

# Freedom for All? Populism and the Instrumental Support of Freedom of Speech<sup>1</sup>

Popular support for freedom of speech is generally high. At the same time, citizens are often willing to censor speech acts they do not agree with. We investigate this paradox, conceptually and empirically, by examining the relationship between populism and freedom of speech. We find that populist individuals display higher support for free speech in its principled and abstract form. Yet, at the same time, they are willing to restrict the rights of their ideological opponents. Left-wing populist individuals are more likely to allow a speech against multinational corporations, yet they tend to deny the same right for a speech against immigrants. On the contrary, right-wing populist individuals are more likely to tolerate a speech against immigrants but less likely to do so for a speech against multinational corporations. These results underline the tendency of populist individuals on both sides of the ideological spectrum to instrumentally trade off free speech for their ideological interests.

“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), individuals are often willing to restrict other individuals’ right to express themselves freely (Petersen et al. 2011). Already sixty years ago, Prothro and Grigg studied this paradox by showing that the acceptance of free speech is generally high but “breaks down completely [when] broad principles are translated into more specific propositions” regarding the rights of specific groups (1960, 286).

This paper investigates a potential source of this discrepancy. Using a survey question and a split ballot experiment, we test whether populist individuals support freedom of speech in its abstract form but, at the same time, are willing to restrict other peoples’ rights based on their ideological interests. We argue that, in spite of a general commitment to abstract democratic values, populist individuals understand and apply these values in an instrumental way that favours their subjective understanding of what is “good” for democracy and society at large (Fish 1994; Krishnarajan 2022), a phenomenon that some scholars have called democratic hypocrisy (Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022).

In general terms, democratic hypocrisy can be defined as the tendency to endorse certain democratic values in abstract terms while, at the same time, applying them in a particular way

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that favours an individual's interests and ideas about politics. We can observe this hypocritical understanding of democracy in the discourse of populist parties. Populist leaders tend to promote themselves as the “uncompromising defenders” of free speech and as a safeguard for “the liberty of the individual that [they] deem central to the liberal democracy” (T. Akkerman 2005, 337). Even so, the liberal defence of democratic principles is often instrumentally used to advance a vision of democracy and society that justifies the importance of certain values over others (Moffitt 2017; Griffin 2000). For instance, in Europe, right-wing populist parties have objected to the right to wear the Islamic headscarf on the grounds of protecting freedom of expression and women's rights (T. Akkerman 2005) but also justified limitations to freedom of speech for ethnic and religious minorities to defend Enlightenment values and core democratic principles (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; Moffitt 2017).

Recent research suggests that this paradoxical view of democracy stems from the fact that people disagree on what democratic liberties are or what they should entail (Ignatieff 2022; Landwehr and Steiner 2017). We investigate this possibility by testing whether populist individuals understand freedom of speech not as a universal right but as a qualified and conditional norm. We argue that when an issue is considered fundamental to the empowerment of the people, populist individuals tend to defend speech acts in the name of democracy. On the contrary, when a speech appears to undermine the will of the people, speech limitations are seen as legitimate and, thus, certain speeches can be negated to safeguard the interests of the people. In other words, free speech is seen as a counter-hegemonic device that is protected or negated to advance the legitimate interests of “the people” and, thus, protect democracy (Mouffe 2005; Moffitt 2017).

Belgium is taken as a case study for two important reasons. First, Belgium has witnessed the success of one of the strongest populist radical right parties in Europe and has recently seen the success of left-wing populism. This allows us to test whether populist individuals from both sides of the ideological spectrum consider freedom and equality subordinated to other equally (or more) important values (Mudde 1995). Second, most of the literature on the topic has focussed on the United States (among others, Sniderman et al. 1989; Prothro and Grigg 1960; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022; Graham and Svobik 2020). Due to the US two-party extreme majoritarianism and partisan polarisation, the ‘hate and fear’ towards the positions of the rival party may generate stronger disdain for democracy (G. Grossman et al. 2022). On the contrary, Belgium has a proportional, highly fragmented, and

volatile multi-party system with a substantial variation in how ideologically close or distant political competitors are (Erkel and Turkenburg 2022). Further, the programmatic agenda and the position towards democracy of populist and mainstream parties in Belgium reflect those found in many other European countries. This enables us to provide valuable insights into the mechanisms behind democratic hypocrisy that are applicable, at least partially, to similar European countries.

