

# Voters of Populist Parties and Support for Reforms of Representative Democracy in Belgium\*

Lisa van Dijk, Thomas Legein, Jean-Benoit Pilet & Sofie Marien\*\*

## Abstract

Recently, studies have burgeoned on the link between populism and demands for democratic reforms. In particular, scholars have been debating the link between populist citizens or voters and support for referendums. In this article, we examine voters of populist parties (Vlaams Belang (VB) and Parti du Travail de Belgique-Partij van de Arbeid (PTB-PVDA)) in Belgium in 2019 and we look at their attitudes towards various types of democratic reforms. We find that voters of populist parties differ from the non-populist electorate in their support for different kinds of reforms of representative democracy. Voters of VB and PTB-PVDA have in common stronger demands for limiting politicians' prerogatives, for introducing binding referendums and for participatory budgeting. While Vlaams Belang voters are not significantly different from the non-populist electorate on advisory referendums, citizens' forums or technocratic reform, PVDA-PTB voters seem more enthusiastic.

**Keywords:** Belgian politics, democratic reforms, elections, populist voters, representative democracy.

## 1 Introduction

Populist parties have gained much popularity in recent years. Well-known examples are the *Rassemblement national* (former Front National; FN) in France, *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) in the Netherlands, *Podemos* in Spain, *Die Linke* in Germany, or the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S) in Italy (Rooduijn, 2018). In this regard, Bel-

\* This article is based on our book chapter titled "Comportement électoral et soutien aux réformes de la démocratie représentative en Belgique"/"Stemgedrag en steun voor hervormingen van de representatieve democratie in België". This chapter was published in the book *Les Belges haussent leur voix / De Belgen verheffen hun stem* (edited by Jean-Benoit Pilet, Pierre Baudewyns, Kris Deschouwer, Anna Kern & Jonas Lefevere). The book chapter focuses on differences in the level of support for reforms of representative democracy across voters of Flemish and Francophone parties. This study extends the scope of the book chapter by examining to what extent the electoral bases of populist parties in Belgium are distinct in their attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy.

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gium is no exception (Pauwels, 2014). The 2019 Belgian elections were marked by the growth of populist parties on both extremes of the political spectrum: Vlaams Belang (VB) on the far right and Parti du Travail de Belgique-Partij van de Arbeid (PTB-PVDA) on the far left. While Vlaams Belang obtained 18 seats, the PTB-PVDA saw its total number of seats in the Belgian federal parliament rise to 12 seats (compared to, respectively, 3 and 2 in the previous legislature) out of 150 in total.

The electoral growth of populist parties across established democracies has attracted a lot of scholarly attention (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Pauwels, 2014; Rooduijn, 2020). And one of the core questions that has been posed is whether and how populist parties and voters are singular in their relationship to democracy. Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2020) have recently shown that populist citizens remain democrats. However, they also conclude that what we still lack are “*more in-depth analyses of the concept of democracy held by populist citizens*” (Ibid, 2020, pp. 15-16). Several recent studies have lifted part of the veil by analysing how populist politicians, voters or citizens would be strongly supportive of some reforms of representative democracy. In particular, there has been quite a lot of attention on the link between populism and support for direct democracy (Bowler et al., 2017; Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Rooduijn, 2018; Rose & Wessels, 2020). A few authors have also examined the connection between populism and technocratic attitudes (Bertsou & Caramani, 2020; Caramani, 2017), or between populism and support for strong leadership (Donovan, 2020).

This article wants to contribute to this debate by examining support for reforms of representative democracy among voters of populist parties in the 2019 Belgian elections. The voters of populist parties that we examine are those that have either voted for the Flemish radical-right populist party Vlaams Belang or for the radical-left party PTB-PVDA that is the last nationwide party running in all electoral districts in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. We analyse whether voters of these two parties are different from the rest of the Belgian electorate in their support for reforming representative democracy. By reforms of representative democracy, we mean reforms that would transform the current logic of representative democracy but which do not question the very foundations of democracy. Especially, we consider four types of reforms: (i) reforms that reduce the current prerogatives and privileges of elected politicians, (ii) direct democracy reforms, (iii) deliberative democracy reforms and (iv) reforms empowering independent experts or technocrats at the expense of politicians (technocratic reforms). Building on that, our study examines support for these sets of reforms among voters of Belgian populist parties, in comparison to those voting for other political parties. In addition, we also explore differences in attitudes towards reforms between voters of right- and left-wing populist parties (VB vs. PVDA voters) as well as between voters of the left-wing populist party on both sides of the language border (PVDA vs. PTB voters).

Our study innovates from the literature on populism in at least two respects. First, it compares within the same study voters from radical-right and radical-left populist parties within one single country, Belgium (for a similar approach in the

Netherlands, see, e.g. Jacobs et al., 2018). Second, it examines in conjunction populist voters' support for different kinds of reforms (direct democracy, deliberative democracy, technocracy and limiting elected politicians' prerogatives), while most earlier studies tend to examine only one type of reform. But our study also wants to contribute to the burgeoning literature on reforms of representative democracy. Research has shown that such reforms are high on the agenda in many established democracies (Bedock, 2017; Geißel & Newton, 2012; Qvortrup, 2017) and that popular demand for further institutional changes is high but also diversified (Font et al., 2015; Gherghina & Geißel, 2019; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015; Webb, 2013). Contemporary societies appear to be divided between citizens satisfied with representative democracy, those calling for greater citizens' participation, and those rather demanding more output-oriented logics of governance that would give more power to independent experts or technocrats (Bengtsson & Christensen, 2016). With our study, we contribute to this growing literature by connecting it with vote choice, and, in particular, voting for populist parties, an aspect that remains underexplored within this subfield.

The article is divided into four sections. We start with a review of the literature on different types of reforms of representative democracy and we set out why we could expect populist voters to be distinct from electorates of other political parties in their preferences for such reforms. Second, we present our data and methodology. Third, we use OLS regression models to show whether populist party electorates hold positions that would differentiate them from the electorate at large. And, fourthly, we discuss the implications of our findings.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 *Types of Reforms of Representative Democracy*

Over the last decades, many democracies have adopted reforms aimed at revitalising representative democracies (Bedock, 2017; Geißel & Newton, 2012; Qvortrup, 2017). These reforms took place in a context of eroding political support and were often portrayed by their initiators as responses to public demands for political change (Bedock, 2016). Yet, these reforms have been very diversified. We can roughly divide such reforms into three categories based on their underlying logic. The first category of reforms concerns a change or alteration in the way in which representative structures are currently organised, but do not go beyond the representative logic. In this regard, we may observe calls for more transparency as well as for the revision of some aspects of the current institutional architecture like the number of elected politicians, the way the electoral system is working or the way parties are organised and financed (Bedock, 2016; Carey, 1998; Cross & Pilet, 2016; Renwick & Pilet, 2016; van Biezen & Piccio, 2013). The second category of reforms pushes to increase the role of citizens in the political decision-making process. Within this logic, instruments such as referendums, participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies composed of citizens selected by lot (also referred to as deliberative mini-publics – DMPs) have emerged (Elstubb & Escobar, 2019; Geißel & Newton, 2012; Smith, 2009). The final category of reforms goes in

the opposite direction. It is based on the idea that citizens would not want more participation, but rather more efficient and de-politicised political systems (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Within this logic, we find reforms that have led not only to the creation of independent states agencies or bodies of experts but also to the establishment of technocratic governments in some countries (Costa Pinto et al., 2017).

