Are Democratic Innovations a Cure for Populism? A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: *Research on populism and democratic innovations has flourished in recent years. Democratic innovations aim to increase citizens' involvement in political decision-making processes. Scholars have written about the effects of democratic innovations on political participation and the political attitudes of participants. However, notwithstanding the growing body of research in this area, there is no overview of the effects of democratic innovations in the context of populism. The present literature review focuses on the link between democratic innovations and populism. The aim is to identify key policymaking aspects of democratic innovations, how they address the various challenges of populism, and which threats populism can pose for their successful implementation. In the review, various examples of this phenomenon are shown, indicating the complex nature of this new and important area of research. We find that although democratic innovations can be misused as instruments of populism, recent literature reveals ever stronger interest in their potential to improve the inclusiveness and legitimacy of democratic policymaking.*

Keywords: ***populism, democratic innovations, policymaking, political participation, populist citizens***

Introduction

The rise of populist movements, dwindling trust in political representatives and institutions, declining voter turnout in recent decades, among other developments, are some of the most pressing challenges for liberal democracy today (Inglehart & Norris 2019; Olivas Osuna & Rama 2022; Kriesi et al.

2008). The crisis of democracy can be understood in different ways, e.g.: 1) post-democracy (Crouch 2004) as the decline of participation, representation and legitimacy in representative democracies ever since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s; 2) technocratic tendencies of governance, where decisions are made by a technocratic elite (Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti 2017); and 3) the 'populist moment' (Mouffe 2018), following the 2008 economic crisis caused by the crisis of neoliberal hegemony, in which democratic ideals of equality and popular sovereignty have been under attack. Most research on populism has focused on its definition, causes and rise and, more recently, its impact on governance and public policymaking (Mudde 2004; Moffitt 2016; Dussauge-Laguna 2022).

In the last decade, research into the participatory behaviour of 'populist citizens', i.e. citizens holding strong populist views, has become particularly important with the emergence of several populist parties and politicians in Europe and beyond that appeal to such citizens. Even though these citizens generally support democratic principles, they are dissatisfied with the democracy being practised in their countries. Recent studies in Western democracies show that politically marginalised citizens and those holding populist views are more likely to support and participate in direct and participatory forms of decision-making, which they also see as a means of improving the political system's responsiveness and influencing policymaking processes on the national and local levels (Bos, Van Spanje & Wichgers 2023: 852; Heinisch & Wegscheider 2020).

However, not much attention has been paid to understanding the mechanisms that could protect and strengthen democracy from populist challenges. The literature includes considerable discussion of democratic innovations as mechanisms that seek to allow citizens to become more engaged in political decision-making and in the design and implementation of public policies, empower local communities, and add to the legitimacy of existing institutions. The gradual introduction of such innovations may be seen as a shift in understanding the role of citizens as passive recipients of public services to a more active and concrete role (Löfgren & Agger 2021: 87). Apart from the growing number of quantitative and qualitative studies investigating the effects of democratic innovations on political participation and the political attitudes of participants (Van der Does & Kantorowicz 2021; Michels 2011; Jacobs 2024; Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove 2014; Trüdinger & Bächtiger 2023), a relevant area of recent research deals with the challenges populism brings to policymaking processes (Dussauge-Laguna 2022).

One can find literature reviews on both populism and democratic innovations. Still, their focus is on either the effects of democratic innovations on participants' attitudes without considering populism (Theuwis, Van Ham & Jacobs 2025) or purely on populist attitudes without considering democratic inno-

vations (Marcos-Marne, De Zuniga & Borah 2023). In any case, systematic reviews linking these two phenomena are scarce. Therefore, the contribution of this systematic review to the research is in addressing the mentioned gap by focusing on the possible link between populism and the policymaking aspects of democratic innovations.

The present study provides an overview following an analysis of the literature to date, but without quantitatively examining the data reported in the published literature (Borah 2017). All 22 publications on populism and democratic innovations indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases, published in English between 2017 and 2024, were analysed. This ensures the relevance of the publications, whose selection is described in greater detail in the section on analytical approach.

The results of our analysis allow us to answer two research questions:

(1) How thoroughly has the populism-democratic innovations nexus been investigated?

(2) More importantly, what significance does this link hold in the context of policymaking?

The review shows clusters of literature around three recurring themes. First, a growing number of studies consider how participation in democratic innovations may affect citizens' populist attitudes. Second, another group of contributions focuses on the deliberative and policymaking dimensions of democratic innovations, including their democratic potential and vulnerability to becoming instrumentalised. The third part of the literature explores the role of social movements and movement-based forms of participation in processes of democratic renewal and institutional contestation. The structure of the article reflects these three themes emerging from the reviewed material, which together capture the main ways in which the populism–democratic innovations nexus has been studied.