We find that populism is associated with support for both abstract and situational freedom of speech but 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 in its abstract form. At the same time, we find that affinity with populist ideas reinforces the tendency to differentiate between speech acts that align with or oppose respondents' ideological interests. Left-wing populist individuals are more likely to think that an individual should be allowed to hold a speech against multinational corporations. At the same time, they tend to deny the very same right for an individual holding a speech against immigrants. For right-wing individuals, the pattern is reversed. That is, populist attitudes are related to a higher tolerance for a speech against immigrants and, at the same time, a lower tolerance for a speech against multinational corporations.

The key contribution of this article is twofold. First, the acceptance of democratic norms has mainly been studied by focusing on background characteristics (e.g., education) (J. L. Gibson 2013), political affiliations (e.g., party identity) (Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022), or policy preferences (Graham and Svolik 2020). By bridging the literature on populism with the one on democratic hypocrisy, this paper shows that populism qualifies how citizens interpret and apply democratic norms. Second, this paper provides evidence that populist attitudes are an additional relevant component to understanding the trade off between democratic rights and ideological interests: populist individuals tend to endorse free speech in its abstract form, yet its concrete application is contingent on whether certain policies, actions, or behaviours are considered good for the people and, thus, for democracy at large (Urbinati 2019).

### **Populism and Democratic Norms**

Populism is a profoundly contested concept, with scholars having defined it as a “thin-centred” ideology (Mudde 2004), a rhetorical style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007), or a political strategy to mobilise and attract voters' support (Weyland 2001). In this paper, we subscribe to the ideational

approach, which defines populism as an ideological framework (or discourse) for thinking about politics centred around the antagonism between a morally superior in-group (“us, the people”) and an evil’ ruling block’ (“them, the enemy of the people”) that is responsible for frustrating the demands of the former (Hawkins et al. 2018). An important aspect of the ideational approach is that it conceives of populism to be orthogonal to left-right or liberal-conservative ideology, making it highly relevant to study whether populist individuals tend to protect a speech with which they already agree and *vice-versa* (for a discussion, see Rooduijn 2019).

### ***Populism and the Two-strand Model of Democracy***

Scholars wonder whether and under which 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 representing and empowering the ordinary people (Taggart 2002; Canovan 1999; Kazin 1998; Laclau 2005). From this perspective, populism represents a “democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” and, thus, it functions 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 and 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 when this means 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, deliberative forms of participation, and even some of the political opinions of their opponents (Zaslove et al. 2021; Bjånesøy and Ivarsflaten 2016; Bos, Wichgers, and van Spanje 2021). At the same time, other studies find that they are more intolerant (Bos, Wichgers, and van Spanje 2021), less attached 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 2022).

To better understand this apparent paradox, it is worth investigating the relationship between populism and the so-called two-strand model of democracy (on this point, see Mény and Surel

2002; Panizza 2005; Taggart 2000; Moffitt 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Abts and Rummens 2007; Canovan 1999). Within the two-strand model, democracy is understood as formed by two distinct pillars: a liberal pillar centred around the protection of individuals' (and minority) rights and a democratic pillar which emphasises popular sovereignty and the popular will (Mouffe 2009). Democratic practices combine both pillars, which are meant to keep each other in check. The potentially abusive “tyranny of the majority” is limited by a set of rules that guarantees that the interests of certain individuals and groups are not curtailed (Dahl 1989).

### ***Populism and Freedom of Speech: Abstract Versus Situational Support***

According to the two-strand logic, the interpretation and justification of democratic liberties depend on the emphasis placed on either the liberal or democratic pillar within the democratic process (Abts and Rummens 2007). Within the liberal tradition, free speech requires an “act of compromise”: freedom should not be tolerated when it offends others (Feinberg 1987; see also Mill 1978). Unlimited free speech is not freedom’s sanctuary but its enemy; thus, some “limit” should be applied to protect rights and freedoms. Consequently, freedom should and must be limited by a set of democratic procedures and legal controls that guarantee that certain groups or actions do not impair the value of tolerance, liberty, and equality (Rawls 1999).

In contrast with this view, populism empathises the importance of the will of the majority (i.e., the democratic pillar) over the anonymous rule of law (i.e., the liberal pillar) (Mény and Surel 2002). Populism sees the liberal pillar as an impediment to the democratic promise of citizens’ power and “tries to capitalise upon this dissatisfaction by reclaiming for the people the power that has been illegitimately taken from them” by the checks and balances inherent to the liberal representative system (Abts and Rummens 2007, 411). Further, in opposition to the liberal tradition, populism assumes that “the people” and “the majority” coincide. In this sense, the limitations imposed by the liberal pillar are not a way to protect democracy from the “tyranny of the majority” but rather an impediment to the realisation of the will of the people.

