

# THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: THE EFFECT OF PARTICIPATION IN A PARTICIPATORY BUDGET ON CITIZENS' POPULIST ATTITUDES

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## THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: THE EFFECT OF PARTICIPATION IN A PARTICIPATORY BUDGET ON CITIZENS' POPULIST ATTITUDES

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## ABSTRACT

Many citizens feel excluded from political decision-making, which, in their eyes, is dominated by an unresponsive political elite. Citizens with high populist attitudes perceive the world through a populist 'lens' and therefore yearn for more popular control and for 'the people' to be included in the political process. Democracy scholars have posed that innovative processes that include and empower citizens can curb such populist sentiments. Participatory budgeting should be particularly suited to address populist demands due to the fact that it is focused on giving citizens actual influence on policy-making. However, so far, no study has examined the effect of participation in a democratic innovation on populist attitudes. The present study addresses this gap in the literature.

This paper empirically assesses if and to what extent participation in participatory budgeting affects populist attitudes, and whether citizens with high populist attitudes are affected differently than citizens with low populist attitudes. Having analysed survey data on participants of four local participatory budgeting events in the Netherlands before and after participation, we find that citizens with high populist attitudes decrease these attitudes significantly after participating in participatory budgeting, whereas citizens with low populist attitudes are not significantly affected. Moreover, the significant difference in change between these two groups suggests that citizens with high populist attitudes go 'through the looking glass' and become less populist after participating in participatory budgeting.

## BIO

Marie-Isabel Theuwis and Rosa Kindt are doctoral researchers at the Department of Political Science at Radboud University Nijmegen. Their research focuses on democratic innovations and populism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Many consider high levels of populism among citizens as a threat to democracy (Rummens, 2017). However, rather than approach populism as a threat, high levels of populism among citizens can also be an indication of an underlying problem. As argued by Canovan (1999), populist ideology thrives where the experienced gap between the democratic ideal—power to the people—and democratic practice—representation—becomes too wide. High levels of populism, then, are a *symptom* of the democratic deficit, that is, the disconnect between the democratic ideal and the practices of electoral democracy (Norris, 2011). Rather than conceive of populism as a pathogen, we approach it as a symptom displayed by an ailing democracy, in response to which we must look for a cure.

One such cure could be the implementation of democratic innovations. Democratic innovations have been put forward as a way of bringing democratic principle and practice closer together, particularly those innovations that focus on increasing citizens' say in political decision-making (e.g. Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Geissel & Newton, 2012; Smith, 2009). Participatory budgeting (PB) is one such democratic innovation that gives a high amount of decision-making power to participating citizens.

Many theorists claim that PB has a positive effect on participants' political attitudes (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Wampler et al., 2021). PB has, under the right circumstances, indeed been found to increase respect for the political elite, as well as the perceived responsiveness of the political elite (Coleman & Sampaio, 2017; Swaner, 2017; Volodin, 2019). However, no research has analysed the effect of participation in a PB on populist attitudes.

This paper thus seeks to answer the following questions: To what extent does participation in a PB have an effect on populist attitudes? Are citizens with high populist attitudes affected differently than citizens with low populist attitudes? After all, there are strong reasons to expect that citizens with high populist attitudes are particularly likely to be affected by participation: they have been found to be especially disappointed by how democracy works in practice (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020), and could likely be more sensitive to the democratic gap and efforts to close it.

We assess these expectations with the use of panel data from four PBs in the Netherlands. We first compared the average level of populist attitudes after the PB with the baseline level. We then conducted a difference-in-differences analysis to detect different effects for citizens with high populist attitudes as compared to citizens with low populist attitudes.

We find that participation in a PB does not lead to a significant change in populist attitudes amongst participants. However, we do find a different effect for participants with high populist attitudes as compared to participants with low populist attitudes. Participants who hold higher populist attitudes significantly lower their populist attitudes after participation, while participants with low populist attitudes increase these attitudes. The difference in change between these groups proves to be significant.

This paper contributes to existing literature in several ways. First, it focuses on the effect of participation in a PB rather than support for a PB, thus moving away from the hypothetical relationship between populism and citizen participation to the actual effects of participation. Second, it examines the effects of a heretofore under-researched type of participatory process, of which the effect on participants has been tested empirically to a very limited extent (Theuwis et al., 2021).

