

LETTER

Are Populists Sore Losers? Explaining Populist Citizens' Preferences for and Reactions to Referendums

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Abstract

Can referendums help increase perceived legitimacy among citizens with populist attitudes? Indeed, public opinion surveys show that populist citizens are especially in favour of referendums. However, we do not know whether this support reflects a principled desire for different decision-making procedures or an instrumental one (that is, because they expect referendums to yield favourable outcomes). We study this question on a real-life case: the Dutch 2018 referendum on the Intelligence and Security Services Act 2017. Using high-quality survey data from both before and after the referendum, we find that, counter to conventional wisdom and our hypotheses, populists' support for referendums is *less* driven by instrumental motives compared to that of non-populists, and that populists are *more* likely than non-populists to accept the outcome of a referendum, even when this outcome is unfavourable.

Keywords: democratic innovations; referendum; populist attitudes; political behaviour

Populism is on the rise and the feeling that politicians do not listen to citizens is widely shared (see Rooduijn 2019). As a response to these widespread feelings, politicians often resort to organizing referendums (Bowler and Donovan 2013; Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2007; Marien and Kern 2018; Scarrow 2001). However, little is known about the impact of these referendums on the citizens whose desires it wishes to meet, especially those with higher degrees of populist attitudes.¹ A limited number of studies has examined the relationship between citizens with a higher degree of populist attitudes and preference for decision-making via referendums. These studies suggest that citizens with a higher degree of populist attitudes (for ease of formulation, henceforth, 'populist citizens')² are especially supportive of decision-making via referendums (Bjånesøy and Ivarsflaten 2016; Jacobs, Akkerman, and Zaslove 2018; Mohrenberg, Huber, and Freyburg 2019).

But does this mean that they consider the outcomes of these referendums as more legitimate? So far, no study has examined this empirically. This matters because it seems that when populist *parties* lose a referendum, they do not 'take "no" for an answer' (Verdugo 2017; see also Pállinger

¹Citizens can be dissatisfied with democracy for many reasons. On top of that, they can have different views of the competence and nature of 'the people'. Depending on those views, they are likely to favor different remedies such as expert, deliberative or direct democracy. For citizens with higher degrees of populist attitudes, referendums are the most likely remedy, hence our focus.

²For ease of formulation, we refer to populist attitudes in a binary way. However, empirically, we conceptualize and measure populist attitudes in a continuous dimension, ranging from low populist attitudes to high populist attitudes (see the method section).

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2018; Silva 2020). Furthermore, recent research on process preferences has found that, in general, citizens' support for referendums is often driven by *instrumental* considerations (Landwehr and Harms 2019; Werner 2019). Is it possible that the demand for referendums among citizens with populist attitudes is primarily an expression of the hope that referendums can function as a shortcut to materialize their own policy preferences? If they do indeed also not 'take "no" for an answer', holding referendums could backfire and undermine the legitimacy of the political system even further.

Using the case of a real-life referendum, we study whether populist citizens' attitudes and reactions towards decision-making through referendums are more or less driven by instrumental concerns than those of their non-populist counterparts. We find that, counter to our expectations, populist citizens turn out to be less instrumental and more principled in both their preference for and reactions to a referendum.

Populist Attitudes and Referendums

We understand populism as a set of ideas that: (1) are people-centred; (2) understand society as a conflict between the people and the elite; and (3) take on a Manichean perspective, where the people are considered as pure and good, whereas the elites are evil and corrupted (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Geurkink et al. 2020; Mudde 2004). Based on the aforementioned definition, it is possible that citizens with a higher degree of populist attitudes consider referendums a more legitimate way of making decisions, preferring referendums out of *normative considerations*. Indeed, part of the populist ideology is the belief that citizens should be their own rulers and political elites only stand in the way of 'government by the people'. Especially in a consensus democracy, the referendum can add an element of a more majoritarian type of democracy, which better fits the populist set of ideas. Populist citizens may thus hold different values regarding the structure and legitimacy of democratic decision-making (Mohrenberg, Huber, and Freyburg 2019).