Seen in this light, speech limitations are seen as a way to “censor” the people and prevent them from questioning the legitimacy of certain political decisions (Moffitt 2017). On the contrary, an unlimited and unconstrained form of freedom of expression gives voice to those issues that are otherwise curtailed (or perceived to be curtailed) by the current system of power (Laclau 2005). As a result, populism claims that free speech “should be as broad as possible” to allow for the

existence of different and non-mainstream opinions (Moffitt 2017, 116). Consequently, it is likely that populist individuals, regardless of their ideological interests, are more likely to think that freedom of speech in its *general and abstract form* should be unlimited and unconstrained.

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

Although populism may support an unconstrained form of freedom of expression, its commitment to freedom may be hypocritical and contingent on specific values that are considered worth defending (Laclau 1996). The emphasis placed on the majority criterion means 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 contributing to the “greater good” and a “moral regeneration” of politics and democracy (Berlin et al. 1968; Müller 2016). On the contrary, the positions of the others (i.e., “the non-people”) are, at least to a certain degree, illegitimate (König and Siewert 2021). The rival camp is seen as a threat to the in-group’s interests and, in a broader sense, a limit to achieving what is good for democracy (Hameleers and de Vreese 2020; Kazin 1998). This implies that rights can be negated when certain values or actions are incompatible with the “will of the people”. Or that democratic liberties should be protected only when they are perceived as “fair”, for instance when they represent the positions of the majority (i.e., “the people”) (Werner 2020; Landwehr and Harms 2020).

This provides populist individuals with a qualified and conditional understanding of what is (il)legitimate and (un)democratic, potentially allowing the justification of democratic eroding behaviours such as the rejection of freedom of speech (Gaines et al. 2007). In concrete terms, the (hypocritical) tendency to deny or defend free speech depends on the ideological content that substantiates the “will of the people” (Andreadis et al. 2018; Hameleers et al. 2021). Generally speaking, left-wing populism is centred around the struggle of the proletariat or the underclass against the bourgeoisie, the rich, the capitalists, and the big multinational corporations (March 2017). On the other hand, right-wing populism centers on safeguarding the native population against external threats, such as Muslims or immigrants (Mudde 2013).

We test this thesis by assessing whether populist individuals tend to instrumentally support freedom of speech based on their ideological dispositions. We expect that the concrete

application of free speech varies according to (1) the ideological content of a speech, (2) the respondent's ideological interests, and (3) their affinity with populist ideas. The underlying assumption herein is that populist attitudes reinforce the tendency for democratic hypocrisy—that is, endorsing speeches aligned with the respondent's ideological interests while rejecting those considered objectionable.

Concretely, among the political right, we expect populist attitudes to strengthen support for speeches that advance the idea that the native population should be allowed to treat immigrants as an inferior and dangerous out-group while weakening the support for speeches that are against pro-business policies. Among the political left, we anticipate populists to be more likely to support free speech when it favours the working class as opposed to the “top 1%”, the capitalists, and the big 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 scoring high on scales of populist attitudes are more likely to allow a speech that is in line with their ideological interests.

**H2b:** Individuals scoring 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 coefficient of populist attitudes on the probability of allowing a speech vary across the ideological content of the speech itself and different ideological groups.

## **Data, instruments, and modelling approach**

### ***Data***

To test our hypothesis, we use original survey instruments that we purposefully designed and included in the 2019 wave of the Belgian National Election Study (BNES). The 2019 wave employs a multi-stage sampling design with municipalities nested within the three main Belgian regions (i.e., Walloon, Flemish, and Brussels-Capital regions). Conducted within a register-based random probability sample of eligible Belgian voters in the 2019 national elections, the data were predominantly collected through face-to-face interactions using computer-assisted personal interviewing from December 2019 to October 2020. The total sample size for this study consists

of 1077 respondents with a response rate of 37.47% (44.34% in Flemish Region and 29.68% in Walloon and Brussels-Capital regions).

## ***Instruments***

### ***Dependent variables***

**Abstract support for freedom of speech:** We measure abstract support for freedom of speech using a question that asks respondents whether they agree or disagree (5-point scale) with the statement that “every individual should say what he/she wants, even if this hurts others”. This question has been designed to resolve some of the conceptual limitations of traditional measures of support for free speech principles. First, following the recommendation of James L. Gibson and Bingham (1982), the measure aims at “specify[ing] a freedom of speech continuum which is independent of any particular group and which reflects the sort of value conflict typically observed in free-speech dispute” (1982, 606). This allows us to measure support for freedom of speech in a context (i.e., Belgium) where the state does not sanction individuals for expressing their opinions unless they openly incite violence or segregation<sup>2</sup>. Second, the item avoids priming respondents with the word “freedom of speech” due to its potentially normative leading connotation. To allow for the comparison of the coefficients with the other main dependent variable of interest (see *infra*), the question has been dichotomised such that respondents are either coded as supporting or rejecting abstract free speech<sup>3</sup>.