In the following section, we describe the particularities of citizens with high populist attitudes. We subsequently summarise what is known about the transformative potential of PB. We then explain why we expect participation in a PB to have a diminishing effect on populist attitudes, especially in citizens with high populist attitudes. In the method section, we outline our research design, before presenting and reflecting upon the results of our study.

## THEORY AND LITERATURE

### Populist attitudes

This section describes populist attitudes and the features of citizens with high populist attitudes. We first briefly define the term populism, then explain how populism manifests itself in individuals, and, finally, describe the characteristics shared by citizens with high populist attitudes.

This paper defines populism using the 'ideational approach', which conceives of populism as a 'thin' political ideology. In essence, this approach 'considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) consider populism to be a 'thin' ideology, because it merely provides a way of making sense of the public sphere rather than a full-fledged vision of that public sphere (p. 6). It does so through four core dimensions: *people-centrism* or a celebration of the people (Schulz et al., 2018); *anti-elitism* or an opposition to the corrupt elite who ignore the general will (Castanho Silva et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2018); *popular sovereignty* or the belief that the people are the only legitimate source of political power (Schulz et al., 2018); and *Manichaeism* or the perception of moral opposition between the good people and the corrupt elite (Castanho Silva et al., 2018).

Approaching populism as a thin ideology means that one accepts that populism can be applied not just to political elites, or the supply-side, but can also be found at the mass level (i.e. in individuals), at the demand-side (Mudde, 2017). In the past, populism in individuals has been studied via proxies such as low political trust, low satisfaction with democracy, or voting for populist parties, whether left-wing or right-wing (Akkerman et al., 2014; Geurkink et al., 2020). Others equated populist thin ideology in individuals with high levels of support for restrictive immigration policies (Ivarsvlaten, 2008) or with 'being on the losing side' of globalisation (Oesch, 2008; Kriesi, 2008). Relatively recently, populism scholars have found that the populist thin ideology manifests itself in individuals as populist attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2018; Hawkins et al., 2012; Schulz et al., 2018; Wuttke et al., 2020). These attitudes are expressions of the core dimensions of populism (Akkerman et al., 2014, p. 1330).<sup>1</sup> To have higher levels of populist attitudes thus means that one sees politics and society through a populist 'lens', in terms of a Manichean struggle between the good people and the corrupt, unresponsive elite, that is unable or unwilling to heed the general will of the people.

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<sup>1</sup> Several authors have developed scales to measure populist attitudes in individuals, and the core dimensions that are measured differ from scale to scale. The scale developed by Schulz and colleagues (2018) also measures people-centrism as a celebration of the people, whereas that dimension of populism is underdeveloped in other populist attitudes scales (Castanho Silva et al., 2020). However, empirically, the dimension of people-centrism is hardly separable from the dimension of popular sovereignty and is therefore put together (Castanho Silva et al., 2018).

Importantly though, holding populist attitudes does not automatically translate to populist voting (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020). Conversely, the characteristics that describe the average populist voter do not automatically apply to the average person holding higher populist attitudes. Thus, the idea that citizens with higher populist attitudes are lower-educated, lower-income, young, white, and male (i.e. characteristics commonly found amongst populist voters; e.g. Kriesi, 2008), does not apply to all people with high populist attitudes. What we do know about citizens with higher populist attitudes is that they are more likely to be 'losers of globalisation', even though this sociodemographic profile only applies to Western Europe and is not found amongst South-American citizens (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020; Spruyt et al., 2016; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). Moreover, populist attitudes become *salient* (i.e. they translate into actual populist voting behaviour) when political elites are perceived to be (extremely) corrupt or unresponsive (Hawkins et al., 2020). We thus argue that populism in individuals must first and foremost be seen in connection to a perceived democratic deficit.