While there is a large literature on citizens' process preferences (for example, Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Webb, 2013), there are only few empirical studies that assess the relationship between populist attitudes and support for referendums. Those studies that tested the relationship directly found a positive relationship between populist attitudes and support for referendums (Bjånesøy and Ivarsflaten 2016; Jacobs, Akkerman, and Zaslove 2018; Mohrenberg, Huber, and Freyburg 2019).

Based on these previous findings, we formulate a first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The higher the degree of populist attitudes of a citizen, the more they support the referendum in question prior to the vote.

Yet, even if we find such a positive relationship between populist attitudes and referendum support, this need not necessarily mean that support for referendums is based on normative considerations about how democratic decisions ought to be made. In fact, a second, explanation could be that populist citizens favour referendums based on *instrumental considerations*. Recent studies on process preferences have found that such instrumental considerations generally play an important role in shaping citizens' support for referendums (Landwehr and Harms 2019; Werner 2019), as well as more general attitudes towards electoral reform (Biggers 2019; Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2006).

While there may be a good theoretical 'fit' between populism and referendums, an alternative expectation is that the subgroup of populist citizens relies on instrumental considerations to support and evaluate referendums, even more so than non-populist citizens. Non-populist citizens may believe that there are other routes to achieve desired policies (for example, expert government or simply via contacting politicians or other types of traditional political participation).

For them, referendums are just one tool. For populists, referendums are likely to be seen as the single most effective tool, as they bypass the elites by handing over power to the people (see Mohrenberg, Huber, and Freyburg 2019: 4).³ Perceived legitimacy is, then, derived not from the process as such, but from the favourability of the outcome. Hence, we expect the relationship between instrumental considerations and support for a referendum to be even stronger among populist citizens.

General studies on process preferences have found that instrumental considerations typically come in two forms (Werner 2019). First, citizens may support a referendum on a given question more so when they are in favour of the policy proposal under discussion. This is because citizens have nothing to lose and much to gain from a referendum on a proposal (or veto of an existing bill) that they endorse. Second, citizens may be more supportive of a referendum if they expect to win the referendum (see also Landwehr and Harms 2019). In both cases, citizens support a referendum because they believe it benefits them. Based on the aforementioned reasoning highlighting that populists consider referendums the single most effective tool to achieve desired policy outcomes, we thus formulate the following two moderator hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: The higher the degree of populist attitudes, the stronger the relationship between support for the specific policy proposal and support for a referendum on that topic.

Hypothesis 2b: The higher the degree of populist attitudes, the stronger the relationship between majority perceptions about an issue and support for a referendum on that topic.

If citizens with populist attitudes are not genuinely in favour of referendums, but rather consider them a convenient tool to reach desired policies, this also has consequences for how legitimate they judge the outcome of a referendum. Therefore, the reaction of citizens with populist attitudes that *lose* referendums is of particular importance to this analysis. Extensive work both on elections and on procedural fairness has shown that outcome favourability plays an important role in shaping citizens' evaluations of the decision-making process and their likelihood to accept the decision (Anderson et al. 2005; Arnesen 2017; Esaiasson et al. 2019; Marien and Kern 2018; Merkley et al. 2019). If populist citizens root their support for referendums in the expectation of favourable outcomes, losing a referendum could lower their willingness to accept the decision (that is, they are 'sore losers')⁴:

Hypothesis 3: The higher the degree of populist attitudes, the lower the willingness to accept the outcomes of referendums among decision losers.⁵

Methodology

Case

We test these hypotheses on a real referendum, namely, the 2018 Dutch referendum on the Intelligence and Security Services Act 2017. Studying a real referendum has the obvious advantage of improving ecological validity compared to hypothetical surveys or experiments. The downside of

³This reasoning reflects the impact of the anti-elitism component of populism in combination with the populist desire for popular sovereignty. The last component of populism – people-centrism – is unlikely to influence the relationship; here, one would simply expect that populists are more likely to hold majority perceptions, not that the effect of majority perceptions is stronger.