Accordingly, the article commences with an overview of recent literature examining the relationship between populism and democratic innovations, concentrating on how participation in democratic innovations can influence citizens' populist sentiments. Second, the deliberative aspects of democratic innovations in relation to policymaking are discussed together with the possibility that democratic innovations can be abused by authoritarian and/or populist governments. The third section then demonstrates how some social movements can take advantage of democratic innovations to reform or challenge political institutions and empower communities. Finally, in the conclusion, the findings are reflected upon and suggestions are made for future research so as to close pertinent research gaps that remain within this topic.

The effects of democratic innovations on populism

Populism is a complex, elusive and controversial term, but has no standard definition. In recent years, the ideational approach has prevailed, defining populism as a set of political ideas about the structure of power in society. The decisive factor is the antagonism within society between two homogeneous groups – the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' – as well as politics as an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2004). The ideational approach is associated with three other important political ideas: 1) anti-elitism; 2) a preference for unrestricted popular sovereignty; and 3) a belief in the homogeneity and greatness of the people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Schulz et al. 2018). In the literature, these 'pillars' of populism are often linked with some of the biggest challenges to democracy today, such as declining trust in political institutions, poor quality of government, disregard for expert-recommended policy measures, etc. (De Cleen 2018; Keefer, Scartascini & Vlaicu 2019). The ideational approach considers populism neither a homogeneous construct nor a uniform ideology, but rather a thin-centred ideology since it only offers a basic lens for interpreting public life rather than a comprehensive vision of how the public sphere should be organised (Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 2; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). It accordingly permits the consideration of different political ideas identified as distinct, albeit interrelated, aspects of populist ideology (Schulz et al. 2018; Hameleers & De Vreese 2020). The approach is thus suitable for observing citizens' populist positions and attitudes, along with their preferences and patterns of political participation (Marcos-Marne, De Zuniga & Borah 2023).

For conceptual clarity, it is important to explain that Mudde's ideational approach to populism implies a constructivist view of populism in which categories like 'the people' and 'the elite' are not pre-given social entities, but are politically constructed and ideologically variable. Seen from this perspective, the central analytical question is not which social groups 'the people' supposedly represents, but the way 'the people is discursively constructed and filled with meaning' (Kim & Mondon 2024: 988). Here, Mudde's ideational approach shares an important affinity with Laclau's (2005) discursive theory, which understands populism as a political logic that constructs 'the people' through antagonism with a dominant power bloc. Laclau (2005) makes this constructivist point even more explicitly, arguing that 'the people' does not merely reflect a pre-existing popular identity and instead actively brings that identity into being (Kim & Mondon 2024: 988). In the section on democracy-strengthening social movements, we draw conceptually on the Laclauian perspective on populism.

As noted in the introduction, recent research has looked at populist tendencies or attitudes held by citizens and how they impact policymaking processes. Democratic innovations bring a spotlight to this nexus. They are 'processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance,

and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence' (Elstub & Escobar 2019: 14). They can offer citizens the opportunity to participate directly in decision-making processes and influence policy outcomes. Democratic innovations thereby address the lack of inclusivity, popular control, transparency and political trust that often fuel populism (Theuwis 2024; Smith 2009; Abrial et al. 2022).

However, there is not a single set of democratic innovations since they vary with respect to how much actual influence they give citizens over decision-making and policy outcomes. Mechanisms of direct democracy, such as referendums, allow citizens to decide directly on concrete policy questions (Altman 2010). The literature chiefly concentrates on binding forms of referendums rather than consultative referendums, in which governments have no obligation to follow/implement the decisions expressed by voters (Smith 2009). Participatory instruments like participatory budgeting can also give citizens a meaningful influence, especially when they are able to debate on and determine the use of public funds. Still, this depends on the extent to which citizens' policy proposals are respected and implemented afterwards, as shown in more detail in the section on democratic innovations and populist attitudes of citizens (Smith 2009; Wampler 2012). Finally, with deliberative mechanisms, like mini-publics, citizens provide in-depth recommendations to policymakers that typically are not binding, with their role being more to provide citizens an opportunity to make considered decisions. Deliberative democracy thus reinforces the dimension of reasoned judgement (Smith 2009).