The relationship between populism and democracy is further highlighted by the fact that all citizens with populist attitudes share an extraordinary democratic profile. Because popular sovereignty is one of the core dimensions of populism, in a way, populism is not just a thin political ideology but also a democratic ideology. Citizens with high populist attitudes see themselves as 'true democrats' (Canovan, 1999, p. 2; Mény & Surel, 2002). This manifests itself as a heightened sensitivity to the gap between the democratic ideal (power to the people) and the democratic practice (electoral democracy). Citizens with high populist attitudes in particular have a strong belief in the democratic ideal and are greatly disappointed with how that ideal works in practice. In other words, they are 'dissatisfied democrats' (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020, p. 7). This at least means they share a rejection of representative or 'trusteeship' democracy (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020). Whether this also translates into support for more direct forms of democracy, that puts the power back in the hands of the people, is less clear. Heinisch and Wegscheider (2020) found no evidence of this. However, other research has consistently shown that citizens with high populist attitudes do support forms of citizen participation, both referendums (e.g. Jacobs et al., 2018; Zaslove et al., 2020) and deliberative mini-publics (Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Zaslove et al., 2020).

## Participatory budgeting

Democratic innovations are '[p]rocesses 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, p. 14). Participatory budgeting is a type of democratic innovation that allows citizens to participate directly in the distribution of public finance (Sintomer et al., 2008). PB is thus a type of such an innovative process that is especially focused on engaging citizens in public decision-making. A precise definition of PB has not yet been agreed upon (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014). However, across the literature, several core features of PBs are discussed.

Sintomer and colleagues (2008), as well as Elstub and Escobar (2019), have posited that decisions have to concern public spending. PB involves distributing limited resources. Wampler (2000) and Sintomer et al. (2008) have indicated that public deliberation has to be part of the decision-making process. Elstub and Escobar (2019: 25) have added that decisions ultimately have to be taken through some form of aggregation. Hence, PB involves deliberation as well as voting. Finally, some authors argue that PB processes need to be recurring (Sintomer et al., 2008; Wampler, 2000), even though in practice PBs are often one-off events with a very concise mandate.

PBs thus contain elements of both deliberation and direct participation (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). However, the level of popular control and policy impact of PBs is higher as compared to deliberative instruments such as mini-publics (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Michels, 2011; Smith, 2009), whilst the degree of contact and exchange with authorities is greater as compared to direct instruments such as referendums. These aspects of popular control and contact with authorities are, as we argue in the subsequent paragraph, substantial for the impact of participation on citizens' populist attitudes. That is why we consider PBs to be a most-likely case to have an effect on populist attitudes.

## Theorising the effect of participation in a PB on populist attitudes

Could participation in PBs have an effect on populist attitudes? Several scholars have claimed that such participation has a positive effect on the relationship between citizens and authorities, and that participants' perceptions of political actors become more positive after participation (cf. Sintomer et al., 2008; Wampler et al., 2021). Empirical research regarding PB's effect on political attitudes, however, is limited. With regards to populist attitudes in specific, no theorising nor empirical research regarding the extent to which participation in a PB affects these attitudes has been done. That is why we theorise in the second part of this section to what extent participation in a PB affects populist attitudes.

Several scholars have claimed that PB events potentially transform how citizens interact with the political system, and, in doing so, deepen democracy (e.g. Wampler, 2010). PBs contribute to better communication between citizens, civil servants, and local politicians (Sintomer et al., 2008) and, as a result, it counters political disaffection in Western democracies (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 78). Additionally, PBs function as 'schools of democracy'. Citizens have a direct experience in policy-making processes and therefore change their attitudes towards local governments (Wampler et al., 2021).

The bulk of empirical research regarding the effects of PB on participants' political attitudes uses qualitative data, whilst quantitative measurements are scarce. Based on interviews, Coleman and Sampaio (2017) found that online participation leads to increased feelings of external efficacy, i.e. the belief that the government is responsive to one's demands (Craig, 1979), but only if the outcome of the PB was implemented. Researchers at a New York PB also interviewed participants and found that participation leads to a greater level of respect for local council members. However, unresponsive communication from the part of the organising authorities leads to a decrease in trust of those unelected local authorities (Swaner, 2017). Finally, Volodin (2019) statistically assessed the effect of participation in a field PB on political trust. He found that, on average, levels of trust in local political actors, such as the mayor and the city council, increased amongst participants. PB processes, if well executed, can thus serve as a cue to participants that local authorities are willing to listen to them and subsequently enhance their satisfaction with those authorities. These increasingly positive perceptions of local authorities can potentially spill over onto views of political elites in general.