These three logics of reforms have also been central in the burgeoning literature regarding how citizens want democracy to be organised. Surveys on the topic have been conducted across several European countries such as Finland, Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Belgium (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Font et al., 2015; Gherghina & Geißel, 2019; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Jacquet et al., 2015; Webb, 2013). They confirm the coexistence of three models of democracy (Bengtsson & Christensen, 2016). In the first model, which Bengtsson and Christensen name the elitist model, elections are the core of democracy, and democracy is primarily a method for citizens to select the leaders who will govern. The core principles of this model remain within the very logic of representative democracy (Manin, 1997; Powell, 2000). The participation model, also referred to as the pluralistic model, sees citizens' participation as central in democracy, and citizens should be given a direct say in major political decisions outside of Election day. Finally, the expertise/technocratic model refers to the idea of stealth democracy and is based on the idea that efficient leaders selected on the basis of their expertise should conduct politics and that citizens' involvement should be minimal.

Next to these studies on broader models of democracy that citizens across Europe support, studies have also burgeoned on public demands for specific reforms. The most studied instrument in that respect is the referendum (Bowler et al., 2007; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). It has been shown to be widely supported across European democracies (Bowler & Donovan, 2019). More recently, studies have been issued on support for instruments of deliberative democracy such as citizens' assemblies and mini-publics (Bedock & Pilet, 2020b). Finally, Bertson and Pastorella (2017) have examined public support across Europe for technocratic forms of government.

Our goal in this article is to build on this literature in examining support for these different types of reforms that correspond to different models of democracy (representative, direct, deliberative and technocratic) among Belgian voters. Yet, we focus more specifically on one subgroup of voters, those that have cast a vote in the 2019 federal elections for a populist party: Vlaams Belang or PVDA-PTB (Pauwels, 2014; Wauters & Pittoors, 2019). The next section elaborates on the literature on populist voting and their support for reforms of representative democracy.

## 2.2 *Populist Party Voters and Their Support for Reforms of Representative Democracy*

In parallel to the literature on reforms and citizens' preferred models of democracy, other scholars have developed a research agenda on populist parties, voters and citizens and how they apprehend democracy. The starting point is that populism is built upon a critique of the current representative democratic model gov-

erned by elected politicians. These politicians are perceived as corrupt, detached from society and unresponsive to the will of 'the people' (Mudde, 2004). Indeed, research has confirmed that populist voters tend to be more dissatisfied with the way democracy is working (Doyle, 2011; Ivarsflaten, 2007; Rooduijn et al., 2016; Rydgren, 2005). Research on populist attitudes has fine-grained this observation. Initially, the strong political dissatisfaction of populist voters was interpreted as a sign that they were mere protest voters (Hooghe et al., 2011; Van der Brug et al., 2000). But gradually, the interpretation was fine-tuned. Populist voters were portrayed as voters holding deeper populist attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2014; Geurkink et al., 2020; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018).<sup>1</sup> And these attitudes were grounded in a specific vision of politics based on four elements: people-centrism, anti-elitism, a perceived antagonism between the people and the elite, and the existence of an identifiable general will that should drive political decisions. These four elements are the basis of populist voters' discontent with contemporary representative democratic systems and of the populist view of what democracy should ideally look like.

Starting from there, several studies have tried to examine how such dissatisfaction with representative democracy would translate into specific demands for alternatives models of governance. The first question was whether populists would still be democrats (see Canovan, 1999; Mair, 2002; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). In their recent study, Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2020) demonstrated that populist citizens remain supporters of democracy as a regime. Yet, what was less clear is what model of democracy they would prefer. A few studies have tried to answer this question. In particular, several analyses have demonstrated that citizens holding populist attitudes would be supportive of direct democracy instruments (Jacobs et al., 2018; Mohrenberg et al., 2019). Others have rather examined the link between populism and support for technocratic governments or for a stronger role for independent experts (Bertsou & Caramani, 2020; Caramani, 2017; Webb, 2013). Recently, Donovan (2020) looked at support for stronger political leaders among populist voters. Yet, what is missing is a more comprehensive approach of how these various elements receive support from populist electorates. We lack studies trying to examine systematically the link between populism and various forms of reforms of representative democracy, defined as reforms that would remain within the democratic logic while challenging a pure representative model. In other words, we are missing a study connecting the literature on populism and reforms with the literature on models of democracy. It is what we propose in this article.

More precisely, we study voters of two very different populist parties in Belgium: Vlaams Belang, a radical-right populist party only running in Flanders, and PTB-PVDA, a radical-left populist party running nationwide (Pauwels, 2014). We examine whether voters of these parties are different from the rest of the electorate in their support for various reforms of representative democracy. In a second step, we explore whether the voter bases of the different populist parties hold different visions of reforms, that is, we compare voters of right-wing to left-wing populist parties (Vlaams Belang vs. PVDA voters) and we compare voters of a left-

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wing populist party from both sides of the language border (PVDA vs. PTB voters).

Building upon these premises, we can outline several expectations in line with the idea that voters of populist parties could be more enthusiastic towards reforms of representative democracy than voters of other parties. We have seen that populism is inherently anti-elitist, and that voters of populist parties tend to be more negative towards the political elite. Populists typically accuse the political establishment of only looking after their own interests and not knowing what is going on in society (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Huber & Ruth, 2017; Spruyt et al., 2016). Given this criticism, we expect populist voters to be supportive of reforms that intend to change democratic practices in the direction of limiting the prerogatives of elected politicians.

*H 1: Populist party voters are more supportive of reforms that limit the prerogatives and privileges of elected representatives than voters of other political parties.*

Second, we may also develop the argument that populist voters would be calling for reforms that would take away power from elected politicians and would increase the direct role of citizens in policy-making. Populism takes a people-centrist perspective, whereby the people are seen as a homogeneous and virtuous entity. This is combined with a view that “politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543 italics in original), since ‘the people’ constitute the ultimate source of legitimacy (Caramani, 2017). Thus, from a populist perspective, the solution to dysfunctional representative politics lies in realising – or, more precisely, returning and restoring – this popular sovereignty (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008).

Correspondingly, looking at citizens’ attitudes, a typical populist standpoint entails that the people, rather than politicians, should make the most important political decisions (Akkerman et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012). This is in line with scholars discussing a tension between populism and representative government, as the latter hampers an unmediated relation between ‘the people’ and government (Bowler et al., 2017). Illustratively, Canovan (2002) argues that a populist viewpoint is characterised by an understanding of democracy as “government by the sovereign people, *not* government by politicians, bureaucrats or judges” (p. 33, italics in original).

As an outing of this ideal, populist parties and voters typically call for more direct democracy instruments such as referendums (Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2007; Pauwels, 2014). Jacobs et al. (2018) find that Dutch populist citizens mirror this stance and are indeed more likely to be in favour of referendums. Likewise, in his study on populist voters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, Pauwels (2014) finds that “a desire for more decision making through referendums [is one of two] important unique drivers for populist voting” (p. 6). In turn, Mohrenberg and colleagues (2019) reach a similar conclusion for populist citizens (and voters) in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Switzerland. Most importantly, referendums correspond to the core ideas of populism: a focal role is given to the people, political elites are bypassed, and the ‘will of the people’ is

realised (Jacobs et al., 2018). From this it follows that we expect populist parties and their voters to be favourable towards direct citizen participation in the political process and, in particular, supportive of referendums.

*H 2: Populist party voters are more supportive of direct democracy reforms than voters of other political parties.*

What is less clear, however, is whether populist voters would also be inclined to support instruments of deliberative democracy such as citizens' assemblies composed via sortition or participatory budgeting. On the one hand, such reforms are also empowering citizens at the expense of elected politicians. Voters of populist parties should consequently be in favour of them. Yet, there are also two arguments that would make it less likely to find support for such deliberative democracy instruments among populist voters. First, most of the time, deliberative democracy instruments remain consultative and are therefore leaving the final word to elected politicians (Farrell et al., 2019). And we know that populism is associated with a view of politicians as being 'corrupt', and to a desire to restrain politicians' prerogatives. Second, populism is based on the idea that there is a 'general will of the people' that can be identified, that is unitary and that would spontaneously emerge (Caramani, 2017). Relatedly, populists are sceptical of "compromise, different viewpoints, and the need to listen to dissenting voices" (Akkerman et al., 2014, p. 1331; see also: Caramani, 2017; Mohrenberg et al., 2019). Deliberative democracy is, by contrast, based on the idea that society is pluralist and that divergent interests and opinions should be confronted. Deliberation would allow defining what would be the best decision for society, even if divergences could remain among participants. Taking these various elements into consideration, we would, therefore, rather expect populist party voters to be less enthusiastic about deliberative democracy instruments because of their pluralistic nature.

