

# Challenging Democracy: Understanding How the Ideas of Populists and Disenchanted Citizens Align

Reinhard Heinisch <sup>1</sup>  and Oscar Mazzoleni <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Salzburg, Austria

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Political Sciences, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

**Correspondence:** Reinhard Heinisch ([reinhard.heinisch@plus.ac.at](mailto:reinhard.heinisch@plus.ac.at))

**Submitted:** 10 September 2024 **Published:** 4 November 2024

**Issue:** This editorial is part of the issue “Challenging Democracy: How Do Ideas of Populists and Disenchanted Citizens Align?” edited by Reinhard Heinisch (University of Salzburg) and Oscar Mazzoleni (University of Lausanne), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i385>

## Abstract

This thematic issue proceeds from the idea that, despite extensive research, we do not know enough about the alternatives to representative party democracy that people disenchanted with democracy and populists envision apart from greater citizen involvement. Citizens’ potential preferences seem to range from stealth democracy and decision-making by apolitical experts to deliberative mechanisms and referenda. The picture is equally blurred when it comes to the views of populist actors themselves. Research suggests that their calls for referendums diminish over time and that they reject deliberative bodies outright. This thematic issue reassesses our understanding of the extent to which populists’ and citizens’ ideas and the alternatives they propose coincide and argues for a wider dissemination of relevant research that explores these shortcomings. The articles presented explore these points by featuring conceptually and/or methodologically innovative contributions that address issues such as the mismatch between populists and citizens in terms of democratic alternatives, (dis)satisfaction with populist parties in public office, the preferences of distinct subgroups as well as the role of political emotions among populist party supporters.

## Keywords

citizen preferences; democracy; ideology; illiberalism; methodology; non-mainstream ideas; populism; referendums

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary politics, both people and populist parties criticize existing democracy. Indeed, the two forms of critique are linked in that populists cite popular grievances as justification for their own actions. Despite

extensive research on populism, however, we do not know enough about how the ideas of disenchanted citizens and populists align (but see Craig, et al., 2001; Hawkins et al., 2018; Huber & Ruth, 2017). For example, what are the specific alternatives to representative party democracy that both citizens and populists envision? More citizen participation? But in what form? Or, do people prefer stealth democracy and “apolitical” experts to citizen juries (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Mohrenberg et al., 2021)?

## 2. Objectives of This Thematic Issue

Recent work on the interaction between radicalism and democratic attitudes has examined systematic patterns in how individuals with non-mainstream ideologies relate to democratic principles. In innovative ways, these studies distinguish between different types of democracy (Ferrin & Kriesi, 2016). Heinisch and Wegscheider (2020) and Geurkink et al. (2020) also show the importance of disentangling populism from the radical host ideology with which it is associated, as some people's evaluation of democracy is shaped by authoritarianism rather than populism or the resentment of native elites. However, these studies are empirically and conceptually limited and do not allow for the emergence of previously untheorized democratic alternatives. The literature has also paid too little attention to the resilience of democratic support in the face of crisis or potential political alternatives (Diamond & Morlino, 2005) and the normative trade-offs involved.

Even on the question of direct democracy, a review of the literature shows both disagreement on people's motivations, ranging from dissatisfaction with party democracy (Caramani, 2017) and feelings of exclusion by ruling elites (Dalton, 2004; Pauwels, 2014) to preferences for input versus output-focused concerns (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Landwehr & Steiner, 2017; Strebel et al., 2019). Moreover, it is not clear to what extent people's understanding of and agreement with direct democracy corresponds to what experts understand by this concept.

The picture is equally blurred when it comes to the views of populist actors themselves. According to Mudde (2007, p. 152), almost all populist radical right parties call for the introduction or the increased use of referendums. However, recent research suggests that populist actors are less likely than non-populist actors to call for referendums and that their preference for referendums declines over time (Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020). Moreover, some authors show that populist voters are no more supportive of referendums than voters of other parties (Fölsch et al., 2024; Rooduijn, 2018). Alternatively, deliberative bodies designed to increase political participation in a more pluralistic way tend to be generally rejected by populists (Geurkink et al., 2020, p. 9). Finally, a similar tension exists between populism and a technocratic model of government. Bickerton and Accetti (2018) describe populists as technopopulist parties, while Caramani (2017) has systematically discussed what populism and technocracy have in common and how they differ.

