Freedom for All? Populism and the Instrumental Support of Freedom of Speech

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Abstract

Populists often cast themselves as unwavering defenders of free speech. In practice, however, they tend to apply free speech instrumentally, denying it to those who hold opposing political views. While existing research has primarily focused on populist individuals' general commitment to democracy, little direct evidence exists on how they concretely understand and apply freedom of speech. Using an original survey question and a survey-embedded experiment, this article examines how support for freedom of speech among populist individuals oscillates between normative principles and instrumental considerations. The findings indicate that those with stronger populist attitudes tend to support free speech in normative terms but are simultaneously inclined to restrict it when their ideological interests are at stake. This suggests that populists view democratic norms not as universal rights but as instrumental values that can be traded for political gain

Keywords: populism, democracy, freedom of speech, tolerance, comparative politics.

"Free speech is not an independent value but a political prize."

— Stanley Fish (1994,102)

Although freedom of speech is considered a fundamental democratic value (Wike and Simmons 2015), people are often eager to restrict others' right to expression (Petersen *et al.* 2011). Already sixty years ago, Prothro and Grigg explored this paradox, showing that while free speech is widely endorsed, it "breaks down completely [when] translated into more specific propositions" regarding the rights of disliked groups (1960, 286). In other words, citizens tend to endorse democratic values in abstract and normative terms, yet apply them instrumentally to advance their political interests and ideas (Graham and Svolik 2020; Werner 2020; Landwehr and Harms 2020; Sniderman *et al.* 1989). This tendency is especially pronounced among populist leaders, who frequently cast themselves as "staunch defenders" of free speech, while simultaneously attempting to suppress views that conflict with their political goals (Moffitt 2017). This raises a crucial question: how do populist individuals reconcile their declared support for democracy with a selective application of fundamental democratic principles?

This article seeks to answer this question by investigating how populist individuals understand and apply freedom of speech, one of the most fundamental democratic liberties. Using an innovative research design that combines original survey questions with a survey-embedded experiment, we investigate whether populist attitudes reinforce the impact of ideological

preferences on the application of freedom of speech. Specifically, we examine whether individuals with stronger populist attitudes uphold freedom of speech as a normative ideal, while simultaneously advocating for the restriction of rights for those with opposing political views. In doing so, we assess why populist individuals are willing to disregard fundamental democratic principles for their political advantages.

The main argument developed in this article is that populist individuals view freedom of speech not as a universal right, but as a conditional norm that can be strategically leveraged to protect their own interests or selectively restricted to undermine the rights of their opponents (Mouffe 2005; Moffitt 2017). The tension between normative and instrumental considerations is especially evident in the rhetoric and strategies of populist parties (Griffin 2000; Moffitt 2017). For instance, in Europe, right-wing populist parties oppose (Muslim) women's right to wear the Islamic headscarf on the grounds of advancing their freedom (T. Akkerman 2005). Conversely, these same populist parties justify restricting free speech for ethnic and religious minorities under the pretense of safeguarding core democratic principles rooted in the values of Enlightenment (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; Moffitt 2017).

This dual interpretation of democratic liberties is central to the populist model of representation. Populists embrace a vision of democracy that purports to champion the interests of ordinary citizens against those of an out-of-touch elite. In this context, they advocate for the free expression of controversial and radical opinions, asserting that these views represent the sentiments and interests of the vast majority (Steiner *et al.* 2024). Any challenge to their right to express such views is framed as obstructive and fundamentally undemocratic (Galais and Pérez-Rajó 2023). At the same time, populists argue that empowering "the people" requires sidelining the rights of those who are not part of "the people", viewing them as obstacles to the democratic ideal of majority rule. This involves challenging established democratic norms that the elites have allegedly 'hijacked' and manipulated to prevent meaningful political change. In doing so, populists position themselves as uncompromising defenders of free speech while simultaneously framing the rights of their opponents as incompatible with the full realization of the popular will and, therefore, illegitimate (Mouffe 2005; Moffitt 2017).

We focus on Belgium for several important reasons. First, the country has witnessed the rise of one of the strongest populist radical right-wing parties in Europe and has more recently seen the success of left-wing populism. Since party leaders play an important role in shaping citizens'

conceptions of democracy (Krishnarajan 2023), it is especially relevant to understand how populist individuals understand fundamental democratic rights in contexts with strong populist mobilization. Second, the presence of both left- and right-wing populist parties allows us to test whether populist individuals from both sides of the ideological spectrum view freedom as subordinated to their interests (Mudde 1995). Third, most of the literature on the topic has focused on the United States (Sniderman *et al.* 1989; Prothro and Grigg 1960; Sullivan *et al.* 1982; Simonovits *et al.* 2022; Graham and Svolik 2020). The extreme majoritarianism and partisan polarization in the U.S. may amplify 'hate and fear' toward opposing party positions and foster greater disdain for democracy (G. Grossman *et al.* 2022). In contrast, Belgium has a proportional, highly fragmented, and volatile multi-party system marked by substantial variation in the ideological distance between political competitors (Erkel and Turkenburg 2022). Finally, the programmatic agendas and stances towards democracy of both populist and mainstream parties in Belgium reflect those found across Europe. This enables us to provide valuable insights into the tensions between normative and instrumental considerations, which are at least partially applicable to similar European countries.