**Situational support of freedom of speech:** To measure how individuals concretely apply freedom of speech when other ideological interests are at stake, we use a split ballot experiment that randomises the object of criticism of a hypothetical speech (Lindner and Nosek 2009). We followed recent literature and selected two salient and representative issues of the contemporary Left-Right divide (Graham and Svulik 2020). The respondents are presented with a text

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<sup>2</sup> Our conceptualisation largely follows the interpretation of the Belgian law regarding freedom of speech. UNIA—the federal agency responsible for promoting and protecting fundamental democratic rights—states, “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 conceptualisation may not be suitable in contexts where free speech regulations are stricter than in Belgium (e.g., Germany). In these contexts, the question should ask directly about state sanctions against people who express their opinions.

<sup>3</sup> The original question is asked on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1. Completely disagree” to “5. Completely agree”. The item has been dichotomised as against (1-3) and in favour (4-5) of free speech. The midpoint of the scale (i.e., neither agree nor disagree) has been included in the against category to be sure to capture those individuals who are (strongly) in favour of free speech in its abstract form. Using the 5-point variable as continuous or ordinal does not change any of the results. Results are reported in the Appendix.



indicating that a “speaker at a public gathering, on television, or on the internet holds a speech against [immigrants/multinational corporations]”. Subsequently, each respondent is asked whether the speech “should be stopped” or “should not be stopped”<sup>4</sup>. This measure provides respondents with a clear choice scenario (i.e., allow or stop the speech), effectively measuring respondents’ willingness to deny freedom of speech in a concrete, yet not normatively charged, situation. It also taps into a situational and instrumentally-motivated understanding of freedom of speech without a priori imposing particular ideological interests or priming the respondent with noxious political groups.

### ***Independent variables***

**Populism:** Populist attitudes are assessed using an adapted version of the scale developed by A. Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014)<sup>5</sup>. The scale captures adverse emotions directed toward 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](#)).

*Table 1: Populist attitudes scale and standardised (Std.) factor loadings.*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Std. Loadings (<math>\lambda</math>)</b>
People and not the politicians should take decisions.	.716
People would be better represented by ordinary citizens.	.753
Power should be returned to the people.	.806
Better if politicians just followed the will of the people.	.663
Ordinary people know better than politicians.	.671

**Ideological position:** We measure respondents’ ideological preferences using the traditional 10-point Left-Right (L-R) self-placement item. To ease the interpretation of the results and take into account the potential non-linearity in the relationship between populism and ideological self-

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<sup>4</sup> The item is a binary choice question. Respondents who mentioned “I don’t know” (approximately 5% of the sample) have been excluded from the analysis. The group is too small to draw any meaningful inference.

<sup>5</sup> We use the shortened version of the scale with slightly adjusted wording to ensure comparability between the French and Dutch translations of the items.

identification (Lilliana Mason 2018), we recoded the L-R self-placement indicator in three categories, namely Left (0-3), Centre (4-6), and Right (7-10)<sup>6</sup>.

**Control variables:** We control for a set of potentially confounding variables. We include sex assigned at birth<sup>7</sup> (i.e., Male, Female), education (Low, Medium, High), age (6 categories and treated as continuous), an index measuring political efficacy (e.g., “Things are so complicated I don’t know what to do”), whether a respondent identifies with a party (Yes, No), and region of residence (i.e., Flemish Region, French-speaking Belgium). These variables have been included (1) to take into account compositional differences (see *infra*) and (2) to rule out the possibility that weaker socioeconomic conditions are driving individuals towards more intolerant positions. The question wording of all the used items and their respective descriptive statistics can be found in the Appendix.

### ***Modelling approach***

To test our hypothesis, we employ Multi Group-Structural Equation Modelling (MG-SEM). This technique has two main advantages compared to traditional regression analysis. First, it takes random measurement error into account by assessing whether a given latent construct (e.g., populist attitudes) is properly measured through a set of survey items (i.e., a set of relevant attitudinal questions). Second, it ensures that our main independent variable of interest (i.e., populist attitudes) is measured and interpreted in the same way across different groups of respondents, in this case, left-, right-wing, and centrist respondents.