Analytical approach

For the literature review, we selected all articles published in English from the Web of Science and the Scopus core collections that contain 'populism' and 'democratic innovations' in the title, abstract, keywords or Keywords Plus (all search fields are available on the website). We collected the data in January 2025 using the search function of Web of Science and Scopus without any time restriction. This search yielded an initial sample of 28 results in Web of Science and 45 results in Scopus. All articles were then checked to see if they actually deal with populism and democratic innovations. We excluded 51 results that merely mention populism and/or democratic innovations without further theoretical/empirical explanations, as well as those from other disciplines which are thus not relevant for our study (e.g. media or film studies, criminology, technology, etc.). We further excluded results that contain book introductions irrelevant to our study or those to which we did not have access. A few theoretical articles from disciplines other than pure political science (e.g. law and religion), but which make a valuable contribution to the conceptual articulation and

elaboration of populism and democratic innovations, were also included in the sample (Landau 2020; Stanley 2020). The final sample comprised 22 relevant publications; 11 of these were duplicates that appeared in both Scopus and Web of Science, a further six in Scopus and five in Web of Science. We collected information about the subject area, type of journal, year of publication, and origin of the corresponding author. Finally, we carefully read all the articles and noted the methods used, the empirical or theoretical focus, and the main results. Seventeen results were journal articles, two were book chapters, one was a book, one was a printed article and one was a review article.

The reviewed research should be understood not only in terms of publication types, but also in terms of where it appeared. A large share of the literature was published in journals such as *Politics and Governance*, *Political Studies*, *European Political Science Review*, *Contemporary Politics*, etc., suggesting that the topic has been developed primarily within political science (12 publications), along with publications from the fields of sociology (1), government (1), geography (1), politics and international relations (1), administrative sciences (1), law (1) and religion (1). In addition, the geographical focus of the reviewed studies is uneven. Of the results where the latter was evident, 14 analysed European cases and four discussed international cases. Furthermore, nine results analysed national cases, six dealt with local cases, and one with a provincial case. The literature most frequently discusses cases from Europe, with a noticeable focus on Western European countries such as the Netherlands (4 cases),[1] France[2] and Spain,[3] while other European contexts, particularly those from Eastern Europe, remain less visible. Highlighting both publication venues and country cases helps clarify the disciplinary profile and geographical concentration of the field. Most (17) authors of the articles come from Europe, followed by three from Australia, one from the USA, one from Latin America, and some articles have international co-authorship. Most articles (6) on populism and democratic innovations were published in 2024, two articles were published in 2023, three in 2022, three in 2021, three in 2020, one in 2019, two in 2018 and one in 2017. These results reveal a Eurocentric focus on the topic and a small, yet growing, interest in it in recent years.

Methodologically, 12 articles had an empirical focus and eight were theoretical in nature. We found six quantitative analyses (four journal articles, one

1 Power to the People? How Participatory Budgets Affect Citizens' Populist Attitudes (Theuwis 2024); Through the looking glass: the effect of participation in a participatory budget on citizens' populist attitudes (Theuwis & Kindt 2024); Have a little faith in deliberation? Examining the effect of participation in a citizens' assembly on populist attitudes (Jacobs 2024); Populists and citizens' assemblies: Caught between strategy and principles (Jacobs 2023).

2 Control or participate? The Yellow Vests' democratic aspirations through mixed methods analysis (Abrial et al. 2022).

3 Questioning European Democracy? Versions of Representation in the 15M Movement and Podemos (Eklundh 2022).

book chapter, one printed article). Cross-sectional surveys were used in three articles; experiments were used in one article, and mixed methods in two articles. Five of the qualitative articles were case studies and one article presented a thematic analysis. The others were theoretical. All three units (two articles, one book chapter), which were based on survey data, dealt with populist attitudes, in particular how participation in democratic innovations affects citizens' attitudes, and explained the concept of 'populist citizens'. They relied on the scale developed by Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014) to measure populist attitudes, which is unidimensional, made up of three interdependent dimensions (populism, pluralism, elitism), has high internal coherence, and is recognised as capturing the concept of populism well (Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove 2014; Theuwis 2024). Most case studies observe the emergence of (populist) social movements on the local, national and international levels and their link to democratic innovations (Antonopoulos 2017; Wanvik & Haarstad 2021; Mercea & Mosca 2021). Some focus more on distinguishing 'thin' from 'thick' varieties of populism and how 'thick' forms can actually foster democratic innovations (Dzur & Hendriks 2018), while others examine exclusionary vs. inclusive forms of populism and further expose the link between populism and citizens' influence on policymaking (Peters & Pierre 2020). One article is based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews to show how political actors can undermine deliberative practices (Oross & Tap 2021).

Figure 1 illustrates the data collection and selection process through a PRISMA flow diagram, a visualisation also used in a meta-analysis conducted by Theuwis, Van Ham and Jacobs (2025).

