

## **Table of Content**

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Populism - what it is and what it wants.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Direct Democracy and Populism - A Twofold Relationship .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>References .....</b>	<b>8</b>

# 1 Introduction

Direct democracy as a variant of democratic models is well established, discussed and analyzed in political science (Held 2006, 4–6, 96–120; Kriesi 2005, 2–7). The difference from a direct democracy to a representative one is rather small though, where the former is acting within the latter supplemented with additional direct democratic elements - such as (mandatory or optional) referenda and initiatives<sup>1</sup>. Despite this fact though these direct democratic tools face skepticism and are often criticized (Kriesi 2006, 600, 2005, 2–4).

One of the major claims has been that direct democratic tools could facilitate populism. A reoccurring argument is here that ordinary citizens' are incapable of deciding on complex policies and can quickly fall prey to charismatic leaders and demagogues during such decisions. Hence direct democratic tools could be exploited by special interests such as by populists (Kriesi 2005, 3, 239; Papadopoulos 1995, 423–25).

However, this is somewhat a simplistic account of direct democracy and its influence on populism, and already Papadopoulos (1995, 425–26) warned against generalizations in this respect. Switzerland, for instance, which is often taken as the example for direct democracy, has not more populism than other countries (Papadopoulos 1995, 426). Moreover, there are also reasonable arguments, which can lead to the conclusion direct democracy can inhibit populism. Thus trying to answer the question *"Does direct democracy facilitate or inhibit populism?"* this essay is set within this discourse.

My essential argument is that direct democratic instruments can facilitate populism, helping to gain momentum by providing populism with an additional media platform. In the long run, however, a direct democratic setting inhibits populism. The instruments can act then as warning lights for populism's strength, even opening the consideration of possible integration of populist movements into the government.

The outline of the essay follows the argument, but starts initially with a short introduction of populism and establishes its connection to direct democracy. The essay is closed with a conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, pure direct democracies, such as in small town meetings like the Landsgemeinde in Switzerland, do currently not exist at the country level. Even the Swiss Case, often used as the example for direct democracy, is actually "semi-direct democracy" where representative parliament and government are still present (Linder 2012, 109–11; Papadopoulos 1995, 421). Out of simplicity reasons though this essay still continues to use the term "direct democracy".

## **2 Populism - What it is and what it wants**

That scholars deal with populism and what might facilitate it is not surprising considering the rise of populist movements and parties in the last three decades (Caramani 2017, 54–55; Mudde 2004; Kriesi 2014, 364–67). Albeit the definition of populism is far from clear and depends on region and context, populism can be described as "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups". Populists claim to represent then the "pure people" acknowledging their "general will" – contrary than done by the corrupt and ruling elite (Mudde 2007 in Akkerman et al. 2014, 1326–27).

However, populism is not authoritarian. Rather it calls for more responsiveness from the representative government (Caramani 2017, 61–62, 64). Thus it is not surprising that populists embrace the notion of direct democracy, such as the one in Switzerland, and in some cases even demand it since its instruments give additional power to the people (Canovan 1999, 2, 6–7; Akkerman et al. 2014, 1328, 1338).

This claim might be superficial, given that populist movements are often lead by charismatic leaders themselves and are so far organized in parties (Akkerman et al. 2014, 1326–28). Nevertheless, the direct democratic tools would provide the populists with what they apparently call for, namely responsiveness from the representative government, the possibility to account them for their actions and an expression of the "will of the people" on a particular issue.

Initiatives can be seen then as the tool to remind the government of what they've neglected, whether on purpose or not, and put these issues on the political agenda. Potential referendums force the government to be responsive to the citizens and include them in their decision-making process to reduce the possibility that a decision of them is overthrown (Papadopoulos 1995, 436–37). Thus one can argue these instruments could tame populism since they have a way of expressing themselves within the institutional bounds. Before this can happen, however, direct democratic instruments also provide an additional media platform to the usual (electoral) campaigns, where populism can gain momentum and establish themselves in the political sphere.

### **3 Direct Democracy and Populism - A Twofold Relationship**

Consistent with the short definition of populism above the "rise of populism" is often depicted as a reaction to representative democracies and their established "cartel parties", which only work for the state. For this rise, the media play an important role enabling populism to personify politics, promote charismatic leaders, criticise the government and raise new issues on the political agenda (Kriesi 2014, 364–65; Caramani 2017, 59). Hence media is used already an important factor for populists to promote themselves.

If direct democratic instruments are added to this setting, populism has then an additional concrete means to an end to appear on the media channels and raise their profile, since the use of direct democratic instruments comes along with campaigns and mobilization. To influence the outcome of a voting media works as a message transmitter of arguments for or against a particular issue (Kriesi 2005, 604; Papadopoulos 1995, 439). As a consequence populists can appear on the political arena more often and deviate from the ruling elite on a specific issue debated along the use of direct democratic instruments.

Switzerland can again serve here as an example, showing that in the aftermath of the referendum on the "entry to European Economic Area" the populist Swiss People's Party established themselves within the political scene and contributed to the failure of the treaty (Kriesi 2005, 27). A more recent example is the Brexit-referendum and the accompanied mediatisation of the already present UK Independent Party, fostering their ideology during the referendum through the media (Hooghe and Marks 2017, 17).