In this paper, two latent variables have been estimated, namely populism and political efficacy. The confirmatory factor analysis model shows good fit ( $CFI = .98$ ,  $RMSA = .052$ ,  $SRMR = .028$ ) with factor loadings ranging between  $\lambda_{min}^{max} = 0.68, 0.81$ . This indicates that both latent variables are properly measured and operationalised (Hu and Bentler 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),

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<sup>6</sup> As robustness, we fit a model adding a measure of the strength of ideological self-placement by folding in half the L-R self-placement measure (L. 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.

<sup>7</sup> This measure is obtained directly from the municipal-level registry data used to construct the sampling frame.

meaning that the estimated latent constructs are understood in the same way across the different ideological groups included in the study (i.e., left-, right-wing, and centrist respondents).

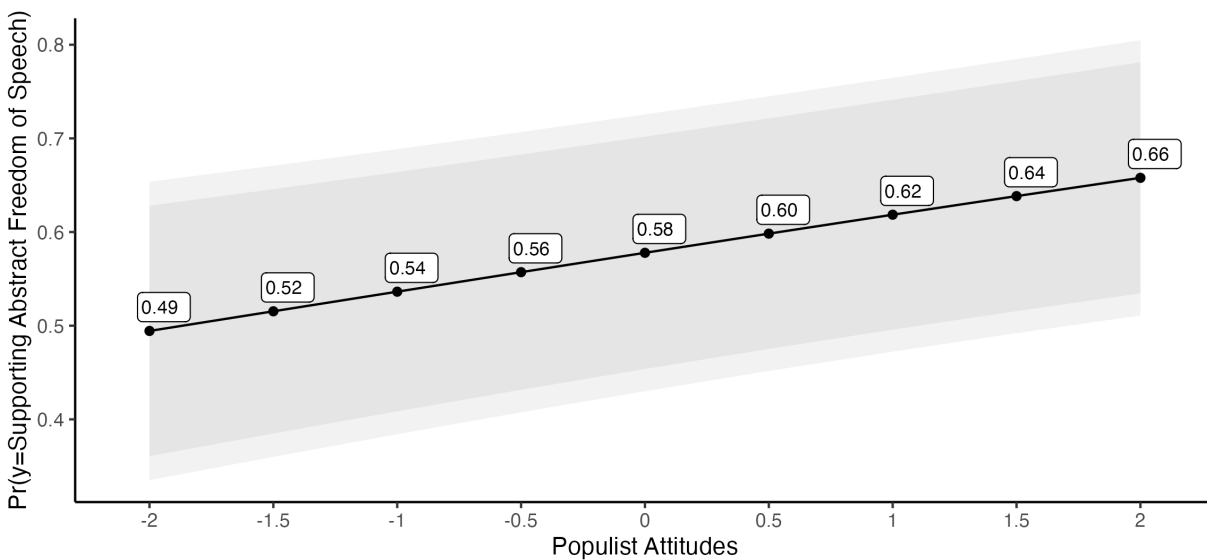
A probit regression is used to estimate the effects on support for abstract and situational freedom of speech (measured as dichotomous variables). We included the same control variables in both models, even if the question measuring situational freedom of speech is a split ballot experiment. This choice allows for two important advantages. First, although the coefficients between the two models are not directly comparable, including the same set of covariates gives us a general idea of the magnitude of the estimated conditional coefficients across the two models. Second, since the split-ballot experiment does not manipulate either ideological interests or populist attitudes, the inclusion of a set of background variables rules out the possibility that the differences in the 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 to marginal probabilities by keeping the continuous predictors at their sample mean and averaging over all the categorical variables included in the model (Long 1997). The coefficients represent the effect of a 1 standard deviation increase in our independent variable of interest on the probability that the outcome is equal to 1. For instance, if populist attitudes increase by 1 standard deviation, the probability of endorsing abstract freedom of speech/allowing a speech increases by X percentage points. All the models are estimated using the SEM package Lavaan (Rosseel 2012) in the R 4.1.x programming language (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 where we regress abstract support for freedom of speech on the measure of populist attitudes. Results reported in Figure 1 show that for each point increase on the populist attitudes scale, an individual is, on average, 5-percentage points more willing to support free speech in its abstract and unconstrained form ( $t = 4.1, p \leq 0.05$ ). Although populism accounts for a relatively small proportion of the variance in the measure of abstract support for freedom of speech, the estimated coefficient is substantially relevant: there is approximately a 20-percentage point difference between the beginning and the end of the populist attitudes scale, revealing a non-negligible association between populism and support for abstract

freedom of speech. This result also holds when controlling for respondent’s L-R ideology, political efficacy, and a set of relevant demographic characteristics. This means that populist attitudes are positively associated with support for freedom of speech in its abstract form across a substantial portion of the Belgian population and for individuals on both sides of the ideological spectrum. This finding provides evidence for H1: populist individuals are more likely to support freedom of speech in its abstract form, accounting for respondents’ background characteristics and a set of potential confounding variables. The full regression table and a series of nested models are reported in the Appendix.