⁴This would be in line with how populist politicians react to losses. When populists in power lose referendums, they tend to react by ignoring the outcome and/or blaming the elites for their loss (Pällinger 2018; Silva 2020; Verdugo 2017). In short, they find it hard 'to take "no" for an answer' (Verdugo 2017).

⁵In the context of this project, we also formulated and tested a hypothesis on changes in referendum support. More information on the argument, hypothesis and results can be found in Table A10 in the Appendix.

our design is that we can only test correlational relationships. Thus, we cannot make causal claims. Further, we have to be cautious in generalizing from this case. To this end, we provide more detailed information on the case in the Online Appendix. What makes this referendum ideally suited to studying the relationships in question is that the policy preference does not overlap substantially with populist attitudes, which can make it difficult to disentangle the role of populist attitudes and loss in the referendum. As Fig. A1 in the Online Appendix shows, we have sufficient variation of populist attitudes among both proponents and opponents of the referendum proposal.

Dataset

The data were collected by the Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences (also known as the LISS-panel), a high-quality probability sample survey panel run by CenterData (University of Tilburg). We use data from two waves of the referendum study. Data for the pre-wave were collected in the weeks prior to the referendum (5–20 March; response = 74.2 per cent). Data for the post-wave were collected after the referendum (22 March–8 April; response = 78.7 per cent). The sample of the post-wave consists partly of respondents who were also invited to the previous waves and partly of ‘fresh’ respondents. For the main analyses, we construct an analytical sample including respondents who answered the questionnaire both pre- and post-wave. This yields an analytical sample of 666 respondents. We also conduct a robustness check on our post-wave analysis including the full sample (see Table A6 in the Online Appendix; $N = 1,322$). The turnout was overestimated in the dataset – a classic problem for survey research about voter turnout. The vote choice distribution is slightly skewed towards decision losers in our analytical sample, yet not in the full post-sample, with which we find substantially the same results (see Table A6 in the Online Appendix). In terms of demographics, our sample compares well to Dutch census data, yet is slightly skewed towards men, older people and higher-educated citizens (Statistics Netherlands 2018). Descriptive information about the sample can be found in Tables A1 and A2 in the Online Appendix.

Operationalization

We use two dependent variables. First, we measure support for the referendum on the information law (seven-point scale, measured in the pre-wave and used for H1, H2a and H2b). Second, we measure to what extent citizens were willing to accept the result of the referendum (seven-point scale, measured in the post-wave and used for H3).

Our main independent variable is populist attitudes. We use the widely used, standard, six-item battery of populist attitudes devised by Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014), measured in the post-wave. It should be noted that one of the items in the scale asks whether citizens should decide instead of politicians on the most important issues. There may be conceptual similarity between this item and support for the specific referendum under study, which is one of our dependent variables. Hence, to err on the side of caution, we decided to drop this item from our main analysis. Robustness checks using the full scale reveal substantially the same results (see Tables A7 and A8 in the Online Appendix).

Further, we measure citizens’ *policy preferences* regarding the information law under question (binary, pre-wave) and their expectation of the referendum result, which is then matched to their policy preference to construct a *majority perceptions* variable (binary, pre-wave). More information on question wording can be found in the Online Appendix.

Results

In the following, we test the outlined hypotheses. It should be noted that we control for party preferences in all models, yet do not show them in the main graphs for ease of readability. The complete regression tables can be found in the Online Appendix (see Tables A4 and A5).