Having described general explanations for the effects that participating in a PB can have on political attitudes, this paragraph outlines to what extent we can expect participation in a PB to have an effect on populist attitudes in particular.

One can intuitively infer a strong relationship between high levels of populist attitudes, on the one hand, and low levels of political trust and perceptions of elite responsiveness, on the other. And indeed, recent research has found that high populist attitudes are strongly related to low levels of political trust and external political efficacy (Geurkink et al.,

2020). We therefore expect that participation in a PB will have a diminishing effect on populist attitudes:

**H1: Participants in a PB will decrease their populist attitudes.**

In fact, in what follows we explain why we expect that the particular features of PB are especially suited to diminish populist attitudes in citizens with high populist attitudes in particular. One of the most important features of PB is the fact that participating citizens are given a large amount of decision-making power: they actually get to determine a part of public spending. The experience of being given decision-making power and seeing that their decision is implemented could not only increase external political efficacy (Coleman & Sampaio, 2017), but also decrease anti-elitism among citizens with high populist attitudes, i.e. the belief that the elite is unresponsive to the demands of the people.

Additionally, the act of making decisions and learning about the work of public authorities could increase understanding for and empathy with elites (Swaner, 2017; Wampler et al., 2021). An enhanced understanding of the complexity of policy-making might counter the expectation of policy-making as simply the execution of the popular will. When citizens with high populist attitudes experience that the popular will is not completely homogenous and that citizens hold different justifiable policy opinions, they might abandon the idea that the elite is not responsive to a unitary popular will.

What is more, we expect that being given decision-making power by the elite will diminish citizens with high populist attitudes' belief that the elite are corrupt and evil. Research into the effects of participatory processes has consistently shown that the perception of being treated respectfully by governmental actors has beneficial effects on citizens' perceptions of the fairness of the process and of themselves as trustworthy decision-makers (Hartz-Karp et al., 2010; Swaner, 2017). Citizens with high populist attitudes' belief in the 'elite' as evil and corrupt makes them especially sensitive to elite behaviour. We expect that they are likely to take notice of being treated by the elite as trustworthy decision-makers, and that this experience will improve their relationship with the elite.

Finally, during a PB, citizens usually develop plans for public spending through discussion or deliberation among each other, making it a highly people-centrist form of participatory decision-making (Zaslove et al., 2020). We expect that participation in a PB will support citizens with high populist attitudes in their belief that the people are wise and capable of generating solutions to difficult problems, and subsequently in their idea that the people should be the main source of legitimate decision-making power. Thus, while we expect that their anti-elitism and Manichaeism will decrease, their people-centrism and belief in popular sovereignty will either be unaffected or, in fact, increase. Still, we expect that overall, their populist worldview, of which their perception of and their relationship with the elite is an integral part, will decrease as a result of participation in a PB. We therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

**H2: Participants in a PB with high populist attitudes will decrease their level of populist attitudes more as compared to participants with low populist attitudes.**



## METHODS

The hypotheses will be tested with the use of panel data from four PB events. Before and after each event, populist attitudes were measured. In the first part of this section, the case selection is described. In the second part, the measurement of populist attitudes is explained in detail. In the final part, the methods of analysis are elaborated.

### Case Selection

To assess the effect of participation in a PB on populist attitudes, this paper uses panel data from four PBs in the Netherlands which took place in Duiven, Maastricht, and Amsterdam-East (2 events).

The Netherlands was selected as it constitutes a typical European case (Gerring, 2008). Dutch citizens consistently hold populist attitudes comparable to other Western industrial democracies (Akkerman et al., 2014; Zaslove et al., 2020). Additionally, the Netherlands have populist parties at both the left and the right, which means that the populist thin-centred ideology is present in the public sphere across the political spectrum (Akkerman et al., 2017).

Duiven, Maastricht, and Amsterdam-East were selected as they provide a different context to test the hypothesised effect. The variable on which we based our selection was the degree of urbanisation. Duiven is a small town with an address density<sup>2</sup> of 1,160 (StatLine - Regionale kerncijfers Nederland, 2022). Maastricht is a medium-sized city with an address density of 2,520. Amsterdam-East is part of a large city and has an address density of 4,155. The higher the address density, the higher the degree of urbanisation. The degree of urbanisation matters because it could affect the proximity of local authorities to citizens. This could, in turn, affect citizens' previous experiences with these authorities and therefore have an impact on the effect of participation in a PB. By choosing cases that differ in their degree of urbanisation, the effect of participation can be tested across these differing contexts.