Our findings show that populism is associated with support for both normative and instrumental considerations, though in divergent ways. Populist attitudes (i.e., the degree to which an individual agrees with populist ideas) are positively associated with support for freedom of speech as a normative principle. At the same time, they reinforce the tendency to distinguish between speech acts that align with or oppose respondents' ideological interests. Left-wing populist individuals are more likely to support the right to criticize multinational corporations but tend to deny the very same right to someone speaking against immigrants. For right-wing populist individuals, the pattern is reversed. That is, populist attitudes are associated with a greater tolerance for speech against immigrants and a lower tolerance for speech against multinational corporations. In other words, populist citizens often exhibit "double standards", supporting someone's right to speak when they agree with their ideological positions while opposing it when they do not.

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, the acceptance of democratic norms has mainly been studied by focusing on background characteristics (e.g., education) (Gibson 2013), political affiliations (e.g., party identity) (Simonovits *et al.* 2022), and policy preferences (Graham and Svolik 2020). By bridging the literature on populism with research on democratic backsliding,

this article demonstrates that populism shapes how citizens interpret and apply democratic norms. Second, this article provides evidence that populist attitudes are an important factor in understanding why citizens are willing to sacrifice democratic principles for their ideological interests. Specifically, we show that the way populist individuals translate normative considerations into concrete respect for democratic liberties is contingent on whether certain policies, actions, or behaviors are considered good for 'the people' and, by extension, for democracy at large (Urbinati 2019).

Populism and Democratic Norms

Populism is a highly contested concept. Scholars have defined it as a "thin-centered" ideology (Mudde 2004), a rhetorical style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007), or a political strategy for mobilizing and attracting voters' support (Weyland 2001). In this article, we adopt the ideational approach, which proposes to view populism as an ideological framework (or discourse) that sees politics as a struggle between a morally superior in-group ("us, the people") and an evil ruling bloc ("them, the enemy of the people") responsible for thwarting the people's demands (Hawkins *et al.* 2018). An important aspect of the ideational approach is its conception of populism as orthogonal to left-right or liberal-conservative ideology, making it highly relevant for studying whether populist individuals tend to protect speech with which they already agree and *vice versa* (for a discussion, see Rooduijn 2019).

Populism and the Two-strand Model of Democracy

Scholars question whether and under what conditions populism is linked to the rejection of fundamental democratic norms (Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2021). On the one hand, some authors argue that populism is the purest form of democracy (Tännsjö 1992). It can function as a "redemptive force" that promises to restore the proper functioning of the representative system by empowering ordinary people (Taggart 2002; Canovan 1999; Kazin 1998; Laclau 2005). From this perspective, populism represents a "democratic response to undemocratic liberalism" and can function as a corrective to a democratic deficit (Mudde 2021, 6). On the other hand, populism has been described as a dangerous threat to democratic values, fundamentally incompatible with a tolerant and pluralist democracy (Weyland 2020; Urbinati 1998). According to this view, populism is a "democratic disfigurement" that "fundamentally rejects any type of limitation on the power of the majority," even at the cost of denying fundamental democratic values (Mudde 2021, 581; see also, Taguieff 1995; Müller 2014).

Recent empirical work on the topic reflects this ambiguity. Some studies find that populist individuals are more supportive of democracy, referendums, and deliberative forms of participation (Zaslove *et al.* 2021; Bjånesøy and Ivarsflaten 2016). Others find that they are less committed to the idea of living in a democracy (Bjånesøy and Ivarsflaten 2016), less supportive of pluralism (Heinisch and Wegscheider 2020), reluctant to accept political compromises (Plescia and Eberl 2021), and more likely to disregard certain procedural aspects of democracy (Lewandowsky and Jankowski 2023). This ambiguity is also evident in the discourse of populist leaders (Moffitt 2017). For example, while claiming to fight the ruling class to restore democracy for the people, they often limit media independence, silence dissent, and undermine judicial oversight to consolidate power and further their political agendas (Enyedi 2024; Bermeo 2016).

This ambivalence underlies the gap between normative and instrumental understanding of democracy (Ignatieff 2022; Landwehr and Steiner 2017). For some, democratic rights are grounded in a *normative* expectation of how democracy should, in principle, work (Landwehr and Steiner 2017). This perspective suggests that citizens have various conceptions of democracy—such as more consensual or majoritarian ones—which influence their understanding of fundamental democratic principles (Landwehr and Harms 2020). From this perspective, democracy is viewed as a system of norms that should fundamentally embody universal and unconditional principles. Yet, in practice, the application of democratic norms often diverges from these normative principles. Citizens interpret democratic norms to suit their own preferences rather than from a principled commitment to democratic ideals. For them, democratic liberties are valued insofar as they protect their interests or advance a particular vision of politics (Graham and Svolik 2020; Werner 2020; Simonovits *et al.* 2022; Fölsch *et al.* 2024). In such cases, support for democracy becomes *instrumental*, contingent on whether it advances other values considered equally, if not more, important than democracy itself (Bowler *et al.* 2007).