*H 3: Populist party voters are less supportive of deliberative democracy reforms than voters of other political parties.*

Yet, we must acknowledge that this hypothesis could be disconfirmed if these instruments are perceived, first and foremost, as tools to increase the power of 'the people', rather than for their deliberative and pluralistic nature. It is actually what Zaslove and colleagues (2020) recently found among Dutch citizens holding populist attitudes.

Finally, we shall note that not all authors agree with the idea that populist voters would be more in favour of citizens' participation and of instruments such as referendums. Rooduijn (2018), for instance, studied the electorate of 15 populist parties in Western Europe and showed that only a minority of these electorates was more supportive of referendums than the electorate at large (see also Bowler et al., 2017). Authors such as Webb (2013) rather make a link between populist attitudes and support for the *stealth democracy* model developed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002). Accordingly, citizens

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do not want to make political decisions themselves; they do not want to provide much input to those who are assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know the details of the decision-making process. (...) This does not mean that people think no mechanism for government accountability is necessary; they just do not want the mechanism to come into play except in unusual circumstances. (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002, pp. 1-2)

The stealth democracy logic is not that the everyday business of government should be left to citizens themselves, but rather that elected politicians could be efficiently replaced by actors freed from the electoral logic. Government is thought to function better “if decisions were left up to non-elected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people” and/or “to successful business people” (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002, p. 143).

Whether this second dimension of the stealth democracy logic – government of experts and technocrats – is compatible with populism is not consensual in scholarly literature. Authors like Canovan (1999), Mudde (2004) or Caramani (2017) would consider that this elitist nature of politics could not be supported by populists. Yet, other authors would rather claim that the primary concern of populism is to reduce the power of elected political elites. They want an output-oriented political system with decisions being made more efficiently and in line with the popular will. Citizens would only intervene during critical junctures, while everyday politics could be left to technocrats, or experts (Barr, 2009; Webb, 2013). In addition, several authors point to similarities between populist and stealth democratic attitudes. Both consider politicians and parties to act in a self-interested way, and ordinary people to agree on a common will (Caramani, 2017; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Mohrenberg et al., 2019). Building on the second approach, we would therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

*H 4: Populist party voters are more supportive of technocratic reforms that provide an enlarged role for independent experts than voters of other political parties.*

Here again, if we find that this hypothesis is disconfirmed, it would underline the anti-elitist nature of populist party voters. Its confirmation would, by contrast, indicate that they are primarily anti-politicians, and not opposed to all types of elites.

We furthermore ask whether Belgian populist voters are similar in their demand for reforms, or whether differences exist between the different populist electorates. To this end, we explore differences in attitudes towards reforms between voters of right- and left-wing populist parties (VB vs. PVDA voters) as well as between voters of the left-wing populist party voter at both sides of the language border (PVDA vs. PTB voters).



### 3 Data and Methodology

#### 3.1 Case Selection

Our study makes use of the data collected within the 2019 Belgian Election Study coordinated by the interuniversity consortium Represent. Focusing on the post-electoral wave, data were gathered after Election day (28 May-18 June) in Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels region. More detailed information on the study and on the sample can be found in the introductory article to this special issue. We would therefore not repeat them in full length here. Nevertheless, it is important to remind that, as demonstrated in this introductory article by van Erkel et al. (2020), we can be confident in the representativeness of the sample of respondents. The sample is representative of the Belgian electorate in terms of gender and age. There is a slight overrepresentation of higher educated voters. And, what is very important for this article, the sample is representative in terms of party choice. There is only a slight overrepresentation of voters from Vlaams Belang and PTB-PVDA, but it does help for this article to achieve numbers of voters for these parties that are large enough for the analyses we want to conduct (see appendix Table A.1.).

Next to the quality of the Represent Belgian Election study, there are several reasons why studying the 2019 Belgian elections is relevant. First, several previous studies have examined the role of political trust in elections in Belgium (Hooghe et al., 2011; Pauwels, 2014) as well as the democratic preferences of Belgian citizens (Jacquet et al., 2015), but none has so far combined both approaches to detect whether support for various reforms of representative democracy is higher among populist voters. Moreover, we also know from previous studies that support for such reforms was quite high among Belgian citizens. Especially, support for a greater use and a greater political weight of referendums tends to be quite high. Approximately 85% of Belgian citizens thinks it is important for democracy “that citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums” (score of 6 or higher on 11-point scale, “ESS Round 6,” 2012). Support for the other reforms – deliberative democracy and technocracy – is less high, but remains however substantial. Jacquet et al. (2015) found, for example, that 84.4% of Belgian voters were in favour of direct democracy, while 62.5% of them would support a move towards a more technocratic model of government. Bedock and Pilet (2020a) found that support for citizens’ assemblies composed by sortition ranged around 50% among Belgian voters.

Second, the 2019 elections have been probably more marked than the previous ones by demands from some parties to develop an agenda for reforms. Belgian political debates used to be dominated by institutional reforms related to federalism and decentralisation. In 2019, this topic was less present, while reforms of representative democracy were more salient. It can be observed on at least three levels. First, in party manifestos, demands for reforms of representative democracy were present for several political parties. PTB-PVDA pushed a strong agenda for reforms constraining the status of politicians. Support for referendum was present in the manifestos of PTB-PVDA, Vlaams Belang, Parti

socialiste (PS), Ecolo and DéFi. Besides, Centre démocrate humaniste (cdH), DéFi, Ecolo, Groen, Mouvement réformateur (MR) and PS propose to set up citizens' assemblies composed by lot. Second, looking at the coverage of the elections in newspapers in the 4 weeks before the elections, we counted 69 articles in Franco-phone newspapers and 120 in Flemish outlets that mention such reforms of representative democracy.<sup>2</sup> Finally, several institutions, and especially the Belgian Senate and the regional parliaments of Wallonia and Brussels, have experimented with deliberative assemblies of citizens selected by lot.

Yet, there are also elements that are idiosyncratic to the Belgian case and that could affect the capacity to generalise our findings to other countries. First, for many years, Belgian politics has been dominated by debates around institutional reforms understood as debates regarding the state structure and devolution of powers from the central/federal level to regions and communities (Deschouwer, 2012). It may lead some voters to perceive any debates related to institutions differently from that in other countries. Second, Belgium is also a country of compulsory voting. It could have several implications for the topic of this article. First, it could artificially boost part of the support for populist parties. Previous studies have shown that such parties were the option chosen under compulsory voting by some dissatisfied voters who would normally abstain (Hooghe et al., 2011). Compulsory voting may also affect how voters evaluate current institutions of representative democracy and their alternatives (be it referendums, citizens' assemblies or technocratic governments). These different elements would have to be taken into account when discussing the implications of the findings of our analyses.

### *3.2 Operationalisation of Attitudes Towards Reforms of Representative Democracy*

Our dependent variable, attitudes towards reforms, was measured as follows. Respondents were asked to what extent they are in favour of a multitude of reforms. From this list, we selected six reforms, as displayed in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

The six reforms were selected in order to capture support for the above-mentioned models of democracy (Bengtsson & Christensen, 2016) and finding inspirations in recent studies conducted across Europe on support for the same kind of reforms (Bedock & Pilet, 2020b; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). The first reform relates to hypothesis 1 about reforms that limit the prerogatives and privileges of elected representatives. The second and third reforms are about support for direct democracy instruments (H2). The fourth and fifth reforms are about support for instruments of deliberative democracy (H3), with participatory budgeting described as a binding instrument. And the sixth reform is about support for a greater role of independent experts in politics (H4) (see Appendix, Table A.2. for descriptive statistics).