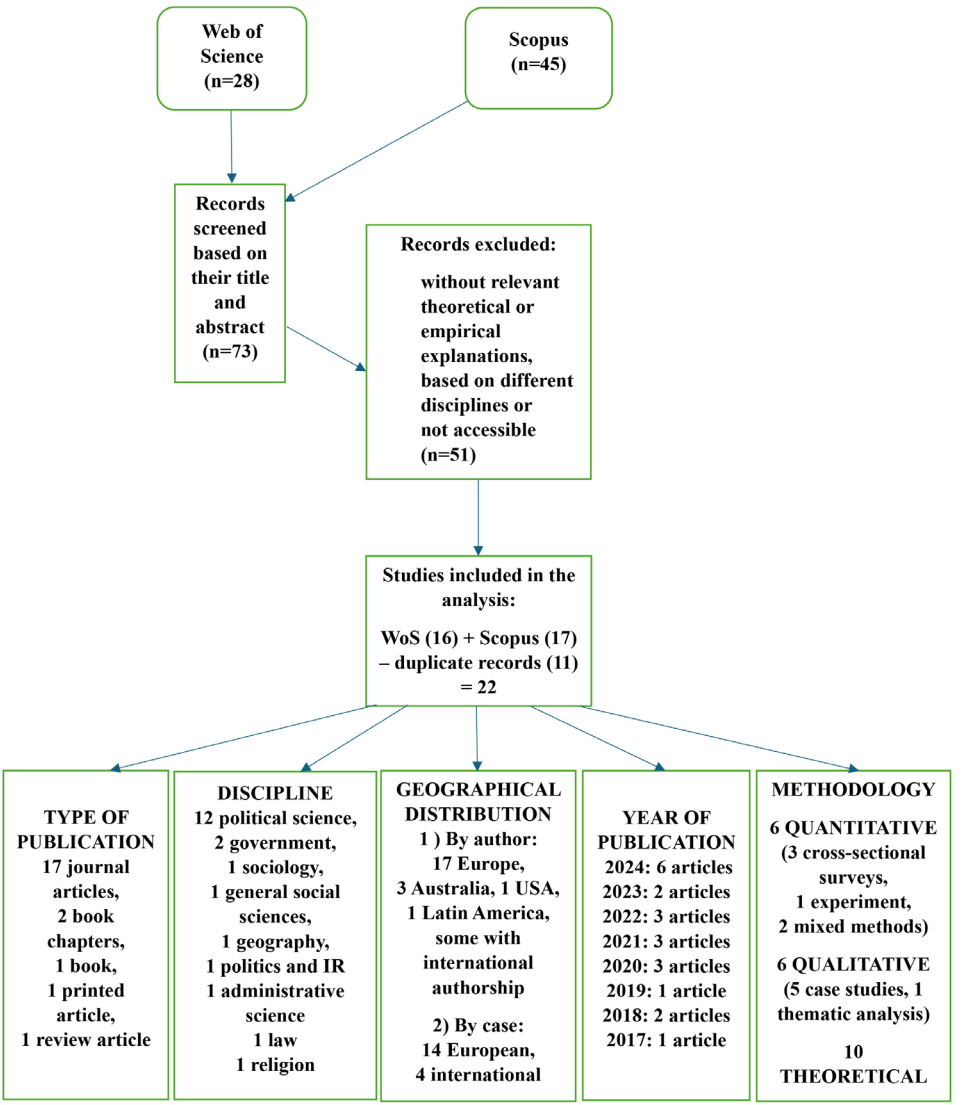
Results

Our reading of all the texts in the sample showed that they could be broadly placed in four categories (or approaches) concerning the link between the democratic innovations and populism. These categories are: 1) a group of articles examining the effects of citizen participation in democratic innovations on populist attitudes; 2) articles focused specifically on deliberative contexts of the issue; 3) articles discussing the role of social movements in the context of populism and democratic innovations; and 4) articles on the institutional aspects of the issue. These categories overlap, and a few articles could be placed in more than one category.

Democratic innovations and populist attitudes of citizens

A number of recent articles attempt to link the fields of populism and democratic innovations by concentrating on how participation in democratic innovations influences citizens' populist attitudes. They conceptualise populism as a phe-

Figure 1: Data collection and selection process presented by way of a PRISMA flow diagram



Source: Author's own elaboration.

nomenon which thrives 'where the gap experienced between the ideal and practice of democracy becomes too wide' and see it as 'a major contemporary expression of the democratic malaise' (Theuwis 2024: 1–2). The authors draw on the ideational approach to populism – already explained as a thin-centred ideology in the section on the effects of democratic innovations on populism –

and stress that from its perspective representative democracy is seen as being controlled by corrupt elites who silence the will of ordinary people. In this view, citizens are largely excluded from decision-making, whereas illegitimate elites make key political choices and undermine popular control (Theuwis 2024: 2; Mudde 2004). Building on the premise that greater citizen participation in political decision-making could bring the democratic ideal and democratic practice closer together, democratic innovations can thus increase inclusivity and popular control and strengthen democracy (Theuwis 2024; Theuwis & Kindt 2024).

