

## **Does direct democracy facilitate or inhibit populism?**

### **Introduction**

According to Cas Mudde's (2004:543) definition, one of the fundamental convictions of populism is that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. Taking "government by the people" literally, populists are against all forms of intermediary institutions between the people and the decision-makers and call for more directness in the political process. Thus it comes as no surprise, that populists all around the world press for the introduction of direct democratic instruments, such as referenda or initiatives and admire the Swiss political system.

A question that has been discussed by several scholars is, if populism poses a threat on democracy or might actually work as a corrective, forcing democracies to employ more direct democracy. However, I would like to turn this question around, asking myself if what populists demand so vigorously actually helps them to become more successful, advance their interests and spread their ideology or if their idealized perception of direct democracy is misled and might turn against them. Thus the question I would like to address in this essay is the following: *Does direct democracy facilitate or inhibit populism?*

On the one hand, focusing more narrowly on direct democratic instruments and campaigns, it can be argued that direct democratic procedures tend to favour the success of populist strategies and thus to a certain extent facilitate populism. However, I will argue that this effect is limited by some important characteristics of direct democracy that populist actors seem to ignore in their admiration of direct democracy. On the other hand, looking at opportunity structures, I will argue that populists' demands for more responsiveness become to a certain extent obsolete in an established direct democratic system where citizens already "have a say" and thus existing direct democracy rather inhibits than facilitates populism.

## Argumentation

### Populist manipulation and citizen competence

Critics of direct democracy often bring up the argument that citizens lack the necessary political skills to make reasonable decisions on often highly complex policies. This becomes especially problematic in the context of direct democracy, where specific knowledge is required. Thus it is argued that in the context of direct democracy, the ordinary citizen becomes highly susceptible to the arguments of charismatic leaders and simplistic slogans during the campaign (Papadopoulos 1995:423). Following that argument, direct democracy provides fertile ground for populist manipulations and their ready-made solutions. Papadopoulos (1995:441) refers to the risk of citizens' manipulation as follows: "Direct democracy procedures tend to play down the complexity of problems and to favour the appeal of simplistic slogans." This argument is further strengthened by the crucial role of the media in direct democratic campaigns. Kriesi (2014) points out, that populists can often rely on a so-called "media complicity". This means that an increasing focus on scandalous events and populist media formats on the side of the media might further benefit populist manipulation.

The whole argument outlined so far is based on the assumption of largely incompetent citizens. However, this assumption can be challenged or at least put into perspective, as Kriesi (2005) finds in his book. Looking at two different paths of opinion formation, namely a *heuristic* and a *systematic* path, he finds that Swiss citizens are generally quite capable of using heuristic or argument-based strategies to make reasonable decisions that are in line with their predispositions. An important finding in this context is the almost complete absence of what Kriesi calls the *polarization effect*. Based on Zaller's theory, Kriesi (2005:150) expected the more unaware (in contrast to the fully aware) partisans to be influenced by the messages or propaganda of the adversarial camp and induced to vote against their general predispositions. However, no such effect could be found. Thus, at least in the Swiss context, even the relatively unaware seem to be able to decide in accordance with their predispositions. This finding suggests that the ability of populists to take advantage of the open door direct democracy leaves to populist manipulation seems to be somewhat limited. Another element that contributes to this limitation is the fact that the direction of a campaign, at least in the case of Switzerland, seems to be relatively unimportant compared to factors concerning coalition compositions among the elites (Kriesi 2005:617).

### **The role of the political elite**

A central finding of Kriesi (2006) is the crucial role of the political elite in direct democracy. In the context of contemporary party democracies, it is the elites (mainly political parties) that control direct-democratic procedures and provide citizens with cues that influence their decision-making. Kriesi (2006) finds that coalition formation among the elites is decisive for the outcome of direct democratic votes in Switzerland.

While this finding clearly goes against the populist ideal of an unmediated expression of the general will of the “people”, it is less clear how the strong influence of the elite affects the actual success of populist parties. An extreme case is Switzerland, where the right-wing populist party (SVP) clearly belongs to the political elite (even though they frame it differently themselves), is very well established and financially strong. In this case, Gerber’s (1999:6) *populist paradox*, which postulates that direct democratic instruments have been transformed from a tool of “the people” to a tool of resourceful, well-organized groups within the elite, might actually have facilitated the rise of the SVP in Switzerland.

However, the Swiss SVP is certainly not representative for populist parties and populism in general, just as the highly organized context of Swiss direct democracy can hardly be compared to direct democratic elements in other countries. To conclude, the question of whether the strong role of the political elite in direct democracy inhibits or facilitates populism can only be answered in relation to the position a certain populist party or movement holds within the political system.

### **Populism and the institutional logic of direct democracy**

Kriesi (2006:617) points to the fact, that the institutional logic of direct democracy favours compromise and consensus. Indeed, in a direct democratic system like Switzerland, everything is based on deliberation and the search for compromise. This consensus culture closely linked to direct democracy, however, stands in stark contrast to the populists’ calls for directness and simplicity. While direct democratic instruments themselves certainly contribute to a more direct link between the citizens and the decision-making process, one should not forget the institutional context direct democracy is situated in. The clash between populism and the consensus culture of the Swiss political system has been clearly visible during the implementation phase of the initiative against mass immigration. Following the populist notion that nothing should

constrain the will of “the people”, the SVP have insisted on the literal implementation of the initiative text against all constraints but finally couldn’t prevail.