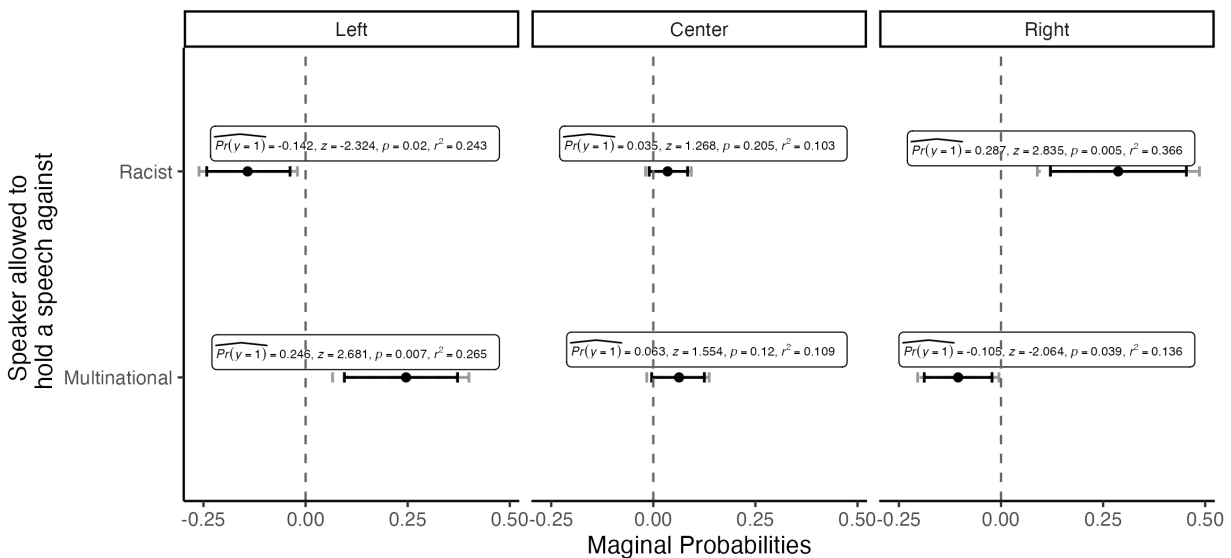
N: 988, R<sup>2</sup>: 0.064

*Figure 1: Predicted probabilities for abstract support for freedom of speech, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. The dependent variable is the question asking whether ‘every individual should say what he/she wants’ (dichotomised). Ribbons represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals around the model-estimated probabilities. The full regression table is reported in the Appendix.*

Next, we test whether freedom of speech is understood differently when it is applied to concrete situations in which particular ideological interests are at stake. To do so, we ran a regression where the situational freedom of speech measure (i.e., the split-ballot experiment) is regressed on the measure of populist attitudes. A multi-group model with six groups is estimated to capture the variation across both the target of the speech (i.e. immigrants/multinational corporations) and ideological groups (left-, right-wing, and centrist respondents). This provides us with the

marginal coefficients of populist attitudes on the propensity to allow or deny a particular speech for each ideological group<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to interpreting the group-specific coefficients, we resort to marginal coefficient plots (Figure 2). The plots depict the increase in the probability of allowing a speech in terms of percentage points for each 1 standard deviation change in the populist attitudes scale. In the plots, the horizontal lines around the dots represent the 90% and 95% confidence intervals around the estimated probabilities. If the confidence intervals depicted in the plot exclude the vertical zero line, it indicates that the estimated coefficients are statistically significant for the particular group/speech pairing. The respective regression table and an additional series of nested models are reported in the Appendix<sup>9</sup>.



N: 988

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

<sup>8</sup> In a traditional regression setting, this procedure is identical to estimating a three-way interaction between populist attitudes, the categorical measure of ideological preferences (i.e., left-, right-wing, and centrist respondents), and a variable indicating whether the speech was against multinationals or immigrants.

<sup>9</sup> As an additional robustness, we also calculated the probability of allowing a speech against immigrants or multinational corporations (split-ballot experiment) across the different ideological groups (Left, Centre, Right) and categorical levels of affinity with populism (Low, Average, High). Unsurprisingly, the estimates (obtained from a GLM probit model) mirror the marginal coefficients of the multi-group SEM model and are reported in the Appendix.