### *3.3 Operationalisation of Populist Vote Choice*

Our independent variable, federal vote choice, is based on the item: "For which party did you vote for the Chamber during the national elections on the 26th of May 2019?". Respondents from the Brussels region who indicated to have voted

**Table 1** *Selected items on reforms of representative democracy in the 2019 Belgian Election Study*

<b>Reform</b>	<b>Item formulation</b>	<b>Answer categories</b>
Cutting MPs' salaries	The income of elected politicians should be limited to a maximum of 2,500 euros (gross) per month. <sup>a</sup>	1 = Totally against; 4 = Totally in favour
Consultative referendums	In general, are you for or against consultative referendums about important national issues? Citizens have the right to vote for or against a specific proposition. The parliament receives the voters' opinion but is not obliged to follow it.	0 = Strongly against; 10 = Strongly in favour
Binding referendums	In general, are you for or against binding referendums about important national issues? Citizens have the right to vote for or against a specific proposition. The parliament receives the voters' opinion and is obliged to follow it.	
Advisory citizens' forums	In general, are you for or against the organisation of consultative citizens' forums on important national issues? A citizens' forum is an assembly composed of around 30 to 50 citizens, selected at random, who meet and discuss a certain topic in order to formulate a recommendation that is then transmitted to the parliament.	
Participatory budgeting	In general, are you for or against participatory budgeting on the national level? Participatory budgeting consists of citizens deciding on a portion of the Belgian public budget. The citizens involved meet and discuss the way in which they wish to spend that amount in order to support different specific projects.	
Experts	Experts should take the major political decisions instead of politicians.	1 = Totally against; 4 = Totally in favour

<sup>a</sup> For this item, a small difference in translation exists for the French and Dutch versions. The French version specified it was about gross income, while the Dutch version did not.

Note 1: 'Don't know' answers were coded as missing values.

Note 2: The four items related to direct democracy and deliberative democracy reforms were presented to respondents in a randomised order.

for one of the bilingual lists (PVDA-PTB or Ecolo-Groen) were assigned to either based on the language (Dutch or French) in which they opted to take our questionnaire.

We have categorised as voters of populist parties those who voted for Vlaams Belang and PVDA in Flanders and for PTB in Francophone Belgium. The choice of these parties as populist parties is based on recent studies that have examined the nature of these parties (Pauwels, 2014; Wauters & Pittoors, 2019). We have thus two broad sets of voters: voters for Dutch-speaking parties and for Francophone parties. For the first set of voters, we then recode respondents into Vlaams Belang voters (N = 406), PVDA voters (N = 134) and voters of all other Dutch-speaking political parties (N = 1,327). For the Francophone voters, we recode

respondents into PTB voters (N = 241) and voters of all other Francophone political parties (N = 1,245).

In our analyses, we have contrasted voters of these populist parties with voters of all other parties in the federal parliament. Previous studies have either followed the same logic or have compared populist voters with voters of liberal, social democratic and Christian democratic mainstream parties (Rooduijn, 2018). We opt for the earlier because the latter approach would force us to ignore a large segment of the electorate that voted for Green parties or N-VA. Respondents were therefore considered as voters of other political parties when they voted for a non-populist party with at least one seat in the federal parliament – that is, CD&V, Groen, N-VA, Open VLD, or sp.a (Dutch-speaking) or cdH, DéFi, Ecolo, MR or PS (Francophone). Other categories of vote choice were coded as missing (e.g. abstainers, blank vote, etc.).

In the second step, where we compare populist voters amongst themselves, we again recoded vote choice. To compare right- and left-wing populist voters, we recoded respondents into Vlaams Belang voters and PVDA voters. To compare left-wing populist party voters at both sides of the language border, we recoded respondents into PVDA voters and PTB voters. Other categories of vote choice, including voting for a non-populist party, were coded as missing in this phase of the analysis.

### 3.4 Control Variables

In our models, we control for the effects of the socio-demographic variables gender (0 = male; 1 = female) and age (0 = 18-34; 1 = 35-54; 2 = 55+ years old; Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). We, moreover, control for two sets of variables that figure prominently both in the scholarship on reforms of representative democracy and on populist voters (see Appendix, Table A.3.). Firstly, we control for satisfaction with democracy (reverse coded so that 1 = very unsatisfied and 5 = very satisfied). Citizens' discontent with the functioning of democracy is often attributed as a driver of a demand for reforms of representative democracy (e.g. Schuck & de Vreese, 2015), while populist voters are often found to be highly dissatisfied with politics (Rooduijn et al., 2016).

Secondly, we control for political sophistication by including respondents' level of education (0 = no higher education; 1 = higher education) and political interest (0 = not interested at all; 10 = extremely interested).<sup>4</sup> According to most studies on support for reforms of representative democracy, citizens who are more engaged with politics – that is, with higher levels of education and/or political interest – are more supportive of reforms (oftentimes referred to as the New Politics or cognitive mobilisation thesis; Bowler et al., 2007; Dalton et al., 2001). Anderson and Goodyear-Grant (2010) find the opposite for referendum support in Canada. They show referendum support to be lower among politically sophisticated citizens. Also, in the populism literature, there is no consensus on the relationship between political sophistication and populist voting. Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2020) show populist citizens in Europe to be more politically interested, while Rooduijn (2018) finds no relation between populist voting and political interest. Yet, he found that voters of populist parties tended

to be less educated in 6 of the 10 countries he covered. The same effect of education was found earlier by Lubbers and colleagues (2002).

### 3.5 Method

We use OLS regression models to examine whether populist voters indeed differ from the non-populist Belgian electorate and from each other in their demands for reforms. Our analysis is based on unweighted data, and we additionally present the results from data weighted on gender, age and education level (Appendix B).

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Starting with a description of the level of support for reforms, it is notable that the different types of reform under scrutiny here receive widespread support amongst Belgian voters. Indeed, voters of both populist and non-populist parties are, on average, favourable towards limiting politicians' salaries, direct democracy and deliberative democracy reforms, and an increased role for experts in politics. What also becomes clear is that populist voters are more enthusiastic towards such reforms compared to the non-populist electorate (Table 2).

**Table 2** Mean support for reforms among the populist and non-populist electorate

Reform	Cutting MPs' salaries	Consultative referendums	Binding referendums	Advisory citizens' forums	Participatory budgeting	Experts
<b>Electorate</b>	4-point scale		11-point scale			4-point scale
<b>Other Dutch-speaking parties</b>	3.00 (0.96)	6.83 (2.31)	6.19 (2.74)	6.53 (2.34)	5.81 (2.56)	2.73 (0.84)
<b>Vlaams Belang</b>	3.37 (0.87)	6.87 (2.62)	7.22 (2.59)	6.78 (2.65)	6.72 (2.59)	2.88 (0.91)
<b>PVDA</b>	3.57 (0.73)	7.40 (2.16)	6.95 (2.60)	7.24 (2.11)	7.01 (1.94)	2.96 (0.75)
<b>Other French-speaking parties</b>	2.87 (0.99)	7.15 (2.23)	6.72 (2.60)	7.05 (2.20)	6.55 (2.32)	2.74 (0.84)
<b>PTB</b>	3.55 (0.75)	7.35 (2.64)	7.81 (2.30)	7.84 (2.21)	7.54 (2.23)	2.90 (0.84)

Note: Standard deviation in parentheses

### 4.2 Comparing Populist Voters to Other Electorates

We now turn to the multivariate analysis. Importantly, the inclusion of controls for satisfaction with democracy and political sophistication will allow us to see if

there is a direct relation between voting for a populist party on attitudes towards reforms. Briefly, a positive (or negative) and significant coefficient denotes that the electorate of the party in the row is significantly more (or less) supportive of the reform in the column displayed compared to the reference vote choice.