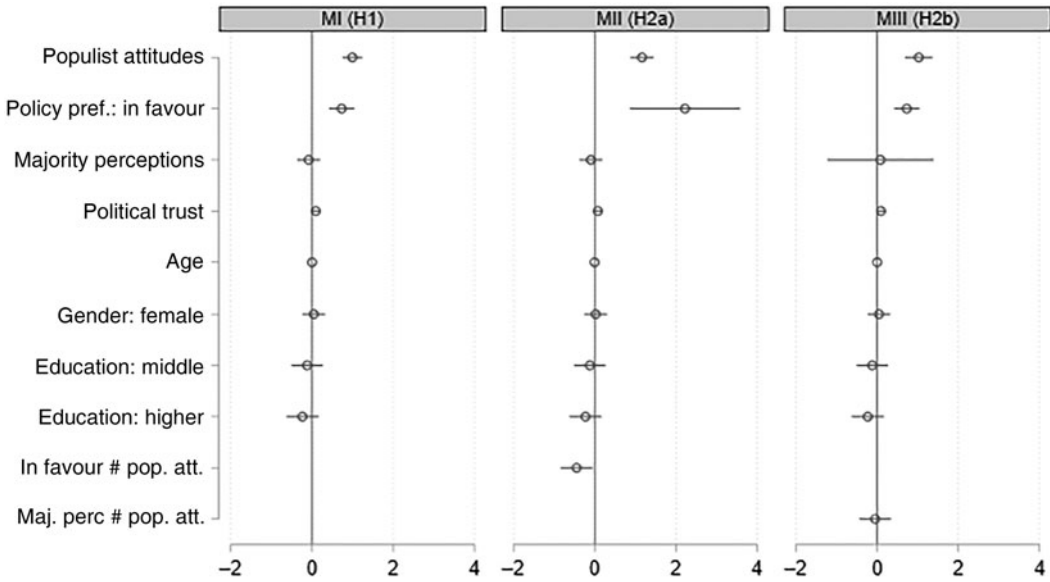


Figure 1. Regression of support for referendum (pre-wave).

Note: Estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients. $N = 666$. $R^2_{MI} = 0.23$; $R^2_{MII} = 0.23$; $R^2_{MIII} = 0.23$. Party preference was included in model but is removed for ease of readability. Bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals. For the corresponding table, see Table A4 in the Online Appendix. Policy pref = Policy preference; Pop. att. = Populist attitudes; Maj. Perc. = Majority perception

H1 predicted that citizens with high levels of populist attitudes would be more supportive of the referendum on the information law than citizens with low levels of populist attitudes. As can be seen in Fig. 1 (Model I), this is indeed the case. Populist attitudes are positively and significantly related to support for the referendum on the information law.

But are populists more instrumental in their support for the referendum? H2a expected that populist attitudes would interact with support for the policy proposal and with the expectation of winning the referendum, indicating that these instrumental considerations are especially prevalent among citizens with populist attitudes. We start with an investigation of the interaction with support for the policy proposal (H2a). As can be seen in Model II, there is indeed a significant interaction between populist attitudes and support for the policy proposal ($p < 0.05$) but in the other direction than predicted. It turns out that populist citizens' support for the referendum is *less* driven by instrumental concerns about changing a specific policy. This interaction is visualized in Fig. 2.

Turning to the interaction with the expectation of winning (H2b), we expected that populist citizens would be especially supportive of a referendum if they expect to win it. As Model III shows, this is not the case: we see no indications of an interaction between populist attitudes and majority perceptions (also visualized in Fig. 2).

Our hypotheses about populist attitudes and support for referendums have only partly been confirmed. Replicating results from existing research, we find that citizens with populist attitudes are more in favour of the referendum in question (H1). Furthermore, and contrary to our own expectations, we find that, compared to non-populist citizens, their support is either *less* driven by instrumental, policy-specific concerns (H2a) or at least not more so in regards to their expectation of winning (H2b).

We now turn to the post-wave to investigate how populist citizens reacted to the outcomes of the referendum. In H3, we expected that such citizens would be less likely to consider the referendum outcome legitimate if they did not get the desired policy outcome.