*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 strong 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<sup>10</sup>. Although coefficients are not directly comparable with the ones obtained from the model for abstract freedom of speech, the explanatory power of populism is larger when situational freedom of speech is concerned. However, its magnitude is asymmetrical across the different speech acts: they are stronger for those issues that are traditionally associated with left- (i.e., multinational corporations) and right-wing (i.e., immigration) populism.

Concerning right-wing voters (right-hand side of Figure 2), the coefficient of populism is positive and highly significant for the speech against immigrants. A point increase on the populist attitudes scale is associated with a 29-percentage point increase in the probability of allowing a speech against immigrants, controlling for all the other variables included in the model ( $t = 2.8, p \leq 0.05$ ). However, among the same right-wing individuals, populist attitudes are associated with an increase in the probability of denying a speech act that favours multinational corporations. Each additional point on the populist attitude scale corresponds to a 10-percentage point decrease in the probability of allowing an individual to hold a speech against multinational corporations ( $t = 2.1, p \leq 0.05$ ).

Moving to left-wing respondents (left-hand side of Figure 2), the coefficients are similar in magnitude but reveal a reverse pattern. The coefficient of populism is positive and significant when left-wing respondents are asked whether to allow a speech against multinational corporations. For each point increase in the populist attitudes scale, left-wing individuals are, on average, 25-percentage points ( $t = 2.7, p \leq 0.05$ ) more likely to think that the speech should be allowed. On the contrary, we found that among left-wing respondents, populist individuals are more likely to deny the right to hold a speech against immigrants. Each additional point increase on the populist attitudes scale corresponds to a 14-percentage point ( $t = 2.3, p \leq 0.05$ ) increase in the probability of thinking that a speech against immigrants should be stopped.

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<sup>10</sup> 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 concrete application of free speech. The probabilities of endorsing a speech against immigrants or multinational corporations across the different ideological groups are reported in the Appendix.

Next, we calculate the explained variance ( $R^2$ ) of populism for the conditional freedom of speech question. The  $R^2$  increases, on average, by 8 percentage points when populist attitudes are included in the model. This further confirms that populism is an important correlate of whether citizens are willing to allow or deny ideologically motivated speech acts. Finally, it is worth noting the coefficient of populism is smaller and insignificant for centrist voters. This result is in line with related literature: ideological interests and traditional L-R host ideology are important factors in the articulation of populist struggle (Silva, Neuner, and Wratil 2022).

These results show that, both among left- and right-wing individuals, those who score high on the populist attitudes scale are more willing to trade off democratic liberties for their ideological interests and less likely to tolerate speeches that are against their ideological interests. This pattern provides support for both H2a and H2b. Populist individuals do not support speech acts unconditionally. Rather, they tend to defend freedom of speech only when it is in line with their ideological interests and deny it when it is against their ideological preferences. In sum, populist attitudes are found to reinforce the tendency for democratic hypocrisy.

## Conclusions

This paper sheds light on the ambivalent relationship between populism and freedom of expression that has been long discussed in the theoretical literature on the topic (Canovan 1999; Mény and Surel 2002; Abts and Rummens 2007; Moffitt 2017). We find that populist individuals on both sides of the ideological spectrum tend to endorse a more “unlimited” and unconstrained form of free speech, according to which individuals should be allowed to say whatever they want (Moffitt 2017). However, using a split ballot experiment where we randomly manipulate 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.

Our findings show that supporting freedom of speech in the abstract does not always generate more tolerant behaviour in situations where respondents’ ideological interests are at stake. Right-wing populists are more willing to protect individuals who speak against immigrants but, at the same time, they tend to deny free speech when the object of criticism involves multinational corporations. This confirms the constitutive importance of nativism and pro-business ideology in the instrumental support for democratic liberties among right-wing populist individuals

(Kokkonen and Linde 2021; Betz 1994). On the contrary, left-wing populists are more likely to allow a speech against multinational corporations. Yet, they are more inclined to deny the same right when the speech is against immigrants. This suggests that socioeconomic issues are a salient dimension of left-wing populism to the extent that populist individuals on the left side of the ideological spectrum are willing to protect free speech only when it facilitates the fight against the dominant economic powers (March 2017).