All four cases apply the Antwerp model of PB. Apart from the typical characteristics of PB like the combination of discussion and voting regarding public spending, similar to most other PBs, the Antwerp model is characterised by the self-selection of participants and the direct authority of decisions. In three rounds, citizens decide how to divide the local budget between projects. The first round focuses on discussion: participants pick five themes which they personally consider important. In the second round, the budget is divided between the chosen themes through discussions in combination with a final vote. Subsequently, citizens are free to propose projects related to the themes and they can check the viability of their projects with civil servants. In the final round, citizens in the area can vote (online) for their favourite projects. The selected projects are announced at a 'festival' (Sobol, 2021).

### Measuring populist attitudes

We measured populist attitudes before and after participation in a PB through surveys that contained the populist attitudes scale of Akkerman and colleagues (2014). The surveys were filled out by participants just before the first round and right after the second round of the PB.<sup>3</sup> The third round was not included in the treatment as for some

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<sup>2</sup> The average number of addresses within a one-kilometre radius.

<sup>3</sup> An overview of the survey responses can be found in Appendix A.

cases this round did not take place in person, whilst for others it did. This decision was made in order to keep the cases comparable and the treatment consistent. The scale developed by Akkerman and colleagues (2014) was opted for as a measurement of populist attitudes as it has a high level of internal coherence and external validity (Castanho Silva et al., 2020). The populist attitudes scale consists of six items that together tap into some of the core dimensions of populism discussed earlier: Manichaeism, anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty. The higher a person scores on this attitude scale, the more this person perceives politics and society through a populist 'lens'.

The items included in the populist attitudes scale are the following:

1. The politicians in the Dutch parliament need to follow the will of the people.
2. The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.
3. The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people.
4. I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.
5. Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.
6. What people call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.

For each statement, respondents can indicate their level of agreement on a scale of 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree). The average value across the six items is what we will refer to as a *respondent's populist attitudes*, which can range from 1 to 5.

In order to differentiate between citizens with high and low populist attitudes, we chose to uphold a cut-off point of 3.5, meaning that citizens with high populist attitudes have an average level of populist attitudes of 3.5 or higher, whereas citizens with low populist attitudes have an average level of populist attitudes below 3.5. This cut-off point was adopted as it lies above the middle and covers approximately the upper quartile of our sample. Nevertheless, in our analyses, we checked whether our findings hold for different cut-off points.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for participants who filled out both the pre-survey and post-survey

	Duiven	Amsterdam Old-East	Amsterdam IJburg	Maastricht	All samples
<b>Average level of populist attitudes pre-survey</b>	3.20 (.77)	3.14 (.59)	3.12 (.85)	3.06 (.68)	<b>3.10 (.69)</b>
<b>Average level of populist attitudes post-survey</b>	3.10 (.94)	3.21 (.79)	2.95 (.91)	3.02 (.71)	<b>3.07 (.79)</b>
<b>N minimum</b>	13	17	10	31	<b>71</b>

**Note.** Standard deviations are displayed in parentheses. Descriptive statistics for all participants who filled out at least one survey can be found in Appendix B. Average level of education: 1=primary education; 2=lower secondary education; 3=higher secondary education; 4=vocational training; 5=university college education; and 6=university education.

We observed that overall, the average level of populist attitudes slightly decreases after participation. This can equally be observed for all but one of the four individual cases. In section 4, we assess whether this decrease is significant and whether the demographics and individual cases affect the overall effect.

## Methods of analysis

In order to test the first hypothesis, we assessed the change in populist attitudes before and after participating in the PB. We did so via a paired samples t-test which allows us to examine within-unit change over time. To test the second hypothesis, we looked at whether there is a different effect from participation for citizens with high populist attitudes as compared to citizens with low populist attitudes. A difference-in-differences analysis will show us to what extent the two groups were affected differently. We checked its robustness with a regression analysis that controls for demographics and the case fixed effect. Additionally, we conducted further robustness checks to account for outliers, ceiling effects, and regression to the mean, which are common issues that can bias the estimated effect.<sup>4</sup>

At least two researchers were present to observe the process of each PB event. The proceedings were described and extra attention was devoted to possible deviations from the Antwerp model of PB and incidents that could affect our findings.