We first compare populist voters to voters of other political parties in Flanders and Wallonia separately (Tables 3 and 4). Our results show Vlaams Belang voters to be significantly more supportive of limiting politicians' salaries, binding referendums and of participatory budgeting in comparison to the non-populist Dutch-speaking electorate. Yet, Vlaams Belang voters are not significantly different in their opinion about consultative referendums, advisory citizens' forums and an increased role for experts. What is interesting in that respect is that voters of Vlaams Belang support a reform that is in the VB 2019 electoral manifesto – binding referendums – but also other reforms such as cutting down MPs' salaries or participatory budgeting. Even though the latter were thus not part of the VB manifesto, the difference between Vlaams Belang voters and the rest of the Belgian electorate seems to be similar when it comes to, for instance binding referendums and participatory budgeting. A vote for VB is associated with a higher level of support for both these reforms by 0.7 points (on an 11-point scale), when holding other variables constant.

Differently, our results show PVDA voters to be significantly different from other Dutch-speaking voters in their attitudes towards all reforms studied here, except for an enlarged role for experts. According to our models, PVDA voters are more favourable towards reducing politicians' salaries, advisory and binding referendums, as well as deliberative democracy reforms. When looking at direct democracy reforms, a vote for PVDA is associated with a higher level of support for consultative and binding referendums by 0.6 points (on an 11-point scale). Interestingly, PVDA voters are more different from the non-populist electorate when it comes to deliberative democracy reforms. More precisely, compared to voters of other parties, PVDA voters are more supportive of advisory citizens' forums by 0.7 points and of participatory budgeting by 1.1 points (on an 11-point scale and when holding other things constant).

A similar pattern emerges for PTB voters. Compared to the non-populist Francophone electorate, PTB voters are also more enthusiastic about limiting politicians' salaries, binding referendums, advisory citizens' forums and participatory budgeting. However, PTB voters are not more supportive of consultative referendums than the other Francophone voters, whereas they are more enthusiastic about an enlarged role for experts. Again, comparing these findings to the common electoral manifesto of PTB-PVDA, we can see that voters of these two parties are more supportive of other parties for two reforms that are in the electoral claims of the radical left: referendums and cutting down MPs' salaries. But they are also more supportive of citizens' forums, participatory budgeting or technocratic governments (for PTB voters), while these reforms were not part of the 2019 PTB-PVDA manifesto. Despite deliberative democracy reforms not being part of the PTB-PVDA manifesto, the difference between PTB voters and the rest of the Belgian electorate is roughly similar for binding referendums, advisory citizens' forums and participatory budgeting (higher levels of support by,

**Table 3** *PVDA and Vlaams Belang Voters' attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy*

	<b>Cutting MPs' salaries</b>	<b>Consulta- tive referen- dums</b>	<b>Binding referen- dums</b>	<b>Advisory citizens' forums</b>	<b>Partici- patory budg- eting</b>	<b>Ex- perts</b>
Vote choice (ref: voters of other Dutch-speaking parties)						
VB	0.21*** (0.06)	0.01 (0.15)	0.70*** (0.17)	0.27+ (0.16)	0.68*** (0.16)	0.03 (0.06)
PVDA	0.45*** (0.09)	0.56* (0.23)	0.59* (0.25)	0.70** (0.23)	1.09*** (0.24)	0.17+ (0.09)
Gender (ref: male)						
Female	0.30*** (0.05)	0.08 (0.12)	0.26+ (0.14)	0.49*** (0.13)	0.44*** (0.13)	0.03 (0.05)
Age (ref: 18-34 years old)						
35-54 years old	0.08 (0.07)	-0.22 (0.17)	0.16 (0.20)	-0.13 (0.18)	0.03 (0.19)	-0.02 (0.07)
55+ years old	0.05 (0.07)	-0.25 (0.17)	0.29 (0.19)	-0.09 (0.18)	-0.12 (0.18)	-0.17** (0.07)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.12*** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.29*** (0.06)	-0.00 (0.06)	-0.11+ (0.06)	-0.05** (0.02)
Education level (ref: no higher education)						
Higher education	-0.24*** (0.05)	-0.22+ (0.12)	-0.81*** (0.13)	-0.39** (0.12)	-0.75*** (0.13)	-0.10* (0.05)
Political interest	-0.07*** (0.01)	0.05* (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	0.07** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.05*** (0.01)
Constant	3.75*** (0.11)	6.84*** (0.29)	7.06*** (0.32)	6.20*** (0.29)	6.61*** (0.30)	3.38*** (0.11)
R2	0.16	0.01	0.07	0.02	0.07	0.05
Adj. R2	0.16	0.00	0.06	0.02	0.06	0.05
N	1587	1720	1709	1676	1652	1458

+  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; standard error between parentheses

respectively, 0.6 points, 0.5 points and 0.7 points on an 11-point scale), when holding other variables constant.

We can thus uphold our first hypothesis that populist voters are more in favour of limiting politicians' prerogatives than voters of other political parties. We find Vlaams Belang, PVDA and PTB voters to be more supportive of limiting politicians' salaries than their counterparts voting for non-populist parties. For our second hypothesis about higher support for direct democratic reforms amongst populist voters, we find consistent evidence for the binding variant of referen-

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**Table 4** *PTB Voters' attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy*

	<b>Cutting MPs' salaries</b>	<b>Consulta- tive referen- dums</b>	<b>Binding referen- dums</b>	<b>Advisory citizens' forum</b>	<b>Partici- patory budg- eting</b>	<b>Ex- perts</b>
Vote choice (ref: voters of other Francophone parties)						
<i>PTB</i>	0.49*** (0.07)	0.17 (0.18)	0.64*** (0.19)	0.54** (0.17)	0.67*** (0.18)	0.16* (0.07)
Gender (ref: male)						
<i>Female</i>	0.14** (0.05)	0.28* (0.13)	-0.00 (0.14)	0.23+ (0.13)	-0.04 (0.13)	-0.01 (0.05)
Age (ref: 18-34 years old)						
<i>35-54 years old</i>	-0.06 (0.07)	0.13 (0.17)	0.06 (0.18)	0.05 (0.16)	-0.05 (0.17)	-0.09 (0.07)
<i>55+ years old</i>	-0.05 (0.07)	0.13 (0.17)	0.30 (0.19)	0.11 (0.16)	-0.32+ (0.17)	-0.07 (0.07)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.16*** (0.02)	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.47*** (0.07)	-0.29*** (0.06)	-0.31*** (0.06)	-0.01 (0.02)
Education level (ref: no higher education)						
<i>Higher education</i>	-0.26*** (0.05)	0.12 (0.13)	-0.41** (0.14)	-0.04 (0.12)	-0.11 (0.13)	-0.02 (0.05)
Political interest	-0.04*** (0.01)	0.07** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.05* (0.02)	0.05+ (0.03)	-0.06*** (0.01)
Constant	3.71*** (0.11)	6.62*** (0.28)	8.37*** (0.30)	7.40*** (0.26)	7.41*** (0.28)	3.24*** (0.11)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.15	0.01	0.08	0.04	0.05	0.05
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.15	0.01	0.07	0.03	0.04	0.04
N	1265	1363	1350	1363	1299	1118

+ p &lt; 0.10; \* p &lt; 0.05; \*\* p &lt; 0.01; \*\*\* p &lt; 0.001; standard error between parentheses

dums, but not its consultative form. On this latter reform, only PVDA voters stand out. The third hypothesis about populist voters being less supportive of deliberative democratic reforms can be rejected. Interestingly, the opposite is mostly (but not fully) shown. Populist voters are more favourable towards participatory budgeting, and PVDA and PTB voters are more supportive of advisory citizens' forums. This relates to the argument that deliberative democracy reforms are mainly understood as empowering citizens, rather than for their deliberative and pluralistic characteristics. Our fourth hypothesis stating that populist voters are more in favour of technocratic reforms is upheld for PTB voters, but not for PVDA or Vlaams Belang voters. Only PTB voters are significantly more positive about an increased role for experts in political decision-making.