Democratic innovations are based on a direct democratic (referendum, initiative, recall, etc.), deliberative (citizens' jury, deliberative survey, consensus conferences, etc.), or participatory (participatory budgeting) approach, as was explained in the section on the effects of democratic innovations on populism. The first two aim to increase the number of decision-makers (Budge 1996; Fung & Wright 2003), while the latter aims to deepen the quality of decisions by opening up more space for discussion (Gutmann & Thompson 1996). Although instruments of direct and deliberative democracy (such as democratic innovations) are not usually discussed in the context of populism, various authors stress their inherently populist character and aspects. The most obvious populist feature of these democratic instruments is that they 'allow the public to legislate without having to involve the formal institutions of government, the public bureaucracy, and democratic representative institutions' and thus can be characterised as the 'ultimate populist weapon' (Peters & Pierre 2020: 933).

At the same time, participation in deliberative processes can give citizens a voice and the feeling that they are heard by other citizens and by politicians to whom they address their ideas and proposals. Deliberation refers to any process 'through which individuals engage in discussions motivated by the desire to find proper solutions for specific issues' and is characterised by 'balanced, comprehensive, inclusive, conscientious, informative and substantive discussions' (Oross & Tap 2021: 805). In this way, it can help alleviate the sense of unresponsiveness that is often seen as a cause of populism. Giving citizens a voice and the opportunity to influence policy also improves the legitimacy of the local political process (Jacobs 2024; Theuwis & Kindt 2024). Even though the articles in our sample are largely concerned with deliberative types of democratic innovations, direct democracy is also briefly discussed (see Peters & Pierre 2020: 933).

The authors of articles examining the populism–democratic innovations relationship are especially interested in the practices of participatory budgeting in which citizens have decision-making power over allocation of part of the local budget (Theuwis 2024: 9). They emphasise that participatory budgeting is 'particularly suited to meeting populist demands because it is designed to give citizens real influence over policymaking' (Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 1). Participatory budgeting processes are platforms that enable better communication

between citizens, civil servants and local politicians. This communication allows citizens to come into direct contact with local authorities, which increases the sense of accessibility and limits the role of elites (Theuwis 2024: 7; Jacobs 2023: 358). Research has shown (Theuwis & Kindt 2024) that when interaction between political actors and citizens is respectful it exerts a positive effect on how citizens view the authorities because it increases trust in local political actors.

Theuwis and Kindt (2024: 5) refer to the example of participatory budgeting in New York where participation saw respect grow for local council members. In addition, citizens with strong populist attitudes, 'populist citizens', can experience a sense of control by the people through (successfully implemented) participatory budgeting processes, which lowers their populist attitudes. However, this only happens if citizens' policy proposals are respected and implemented. The authorities not implementing citizens' proposals in an adequate manner could exacerbate the existing mistrust and populist sentiments could even increase (Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 5).

The lack of a direct impact, transparency, inclusivity and clarity during participatory budgeting processes are mentioned in the literature as important factors in the rise of populist attitudes. Leaving participants' expectations unmet can cause feelings of disappointment and frustration with the authorities' actions during the process. One of the biggest mistakes while conducting participatory budgeting is not giving all citizens equal opportunities to participate. Inefficient political decisions can ensue if the participating citizens are not representative. Further, imposing barriers on the participation of marginalised groups could reinforce their firm belief in the insurmountable antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' (Theuwis 2024: 15; Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 5).

There are also a few studies investigating whether populist citizens are genuinely more supportive of referenda, whether they participate in them more frequently than less populist citizens, what motivates them to participate in them, and how they then vote (Jacobs, Akkerman & Zaslove 2018; Werner & Jacobs 2022). Referendums are viewed as a mechanism for returning power to the people. They offer a more immediate way of expressing the popular will and can serve as an instrument for challenging political elites perceived to be corrupt. In this sense, referendums align closely with the three core dimensions of populism: they are centred on the people; they limit elite power; and they provide a tool for holding corrupt elites accountable, at least to some degree (Jacobs, Akkerman & Zaslove 2018: 520; Mudde 2007: 152).