## RESULTS

### Effect of participation on populist attitudes

The results of our first hypothesis test are presented in Table 2. We observed that participants decreased their level of populist attitudes by .03 on average. This decrease is however not significant at any standard level of significance. Therefore, we fail to confirm our first hypothesis as we found no evidence that participation in a PB leads to a decrease in citizens' populist attitudes.

**Table 2.** *Change in populist attitudes for all participants*

	Before PB	After PB	Change	N
<b>All participants</b>	3.10	3.07	-.03 (.07)	71

**Note.** Standard errors are displayed in parentheses. Paired t-test with two-tailed significance levels.  
<sup>†</sup>p < 0.1, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

<sup>4</sup> The complete results of the robustness checks can be found in Appendix C.

## Effect of participation for citizens with high populist attitudes

In order to test the second hypothesis, we compared the average change in populist attitudes between citizens with high and low populist attitudes. The results are shown in Table 3.

Looking at between-group differences, we can see that the two groups differ significantly in their level of populist attitudes before the PB. This, of course, is a direct consequence of splitting the sample into citizens with high and low populist attitudes. More interestingly, after the PB, the two groups differ less in their level of populist attitudes, even though they still differ significantly. The groups thus converged in terms of their populist attitudes but are still highly distinguishable. When looking at the changes over time, we observed an interesting trend amongst citizens with high populist attitudes. Even though the group is rather small, participation in a PB causes them to decrease their populist attitudes significantly. Citizens with lower populist attitudes, inversely, increase their populist attitudes, although not in a significant way. Finally, when we look at the difference-in-differences estimator, we can observe that citizens with high populist attitudes are significantly differently affected by participation as compared to citizens with low populist attitudes. The populist attitudes of citizens with high populist attitudes decreased by .34 points, which is significantly different from the increase of .09 points experienced by citizens with low populist attitudes. Thus, we find evidence to support hypothesis 2. However, before accepting hypothesis 2, we conducted several robustness checks.

**Table 3.** *Change in populist attitudes for citizens with high and citizens with low populist attitudes*

	Before PB	After PB	Change	N
<b>High populist</b>	3.92	3.58	-.34 (.13)*	20
<b>Low populist</b>	2.78	2.87	.09 (.08)	51
<b>Difference</b>	-1.14 (.12)***	-.71 (.19)***	.43 (.15)**	71

**Note.** Standard errors are displayed in parentheses. High populist (average populist attitudes pre  $\geq$  3.5); low populist (average populist attitudes pre  $<$  3.5). Paired samples two-tailed t-tests were conducted to assess changes over time. Unpaired samples two-tailed t-tests were conducted to assess differences between the groups. The difference between these statistics is the difference-in-differences estimator.

†p < 0.1, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

## Testing the robustness of the estimated effect

Individual-level and contextual factors, rather than the treatment and initial level of populist attitudes, could also account for the effect we observed. To verify whether that is the case, we conducted a regression analysis that includes several demographic variables as well as case dummy variables. We can see in Model II, as displayed in Table 4, that none of these variables can explain the main effect of participation on all participants. Moreover, in Model III in the same table, we see that holding high populist attitudes significantly predicts the decrease in populist attitudes, even after controlling for demographic and case variables.

**Table 4.** Models including demographic and case variables

	Change in populist attitudes		
	I	II	III
<b>Age</b>	.002 (.006)	.002 (.006)	.003 (.005)
<b>Female (ref: male)</b>	-.138 (.146)	-.165 (.164)	-.128 (.155)
<b>Education</b>	-.076 (.084)	-.070 (.093)	-.142 (.091)
<b>Duiven (ref: Maastricht)</b>		.029 (.234)	-.039 (.222)
<b>Amsterdam Old-East (ref: Maastricht)</b>		.167 (.202)	.177 (.190)
<b>Amsterdam IJburg (ref: Maastricht)</b>		-.037 (.240)	.092 (.231)
<b>High populist attitudes</b>			-.492 (.165)**

**Note.** Regression coefficients are unstandardised and shown with standard errors in parentheses. Models are linear regressions where the dependent variable is the change in average populist attitudes (-4; 4) from before to after the PB. Education (1=primary education; 2=lower secondary education; 3=higher secondary education; 4=vocational training; 5=university college education; 6=university education); High populist attitudes (1=average populist attitudes pre  $\geq$  3.5; 0=average populist attitudes pre  $<$  3.5).