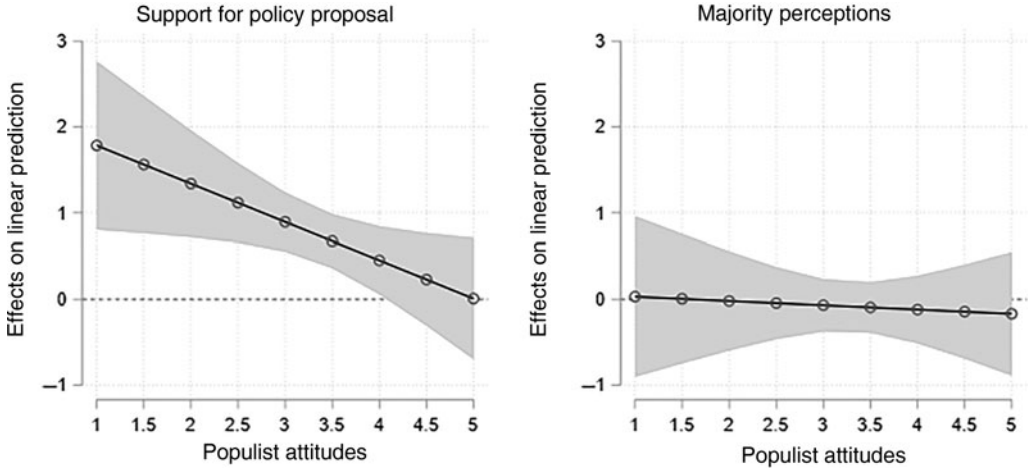


Figure 2. Marginal effects of support for the policy proposal and of majority perceptions on support for the referendum across populist attitudes.
Note: N = 666. The graph presents the visualization of the interaction in Model II and Model III of Fig. 1. For the corresponding table, see Table A4 in the Online Appendix.

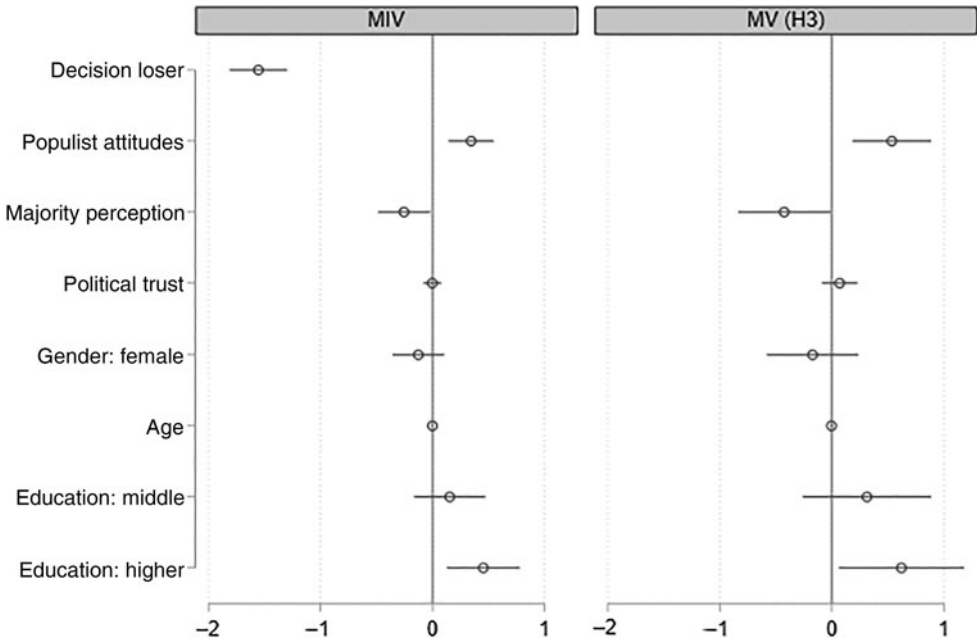


Figure 3. Linear regression of acceptance of the referendum outcome (post-wave).
Note: Estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients. MV shows effects for the subgroup of decision losers. $N_{MIV} = 666$, $R^2_{MIV} = 0.29$; $N_{MV} = 339$, $R^2_{MV} = 0.10$. Party preference was included in the model but is removed for ease of readability. Bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals. For the corresponding table, see Table A5 in the Online Appendix.

We first test how acceptance of the referendum result relates to outcome favourability and populist attitudes among the whole sample (see Model IV in Fig. 3). As expected, we see that those who lost exert lower willingness to accept the outcome of the referendum than those who won. Interestingly, populist attitudes are positively (and significantly) associated with

acceptance of the outcome. However, this could be driven by decision winners (Marien and Kern 2018).