During such campaigns, the presence of the populists in the political arena helps them to get additional publicity. As such, the outcome of the vote might not always be important for the populists but only be used to get the attention of the people towards their propaganda. Furthermore, the raising potential that populist movements might sway the vote to their side helps them to become an essential actor in the political sphere and be taken seriously by the other parties. Thus once becoming an important actor, they can make use of what Papadopoulos(1995, 428) calls the blackmail potential of anti-systems parties, threatening the government not to conform with their aims. In the end, populists have through direct democratic instruments a specific setting, where they can challenge the ruling government.

Additionally, if direct democratic instruments are part of the rules of the game and are not used exceptionally, as in the Brexit-referendum, populist actors can proactively call for a referendum or an initiative. In Switzerland this happened for example between 1970-1987 where right-wing populists mobilized the population to vote on various referenda, all against too progressive and modernist government policies. It might be that such a mobilization is only a phenomenon for a specific time (Papadopoulos 1995, 426). But one can not deny that also after this period

especially the right-wing populists can have an impact on the outcome of the respective issue-vote, thus having more power in a direct democratic setting (Kriesi 2014, 605, 2005, 59).

Nevertheless, the claim that direct democracy only facilitates populism because citizens are vulnerable to populists due to a lack of capacity to understand complex issues and ignorance, especially on such national referenda, is not entirely accurate and a simplification (Isernia and Fishkin 2014, 312). Kriesi (2005) for example has already shown for the Swiss Case that citizens indeed do vote argument-based and not necessarily follow heuristics. Moreover, the direction and intensity of campaign does not influence the outcome of a vote entirely but depend on specific circumstances, such as closeness of a vote and especially coalitional configurations of the political elite (Kriesi 2006, 617–18). Accordingly, Kriesi (239) argues that as long as there is a variety of opinions amongst the elite and clearly structured coalitions, the introduction of direct democratic instruments to representative democracy does not lead consequently to populism.

Besides this the direct democratic instruments can even inhibit populism, acting as a warning system for the government. The use of a referendum, initiative and or mobilization for it by populists can signal the government that they have a legitimacy problem. Furthermore especially when the outcome of an issue-vote is unexpected, it shows that indeed the claims of populists must be taken seriously. Thus the above mentioned blackmail potential forces the established parties to listen to the populist's claims and be responsive to them, which can deradicalize the populist claims shortly. (Papadopoulos 1995, 428, 436–37).

An even more inhibiting force of direct democratic instruments to populism is though if the blackmail potential can be transformed into a coalition potential, integrating the opposing group into the government. The possibility of this has already been shown with the inclusion of the Catholic Conservatives in Switzerland to the government due to their successful use of referendums (Papadopoulos 1995, 428). The same can happen with populists since at the moment they operate as parties as well and can be seen as correctives to the system (Caramani 2017, 64–65). Thus in the long run, through integration in the government and embedding populists groups in the direct democratic systems, their claims can be tamed, if not even inhibited since they are now working within the direct democratic constraints themselves.

Such a development should be possible in other countries as well. For the example of Italy and Beppe Grillo's "five star movement"<sup>2</sup> Kriesi (2014, 271) writes that "As representatives of such anti-parties get elected, as they are socialised into the governing function of parties (at the local

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<sup>2</sup> The five star movement won 25.5 percent of the votes in the February 2013 election and thus acts no within the government (Kriesi 2007, 270)

level first, at higher levels later on), these groups may be transformed into regular parties, even if they keep their populist characteristics to some extent.". However, Kriesi writes here also that Grillo's party at the time refused to work with the mainstream parties to form a government. In a direct democratic setting, where cooperation is most of the times inevitable in order not to provoke a referendum, such behaviour might be contained though.

## **4 Conclusion**

As we have seen the question to answer "Does direct democracy facilitate or inhibit populism" is not an easy one, since as always there is a pro and contra site. Rather than given a black and white answer, this essay argued for a development, where direct democratic instruments might indeed facilitate populism, due to the provision of an additional media platform within which populists can act. Once gaining momentum though and hence becoming an actor who can't be neglected, the situation around populism might change. Acknowledging the potential of the populist's, after it has been brought to the open by direct democratic instruments, governments in a direct democratic setting are rather forced to take actions to reduce the blackmail potential of populists. This means they must work together with the populist actors, if not integrate them into the government. Doing this, populist movements are contained within the direct democratic setting. They might still position themselves as a populist movement, working against the corrupt elite. However, they will be part of the game. In this way, direct democracy can inhibit populism.

Of course, such a developed as outlined here, which can be pictured as an inverse U shaped development, is rather paradigmatic. As mentioned in the beginning, the notion of populism is different depending on the region and context. Also, the current effects of direct democracy are hard to establish since there are not a lot of cases of direct democratic countries. As such the essay used mostly Switzerland as an example, where one can argue that it has specific conditions (Kriesi 2005, 4, 236). Accordingly, criticism that the picture provided here is theoretical, lacking the scope of the potential developments of the real world is understandable. However, the important thing to take from here would then still be that in theory, direct democratic instruments are not per se only facilitate populism. As such the inclusion of them into a representative democracy should be not only always be rejected, but evaluated for the specific setting.

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