In this article, we argue that the tension between normative principles and instrumental considerations is intrinsic to the populist model of democratic representation. Although populists advocate for a normative conception of freedom of speech that allows for the expression of controversial and radical views, they selectively uphold or restrict the very same right depending on whether it aligns with their political objectives. To understand how populists reconcile these contrasting considerations, it is helpful to examine the relationship between populism and the so-called two-strand model of democracy (see Mény and Surel 2002; Panizza 2005; Taggart 2000;

Moffitt 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Abts and Rummens 2007; Canovan 1999). In the two-strand model, democracy comprises two pillars: a liberal pillar, which is focused on protecting individual and minority rights, and a democratic pillar, which emphasizes popular sovereignty and reflects the collective will of the majority (Mouffe 2009). Democratic practices integrate both pillars, each designed to keep the other in check. The potentially abusive "tyranny of the majority" is constrained by a set of rules that ensure the interests and rights of certain groups are safeguarded (Dahl 1989).

Populism and Freedom of Speech: Normative Versus Instrumental Support

The two-strand model of democracy proposes that the normative justification of democratic liberties depends on the emphasis placed on either the liberal or democratic pillar (Abts and Rummens 2007). Within the liberal tradition, free speech requires an "act of compromise": it should not be tolerated when it offends or hurts others (Feinberg 1987; see also Mill 1978). Unlimited free speech can threaten rather than safeguard freedom; therefore it should and must be limited by a set of norms, procedures, and legal controls that ensure that the values of tolerance, liberty, and equality are respected (Rawls 1999).

In contrast to the liberal tradition, populism prioritizes popular sovereignty over the liberal pillar, seeing the latter as an obstacle to the empowerment of citizens (Mény and Surel 2002). Within populist politics, majority opinion is seen not just as one perspective among many but as the embodiment of society's interests as a whole. As a result, democratic legitimacy resides directly and fully with "the people" rather than with institutional norms and practices. The checks and balances of the liberal pillar are seen as a way for the elites to limit the popular mandate, thereby hindering a fully realized democratic process. In other words, populism seeks to achieve political change by "reclaiming for the people the power that has been illegitimately taken from them" by the restrictions imposed by the liberal system (Abts and Rummens 2007, 411). This perspective is anchored in a conception of democracy that sees the realization of the "will of the people" as the cornerstone of democratic governance and the foundation of nearly all forms of freedom (Panizza 2005).

According to this view, populist citizens see any restriction on free speech as a violation of their fundamental democratic rights. Free speech should remain "as broad as possible" with minimal, if any, constraints (Moffitt 2017, 116). This view is rooted in the normative belief that open

expression, regardless of its nature, is vital to democracy: it empowers citizens to challenge the *status quo*, voice their concerns, and hold those in power accountable for their actions and decisions (Moffitt 2017; Laclau 2005). Accordingly, populists interpret free speech in majoritarian terms, arguing that political expression should not be held in check by the limitations imposed by the liberal pillar. Consequently, our first hypothesis rests on the expectation that populist individuals are more likely to support *unconstrained* forms of expression, even when this entails speech that is controversial, unpopular, or socially unacceptable

H1: Individuals who score high on scales of populist attitudes are more likely to support freedom of speech in its abstract and unconstrained form.

While populist individuals endorse a normative view of freedom of expression that allows all types of speech, in practice, this support is conditional. The emphasis on the majority criterion implies that "a part of the people (often a very large one) becomes a *non-people*, an excluded part" (Sartori 1987, 32 *original emphasis*). The values of the in-group (i.e., "the people") are the only ones that contribute to the "greater good" and a "moral regeneration" of politics and democracy (Berlin *et al.* 1968; Müller 2016). In contrast, the positions of the out-group (i.e., "the non-people") are considered, at least to some extent, as illegitimate (König and Siewert 2021). They are seen as a threat to the in-group's interests and, more broadly, as an obstacle to achieving what is considered good for democracy (Hameleers and de Vreese 2020; Kazin 1998). This implies that the rights of the "non-people" can be legitimately denied when certain values or actions are deemed incompatible with the "will of the people"; or that democratic liberties should be protected only when they are perceived as "fair" – for example when they empower or protect the interests of the majority (i.e., "the people") (Werner 2020; Landwehr and Harms 2020).

As a result, populists are inclined to think that their interests should be realized as directly as possible and take precedence over the rights of those who do not represent the interests of the majority. This suggests that populist individuals have a qualified and conditional understanding of what is (il)legitimate and (un)democratic, which may lead them to justify democratic-eroding behaviors, such as denying freedom of speech to their political opponents. In practical terms, the instrumental tendency to defend or deny free speech hinges on the ideological content that substantiates the "will of the people" (Andreadis *et al.* 2018; Hameleers *et al.* 2021). Generally speaking, left-wing populism centers on the struggle of the proletariat or underclass against the bourgeoisie, the rich, the capitalists, and the large multinational corporations (March 2017). On

the other hand, right-wing populism centers on safeguarding the "native" population against external threats, such as immigrants or religious minorities (Mudde 2013)

We empirically test this argument using an innovative research design to examine whether populist individuals instrumentally support freedom of speech based on their stated ideological preferences. We expect that the concrete application of free speech will vary based on (1) the ideological content of a speech, (2) the ideological preferences of the respondent, and (3) their affinity with populist ideas. The underlying hypothesis herein is that populist attitudes reinforce the tendency to rely on instrumental considerations—supporting speeches aligned with the respondent's ideological interests while rejecting those they deem objectionable.

Specifically, on the political right, we expect populist attitudes to strengthen support for speeches advocating the idea that the "native" population should be allowed to treat immigrants as an inferior and dangerous out-group, while reducing support for speeches opposing pro-business policies. On the political left, we anticipate populists to be more inclined to support free speech that favors the working class as opposed to the "top one percent", capitalists, and large multinational corporations. At the same time, we expect that they are less likely to do so when a speech contains anti-immigrant discourse.