Investigating this question also requires addressing methodological limitations. Support for democracy has largely been measured in rather general ways (Carlin & Singer, 2011; Inglehart, 2003; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007), while the use of innovative survey items, scenario-based interviews, and survey experiments (e.g., Baviskar & Malone, 2004; Braizat, 2010; Lu, 2013; Werner, 2019) to uncover the specific features that citizens associate with democracy has been limited.

### 3. Overview of the Contributions

The current state of scholarship has reached a point where we need to reassess our understanding of the extent to which the ideas of populists, citizens, and the alternatives they propose coincide. The articles in this issue, therefore, address the questions previously presented by offering conceptually and/or methodologically sophisticated contributions. Specifically, the issue consists of 13 articles that explore the aforementioned issues, conceptual questions, and methodological approaches.

Jean-Benoit Pilet, Davide Vittori, Emilien Paulis, and Sebastien Rojon examine which actors populist supporters prefer to see governing (Pilet et al., 2024). In this contribution, the authors surveyed people in eight European countries and found that citizens who are more sympathetic to populist parties, support models of government that challenge representative democracy. The findings reveal a complex relationship with democracy, as people prefer more input from citizens, but also from experts, which hardly matches the preferences of populist parties.

Simon D. Brause and Lucy Kinski analyze whether populist party voters would become more satisfied with democracy as populist parties gain success (Brause & Kinski, 2024). The authors analyzed data from 21 countries and found that populist parties in Europe are not more responsive to populist party voters than mainstream parties. However, while populist parties' agenda responsiveness increases voter satisfaction with democracy, populists in government do not appear to have a similar effect.

Viktoria Jansesberger and Susanne Rhein argue that female voters and radical right parties have different ideas about the delineation of in-groups and out-groups in society (Jansesberger & Rhein, 2024). They base this on evidence that women care more about specific attributes of democracy than men do. This helps explain why there is a gender gap in support for these parties. The authors employ data from the European Social Survey to support their ideas.

Nina Wiesehomeier and Saskia P. Ruth-Lovell examine how trust affects support for direct democracy (Wiesehomeier & Ruth-Lovell, 2024). Using original survey data from Argentina, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, the authors distinguish between different objects of trust, including elites, institutions, "the people," and society as a whole. The results highlight different groups of citizens and emphasize the importance of horizontal and vertical trust dynamics in preferences for different configurations of direct democracy.

Sergiu Gherghina, Brigitte Geissel, and Fabian Henger explore direct democracy and the rise of referendums and citizen deliberation (Gherghina et al., 2024). The article looks at 15 political parties in Germany and the UK. Drawing on party manifesto data from 2010 to 2024, the authors find that political parties and citizens rarely agree on the use of referendums and other forms of direct democracy. Furthermore, people's enthusiasm for these methods is seldom reflected in the parties' rhetoric. However, in terms of direct democracy, parties differ in their responsiveness and on whether they are in government or opposition.

Anne Küppers also deals with representative democracy but in the context of examining the role of conspiracy beliefs (Küppers, 2024). Using survey data from Germany, this author shows that belief in conspiracy theories is positively associated with a preference for direct democratic decision-making, but

crucially also with a preference for expert-based decision-making. As such, these findings dovetail with Pilet et al. (2024) in this issue.

Marco Fölsch asks whether affective polarization and populism affect the support for holding referendums (Fölsch, 2024). Using survey data from Austria and Germany, he finds that being affectively polarized has a positive effect on the support for holding referendums. However, this effect is moderated by citizens' individual-level populism.

Lea Kaftan proceeds from the idea that elected leaders, with the support of their voters, challenge liberal democratic institutions during election campaigns (Kaftan, 2024). This article looks at how post-war German citizens and parties have addressed democracy and liberal democracy in their regional and national election platforms. The findings show that democracy per se and conceptions of democracy in party competition can be both valiance issues and positional issues depending on the given positional logic. The same applies to the concepts of social and direct democracy, even in times without democratic backsliding.

Zsolt Enyedi continues the thread of challenges to democracy by theorizing the relationship between populism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism (Enyedi, 2024). The analysis conceptualizes the existence of nine different routes to illiberalism and identifies these pathways as authoritarian, traditionalist, religious, libertarian, nativist-nationalist, populist, paternalist, materialist-technocratic, and leftist. Illiberalism is conceived not as a stage between democracy and dictatorship, nor as a specific ideology, but as a complex ideational syndrome that inspires action against liberal democracy.

