

Democracy by stealth? Does the rise of populism challenge the participatory paradigm of European democracy?

Aims of the project

Are core European institutions under threat from populism? Even the quickest glance suggests yes. The euro-skeptical United Kingdom Independence Party helped spark the UK to leave the EU. The Italian Five Star Movement successfully ran on an anti-establishment platform, became part of the governing coalition and quickly ran afoul of EU budget deficit rules. Even more worrying for the European Union (EU) project is the Hungarian turn towards “soft authoritarianism”, which seems bound for a collision course with Brussels.

These events demonstrate how populism fundamentally challenges the European project. European populism is more than anti-establishment – it is profoundly at odds with the EU Habermasian paradigm, emphasizing that enhanced deliberation and inclusion in decision-making processes ensure democratic legitimacy and satisfaction (e.g. Habermas 1996). Yet reactions to populism rely on the Habermasian idea, extensively calling for more participatory and deliberative democracy to address populism. Previous EU Commission President Prodi called for more participatory “hands on” democracy and involvement in making policy (Prodi cited in Mudde 2004, p. 557). If more opportunities to participate is the answer, why haven’t bottom-up democratic initiatives such as the Citizens’ Initiative from the Lisbon Treaty or deliberative forums to discuss politics prevented the rise of European populism?

This tension requires a better understanding of which (democratic) decision-making process Europeans *really* want. We therefore propose a theoretically informed investigation of preferences for democratic decision-making institutions at the EU and national levels using large-n representative surveys and laboratory (lab) experiments, measuring attitudes and physiological responses to discussion. Importantly, our results may challenge the Habermasian ideal of more inclusion. Our multi-method approach combines large-n surveys to measure Europeans’ *self-reported* decision-making preferences and lab experiments to directly *observe* group decision-making behavior. We develop a novel lab paradigm that simultaneously measures decision-making processes preferences and physiological markers of arousal/anxiety, followed by an exit questionnaire. Combining physiological, behavioral, and attitudinal measures in a single experimental paradigm gives us new insights into how people respond to democratic decision-making. The experiments are carried out in Denmark, Italy, Germany and the UK. To understand decision-making preferences’ regional variation, we field surveys in EU28 countries with populations greater than one million residents.

Main questions

We answer three core questions: (1) *What* are the preferences for inclusion and participation in democratic decision-making at the EU and national level; (2) *How* do these preferences relate to support for populist parties; (3) *How well* do our findings fit EU’s participatory democratic strategies? These questions lead to six research objectives:

- 1) Develop our theoretical understanding and empirical measurement of populism. Add to the definition of populism by introducing a new salient predictor: decision-making process preferences and, thus, engage in theory-building of a more holistic view on European populism. Importantly, this is crucial to understand populism and offers a clear way forward in understanding right vs left-wing populism
- 2) Identify *empirically* differences in decision-making preferences between right- and left-wing European populism
- 3) Identify national differences in populism support. How vulnerable are European states to following Hungary’s path away from democracy?
- 4) Evaluate the explanatory power of decision-making process preferences on the propensity to support populist parties vis-à-vis other salient explanations
- 5) Explore how decision-making process preferences predict Euroscepticism – and how this may be mediated/moderated by populist sentiments
- 6) Develop ways to measure how social desirability (i.e. misreporting of political preferences due to fear of social stigmatization) by comparing *actual* behavior, *physiological* arousal (in experiments) and *observed* political attitudes (in surveys)

Theoretical base and methodological approach

Our theoretical expectations draw from three distinct literatures: European populism (e.g. Mudde 2004), Habermasian democracy (e.g. Habermas 2009), and stealth democracy (e.g. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2017). We explore the types of decision-making institutions people prefer and how involved they want to be in democratic decision-making.

Contrary to most democratic theory assumptions, we expect significant heterogeneity in people’s preferences. Also, we have three theoretical expectations about what factors help explain variation in process preferences: individual level differences in core psychological constructs (e.g. conflict aversion), individual behavioral differences (e.g. media diet, political participation), and cross-national contextual differences (e.g. corruption, crisis events).