H2a: Individuals who score high on scales of populist attitudes are more likely to allow a speech that is in line with their ideological interests.

H2b: Individuals who score high on scales of populist attitudes are more likely to deny a speech that is against their ideological interests.

In practice, this means testing whether the direction and magnitude of the populist attitudes coefficient vary based on the ideological content of the speech and across different ideological groups.

Data, instruments, and modeling approach

Data

To test our hypothesis, we designed a set of original survey questions and included them in the 2019 wave of the Belgian National Election Study (BNES). The 2019 wave used a multi-stage sampling design, with municipalities nested within Belgium's three main regions (i.e., Wallonia, Flanders, and Brussels-Capital Region). The data was collected from a register-based random

probability sample of eligible Belgian voters in the 2019 national elections, primarily through face-to-face computer-assisted personal interviews from December 2019 until October 2020. The total sample size for this study consists of 1110 respondents (988 respondents after applying listwise deletion), with an overall response rate of 37.47% (44.34% in the Flemish Region and 29.68% in the Walloon and Brussels-Capital regions).

Instruments

Dependent variables

Normative support for unconstrained freedom of speech: We measure support for an unconstrained form of freedom of speech by asking respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement that "every individual should say what he/she wants, even if this hurts others." This question is designed to address some of the limitations of traditional measures of support for free speech principles. First, rather than merely assessing whether citizens endorse others' right to express their views, our measure captures the tension between protecting free speech and allowing disrespectful and controversial speech. In doing so, it "reflects the sort of value conflict typically observed in free-speech disputes", thereby mitigating the tendency for overly positive responses that arise when freedom of speech is measured in abstract or normative terms (Gibson and Bingham 1982, 606). Second, the measure aligns with the interpretation of free speech in the Belgian legal context, where individuals are not sanctioned for expressing their opinions unless they openly incite violence or segregation[1]. To allow for the comparison of the coefficients with the other main dependent variable of interest (see next paragraph), the question was dichotomized, coding respondents as either supporting or rejecting abstract free speech[2].

[1] Our conceptualization aligns closely with the interpretation of UNIA, the federal agency responsible for promoting and protecting fundamental democratic rights in Belgium. UNIA states that "in Belgium, you are entitled to free speech. This means that you can say many things, even if others experience them as shocking, disturbing, or hurtful" (UNIA 1993). This interpretation is similar to those adopted in other European countries, and previous studies have found that populist citizens tend to support an unconstrained form of freedom of expression, similar to the one used in this study (Zaslove and Meijers 2024). However, it is important to highlight that our conceptualization may not be suitable for other contexts, such as in countries with stricter free speech regulations (e.g., Germany) or where the issue of controversial or offensive speech is highly salient and tied to specific contentious issues (e.g., "Cancel" and "Woke" culture in the United States).

[2] The original question is asked on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1. Completely disagree" to "5. Completely agree." The item has been dichotomized as against (1-3) and in favor (4-5) of free speech. The midpoint of the scale (i.e., neither agree nor disagree) has been included in the against category to ensure that we capture those individuals who are (strongly) in favor of free speech. Using the 5-point variable as continuous or ordinal does not change any of the results. Results are reported in the Appendix.

Instrumental support for freedom of speech: To measure how individuals concretely apply freedom of speech when their ideological interests are at stake, we use a survey-embedded split-ballot experiment that randomizes the object of criticism of a hypothetical speech (Lindner and Nosek 2009). Following the recent literature, we selected two salient and representative issues that capture the contemporary left-right divide (Graham and Svolik 2020). Respondents are presented with a statement indicating that "A speaker at a public gathering, on television, or on the internet holds a speech against [immigrants/multinational corporations]." Each respondent is then asked whether the speech "should be stopped" or "should not be stopped"[3]. This measure presents respondents with a clear choice scenario (i.e., allow or stop the speech), effectively gauging their willingness to restrict freedom of speech in a concrete, yet not normatively charged, situation. It taps into a situational and instrumentally motivated understanding of freedom of speech without *a priori* imposing particular ideological interests or priming the respondent with contentious political groups.

Table 1: Support for (instrumental) freedom of speech across the different experimental conditions

	Multinational corporations	**Immigrants**
The speech should be stopped	43%	67%
The speech should *not* be stopped	57%	33%

Independent variables

Populism: Populist attitudes are measured using an adapted version of the scale developed by A. Akkerman *et al.* (2014)[4]. This scale captures negative sentiments towards the political establishment and the perception of the in-group as a unified entity with a homogeneous will that should be the center and the end-all of politics. It correlates at $r > .8$ with other commonly used populist attitudes scales and functions similarly (for details, see Castanho Silva *et al.* 2020).

[3] The item is a binary choice question. Respondents who answered "I don't know" (less than 3% of the sample) have been excluded from the analysis. The group is too small to draw any meaningful inferences.

[4] We use the shortened version of the scale with slightly adjusted wording to ensure comparability between the French and Dutch translations of the items.

Table 2: Populist attitudes scale, mean, standard deviation (std dev), and standardized (std) factor loadings.