We then turn to the subsample of decision losers in Model V. We expected a negative correlation between populist attitudes and acceptance of the unfavourable referendum result. However, we find the exact opposite: the higher a citizen's degree of populist attitudes, the higher their willingness to accept the unfavourable outcome. It therefore seems that citizens with high populist attitudes are more gracious losers in a referendum than citizens with low populist attitudes, disconfirming our hypothesis.

Robustness Checks

To check the stability of our findings, we ran several robustness checks. First, we run the analyses on decision acceptance using the *full sample* of third-wave respondents (N = 1,322) instead of the overlap sample between the pre- and post-wave that we present in the main analysis. We find substantially the same results (see Table A6 in the Online Appendix).

Second, we rerun all our analyses using the *full populist attitudes scale*. This scale includes the item 'On the most important issues, citizens should decide instead of politicians' that we removed for our main analysis because it related too closely to support for populist attitudes. We find substantially the same results as in our main analysis, with slightly bigger effect sizes. The results can be found in Tables A7 and A8 in the Online Appendix.

Third, we assess the *conditionality of our findings on the policy issue* of the referendum to gain insights into its generalizability. While there was substantial attention to the topic of data protection in the public debate, it is not the most salient and pressing policy issue for most citizens. We interact the importance that respondents attributed to the policy issues with populist attitudes in our analysis of decision acceptance for both the full sample and the decision losers. We find no significant interaction effect; hence, even populist citizens that cared strongly about the issue were more willing to accept an unfavourable outcome than their non-populist, caring counterparts. The results can be found in Table A9 in the Online Appendix.

Conclusion

We expected populist citizens to be sore losers when compared to non-populist ones. It turns out that this is not the case in our study. Citizens with populist attitudes were less instrumental and more principled in their support for referendums, and in line with this, they were more accepting of the referendum result, even when the outcome was unfavourable. The obtained results are robust across different analysis specifications.

These findings have a range of implications. First, they shed light on the potential of referendums to strengthen popular legitimacy. The concern about growing dissatisfaction with the political system and resulting low levels of legitimacy is prevalent both in political science and among practitioners. Many critics worry that participatory processes will only appeal to those citizens who are already politically privileged – the interested, trusting and educated citizens – and will cause even more frustration among those who feel excluded and neglected (Smith 2009). Our results suggest that referendums hold a normative appeal to citizens with populist attitudes and could build consent even in the light of unfavourable policy outcomes. It seems that populist citizens are not necessarily up for ignoring the rules of the game; they just think there should be different rules.

However, a second implication opens up a problem for political practice. What should be done if different subgroups of the population consider different decision-making arrangements as legitimate? For instance, it could be that citizens are dissatisfied but, at the same time, consider their fellow citizens incompetent. Such citizens are likely to prefer expert democracy and dislike referendums. This causes a conflict between the normative democratic preferences of different societal groups, one that is not easily resolved and requires the consideration of other democratic goods.

As with every study, ours comes with some limitations. First of all, we could only study correlations between our variables of interest and can therefore only theorize about the causal relationships. Second, since we use data from a single referendum, questions of generalizability may arise. While the Dutch 2018 referendum is an excellent first testing ground to examine the relationship between populist attitudes and losing referendums, as populist citizens were relatively evenly distributed in terms of winning and losing, it is important to test the findings in other country settings as well. Although our study indicates that populist citizens' support for referendums is more normative and, consequently, can correlate positively with decision acceptance, it remains to be examined under which circumstances such correlations materialize. Third, it remains to be seen whether populist citizens would behave similarly for highly contested issues, such as migration. While our data suggest that issue importance does not change populist citizens' willingness to accept the decision, future studies are required. Evidently, while a crucial one, our research constitutes only a first step. Indeed, it remains to be investigated further under which specific circumstances and to what extent referendums can help bring populist citizens back in.

Supplementary Material. Online appendices are available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123421000314>.

Data Availability Statement. The dataset used for the analyses in this manuscript is publicly available and can be found at: https://www.dataarchive.lissdata.nl/study_units/view/815. Replication code (see Werner and Jacobs 2021) can be found at the Harvard Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DTN3JF>.

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