Annika Werner and Reinhard Heinisch test individuals' attitudes toward liberal democracy when being forced to consider effective but constitutionally suspect countermeasures to Covid-19 (Werner & Heinisch, 2024). The authors' survey experiment reveals contrary to the expectations: Feeling affected by the pandemic alone makes little difference in the respondent's willingness to adopt illiberal or anti-democratic policies. However, respondents are shown to be less likely to resist illiberal and anti-democratic policies, if they are personally affected and if they are also authoritarian or distrustful of the government.

Jochem Vanagt, Katrin Praprotnik, Luana Russo, and Markus Wagner deal with affective polarization too (Vanagt et al., 2024). Proceeding from the idea that affective dislike toward the radical right is well-established, the authors ask about the perspective of radical right supporters toward others. The researchers examine the differentiation of dislike of mainstream parties among these voters in nine European polities. The results show that some dislike all mainstream parties, while others show a more familiar pattern along ideological lines. Crucially, however, the dislike differentiation among radical right supporters is related to, among other things, ideological extremism, satisfaction with democracy, and political tolerance.

Fabian Habersack and Carsten Wegscheider argue that deprivation and feeling left behind increase one's sense of not being represented in politics (Habersack & Wegscheider, 2024). Using data from the *German Longitudinal Election Study* of 2021, the authors find that both perceptions of personal and societal deprivation as well as a greater perceived distance from government are associated with populist attitudes. Those who struggle economically care less about political representation, while among those who are better off, distance from the government is an effective driver of populist attitudes.

Cristiano Gianolla, Lisete Mónico, and Manuel João Cruz contend that there is insufficient research on the democratic views of radical right populism (Gianolla et al., 2024). To address this, the article uses the heuristic of “emotion narrative” to examine their political culture. The article evaluates the parties Chega and Fratelli d’Italia in Portugal and Italy, respectively, and finds that radical right populist parties use emotion to create exclusionary identities with an affinity for centralism.

We hope that those interested in comparing how citizens and populists challenge democracy will find this thematic issue to be an informative and useful collection of articles.

### Acknowledgments

This research was funded in whole or in part by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [DOI 10.55776/I6035].

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### References

- Baviskar, S., & Malone, M. F. T. (2004). What democracy means to citizens—And why it matters. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 76, 3–23.
- Bengtsson, Å., & Mattila, M. (2009). Direct democracy and its critics: Support for direct democracy and ‘stealth’ democracy in Finland. *West European Politics*, 32(5), 1031–1048.
- Bickerton, C. J., & Accetti, C. I. (2018). ‘Techno-populism’ as a new party family: The case of the Five Star Movement and Podemos. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 10(2), 132–150.
- Braizat, F. (2010). The meanings of democracy: What Arabs think. *Journal of Democracy*, 21(4), 131–138.
- Brause, S. D., & Kinski, L. (2024). Populist party responsiveness and populist party voter satisfaction with democracy in Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8420. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8420>
- Caramani, D. (2017). Will vs. reason: The populist and technocratic forms of political representation and their critique to party government. *American Political Science Review*, 111(1), 54–67.
- Carlin, R. E., & Singer, M. M. (2011). Support for Polyarchy in the Americas. *Comparative Political Studies*, 44(11), 1500–1526.
- Craig, S. C., Kreppel, A., & Kane, J. G. (2001). Public opinion and support for direct democracy: A grassroots perspective. In M. Mendelsohn & A. Parkin (Eds), *Referendum democracy* (pp. 25–46). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dalton, R. J. (2004). *Democratic challenges, democratic choices: The erosion of political support in advanced industrial democracies*. Oxford University Press.
- Diamond, L., & Morlino, L. (2005). *Assessing the quality of democracy*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Enyedi, Z. (2024). Concept and varieties of illiberalism. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8521. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8521>
- Ferrin, M., & Kriesi, H. (2016). *How Europeans view and evaluate democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Fölsch, M. (2024). Do affective polarization and populism affect the support for holding referendums? *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8590. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8590>
- Fölsch, M., Dolezal, M., Heinisch, R., Wegscheider, C., & Werner, A. (2024). Cue-taking, populist attitudes, and support for holding a referendum: Evidence from survey experiments. *Contemporary Politics*, 30(4), 553–575.
- Geurkink, B., Zaslove, A., Sluiter, R., & Jacobs, K. (2020). Populist attitudes, political trust, and external political efficacy: Old wine in new bottles? *Political Studies*, 68(1), 247–267.