In line with recent literature, our findings document the tendency of right-wing individuals to interpret and justify certain democratic norms instrumentally (Kokkonen and Linde 2021; Huber and Schimpf 2017). We add to this literature by showing that the propensity of left-leaning individuals to be more tolerant compared to right-wing individuals may have undergone a shift, at least, among the most populist part of the electorate (c.f., Altemeyer 1996; Davis and Silver 2004; Lindner and Nosek 2009; Sniderman et al. 1989). Similarly to their ideological counterparts, left-wing populist individuals think that individuals with opposite political ideas should not be allowed to express their opinions publicly, perhaps to avoid spreading and legitimising certain ideas that are considered dangerous or harmful for democracy (Orazani, Wohl, and Leidner 2020).

This finding supports the idea that both left- and right-wing populist individuals apply the same logic when protecting or denying free speech. To advance specific ideological interests, populism presents certain norm-eroding practices as necessary (and, thus, legitimate). In this sense, the willingness to protect or reject democratic norms is instrumentally motivated: what is democratic and undemocratic is understood in a way that helps them to advance the interests of “the people” and struggle against what is considered unfair or oppressive (Krishnarajan 2022; G. Grossman et al. 2022). In other words, the ideological interests of populist individuals influence how freedom is understood, articulated, and, ultimately, applied. This suggests that substantive commitment to democracy should be investigated taking into account the intrinsic tension between democratic practices and other, equally important, values (Rostbøll 2010).

On a more theoretical level, our work adds to the literature that investigates how ideologically different groups of voters have different normative understandings of democracy (König and Siewert 2021; Ferrín and Hernández 2021; Landwehr and Steiner 2017). Right-wing populist individuals may interpret and apply liberties to control and avert societal change. In this conception, democratic norms are used to prevent individuals from challenging the current



economic system and preclude the enfranchisement of the non-native population. On the contrary, populist individuals on the left side of the ideological continuum may understand democratic liberties as an instrument of change. In this case, democratic norms are used to struggle against the mainstream economic (capitalist) system and empower disenfranchised minority groups (i.e., immigrants). These different understandings of democracy underlay the inclination of populist individuals to “save democracy” by curtailing the very rights they aim to safeguard (Marcus et al. 1995).

The slippage between abstract commitment to civil liberties and their concrete application underlines “that the exercise of rights generates costs” that, at times, are so significant that citizens are willing to give up or negate certain rights (Peffley, Knigge, and Hurwitz 2001, 108–9). This may help us understand the nature of public support for freedom of speech and the increasing levels of polarisation across developed democracies (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). Free expression and tolerance are not unlimited and unconditional. Instead, they are in continuous conflict with other values that, at times, can be considered even more fundamental (Peffley, Knigge, and Hurwitz 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 based on how politicians employ particular ideological content and the way in which citizens integrate it into their attitudes and political judgements (Ciuk and Yost 2016; Fossati, Muhtadi, and Warburton 2022). From this perspective, those voters attracted by the divisive and antagonist nature of populism may instrumentally use democratic liberties to justify a divisive and polarising rhetoric against certain out-groups, effectively increasing societal polarisation.

Although we are confident that the results presented in this paper are useful to better understand the ambivalent relationship between populism and democratic liberties, they do not provide, by any means, strong bases for causal claims. Even if we randomly manipulated the speech target, the direction of the causality between populism, abstract understanding, and situational application of freedom of speech is difficult to establish<sup>11</sup>. That is, individuals who are more

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<sup>11</sup> 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.

likely to see freedom of speech as situational may have been attracted by the rhetoric of populist candidates and parties and, thus, have become more populist.

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—refuse to support free speech when it is against their interests. Furthermore, despite being quite representative of the contemporary Left-Right divide, our results may be specific to the chosen target of the speech. It may be that left-wing individuals display a form of “inclusionary intolerance” that entails limiting the rights only of those who threaten certain 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 translate to other redistributive policies (e.g., higher corporate tax). Further studies should investigate whether democratic hypocrisy among populists is limited to specific ideological motivations or extends to other disadvantaged groups (e.g., Romani people).

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 also for the study of other civil liberties. Our results support the idea that democratic liberties are intrinsically subjected to a certain degree of instrumentalisation (Fish 1994). This implies the presence of disagreement over the limits and the meaning of certain values that can generate potential conflicts in the interpretation of democratic norms (Rostbøll 2010). For instance, recent survey data show that individuals disagree on whether a speech is hateful and harmful and, thus, whether it should be legally permitted (Ekins 2017). Given its relevance for contemporary democracies, studying how populism interprets democratic norms might help explain why and how voters and party leaders revise democratic principles in light of other relevant norms. Ultimately, this may help us to better understand when and under which conditions individuals are willing to put a price on fundamental democratic rights.

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