Our project fundamentally challenges the core theoretical premise of the Habermasian paradigm that democratic inclusion and participation is universally desired and a remedy to political malaise and discontent (e.g., Habermas 2009). While deliberative and participatory theories assume a willingness to participate in politics and “update” political views (e.g., Habermas 2009), conclusions in political psychology show that individuals may not update opinions when deliberating (e.g., Mendelberg 2002, Mutz 2006), and may not even update factual beliefs in the face of contrary evidence (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Pioneering work on stealth democracy finds that conflict aversion and false consensus (i.e. overestimates of consensus by assuming other people possess similar preferences) make people less desirous of decision-making inclusion or deliberation. Many prefer a kind of “stealth democracy” where participation is not obliged (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2005), creating a contrast between the inclusive Habermasian view and the anti-pluralist, antagonistic and Manichean populist worldview (e.g. Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017). Building on existing research (e.g. Mutz 2006), we test assumptions that individuals *have* preferences for inclusion, including the psychological prerequisites to carry out such engagements. Importantly, our approach differs from studies and existing critiques of deliberative theory (e.g., Sanders 1997, Sulkin and Simon 2001, Mutz 2008).

There are important commonalities between European populists and individuals supporting “stealth democracy”. First, they do not wish for more democratic participation. Mudde (2004) highlights that newer right-wing populism demands “responsive” government that implements preferred policies without bothering the citizenry. According to Mudde (2004), populists do not wish for more participatory democracy, which is empirically supported by Bowler et al. (2003). It is only when threatened by crisis they mobilize into movements and parties (Taggart 2004, p. 278). Also, populist and stealth democrats alike express frustration by the complexity of politics (*Ibid*, p. 273). A second commonality is a wish for more business-like professionals in politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2005, p. 137). The populists’ trust in professionals follows their distrust in politicians, as seen in numerous re-elections of Berlusconi in Italy (Mudde 2004, p. 547). A third commonality is a preference for charismatic and strong leadership. Charismatic leaders are an alternative “to the wholesale political involvement on their own part” (Taggart 2004, p. 278). This strong common ground for supporters for stealth democracy and populist parties provide us with reasons to suspect that European populists may also prefer kinds of stealth democracy, including non-participatory decision-making processes.

We will begin by testing the psychological causal mechanisms of stealth democracy (e.g. conflict aversion) in lab experiments where individuals are exposed to group decision-making processes, varying on parameters determining degrees of deliberation and participation in decision-making (i.e. the experimental treatment). Throughout the decision-making game we use skin conductance as physiological measure to see if conflict aversion (measured as arousal) is prevalent during decision-making. The experiments also allow us to validate the use of survey questions to capture core psychological processes. To ensure context robustness, we use the same experiment in Italy, Denmark, the UK and Germany (N=250 per country). This part provides crucial insights into preferences and reactions to decision-making, especially given how little research examines the validity of assumptions underlying the deliberative and participatory EU ideal.

Second, we use large-n surveys to explore if decision-making process preferences/stealth democracy predicts support for populism. On top of the usual socio-demographic questions, we include the stealth democracy questions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2005, Hibbing, Theiss-Morse et al. 2017), context-relevant items and self-reported psychological traits (e.g. deliberation eagerness). The surveys allow us to test the generalizability of inferences from the lab on the European populace, generalize representative strength to the study, providing unique insight into the association of stealth democracy, decision-making process preferences and populism in various contexts. The results provide ground-breaking empirical insights into the decision-making processes people *really want* – and its relation with right- and left-wing populism.

Significance of the project to the field “Challenges for Europe”

Theoretically, both elites and academics have for decades assumed that the answer to populists’ grievances, particularly at the EU level, was more participation in decision-making processes (see Mudde 2004, p. 557). While extensive work exists on under which circumstances democratic decision-making participation and deliberation work (e.g. Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017), also in a EU context (e.g. Sanders 2012), it is essential to understand the limits of these approaches and to identify if some people do not wish for engagement. Our project helps reshape the study of populism as a coherent European phenomenon, rather than a piecemeal focus on policy- or crises-related grievances (Bosco and Verney 2012, Taggart 2017).

Our main contribution is to shed light on the populist challenges for Europe, exploring how and to what degree decision-making preferences and stealth democracy preferences explain populism. This way we provide novel knowledge about what constitutes right- and left-wing populism and cross-country populism varieties. The conclusions yield salient bottom-up insights into what causes populist reactions and which democratic visions populists possess, contributing to the “thin ideology of populism” (Stanley 2008), by adding a processual element.

Our agenda is truly interdisciplinary. We draw on insights from political psychology, focusing on psychological predispositions for deliberation and participation (e.g., Morrell 1999, Mutz 2006), while we also rely on

and contribute to the Euroscepticism literature (e.g. McLaren 2007, Nielsen 2016) and the study of European populism (e.g. Lewandowsky, Giebler et al. 2016, Taggart 2017). Lastly, our innovative methodology offers a salient contribution into how physiological measures can be used in research, exploring politically sensitive areas and provide psychological insights into decision-making that are not easily measured by conventional methods.