**Table 5** *PVDA vs. VB Voters' attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy*

	<b>Cutting MPs' salar- ies</b>	<b>Consulta- tive refer- endums</b>	<b>Binding referen- dums</b>	<b>Advisory citizens' forum</b>	<b>Partici- patory budg- eting</b>	<b>Ex- ports</b>
Vote choice (ref: PVDA)						
VB	-0.22*	-0.46+	0.25	-0.37	-0.43+	-0.12
	(0.09)	(0.26)	(0.27)	(0.26)	(0.26)	(0.10)
Gender (ref: male)						
Female	0.32***	0.55*	0.71**	0.88***	0.68**	-0.04
	(0.08)	(0.25)	(0.26)	(0.25)	(0.24)	(0.10)
Age (ref: 18-34 years old)						
35-54 years old	0.01	-0.55+	-0.14	-0.57+	-0.51+	-0.06
	(0.11)	(0.32)	(0.33)	(0.32)	(0.31)	(0.13)
55+ years old	0.08	-0.44	0.27	0.08	-0.46	-0.29*
	(0.11)	(0.34)	(0.34)	(0.34)	(0.32)	(0.13)
Satisfaction with democracy						
	-0.11**	0.06	-0.25*	0.07	-0.21+	-0.04
	(0.04)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.04)
Education level (ref: no higher education)						
Higher education	-0.19*	-0.10	-0.51*	-0.55*	-1.00***	-0.06
	(0.08)	(0.24)	(0.24)	(0.24)	(0.23)	(0.09)
Political interest						
	-0.03*	0.09*	0.12**	0.14**	0.08+	-0.03+
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Constant						
	3.91***	6.92***	6.71***	6.31***	7.65***	3.44***
	(0.18)	(0.55)	(0.56)	(0.55)	(0.53)	(0.21)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.09	0.03	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.04
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.08	0.02	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.02
N	451	487	487	477	466	393

+  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; standard error between parentheses

#### 4.3 Comparing Populists Voters Amongst Themselves

Having examined the differences between populist electorates and voters of other parties, it is moreover interesting to explore whether populist electorates differ from each other in their support for reforms. We first compare Vlaams Belang voters to PVDA voters (see Table 5), and we find that Vlaams Belang voters are significantly less enthusiastic about limiting politicians' salaries. This suggests PVDA voters to be more radical in their demand for this reform.

When comparing PVDA to PTB voters, we find significant differences in their opinions about binding referendums and advisory citizens' forums (see Table 6). Compared to PVDA voters, the PTB electorate is significantly more supportive of these democratic reforms.

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**Table 6** *PVDA vs. PTB Voters' attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy*

	<b>Cutting MPs' salaries</b>	<b>Consulta- tive referen- dums</b>	<b>Binding referen- dums</b>	<b>Advisory citizens' forum</b>	<b>Partici- patory budg- eting</b>	<b>Ex- perts</b>
Vote choice (ref: PVDA)						
<i>PTB</i>	-0.07 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.28)	0.81** (0.28)	0.60* (0.25)	0.46+ (0.25)	-0.10 (0.10)
Gender (ref: male)						
<i>Female</i>	0.20* (0.09)	0.13 (0.27)	0.22 (0.27)	0.29 (0.24)	0.26 (0.24)	0.16 (0.10)
Age (ref: 18-34 years old)						
<i>35-54 years old</i>	-0.03 (0.11)	-0.14 (0.34)	0.44 (0.34)	0.25 (0.30)	0.24 (0.31)	0.09 (0.13)
<i>55+ years old</i>	-0.08 (0.12)	-0.17 (0.39)	0.68+ (0.38)	0.35 (0.34)	0.27 (0.34)	0.01 (0.14)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.08+ (0.04)	-0.09 (0.13)	-0.25* (0.12)	-0.18 (0.11)	-0.21+ (0.11)	-0.01 (0.05)
Education level (ref: no higher education)						
<i>Higher education</i>	-0.13 (0.09)	0.75** (0.28)	0.01 (0.27)	0.30 (0.24)	0.03 (0.24)	-0.01 (0.10)
Political interest	-0.01 (0.02)	0.13** (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	0.08+ (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	-0.05** (0.02)
Constant	3.80*** (0.18)	6.54*** (0.56)	6.90*** (0.56)	6.65*** (0.50)	7.08*** (0.51)	3.23*** (0.20)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.03	0.06
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.01	0.03
N	323	341	345	341	328	273

+ p &lt; 0.10; \* p &lt; 0.05; \*\* p &lt; 0.01; \*\*\* p &lt; 0.001; standard error between parentheses

## 5 Discussion

While research on populist parties, citizens and voters has grown substantially over the past decades, little is known about what *type* of reforms of representative democracy populists particularly favour. In this article, we aim to address this by asking whether voters of populist parties are distinct from the non-populist electorate in their attitude towards various types of reform. Our study is innovative in two respects. First, we compare voters of both radical right-wing and radical left-wing populist parties within the context of one single country, Belgium, something that had only been done before for the Netherlands. This allows us to not only examine differences between populist and non-populist electorates, but

also to explore whether populist voters are distinct from each other. Second, we look at four types of reforms: (i) reforms that reduce the current prerogatives and privileges of elected politicians, (ii) direct democracy reforms, (iii) deliberative democracy reforms and (iv) reforms empowering independent experts or technocrats at the expense of politicians (technocratic reforms).

Our results show the following. First, we hypothesised voters of populist parties (VB, PVDA and PTB) to be particularly supportive of limiting prerogatives and privileges of elected politicians (H1). This indeed is what we find: VB, PVDA and PTB voters are more supportive of reducing elected politicians' salaries than voters of other political parties. We thus find support for our first hypothesis. Second, we hypothesised voters of populist parties to be particularly supportive of instruments of direct democracy (H2). Again, we find considerable support for this hypothesis, mostly for referendums with a binding character. Vlaams Belang, PVDA and PTB electorates are more supportive of binding referendums, while PVDA voters are also more favourable towards consultative referendums. Third, we expected populist voters to be less supportive of deliberative democracy reforms because of their pluralistic nature (H3). Our results, however, show the opposite: Vlaams Belang, PVDA and PTB electorates are more supportive of participatory budgeting, while the latter two are also more enthusiastic about advisory citizens' forums than other voters. This suggests that deliberative democracy reforms are primarily perceived as empowering citizens. Fourth, we hypothesised populist party voters to be more supportive of technocratic reforms (H4). Here, we only find PTB voters to be more positive towards an enlarged role for experts in political decision making.

Building upon these results, our study provides several important insights into understanding how populist voters are different from non-populist electorates in their attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy. Various studies have shown that support for reforms was high in many democracies, even though there are variations in the magnitude of support across types of reforms, across countries and across citizens (Anderson & Goodyear-Grant, 2010; Bertsoy & Pastorella, 2017; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). Yet, what was less clear in previous studies is whether these demands for reform are particularly prominent among populist voters. And we do find evidence in this respect. Indeed, voters of populist parties, both on the radical left and on the extreme right, tend to be more supportive of various reforms.