This example illustrates, that direct democracy might help populist parties to place their issues on the political agenda and activate latent populist attitudes among citizens but the implementation of their ideas is, at least in the case of Switzerland, somewhat restricted by the consensus culture of the Swiss direct democratic system and the generally strong institutional constraints.

### **The putative will of “the people” vs. the will of the median voter**

Bochsler and Hug (2015) showed in their study, that referendums and initiatives push policies towards the voter’s preferences. In other words, in countries, which make use of direct democratic instruments, policies should more closely represent the median voters’ preferences.

Intuitively, this is perfectly in line with populist demands for more responsiveness of political systems to the will of “the people” and should thus support the argument, that direct democracy facilitates populism. However, as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017:501) point out, the populist notion “the people” is essentially an “empty signifier”, referring to an adjustable image of the “good” people. Thus, what populists have in mind calling for more responsiveness is not the objective will of the majority of the citizens in a country, but rather the putative will of their idea of the “common people”. Looking at the voteshare of populist parties, which (at least in Europe) is still rather low, I doubt that the “real”, objective will of the majority, expressed through direct democracy will often be in line with the populist ideology. Thus, the fact that direct democracy pushes policies towards the median voter’s preferences doesn’t necessarily have to foster populists’ (electoral) success and could just as well work against them.

### **Do populist demands become obsolete in direct democracy?**

So far I have argued, that although direct democracy seems to be very popular among populist actors, and the idea of direct democracy tends to be in line with the populist understanding of “government by the people”, there are some factors that question the assumption that direct democracy facilitates populism. However, I will now turn to my final argument, as to why direct democracy might actually inhibit populism.

There are several factors that contribute to the current success of populist parties. One of the most important factors on the demand side is the perceived unresponsiveness of a government to its citizens (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). As I have shown above with the study of Bochsler and Hug (2015), direct democratic procedures certainly increase the responsiveness of a political system by pushing policies towards the preference of the median voter. In other words, in a direct democratic system citizens already “have a say” in politics, as they can directly decide upon policy issues. Thus, the populists’ core demand for a more direct expression of the general will becomes to a certain extent obsolete and loses its power to mobilize “the people” against “the elite”. In that sense, existing direct democracy might actually take away populist movements’ driving force.

This point can be strengthened by Canovan’s (1999) argument about the two faces of democracy. From a *pragmatic* point of view, democracy is just a form of government that relies on institutions that limit power and make the system effective. From a *redemptive* point of view, however, democracy is popular power in its most direct sense that is supposed to bring salvation to the people. Based on these two visions, Canovan (1999) argues, that the stronger the tensions between the pragmatic and the redemptive side of democracy, the more room for populist mobilization. In a direct democracy, I argue, these tensions are reduced by adding mechanisms that allow for a more direct expression of the *vox populi* to a system that is otherwise merely built on alienating institutions. In that sense, direct democracy incorporates to a certain extent the romanticised redemptive call for an unmediated expression of the people’s will. Consequently, the room for populist mobilization is largely reduced.

Interestingly, the Swiss case (again) seems to be at odds with this argument. Based on the fact that direct democratic decision-making is a highly institutionalized element of the Swiss political system, one would expect the opportunity structures for populist mobilization to be rather limited. However, with a voteshare of around 30 percent, the SVP is more successful than most other right-wing populist parties in Western Europe. To solve the Swiss “puzzle” would go beyond the scope of this essay, but the unique institutional characteristics of the Swiss political system certainly play an important role in that context.

## Conclusion

As I mentioned in the introduction, there are two perspectives one can take in order to answer the question whether direct democracy facilitates or inhibits populism.

On the one hand, focusing on whether the introduction of direct democratic instruments would contribute to populist success, I could show in this essay that relevant factors in a direct democracy such as the competence of the citizens, the role of the elite, the compromise-orientated logic of direct democracy and the strengthened influence of the median voter do not necessarily work in favour of populism, even though many aspects of direct democracy seem to be in line with populists' demands for more responsiveness and direct involvement of the citizens in the decision-making process. It thus seems that populist actors are to a certain extent misled by their ideological admiration for direct democracy.

On the other hand, focusing on whether existing direct democracy facilitates or inhibits populism, I come to the conclusion that populists' demands for more directness and responsiveness become to a certain extent obsolete in an established, well functioning direct democracy where citizens already have the tools to express their will directly and thus "have a say" in politics. In that sense, existing direct democracy might actually inhibit populism.

Finally, to answer the question addressed in this essay, two factors seem to be essential: The timing of populist mobilization and the quality of existing direct democracy. If the citizens associate the populist actors with the successful introduction of direct democratic instruments, they will most certainly facilitate their future rise. If, however, populists start to mobilize in a political system where direct democracy is already established and well functioning, direct democracy rather inhibits the further rise of populism.

## Literature

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This is a well-reasoned and clearly structured essay that brings up convincing conditional arguments for different answers to the essay question. I also liked the additional literature you discussed. I would have liked to see more exploration of the Swiss puzzles in your essay. Probably direct democracy provides a venue to any issues and parties that challenge the mainstream, be they populist or not. 5.5