- Gherghina, S., & Silagadze, N. (2020). Referendum policies across political systems. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(1), 182–191.
- Gherghina, S., Geissel, B., & Henger, F. (2024). Limited congruence: Citizens' attitudes and party rhetoric about referendums and deliberative practices. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8754. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8754>
- Gianolla, C., Mónico, L., & Cruz, M. J. (2024). Emotion narratives on the political culture of radical right populist parties in Portugal and Italy. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8556. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8556>
- Habersack, F., & Wegscheider, C. (2024). Left behind economically or politically? Economic grievances, representation, and populist attitudes. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8567. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8567>
- Hawkins, K. A., Carlin, R. E., Littvay, L., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (Eds.). (2018). *The ideational approach to populism: Concept, theory, and analysis*. Routledge.
- Heinisch, R., & Wegscheider, C. (2020). Disentangling how populism and radical host ideologies shape citizens' conceptions of democratic decision-making. *Politics and Governance*, 8(3), 32–44.
- Hibbing, J. R., & Theiss-Morse, E. (2002). *Stealth democracy: Americans' beliefs about how government should work*. Cambridge University Press.
- Huber, R. A., & Ruth, S. P. (2017). Mind the Gap! Populism, participation and representation in Europe. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(4), 462–484.
- Inglehart, R. (2003). How solid is mass support for democracy—And how can we measure it? *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 36(1), 51–57.
- Kaftan, L. (2024). Party competition over democracy: Democracy as electoral issue in Germany. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8502. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8502>
- Küppers, A. (2024). Anything but representative democracy: Explaining Conspiracy believers' support for direct democracy and technocracy. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8582. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8582>
- Landwehr, C., & Steiner, N. D. (2017). Where democrats disagree: Citizens' normative conceptions of democracy. *Political Studies*, 65(4), 786–804.
- Lu, J. (2013). Democratic conceptions in East Asian societies: A contextualized analysis. *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 9(1), 117–145.
- Mohrenberg, S., Huber, R. A., & Freyburg, T. (2021). Love at first sight? Populist attitudes and support for direct democracy. *Party Politics*, 27(3), 528–539.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pauwels, T. (2014). *Populism in Western Europe: Comparing Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands*. Routledge.
- Pilet, J., Vittori, D., Paulis, E., & Rojon, S. (2024). The preferred governing actors of populist supporters: Survey evidence from eight European countries. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8731. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8731>
- Rooduijn, M. (2018). What unites the voter bases of populist parties? Comparing the electorates of 15 populist parties. *European Political Science Review*, 10(3), 351–368.
- Schedler, A., & Sarsfield, R. (2007). Democrats with adjectives: Linking direct and indirect measures of democratic support. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(5), 637–659.
- Stebel, M. A., Kübler, D., & Marcinkowski, F. (2019). The importance of input and output legitimacy in democratic governance: Evidence from a population-based survey experiment in four West European countries. *European Journal of Political Research*, 58(2), 488–513.
- Vanagt, J., Praprotnik, K., Russo, L., & Wagner, M. (2024). Affective polarization among radical-right supporters:

Dislike differentiation and democratic support. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8531. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8531>

Werner, A. (2019). What voters want from their parties: Testing the promise-keeping assumption. *Electoral Studies*, 57, 186–195.

Werner, A., & Heinisch, R.(2024).Democracy amid pandemic: A survey experiment on how Covid-19 affectedness influences support for anti-liberal policies. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8469. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8469>

Wiesehomeier, N., & Ruth-Lovell, S. P. (2024). Trust the people? Populism, trust, and support for direct democracy. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8648. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8648>

### About the Authors



**Reinhard Heinisch** is professor of comparative Austrian politics at the University of Salzburg. His main research is centered on comparative populism, Euroscepticism, political parties, and democracy. His research has been published in journals such as the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *European Political Research*, *Political Studies*, *West European Politics*, and *Democratization*. His latest book publication is *Politicizing Islam in Austria* (Rutgers University Press, 2024).



**Oscar Mazzoleni** is professor of political science and political sociology at the University of Lausanne. His main research is focused on populism, party politics, nationalism, and regional politics. His research has appeared in journals such as *Party Politics*, *Comparative European Politics*, *Government and Opposition*, *Political Studies*, *European Politics and Society*, *Socio-economic Review*, and *Populism*.