Item	Mean	Std Dev	Std. loadings (λ)
People and not the politicians should take decisions.	2.94	1.03	0.71
People would be better represented by ordinary citizens.	3.01	0.99	0.76
Power should be returned to the people.	2.64	0.97	0.81
Better if politicians just followed the will of the people.	2.85	1.01	0.66
Ordinary people know better than politicians.	2.52	0.96	0.68

Ideological position: We measure respondents' ideological preferences using the traditional 10-point left-right (L-R) self-placement item[5]. To facilitate interpretation and account for potential non-linearity in the relationship between populism and ideological self-identification (Mason 2018), we recoded the L-R self-placement indicator in three categories, namely left (0-3), centre (4-6), and right (7-10)[6].

Control variables: We control for a set of potentially confounding variables. We include sex assigned at birth[7] (Male, Female), educational level (Low, Medium, High), age (6 categories and treated as continuous), an index measuring political efficacy ("Things are so complicated I don't know what to do"), whether a respondent identifies with a party (Yes, No), and region of residence (Flemish Region, French-speaking Belgium). These controls are included to (1) account for compositional differences and (2) rule out the possibility that weaker socioeconomic conditions are driving individuals towards more intolerant positions. The wording of all items used, along with their respective descriptive statistics, can be found in the Appendix.

[5] As a robustness test, we measure ideological preferences using, instead of the categorical measure of LR self-orientation, an index measuring anti-immigration attitudes and one measuring support for economic egalitarianism. The results are unchanged and are reported in the Appendix.

[6] To further test robustness, we also fit a model incorporating a measure of the strength of ideological self-placement by folding the L-R self-placement measure on its midpoint (Mason 2018). This rules out the possibility that the results are driven by those ideologically extreme respondents who place themselves at both ends of the scale (i.e., 0 and 10). Results are unchanged and reported in the Appendix.

[7] This measure is obtained directly from the municipal-level registry data used to construct the sampling frame.

Modeling approach

To test our hypothesis, we employ Multi-Group Structural Equation Modeling (MG-SEM). This method offers two key advantages over traditional regression analysis. First, MG-SEM accounts for random measurement error by evaluating whether a latent construct (e.g., populist attitudes) is accurately measured through a set of relevant survey items. Second, it ensures that our main independent variable of interest (i.e., populist attitudes) is measured and interpreted consistently across different groups of respondents—in this case, left-wing, centrist, and right-wing respondents.

In this article, we estimated two latent variables: populism and political efficacy. The confirmatory factor analysis model demonstrates good fit ($CFI = .98, RMSA = .059, SRMR = .040$) with factor loadings ranging between $\lambda_{min}^{max} = 0.68,0.81$. This indicates that both latent variables are properly measured and operationalized (Hu and Bentle 1999). Metric equivalence is achieved for both latent factors ($\Delta\chi^2 p \geq .05, \Delta CFI \leq -.10, \Delta RMSA \leq .015$, Chen 2007), indicating that the estimated latent constructs are understood in the same way across different ideological groups included in the study (i.e., left-wing, centrist, and right-wing respondents).

A probit regression is used to estimate the effects on both normative and instrumental support for freedom of speech, with each measure treated as a dichotomous variable. The same control variables are included in both models, even though the question measuring instrumental freedom of speech is part of a split-ballot experiment. This choice offers two key advantages. First, although the coefficients between the two models are not directly comparable, including the same set of covariates provides us a general sense of the magnitude of the estimated conditional coefficients across both models. Second, because the split-ballot experiment does not manipulate either ideological interests or populist attitudes, including background variables helps rule out the possibility that observed differences in coefficients between left- and right-wing populists are due to compositional differences. A model without the control variables is reported in the Appendix.

The regression coefficients have been transformed into marginal probabilities by setting continuous predictors to their sample mean and averaging across all categorical variables included in the model (Long 1997). The coefficients represent the effect of a one standard deviation increase in our independent variable of interest on the probability that the outcome equals 1. For example, if populist attitudes increase by one standard deviation, the probability of

allowing a speech increases by X percentage point. All models are estimated using the SEM package *Lavaan* (Rosseel 2012) in R version 4.2.x (R Core Team 2019).

Results

To test whether populist individuals are more likely to endorse freedom of speech in its abstract and unconstrained form, we fit a model regressing normative support for unconstrained freedom of speech on the measure of populist attitudes. The results (Figure 1) indicate that, on average, for each point increase on the populist attitudes scale, an individual is 6.1 percentage point more willing to support free speech in its abstract, unconstrained form ($t = 3.14, p \leq 0.05$). Although populist attitudes explain only a modest portion of the variance in abstract support for freedom of speech, the strength of the estimated coefficient is substantial, underscoring a non negligible association between populist attitudes and normative support for freedom of speech.

Importantly, this result remains robust even after controlling for respondents' left-right ideology, political efficacy, and various demographic characteristics, indicating a positive association between populist attitudes and support for freedom of speech across a broad segment of the Belgian population. These findings support Hypothesis 1: populist individuals are more inclined to believe that people should be free to express their opinions, even when such expressions may be hurtful to others. The full regression table and a series of nested models can be found in the Appendix.