As mentioned in the introduction, a range of survey-based studies conducted across Western democracies indicate that citizens who feel politically excluded are actually more likely to favour direct and participatory forms of decision-making (Bos, Van Spanje & Wichgers 2023; Heinisch & Wegscheider 2020). Van der Does and Kantorowicz (2021) suggest two main logics to explain this phenomenon. According to the 'anti-establishment' logic, the higher support

for democratic innovations among citizens who feel they are excluded is unconditional as citizens who are typically politically excluded would likely choose anything other than the mechanisms of established representative democracy. Second, the 'instrumental' logic suggests that politically excluded citizens will express greater support for democratic innovations than other citizens only when these innovations benefit them, enable them to control the process, or guarantee outcomes favourable for them. Nevertheless, their analysis of Dutch citizens' preferences for participatory budgeting found no support for the anti-establishment logic and partial support for the instrumental logic (Van der Does & Kantorowicz 2021). Further, after studying data on the 2018 Dutch referendum on the Intelligence and Security Services Act 2017, Werner and Jacobs (2022: 1415) established that citizens with populist attitudes expressed less instrumental and more principle-driven support for referendums. They were also more willing to accept the outcome, even if it was not in their favour (ibid.).

Articles in this category examine populism on the level of individual citizens and measure citizens' populist attitudes using the scale developed by Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014). The scale is recognised and well established as it encompasses the sub-dimensions of populism and their interrelationships and 'is most consistent with the theoretical holistic notion of populism as a lens through which (populist) citizens perceive reality' (Jacobs 2024: 8; Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 3).

Deliberative aspects of democratic innovations and populism

Recent research shows that deliberation could lead to more transparent and inclusive representative institutions given the challenges posed by post-materialist societies with political agendas in place that require greater citizen participation in the political process (Oross & Tap 2021). Deliberative democracy offers both an attractive normative ideal and an evaluative framework able to 'help guide and assess our attempts to reconcile the republican promises of democracy – autonomy, equality and rationality – with liberalism; the rule of law and necessary representation' (Landwehr & Schäfer 2023). The essential assumption of the deliberative approach to policymaking is 'that the people, given the opportunity to discuss policy, will produce good or at least popular answers', which corresponds to the general populist rhetoric of the 'virtuous' and 'rational' people (Peters & Pierre 2020: 935).

The mechanisms of democratic innovations 'are designed to allow the public to control policymaking and even implementation, bypassing the institutions that are assumed to be controlled by a less virtuous elite' (Peters & Pierre 2020: 935). Although the decisions made via such mechanisms do not necessarily result in wise or effective policy, they do reflect the unmediated will of the electorate (ibid.). According to Smith's framework in his book *Democratic*

Innovations (2009), 'all democratic innovations aim to realise the following democratic goods: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, and transparency' (Flinders, Wood & Corbett 2019: 150).

Democratic innovations often aim to boost the participation of citizens who are absent from traditional political arenas and do not otherwise participate in politics or belong to a marginalised group. Such innovations should involve 'citizens who are dissatisfied with the current political system (and traditional channels of participation) in order to get critical input into the policymaking process and to increase political equality' (Karlsson, Johannessen & Sønderskov 2022: 67). The authors of a Swedish survey on how young people viewed local democratic innovations found that these innovations' legitimacy depends on the representativeness of participants with respect to the demos overall, and on the level of support for democratic innovations among non-participants (Karlsson, Johannessen & Sønderskov 2022: 72).

The literature contains frequent mentions of the possibility that democratic innovations/deliberative practices have been used to the advantage of certain political actors in countries that have experienced democratic backsliding in the last decade (Oross & Tap 2021). Deliberative, yet also participatory or direct-democratic practices employed by authoritarian governments to establish a form of consultation with the public in an attempt to legitimise their actions and appear more democratic are referred to by scholars as 'consultative authoritarianism' (Peters & Pierre 2020: 936). With such practices, although citizens and officials formally participate in substantive discussions, those in power exercise considerable control over these processes, and deliberation proceeds within the strict limits set by political authorities (Oross & Tap 2021: 806). However, using the term authoritarian in the context of democratic innovations rooted in deliberative practice is problematic, since such innovations require the conditions mentioned in the section on deliberative aspects of democratic innovations and populism: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, and transparency (Flinders, Wood & Corbett 2019: 150). As noted above, these conditions are missing from the consultation processes in question. Hence, even though Peters and Pierre (2020: 936) acknowledge that 'consultative authoritarianism may appear just [sic] window-dressing on an authoritarian regime', they emphasise that certain elements of populist ideology can still be seen in them. If these elements were absent, there would be little reason for the regime to engage in such consultations at all. Public participation in these processes can serve several purposes: measuring public opinion on policies, collecting useful information, and reinforcing the regime's legitimacy. It may also give the illusion that ordinary people have a role in ensuring the success of the programme, even if that role is largely one of co-optation. In this sense, it may represent a form of top-down populism, albeit it can still be understood as populist (Peters & Pierre 2020: 936).