<sup>†</sup>p < 0.1, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

As mentioned earlier, alternative cut-off points than 3.5 to differentiate between citizens with high and low populist attitudes can be opted for. That is why we conducted the same analysis as in Table 3 with different cut-off points. These analyses can be found in Appendix C.1. We first increased the cut-off point to the next possible level of populist attitudes, which is 3.67. By doing so, the group size of citizens with high populist attitudes decreased to 13. Importantly, we found that the direction of change for both groups is still the same: citizens with initial populist attitudes of 3.67 or higher on average decreased their populist attitudes, while the other group increased their populist attitudes. However, the change over time for citizens with high populist attitudes is only significant at the 10% level, while the difference in change between the groups is not significant anymore. This is likely due to the small size of the group of citizens with high populist attitudes. When we repeated the analysis with the subsequent cut-off point of 4.0, the size of the group with high populist attitudes decreased further to 10. The change over time for this group is not significant anymore at any standard level of significance. Yet, both groups still behaved as before. Hence, our study is limited in exploring different cut-off points mainly due to its small sample size.



Another factor which could bias our estimates is regression to the mean. As we split our sample into two groups for testing the second hypothesis, the effect we find might be generated by the fact that observations at the margin of the cut-off point could be misclassified due to the realisation of their errors. In order to check whether our analysis is affected by regression to the mean, we repeated the analysis of Table 4 but replaced the dummy variable of high populist attitudes with a continuous variable. The results can be found in Table 9 in Appendix C.2. We see that the variable of interest, i.e. the level of populist attitudes before the PB, still significantly explains a decrease in populist attitudes, while control variables still fail to account for that effect. We thus find no evidence for the influence of regression to the mean on our estimates.

A last factor that could bias our findings are ceiling effects. Ceiling effects mean that the scale on which we measure populist attitudes artificially limits the change that participants can experience because change is only possible from -4 to 4. In order to check for this effect, we visually explored our dataset. A scatterplot with the initial level of populist attitudes on the x-axis and the final level of populist attitudes on the y-axis can be found in Appendix C.3. In case there are many observations at each end of the y-axis, this could mean that participants were not able to change into more extreme populist attitudes at either end. However, we only found two out of 71 observations that are potentially influenced by ceiling effects.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we did not find evidence to support the claim that participation in a PB has a significant effect on citizens' populist attitudes. Nevertheless, when looking at the effect of participation for citizens with high populist attitudes only, we see that they significantly decrease their attitudes after participation. Moreover, citizens with high populist attitudes are significantly differently affected by participation as compared to citizens with low populist attitudes.

These findings constitute evidence that PBs are successful at bringing the democratic ideals of citizens with high populist attitudes into practice. For citizens with low populist attitudes, PBs do not seem to have any substantial effect. Having contact with local authorities and being able to directly decide on public spending thus seems to affect those citizens that are most disillusioned with democracy. The transformative experience of participating in a PB for these citizens is like stepping through the looking glass.

Our study had several limitations. First, due to small sample size, we might not have had enough statistical power to detect an effect of participation on all participants. With regards to the different effect of citizens with high and low populist attitudes, however, the small sample size did not seem to affect our findings as small samples generally lead to false negatives. Hence, in order to further substantiate our finding that participation in a PB does not affect participants' populist attitudes, research with a larger sample is necessary.

Furthermore, research in a different country-setting would strengthen our findings. We designed our research in a way that the size of the polity was different, whilst attempting to keep other factors, such as the PB process and the country, constant. The fact that all cases took place in the Netherlands limits their generalisability to countries that, for instance, do not have a multi-party system with several populist parties.