The EU has long struggled to unwrap and meet citizens' preference for democracy (e.g. Nicolaïdis, 2012). With the insights from this project, we provide academics, professionals, and policy-makers with solid new insights into the European electorates' *real* decision-making preferences. The conclusions help build more robust decision-making structures and institutions at the national and the EU level, which, consequently, will become more legitimate in the eyes of the population.

Participants and their project tasks

Due to its cross-disciplinary nature, the project includes methodological specialists and experts on regional politics, Euroscepticism, populism, political behavior and psychology. We have assembled a team of world-leading experts with a proven track record of excellent research. Our team seeks to balance gender and junior/senior representation. The team is organized in groups following two work packages - WP1 focuses on experiments, WP2 on large-n surveys. Yet members are invited to all workshops to ensure idea-exchanges, continuity and learning across tasks. Tasks within the group follow the areas of expertise, which are overlapping for most participants.

Lab experiment and physiological lab equipment: Giebler (WZB); Heekeren (Freie University); Mönster (Aarhus); Nielsen (CBS); Olmastroni (Siena); Reifler (Exeter)

Cross-national surveys; public opinion: De Sio (LUISS); Giebler; Isernia (Siena); Landini (LUISS); Nielsen; Reifler; Reher (Strathclyde); Stanley (SWPS)

Democratic and populist theories; EU attitudes formation: Giebler; Herman (Exeter); Nielsen; Reher; Stanley

Political psychology: De Sio; Isernia; Nielsen; Reifler

Regional political experts:

- Eastern Europe: Herman; Stanley
- Nordic countries: Nielsen
- Germany and continental Europe: Giebler; Reher
- The UK: Reifler; Stanley
- The Mediterranean: De Sio; Landini; Olmastroni; Verzichelli (Siena)

Confirmed lab facilities with skin conductance BIOPAC at the universities in Aarhus, Siena, Exeter, and Freie Berlin

Advisory board: Elizabeth Theiss-Morse and John Hibbing (Nebraska)

Work plan and time schedule

We expect at least 7 original articles in top 5 journals within political science (e.g. APSR) and articles in sub-fields like methodological journals (e.g. JEPS), regional EU journals (e.g. EUP), and political psychology journals (e.g. Political Psychology). In addition to a website and social media activity, we publish reports and write analyses to newspapers to reach a broader non-academic audience.

Lab experiments (WP1): In Denmark, UK, Germany and Italy we conduct identical lab experiments (N=250 per country, incl. pilots). The experiments tap subjects' reaction to different degrees of participation and inclusion in a decision-making game, while we simultaneously use skin conductance to tap physical arousal. This way, we can assess which decision-making component that yield most conflict aversion and dissatisfaction, providing us with novel psychological information about what constitutes decision-making preferences. Building on this, we produce new psychological survey items to be incorporated in WP2 to test these findings as predictors for populism. The outcome variable (i.e. decision-making process preferences) is measured in the experiment using a questionnaire. Here we also tap populist and stealth democracy support and democratic participation habits. WP1 eventually has data from n=1,000 subjects in 4 key EU countries - an unprecedent number of subjects in these types of experiments, which strengthens the robustness of the conclusions.

Cross-national surveys (WP2): We conduct cross-national representative surveys in 25 EU countries (n=1,500 per country). The surveys include relevant context-related variables because populism varies across regions (e.g., Taggart

2017) as well as questions about populist support (outcome variable), levels of perceived political responsiveness, Euroscepticism, the stealth democracy survey items, and newly developed questions based on WP1. The survey allows us to test how stealth democracy and decision-making preferences impact populist party support and how EU attitudes play a role in that equation, while we are able to identify regional effects and control for individual-level variables.

We envisage 5 workshops and a final dissemination conference to ensure close collective cooperation on the vital parts of both WP's (i.e. developing experiments, data collection, discussing analytical results and manuscripts, dissemination).

Table 1: Work plan

Year	Work package	Period	Tasks	Outcome
2020	1	Spring	<u>Workshop 1:</u> Kick off; division of tasks; development of pilot experiments	Development of experiments + pilots conducted
	1	Autumn	<u>Workshop 2:</u> Adjustment after pilot experiments. Experiments are prepared	Experiments conducted
2021	1/2	Spring	<u>Workshop 3:</u> Discussion of experimental results. Surveys finalized and aired	Results discussed; survey executed
	2	Autumn	<u>Workshop 4:</u> Survey results discussed <u>Workshop 5:</u> Preliminary results presented	Survey results discussed;
2022	1/2	Spring/ Autumn	<u>Dissemination conference</u> with external guests; article writing	Dissemination; articles in review