Examples of hijacking direct and deliberative democracy practices include evidence from Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Slovakia (Oross & Tap 2021). In recent literature, Hungary is especially in the spotlight. In 2005, the radical populist party Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) developed the National Consultation as a deliberative practice to strengthen the party's embeddedness in society and introduced it following its election victory in 2010. As part of the National Consultation, the government posts questionnaires about political issues to citizens at home. Even though the National Consultations can be seen as a deliberative practice because they meet several characteristics of a deliberation (i.e. they are informative in nature, community-based in sentiment and provide valuable contributions) and give citizens the opportunity to participate in discussions on issues that they determine, they are instrumentalised and manipulated by Fidesz. The National Consultations became a tool of Fidesz to legitimise the anti-European positions of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and to reinforce xenophobic attitudes and a fear of migrants (Oross & Tap 2021: 811).

Another phenomenon complicating the legitimacy of deliberative innovations is technocratic governance since it 'eliminates the need for innovations to be democratic' (Flinders, Wood & Corbett 2019: 155). Some scholars have suggested that technocracy can be understood as 'policy without politics', whereby depoliticisation is problematic because it 'violates the democratic good of "inclusivity", which envisages the need "for presence and voice" in large parts of society in order to achieve equality' (ibid.). Yet, populism can also be understood as 'politics without policy' (Yerramsetti 2021). Populism and technocracy are in a complementary relationship as they advance a 'unitary, non-pluralistic, unmediated and unaccountable vision of the general interest of society' (Yerramsetti 2021: 917). The European Union (EU) has been portrayed as 'the ultimate technocratic project' because it encompasses numerous technocratic institutions, including the European Central Bank, the European Court of Justice and various other independent regulatory agencies (Reiser & Hebenstreit 2020: 569). Nevertheless, recent literature highlights the EU's efforts to engage ordinary citizens via participatory mechanisms such as online petitions, policy consultations, the European Citizens' Initiative, the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2022) and the European Citizens' Panels (which were initially part of the Conference on the Future of Europe before becoming a broader tool on their own). From this perspective, the EU can only become truly democratic if it develops participatory mechanisms which involve a critical mass of citizens and allow them to shape EU policies. This view supports the use of democratic innovations as effective tools for improving representation and deliberation (García-Guitián & Bouza Garcia 2024: 4).

Despite the above-mentioned potential dangers and obstacles to the successful implementation of democratic innovations, their deliberative contribution to the deepening of democratic processes is acknowledged in recent literature.

Such deliberative mechanisms promote respectful interaction between citizens, civil servants and local politicians as well as access to influence by bringing more voices and interests into decision-making processes, potentially changing the way citizens interact with the political system (Stanley 2020; Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 5). In the literature, democratic innovations were described by Jacobs (2024: 12) as 'cures for the ills of democracy'.

Democracy-strengthening social movements

Populist politicians and populist movements have usually been associated with the undermining of deliberative and inclusive principles of representative government, exclusionary prejudice, or racism ('thin' varieties of populism). Still, recent literature suggests that some forms of populism may offer opportunities for democratic renewal (Dzur & Hendriks 2018).

'Thick' populism 'encourages popular participation through the organising strategies of citizen movements that work to circumvent, challenge and reform political institutions' (Dzur & Hendriks 2018: 335). Thick populist movements offer democracy-enhancing and trust-building forms of organisation and political practices with the intention of modifying or changing the practices and conventions of representative government. Some scholars suggest that successful, citizen-led, democratic innovations may possess certain 'thick populist' dimensions, 'such as community organising, empowering everyday people, building civic capacity and collectively solving problems (sometimes in collaboration with state and market actors)' (Dzur & Hendriks 2018: 335, 340). The authors discuss examples of thick populist organisations, institutions, campaigns and thick populist efforts by everyday citizens (ibid.). While discussing progressive social movements and grassroots initiatives, some authors mentioned above shift conceptually from the ideational approach toward Laclau and Mouffe's perspective on populism (Eklundh 2022). With this approach, populism is understood as a mode of articulating political identities that are not inherently tied to either left- or right-wing ideologies. Rather than preceding such identities, ideologies emerge through their articulation (Eklundh 2022: 336). In her influential book *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe (2018: 16) points to political movements Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain as examples of actors 'implementing a form of populism aimed at the recovery and deepening of democracy'. These examples are examined in greater detail below in relation to the more recent literature.

It is vital that social movements use deliberative and participatory practices not only for internal purposes, 'but also as a means to engage with society at large' (della Porta & Felicetti 2022). Democratic innovations and the mobilisation of movements 'can be depicted as efforts to run counter the crisis of legitimacy in Western democracy and the disappointment of a large number of citizens with the representative model' (Abrial et al. 2022: 481–82).

