countries find it an essential element of democracy that “*courts are able to prevent the government from acting beyond its authority*”. In France and the UK, populist citizens endorse the rule of law to a similar or even stronger extent. Only in Switzerland, to a small degree (Cohen's  $d = 0.21$ ), and, to a larger extent, in Germany (Cohen's  $d = 0.47$ ) do populists place less importance on the rule of law than other members of the society. This finding again underscores that among ordinary citizens populism does not manifest as a shared understanding of how democracy should work; instead the implications of populist ideas for system-related attitudes seem to depend on the political context. Altogether, these findings therefore do not warrant the conclusion that populists generally exhibit a fundamentally different understanding of democracy than other citizens.

Figure 3 shows respondents' choices when confronted with the trade-off between unrestricted citizen sovereignty to “*vote on any constitutional clause, even if this leads to the abolishment or limitation of constitutional safeguards, such as certain minority rights*” versus constitutional safeguards that cannot be abolished by popular votes.

In the first row, Figure 3 shows that most citizens endorse constitutional safeguards to protect the minority against the ‘tyranny of the majority’. Not all citizens endorse constitutional safeguards

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 5 for analyses with continuous measures which generate similar results.

with equal commitment but adherence to populism does not explain differences in how strongly one endorses constitutional safeguards. Overall, populist and non-populist citizens seem to think very similarly about the value of constitutional checks on majority rule.

Examining in the second row attitudes towards the opposite item, we would expect a mirror image of the distributions in the first row. In fact, however, on this item we observe noticeable differences between populists and non-populists. Although we just saw that many populists *support* restrictions of popular sovereignty to protect minorities, many populist citizens also *reject* restrictions on popular sovereignty. Figure 3 shows aggregate-level results but individual-level analyses (see Appendix 4) confirm that those populists who oppose constitutional safeguards are often the same respondents who also endorse these provisions. Hence, the regime conceptions expressed by these respondents are internally inconsistent.

Supporting opposite statements is not unique to populists but populist citizens are particularly likely to express contradictory demands. Taking Germany as an example, populists are 72% more likely to hold inconsistent demands on constitutional design than non-populists (UK 59%, France, 64%, Switzerland 65%).<sup>2</sup> Hence, populist conceptions of democracy are not characterized by a desire to replace the liberal-democratic order with a well-defined populist alternative. Rather, it seems characteristic of many populist belief systems to hold ideas about government that inherently contradict each other.

## CONCLUSION

Populist citizens are often considered a threat to democracy. But do they actually reject the principles that constitute modern liberal democracies? Survey data from Switzerland, Germany, France and the United Kingdom shows some evidence in line with a depiction of populist citizens as dissatisfied democrats: Populist citizens are more often dissatisfied with democracy's working and put higher emphasis on the role of ordinary citizens. But otherwise their conceptions of democracy are not so different from their non-populist counterparts. On average, citizens in both groups value constitutional safeguards to protect minorities and endorse expert input in political decision-making. In contrast to the depiction of populist citizens as anti-pluralist adversaries of liberal democracy, populists often place similar importance as other citizens on courts that prevent unauthorized government actions.

These findings contradict the idea of populist citizens as threats to liberal democracy. Yet, other findings are troubling. Democratic decision-making in pluralistic, complex societies requires an acknowledgment of the trade-offs that invariably come with any political decision. But citizens with a populist worldview express inherently contradictory conceptions of governing. Future research may investigate whether the observed contradictions in populist belief systems originate from a lack of capabilities to recognize these inconsistencies or from a lack of motivation to resolve them. In any case, these findings suggest that many populist citizens want to have the cake and eat it, demanding from politics what it cannot deliver.

It is important to keep in mind that inconsistent belief systems are neither new to political scientists (Converse, 2006) nor fixed. Contradictory demands may express lingering ambiguity and uncertainty. Because populist citizens are more dissatisfied with the status quo, they are potentially more open to changes but still indeterminate about the direction of change. These observations point to the role of elite communication. Possibly, political entrepreneurs could exploit populist ambivalence towards democratic trade-offs for institutional changes that resolve democratic tensions in an illiberal way. But the fact that populist belief systems are not fundamentally distinct from those held by other citizens suggests that they may also be open to institutional reforms from system-integrative parties if they center on popular sovereignty to address populist disaffection. Future research might investigate the consequences of attitude ambiguity among populists and whether these inconsistent attitudes also extend to other domains of life.

Another avenue of future research is the variation across countries demonstrated in this study. Research has demonstrated the heterogeneity that exists among populist parties (Huber &

<sup>2</sup>One might object that the findings reflect spurious correlations that arise from acquiescence biases but additional analyses suggest no proclivity of populist citizens for to agree on any survey item, see Appendix 6.

Schimpf, 2017) and future studies may investigate how differences in the democratic belief systems of populist citizens may be a reflection of the specific rhetoric and policies provided by populist parties in a given country. Here, it is also important to keep in mind that we have not investigated polities where populist parties recently led national government, leaving unclear how democratic conceptions among populist citizens change once their preferred parties enter government (eg. Hartevelde et al., 2021).

Further limitations of this study involve issues of measurement. Manicheanism is a key reason for the theorized incompatibility of populism and democracy but it is not very well represented in the items of the populism scale used in this study. Moreover, the scale assesses the populist dimension of popular sovereignty with support for direct-democratic measures to the effect that attitudes towards conceptions of democracy (the explanatory concept of interest) are already included in the measurement of the explaining indicators. Finally, this study could reveal attitudinal inconsistencies because respondents were not forced to choose between conflicting trade-offs. Yet, this measurement approach might have hidden stronger disagreement between populist and non-populist citizens that would emerge in other designs such as conjoint experiments where people are forced to reveal their preferences of one regime type over the other.

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## OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned Open Data and Open Materials badges for making publicly available the digitally-shareable data necessary to reproduce the reported results. The data is available at <https://osf.io/kzmv7/>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at <https://osf.io/kzmv7/>.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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