This does not mean, however, that all populist voters are supportive of all types of reforms. Populist voters are not uniform in their attitude towards democratic reforms. Overall, PVDA and PTB voters are more enthusiastic about reforms limiting politicians' prerogatives and empowering citizens – even if this means in an advisory role. PTB voters are also more supportive of enlarging the role of experts at the expense of politicians. Differently, Vlaams Belang voters clearly favour reforms that are anti-elitist and people-centric. The Vlaams Belang electorate is more supportive of reducing the role of elected politicians, both in the sense of limiting their salaries and giving the final word to ordinary citizens. Yet, they do not settle for only giving citizens an advisory role in political decision

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making: citizens' role must be binding for Vlaams Belang voters to be more supportive of reforms that empower citizens. It could be that Vlaams Belang voters perceive advisory referendums and citizens' forums as insufficient to meet their anti-elitist and people-centrist demands, given that power remains in the hands of the – in their view – corrupt political elite.

Apart from differences between voters of populist parties and other electorates, we also show that populist voters do not support reforms to the same extent. We find PVDA voters to be more radical in their demand for limiting politicians' salaries than Vlaams Belang voters. In turn, the PTB electorate is more enthusiastic about some reforms than PVDA voters. Compared to PVDA voters, the PTB electorate is significantly more favourable towards binding referendums and advisory citizens' forums.

With these findings, we believe that we contribute to providing some answers to the recent invitation by Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2020) to develop a better understanding of what model of democracy populist citizens would support. Looking at voters of populist parties, which is not strictly equivalent to populist citizens, we show that there is a strong support for a logic of government that would limit the privileges of elected politicians and that would give a greater role to citizens into policy-making. Regarding the latter aspect, we also show that what appears to matter most is to give citizens more power. The instruments to achieve that appear to be flexible. It is not only about referendums. It could also be via more deliberative instruments such as citizens' assemblies or participatory budgeting. Zaslove et al. (2020) found the same patterns among Dutch populist citizens. What appears to matter is to empower citizens. Such demand does not appear to be moderated by how it occurs. Deliberative democracy could, a priori, enter in contradiction with populist conceptions of democracy as being pluralistic and consensus-driven. It does not seem to be a problem for populist voters in Belgium. Finally, regarding the link between populism and technocracy, we show that it is indeed much less straightforward as only PTB voters would be more supportive of such a change than the rest of the Belgian electorate.

These elements should invite other researchers, we believe, to conduct research that would try to examine how populist voters (or citizens) evaluate and support different models of democracy and different sets of reform in conjunction. We encourage colleagues to go beyond analysing support for only one type of reform. We also invite future studies that compare left-wing and right-wing populists. These new studies would also identify more clearly what parts of our findings are idiosyncratic to Belgium. In particular, as we have said above, Belgium is a country of compulsory voting, and this could lead some voters who would normally abstain to turn to a vote for a populist party. Therefore, it could very well be that democratic preference of populist voters would be different outside Belgium. Yet, only more research on democracy and populism could help elucidating that.

## Notes

- 1 We recognise that populist attitudes and the populist vote cannot be equated. As Rovira and Van Hauwaert (2020) point out: “the existence of populist ideas at the mass level does not imply that populist forces automatically receive public support” (p. 2) and because “the populist potential vastly outweighs the populist vote in any society, and we must therefore carefully distinguish between the two” (p. 4). Yet, this does not mean the two are unrelated. To the contrary, Akkerman and colleagues (2014) and Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2018) show populist attitudes to be more prevalent among populist voters. In this article, we analytically focus on the voter bases of populist parties while also making use of literature about populist citizens to build our hypotheses.
- 2 In our coding, we took a broad approach to capture whether citizens would be familiar with the various reforms. This means that we include articles that appear in regional newspapers and/or that are not related to Belgium per se, because we argue that these do raise knowledge among citizens that, for instance, referendums can be a novel political instrument. We only count articles about reforms that generally pertain to the four directions of reforms proposed in this article. We covered the following newspapers: *L’Avenir*, *la Dernière Heure*, *L’Echo*, *La Libre Belgique*, *Metro FR*, *Le Soir* and *Sud Presse* (Francophone) as well as *Het Belang van Limburg*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, *Krant van West-Vlaanderen*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Metro NL*, *De Morgen*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *De Standaard* and *De Tijd* (Dutch-speaking).
- 3 To adapt these items to the Belgian context, we proceeded in two steps. First, we systematically examined party manifestos for the 2019 Belgian elections. It led to constructing items that were directly derived from the manifestos of some parties, for example on MPs’ salaries, or to rephrase some items used abroad, for example on support for citizens’ assemblies or for referendums. The second step was a pilot study conducted a few months before the election with a sample of 800 respondents in order to validate the items constructed.
- 4 Political interest was measured in the pre-electoral survey wave.

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## Appendix A Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics below were computed using only respondents who voted for either a populist or another political party with a seat in the federal parliament. We dropped respondents who indicated in the question of vote choice: PP, other, blank or invalid, I did not vote, I could not (yet) vote, I do not remember.

**Table A1** Sample description

<b>Gender</b>		
Male: 55.2%	Female: 44.8%	
<b>Age</b>		
18-34 years old: 19.7%	35-54 years old: 37.4%	55+ years old: 42.9%
<b>Education level</b>		
No higher education: 47.6%	Higher education: 52.4%	
<b>Vote choice</b>		
PVDA: 7.2% (N = 134)	Vlaams Belang: 21.8 % (N = 406)	Other (Dutch-speaking): 71.1 % (N = 1,327)
PTB: 16.2% (N = 241)	Other (French-speaking): 83.8 % (N = 1,245)	

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**Table A2** *Descriptive statistics of respondents' attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy*

Survey item	Response scale	Descriptive statistics	Number of respondents (excluding 'don't knows')	Number of 'I do not know'/'No opinion'
Limit MPs' salaries	1 = Totally disagree; 4 = Totally agree	$M = 3.06$ ; $SD = 0.96$	$N = 2,912$	$N = 505$
Consultative referendums	0 = Strongly against;	$M = 7.01$ ; $SD = 2.35$	$N = 3,148$	$N = 268$
Binding referendums	10 = Strongly in favour	$M = 6.67$ ; $SD = 2.68$	$N = 3,125$	$N = 291$
Advisory citizens' forums		$M = 6.88$ ; $SD = 2.35$	$N = 3,103$	$N = 312$
Participatory Budgeting		$M = 6.37$ ; $SD = 2.49$	$N = 3,013$	$N = 401$
Experts	1 = Totally disagree; 4 = Totally agree	$M = 2.77$ ; $SD = 0.85$	$N = 2,626$	$N = 790$

Note: In the last column, we additionally report the number of respondents who opted for 'I do not know'/'No opinion'. The reason for doing so is that some voters may not be very familiar with the reforms of representative democracy that we study, despite the description of the reforms provided (see Table 1). The number of missing values was below 10 respondents, and was not reported here.

**Table A3** *Descriptive statistics of control variables*

Survey item	Response scale	Descriptive statistics
Satisfaction with democracy	1 = Very unsatisfied; 5 = Very satisfied	$M = 2.69$ ; $SD = 1.09$
Political interest	0 = Not interested at all; 10 = Extremely interested	$M = 5.89$ ; $SD = 2.74$

## Appendix B Weighted Analysis

We computed analyses based on data weighted for gender, age and education level. Weights were computed for the full sample of the post-electoral wave. We use the *p-weights* function available in STATA software.