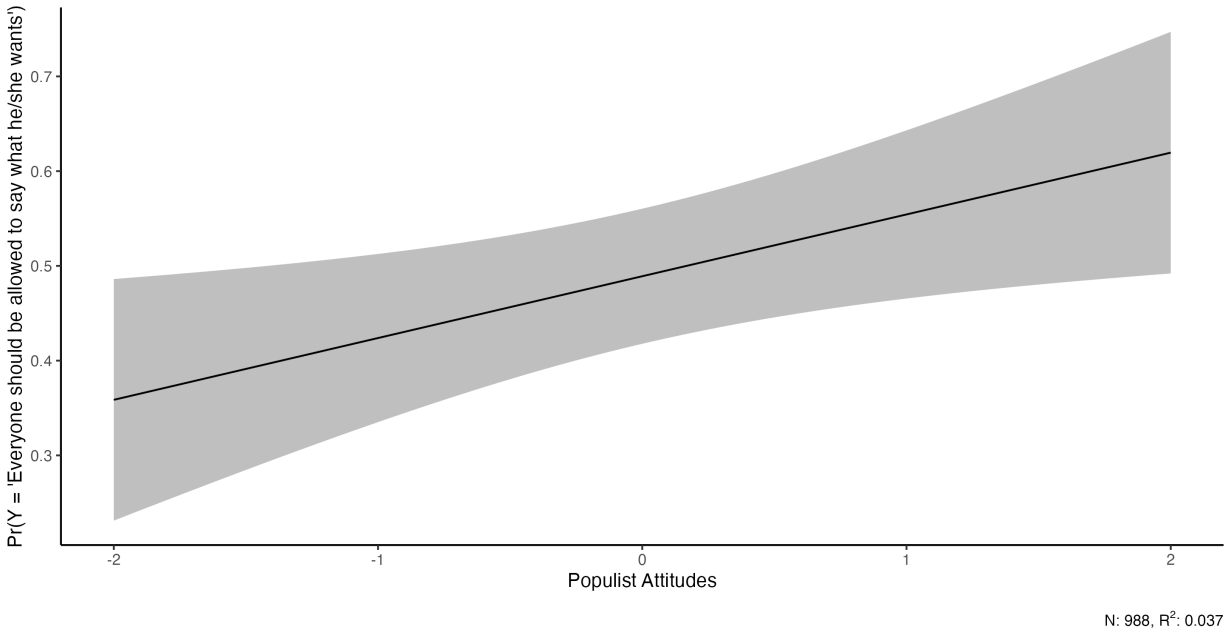

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of normative support for unconstrained freedom of speech, controlling for all other variables included in the model. The dependent variable is the question asking whether 'every individual should say what he/she wants, even if this hurts others' (dichotomized). Ribbons represent 95% confidence intervals around the model-estimated probabilities. The full regression table is reported in the Appendix.

Next, we examine whether affinity with populist ideas reinforces the tendency to distinguish between speeches that align with or oppose respondents' ideological interests. To do this, we regress the instrumental measure of freedom of speech (i.e., the split-ballot experiment) on populist attitudes. We employ an MG-SEM model with six groups to capture variations across both the target of the speech (i.e., immigrants vs. multinational corporations) and ideological groups (left-wing, centrist, and right-wing respondents). We then calculate the marginal coefficients of populist attitudes on the propensity to allow a particular speech for each ideological group[8].

Alongside examining the group-specific coefficients, we use marginal coefficient plots (see Figure 2) to illustrate the effect of populist attitudes on the likelihood of allowing a speech. These plots show the change in probability, measured in percentage point, for each one standard deviation increase on the populist attitudes scale. The horizontal lines around the dots represent the 90% and 95% confidence intervals for the estimated probabilities. If the confidence intervals do not overlap with the vertical zero line, the coefficients are statistically significant for the respective group and speech type. The corresponding regression table and additional nested models are provided in the Appendix[9].

[8] In a traditional regression framework, this procedure is equivalent to estimating a three-way interaction between populist attitudes, the categorical measure of ideological preferences (i.e., left-wing, centrist, and right-wing respondents), and a variable indicating whether the speech targets multinational corporations or immigrants.

[9] As an additional robustness, we also calculated the probability of allowing a speech against immigrants or multinational corporations across different ideological groups (left, centre, right) and categorical levels of populist affinity (Low, Average, High). These estimates, obtained from a GLM probit model, are consistent with the marginal coefficients of the MG-SEM model and are reported in the Appendix.