Social movements occasionally develop into movement parties that bridge the concepts of 'party' and 'movement'. Movement parties are political parties with the goal of competing in elections and have a clear hierarchical structure, yet they also retain the characteristics of social movements. They use non-electoral means, such as bottom-up decision-making through assemblies and grassroots initiatives (progressive movement parties) or plebiscitary forms of engagement (radical-right parties), to promote or oppose specific social and policy changes (Santos & Mercea 2025: 169; Eklundh 2022). Movement parties hold varying ideological orientations: green/left-libertarian, far-right, eclectic and centrist. Eklundh (2022: 336) discusses the case of the Podemos movement party in Spain, noting that 'Podemos could be seen as the transition of the 15M movement to a more hierarchical and leadership-oriented organisation' because it 'has increasingly adopted the characteristics of the mainstream European political party with a centralised decision-making body and hierarchical structure'. Similarly, other left-wing movement parties in Europe, for example Syriza in Greece and Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal, have 'channelled the large street mobilisations against austerity policies in these countries into electoral support' (Santos & Mercea 2025: 171). The latter authors also note that radical right-wing movement parties in Western Europe, such as the German Alternative for Germany and the UK Independence Party, 'capitalised on the growing resentment against migration in some sectors of the population for the institutional gain' and that 'eclectic' movement parties such as the Italian Five Star Movement are focusing on both social policies and anti-immigration discourses (Santos & Mercea 2025: 172).

Previous research observed the use of 'populist communication' by many movement parties, which resonates with voters who tend towards populist attitudes. Supporters of far-right movement parties are primarily nativist and anti-immigration, whereas voters of green/left-liberal parties mainly express environmental concerns (Santos & Mercea 2025: 174). However, these issues can be politicised from several different positions – both left-wing and right-wing populist movements, which 'leads to questioning the legitimacy of both the process and substance of mainstream policymaking' (Wanvik & Haarstad 2021: 2096). Consequently, populism questions both the *content* of policies and the *form* of politics (Wanvik & Haarstad 2021: 2101).

Conclusion and suggestions for future research

In the presented systematic literature review, we analysed 22 relevant English-language publications indexed in Web of Science and Scopus that address the populism-democratic innovations relationship. By searching in all available fields, we aimed to capture all relevant aspects of that relationship. Our sample

proved to be quite exhaustive as we managed to identify several key thematic strands within the literature.

The systematic literature review shows that the relationship between democratic innovations and populism is complex and ambivalent. Rather than functioning as a general cure for populism, democratic innovations can both challenge and reinforce populist politics, subject to their design, implementation and political context. The main contribution of this article lies in showing that the existing literature systematically distinguishes at least three different dynamics that link democratic innovations and populism. The findings challenge the commonly held assumption that democratic innovations constitute a straightforward corrective to populism.

The review suggests that participatory and deliberative democratic innovations are most likely to counter populist politics when they provide citizens with meaningful opportunities for voice, inclusion and influence over policymaking. Under such conditions, they may reduce the perceptions of exclusion and unresponsiveness that often underpin populist attitudes. This, however, represents only one side of the relationship. At the same time, the literature shows that direct-democratic instruments like referendums may resonate strongly with populist demands for unmediated popular sovereignty, which helps explain why some democratic innovations may unintentionally reinforce, rather than counter, populist dynamics. Participatory and deliberative practices can also be instrumentalised by populist or authoritarian actors. Democratic innovations should therefore be understood not as inherently democratic remedies, but instead as institutional mechanisms whose effects remain conditional and politically contested.

Overall, the reviewed research indicates that democratic innovations can challenge certain dimensions of populist politics, particularly those related to political exclusion, mistrust and weak responsiveness, albeit only to a limited extent and in specific institutional conditions. Taken together, these findings should be interpreted with some caution: that is, several limitations to this review should be noted. First, the study does not offer a quantitative synthesis of the literature, but a qualitative overview of the main analytical patterns in the field. Second, the review includes only English-language publications, which may have excluded relevant scholarship in other languages and thereby introduced a language bias. The described limitation is especially relevant given that both democratic innovations and populist politics are highly context-dependent and very important in a field shaped by national and regional political contexts, where non-English research may offer different empirical cases and conceptual perspectives. Similarly, the strong concentration of reviewed studies on European cases further limits the broader generalisability of the findings. A more linguistically and geographically diverse corpus might yield a broader variety of cases, research traditions and interpretations of both populism and demo-

cratic innovations. Finally, the review may also be affected by publication bias since studies with null or weak findings may be less likely to appear in indexed outlets. As the review is not quantitative, this potential bias cannot be assessed statistically, yet remains relevant while interpreting the findings.

These limitations point to several directions for future research. Future work should therefore pay greater attention to the long-term effects of participation, more clearly differentiate between types of democratic innovations, and address the current geographical imbalance of the literature. Comparative work across regions would be especially valuable for assessing whether the patterns identified in predominantly European scholarship also appear in other political and institutional contexts.

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