**Table B1** *Vlaams Belang and PVDA Voters' attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy (weighted sample)*

	Cutting MPs' salaries	Consultative referendums	Binding referendums	Advisory citizens' forums	Participatory budgets	Experts
Vote choice (ref: voters of other Dutch-speaking parties)						
VB	0.20*** (0.06)	0.17 (0.16)	0.63*** (0.17)	0.34* (0.17)	0.70*** (0.17)	0.01 (0.07)
PVDA	0.41*** (0.08)	0.21 (0.41)	0.72* (0.31)	0.44 (0.29)	1.03*** (0.24)	0.18+ (0.09)
Gender (ref: male)						
Female	0.32*** (0.05)	-0.03 (0.14)	0.28+ (0.15)	0.44** (0.14)	0.37** (0.14)	0.02 (0.06)
Age (ref: 18-34 years old)						
35-54 years old	0.08 (0.07)	-0.17 (0.20)	0.15 (0.21)	0.04 (0.19)	0.11 (0.18)	0.00 (0.08)
55+ years old	0.07 (0.07)	0.06 (0.20)	0.57** (0.21)	0.32+ (0.18)	0.12 (0.18)	-0.10 (0.07)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.10*** (0.02)	0.04 (0.07)	-0.23** (0.07)	0.02 (0.07)	-0.11 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.03)
Education level (ref: no higher education)						
Higher education	-0.24*** (0.05)	-0.06 (0.13)	-0.74*** (0.14)	-0.18 (0.13)	-0.66*** (0.13)	-0.09+ (0.05)
Political interest	-0.05*** (0.01)	0.08** (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.05*** (0.01)
Constant	3.56*** (0.12)	6.30*** (0.35)	6.61*** (0.36)	5.72*** (0.34)	6.38*** (0.34)	3.24*** (0.13)
R2	0.15	0.01	0.07	0.02	0.06	0.04
Adj. R2	0.15	0.01	0.06	0.02	0.06	0.03
N	1,587	1,720	1,709	1,676	1,652	1,458

+  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; standard error between parentheses

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**Table B2** *PTB voters' attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy (weighted sample)*

	<b>Cutting MPs' salaries</b>	<b>Consulta- tive refer- endums</b>	<b>Binding refer- endums</b>	<b>Advisory citizens' forum</b>	<b>Partici- patory budg- eting</b>	<b>Ex- perts</b>
Vote choice (ref: voters of other Francophone parties)						
<i>PTB</i>	0.35*** (0.09)	0.05 (0.26)	0.59** (0.21)	0.52* (0.23)	0.85*** (0.23)	0.03 (0.11)
Gender (ref: male)						
<i>Female</i>	0.11+ (0.07)	0.10 (0.16)	-0.13 (0.17)	0.16 (0.15)	-0.04 (0.17)	-0.05 (0.07)
Age (ref: 18-34 years old)						
<i>35-54 years old</i>	-0.05 (0.08)	0.21 (0.19)	0.02 (0.22)	0.11 (0.19)	-0.06 (0.19)	-0.07 (0.08)
<i>55+ years old</i>	-0.06 (0.09)	0.31 (0.21)	0.22 (0.23)	0.12 (0.21)	-0.32 (0.21)	-0.06 (0.09)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.18*** (0.03)	0.00 (0.09)	-0.44*** (0.09)	-0.26** (0.09)	-0.22** (0.08)	-0.02 (0.04)
Education level (ref: no higher education)						
<i>Higher education</i>	-0.30*** (0.06)	0.16 (0.14)	-0.45** (0.16)	-0.09 (0.14)	-0.13 (0.15)	-0.02 (0.06)
Political interest	-0.04*** (0.01)	0.09* (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.06+ (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	-0.06*** (0.01)
Constant	3.85*** (0.13)	6.26*** (0.35)	8.26*** (0.34)	7.25*** (0.32)	7.05*** (0.36)	3.23*** (0.15)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.16	0.02	0.07	0.03	0.04	0.03
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.15	0.01	0.07	0.03	0.04	0.03
N	1,265	1,363	1,350	1,363	1,299	1,118

+ p &lt; 0.10; \* p &lt; 0.05; \*\* p &lt; 0.01; \*\*\* p &lt; 0.001; standard error between parentheses

**Table B3** *PVDA vs. VB party voters' attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy (weighted sample)*

	<b>Cutting MPs' salar- ies</b>	<b>Consulta- tive refer- endums</b>	<b>Binding refer- endums</b>	<b>Advisory citizens' forum</b>	<b>Partici- patory budg- eting</b>	<b>Ex- ports</b>
Vote choice (ref: PVDA)						
VB	-0.21*	0.00	-0.01	-0.07	-0.34	-0.15
	(0.08)	(0.42)	(0.34)	(0.32)	(0.28)	(0.10)
Gender (ref: male)						
Female	0.28***	0.14	0.49+	0.63**	0.40+	-0.06
	(0.08)	(0.27)	(0.26)	(0.24)	(0.23)	(0.11)
Age (ref: 18-34 years old)						
35-54 years old	-0.03	-0.33	-0.24	-0.19	-0.42	-0.01
	(0.11)	(0.41)	(0.35)	(0.33)	(0.30)	(0.14)
55+ years old	0.03	-0.02	0.39	0.58+	-0.16	-0.19
	(0.12)	(0.41)	(0.37)	(0.33)	(0.31)	(0.14)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.11*	0.06	-0.23+	0.04	-0.21+	-0.04
	(0.05)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.05)
Education level (ref: no higher education)						
Higher education	-0.16*	0.20	-0.34	-0.21	-0.77**	0.00
	(0.08)	(0.30)	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.26)	(0.10)
Political interest	-0.01	0.11*	0.13**	0.19***	0.09*	-0.02
	(0.02)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Constant	3.84***	6.21***	6.79***	5.43***	7.38***	3.32***
	(0.20)	(0.76)	(0.69)	(0.62)	(0.57)	(0.24)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.08	0.02	0.05	0.07	0.05	0.02
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.06	0.01	0.04	0.06	0.03	0.00
N	451	487	487	477	466	393

+ p &lt; 0.10; \* p &lt; 0.05; \*\* p &lt; 0.01; \*\*\* p &lt; 0.001; standard error between parentheses

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**Table B4** *PVDA vs. PTB voters' attitudes towards reforms of representative democracy (weighted sample)*

	<b>Cutting MPs' salaries</b>	<b>Consultative referendums</b>	<b>Binding referendums</b>	<b>Advisory citizens' forum</b>	<b>Participatory budgeting</b>	<b>Exports</b>
Vote choice (ref: PVDA)						
<i>PTB</i>	-0.12 (0.11)	0.21 (0.47)	0.57 (0.37)	0.81* (0.35)	0.49 (0.31)	-0.19 (0.13)
Gender (ref: male)						
Female	0.01 (0.12)	-0.17 (0.41)	0.08 (0.33)	0.07 (0.32)	-0.08 (0.28)	0.00 (0.13)
Age (ref 18-34 years old)						
<i>35-54 years old</i>	0.06 (0.13)	0.12 (0.57)	0.41 (0.49)	0.55 (0.42)	0.50 (0.42)	0.10 (0.16)
<i>55+ years old</i>	-0.01 (0.17)	0.63 (0.63)	0.98+ (0.53)	1.06* (0.49)	1.00* (0.45)	0.03 (0.21)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.13* (0.06)	0.08 (0.18)	-0.13 (0.16)	-0.09 (0.15)	-0.15 (0.15)	0.03 (0.08)
Education level (ref: no higher education)						
<i>Higher education</i>	-0.01 (0.10)	1.16** (0.39)	0.10 (0.36)	0.55+ (0.31)	0.12 (0.29)	0.03 (0.12)
Political interest	-0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.07)	0.03 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.05** (0.02)
Constant	3.99*** (0.22)	6.15*** (0.82)	7.33*** (0.67)	6.21*** (0.63)	7.13*** (0.58)	3.21*** (0.28)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.07	0.05	0.05
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.02
N	323	341	345	341	328	273

+ p &lt; 0.10; \* p &lt; 0.05; \*\* p &lt; 0.01; \*\*\* p &lt; 0.001; standard error between parentheses