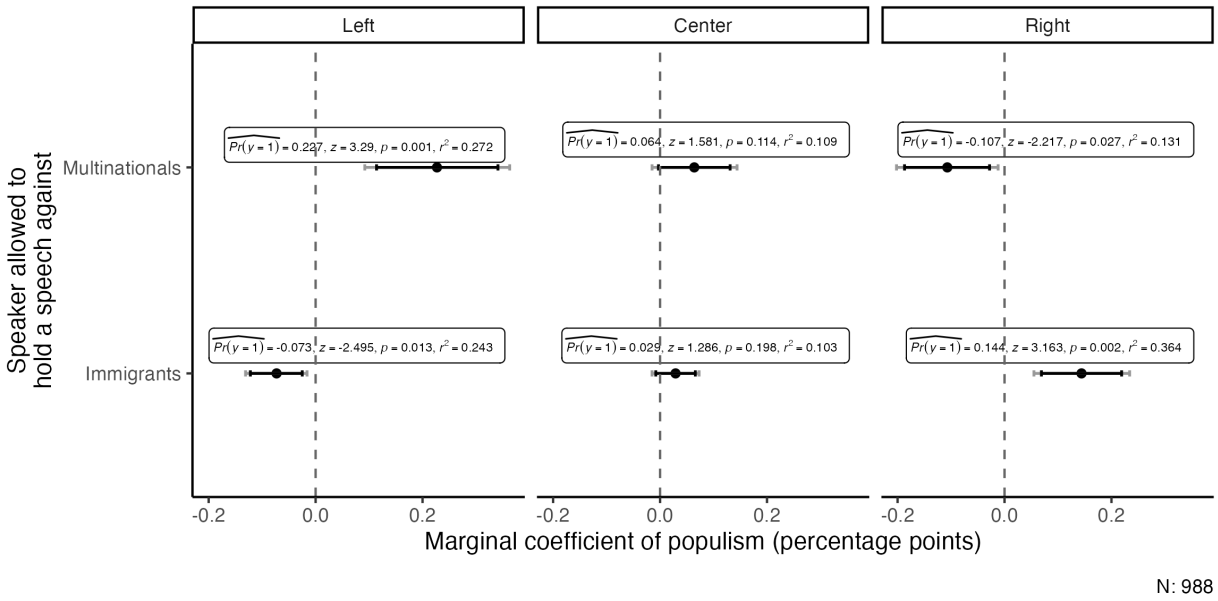

Figure 2: Coefficient of populist attitudes on allowing ideologically motivated speeches, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. The dependent variable is the split-ballot experiment in which the object of criticism varied (i.e., immigrants and multinational corporations). Error bars represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals around the estimates. The full regression table is reported in the Appendix.

In general, the results reveal significant heterogeneity in the patterns of association but substantial similarities in how left- and right-wing populist individuals trade off free speech for their ideological interests[10]. The coefficient for populism is notably larger when instrumental considerations are at play, with both left- and right-wing populists showing tendencies to prioritize their ideological interests over democratic principles.

For right-wing voters (right-hand side of Figure 2), populist attitudes show a strong and statistically significant positive relationship with support for anti-immigrant speech. A one standard deviation increase on the populist attitudes scale is associated with a 14 percentage point increase in the probability of permitting such speeches, holding all other variables constant ($t = 3.2, p \leq 0.05$). Conversely, among the same right-wing individuals, populist attitudes are associated with a decreased probability of allowing speeches against multinational corporations. Each standard deviation on the populist attitudes scale corresponds to a 11 percentage point

[10] We find that L-R ideology alone (left, centre, right) correlates only moderately with the propensity of allowing ideologically motivated speeches, confirming the importance of populist attitudes in explaining the connection between ideological interests and the instrumental application of free speech. Results are reported in the Appendix.

decrease in the probability of permitting speeches against multinational corporations ($t = 2.2, p \leq 0.05$).

Moving to left-wing respondents (left-hand side of Figure 2), the coefficients of populism are similar in magnitude but reveal a reverse pattern. The coefficient is positive and significant when left-wing respondents are asked whether to allow a speech against multinational corporations. Each standard deviation increase on the populist attitudes scale corresponds to a 23 percentage point increase in the probability of permitting such speeches ($t = 3.3, p \leq 0.05$). On the contrary, populist attitudes among left-wing individuals are associated with a higher probability of denying the right to hold speeches against immigrants. A one standard deviation increase in the populist attitudes scale correspond to a 7 percentage point decrease in the probability of thinking that a speech against immigrants should be allowed ($t = 2.5, p \leq 0.05$).

Further, we calculate the explained variance (R^2) of populism. Including populist attitudes in the model increases the R^2 by an average of 8 percentage point among left- and right-wing respondents. This notable increase emphasizes the strong link between populist attitudes and the tendency of individuals to accept or reject a speech based on its ideological content. Finally, it is worth noting the coefficient of populism is smaller and insignificant for centrist voters. This finding aligns with existing literature suggesting that traditional positional issues are central to populist ideology (Silva *et al.* 2023), influencing even decisions about granting or denying fellow citizens the right to speak.

These results demonstrate that, regardless of political orientation, individuals with higher populist attitudes are more likely to trade off democratic liberties for their ideological interests. This finding provides support for both H2a and H2b. Populists do not support freedom of speech unconditionally. Instead, they tend to defend it only when it aligns with their ideological interests and restrict it when it conflicts with their interests. In sum, populist attitudes reinforce the tendency to interpret democratic norms instrumentally based on whether they advance or hinder populist goals and preferences.

Conclusions

This article sheds light on the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy, a subject extensively explored in the theoretical literature on the topic (Canovan 1999; Mény and Surel 2002; Abts and Rummens 2007; Moffitt 2017). Our findings indicate that populist

individuals across the ideological spectrum tend to endorse an unconstrained view of free speech, believing that people should be allowed to say whatever they want, even if it may offend others (Moffitt 2017). However, using a split-ballot experiment in which we randomly manipulated the target of the speech act (i.e., immigrants and multinational corporations), we found that populist individuals tend to instrumentally protect or deny free speech based on their ideological preferences.

This suggests that supporting freedom of speech in normative terms does not always generate more tolerant behavior in situations where respondents' ideological interests are at stake. Right-wing populists are more likely to protect individuals who speak against immigrants, yet they tend to deny free speech when the object of criticism involves multinational corporations. Similarly, left-wing populist individuals are more likely to permit a speech against multinational corporations but are inclined to deny the same right when the speech targets immigrants. This result suggests that pro-business ideology and nativism are so central to left- and right-wing populism that individuals are willing to compromise on fundamental democratic values to safeguard their ideological interests (March 2017; Kokkonen and Linde 2021).

These findings highlight that both left- and right-wing populists apply the same logic in their decision to protect or deny free speech. While previous literature has found left-leaning individuals to be less instrumental compared to their right-wing counterparts (Altemeyer 1996; Davis and Silver 2004; Lindner and Nosek 2009; Sniderman *et al.* 1989), our research suggests a potential shift in the attitudes of left-leaning individuals, particularly among the populist segment of the electorate. This shift reflects a broader trend identified in recent scholarship: the support of core democratic norms among both right- and left-wing citizens is often contingent upon their ideological and partisan interests. (Werner 2020; Simonovits *et al.* 2022; Graham and Svolik 2020; Landwehr and Harms 2020; Krishnarajan 2023).

More generally, our findings suggest that to better understand citizens' commitment to democracy we need to examine the tension between normative principles and instrumental considerations. Existing literature has primarily examined individuals' abstract commitment to democracy (Claassen *et al.* 2024), often overlooking how normative ideals are translated into principled respect for democratic liberties. Supporting democracy, however, involves more than simply endorsing abstract ideas about how democracy should ideally function. Rather, it hinges on whether citizens actually respect democracy even when limiting others' rights might yield

political advantages. By examining how (populist) individuals concretely apply democratic norms, we demonstrate that citizens' understanding of what is democratic and undemocratic is both qualified and instrumental. In doing so, our work shows that populism promotes a form of democratic governance that justifies illiberal and norm-eroding practices—such as restricting others' freedom of expression—in the name of serving "the people" and advancing a particular vision of politics and society.

This phenomenon suggests that citizens have different understandings of democracy, which influence how norms are interpreted, articulated, and, ultimately, applied (König and Siewert 2021; Ferrín and Hernández 2021; Landwehr and Steiner 2017). Depending on how citizens prioritize different aspects of democratic rule (i.e., the liberal versus the democratic pillar), they may either uphold certain rights, viewing them as essential for fulfilling the democratic promise of majority rule, or deny them to avoid legitimizing ideas they consider unjust or oppressive (Orazani *et al.* 2020). As previous scholarship has noted (e.g., Marcus *et al.* 1995), this reflects the paradoxical tendency to "save democracy" by restricting the very rights that democracy is meant to safeguard.

On a more theoretical level, the gap between normative commitment to democratic liberties and their concrete application highlights that "the exercise of rights generates costs"— costs that can be significant enough for citizens to forego or negate democratic rights (Peffley *et al.* 2001, 108–9). This may help us better understand the nature of public support for fundamental democratic norms and its relationship with the rising levels of polarization in developed democracies (McCoy *et al.* 2018). Free expression and tolerance are neither unlimited nor unconditional. Instead, they are in constant tension with other values that can, at times, be considered even more fundamental (Peffley *et al.* 2001). When a political issue becomes salient in voters' minds (e.g., "they steal our jobs"), the relative importance of other considerations (e.g., protection of immigrants' rights) may decrease (Ciuk and Yost 2016; Fossati *et al.* 2022). Convinced that their adversaries hold fundamentally incompatible visions of what is "good" for society, individuals may endorse increasingly undemocratic measures to "defend" democracy from the other side—ultimately exacerbating polarization and deepening intergroup conflict (Şaşmaz *et al.* 2022; Schedler 2023; Stefanelli 2023).

While the findings presented in this article contribute significantly to our understanding of the ambivalent relationship between populism and democratic liberties, they do not, by any means,

provide a strong basis for causal claims. Even with the random manipulation of the speech target, establishing the direction of causality between populism and instrumental considerations remains difficult[11]. Individuals who are inclined to instrumentally apply freedom of speech may be drawn by the rhetoric of populist candidates and parties, thereby becoming more populist themselves.

Our results should also not be interpreted as evidence that populism *always* undermines freedom of expression. We find no evidence that centrist populist individuals—the largest ideological group in our sample—oppose free speech. Furthermore, despite being quite representative of the contemporary left-right divide, our results may be specific to the chosen target of the speech. Left-wing individuals may display a form of "inclusionary intolerance" that involves limiting the rights of those who threaten certain disadvantaged groups (i.e., immigrants) (M. Grossman and Hopkins 2016). Similarly, the higher propensity of right-wing populists to limit a speech against multinational corporations may not extend to other redistributive policies (e.g., capital tax). Further studies should investigate whether instrumental considerations among populist citizens extend to other groups (e.g., Romani people) and issues (e.g., environmental protection).

Despite these limitations, this work establishes that populist ideas matter greatly, not only for understanding the nature of public support for freedom of expression but more generally for the study of democracy. The substantial disagreement over the limits and meaning of certain democratic norms suggests that democratic liberties are inherently subject to a certain degree of instrumentalization (Fish 1994; Rostbøll 2010). For instance, recent survey data show that individuals disagree on whether a speech is hateful and harmful, and therefore, whether it should be legally permitted (Ekins 2017). Investigating how populism challenges the legitimacy of democratic norms and redefines what is (un)democratic may shed light on why and how voters revise democratic principles in light of competing values. Ultimately, this may deepen our understanding of when—and under what conditions—citizens are willing to place a price on fundamental democratic rights.

Notes

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[11] This is due to the fact that we could only randomly manipulate the object of criticism of the speech (i.e., immigrants/multinational corporations) and not respondents' populist attitudes or ideological preferences.

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