Additionally, the features of the actual population that we are studying is not known, which also limits the study's external validity. The actual population are all citizens that would attend a PB if they had a chance. There currently exist no data that describes the features of this population, which makes it impossible to assess to what extent our sample is representative of the population. That is why future research should also focus on determining who those citizens are that would actually show up at a PB.

Lastly, we focused on the causal effect of participation in a PB on populist attitudes. However, imperative to interpret and understand our findings is to study the causal mechanism that explains this effect. In order to understand why citizens with high populist attitudes are affected differently than citizens with low populist attitudes, research that focuses on experiences and perceptions during the PB that could account for such a differing effect would be highly beneficial. Such research could inform future designs of democratic innovations that bring the democratic ideals of those that are most disillusioned with democracy into practice.

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## APPENDIX A

### Survey responses

**Table 5.** Overview of survey responses for all sample and per case

	Duiven	Amsterdam Old-East	Amsterdam IJburg	Maastricht	All samples
<b>N filled out at least one survey</b>	69	72	87	157	<b>385</b>
<b>N filled out both surveys</b>	13	17	10	31	<b>71</b>
<b>Response rate</b>	73.3%	74.8%	74.9%	88.2%	<b>77.8%</b>

## APPENDIX B

### Descriptive statistics

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics for participants who filled out at least one survey

	Duiven	Amsterdam Old-East	Amsterdam IJburg	Maastricht	All samples
<b>Average level of populist attitudes pre-survey</b>	3.32 (.72)	3.28 (.80)	3.06 (.81)	3.26 (.70)	<b>3.23 (.75)</b>
<b>Average level of populist attitudes post-survey</b>	3.30 (.82)	3.24 (.85)	3.00 (.86)	3.10 (.75)	<b>3.14 (.82)</b>
<b>Average age</b>	51.64 (17.42)	55.71 (11.33)	52.51 (16.25)	59.88 (16.01)	<b>56.11 (15.86)</b>
<b>Percentage of female participants</b>	50.00 (.50)	73.00 (.45)	53.00 (.50)	44.00 (.50)	<b>52.00 (.50)</b>
<b>Average level of education</b>	4.28 (1.14)	4.80 (1.26)	5.00 (1.17)	5.04 (1.11)	<b>4.85 (1.19)</b>
<b>N minimum</b>	30	35	40	58	<b>163</b>

**Note.** Standard deviations are displayed in parentheses. Average level of education: 1=primary education; 2=lower secondary education; 3=higher secondary education; 4=vocational training; 5=university college education; 6=university education.

## APPENDIX C

## Robustness checks

## C.1 Different cut-off points

**Table 7.** *Change in populist attitudes for citizens with high and citizens with low populist attitudes (cut-off point 3.67)*

	Before PB	After PB	Change	N
<b>High populist</b>	4.141	3.885	-.256 (.128) <sup>†</sup>	13
<b>Low populist</b>	2.864	2.884	.021 (.083)	58
<b>Difference</b>	-1.278 (.148) <sup>***</sup>	-1.000 (.212) <sup>***</sup>	.277 (.185)	71

**Note.** Standard errors are displayed in parentheses. High populist (average populist attitudes pre  $\geq$  3.67); low populist (average populist attitudes pre  $<$  3.67). Paired t-test with two-tailed significance levels for changes over time, unpaired t-test with two-tailed significance levels for differences between the groups.

<sup>†</sup>p < 0.1, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001.

**Table 8.** *Change in populist attitudes for citizens with high and citizens with low populist attitudes (cut-off point 4.00)*

	Before PB	After PB	Change	N
<b>High populist</b>	4.283	4.050	-.233 (.143)	10
<b>Low populist</b>	2.903	2.906	.003 (.080)	61
<b>Difference</b>	-1.380 (.169) <sup>***</sup>	-1.144 (.234) <sup>***</sup>	.237 (.207)	71

**Note.** Standard errors are displayed in parentheses. High populist (average populist attitudes pre  $\geq$  4.0); low populist (average populist attitudes pre  $<$  4.0). Paired t-test with two-tailed significance levels for changes over time, unpaired t-test with two-tailed significance levels for differences between the groups.

<sup>†</sup>p < 0.1, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001.

## C.2 Regression to the mean

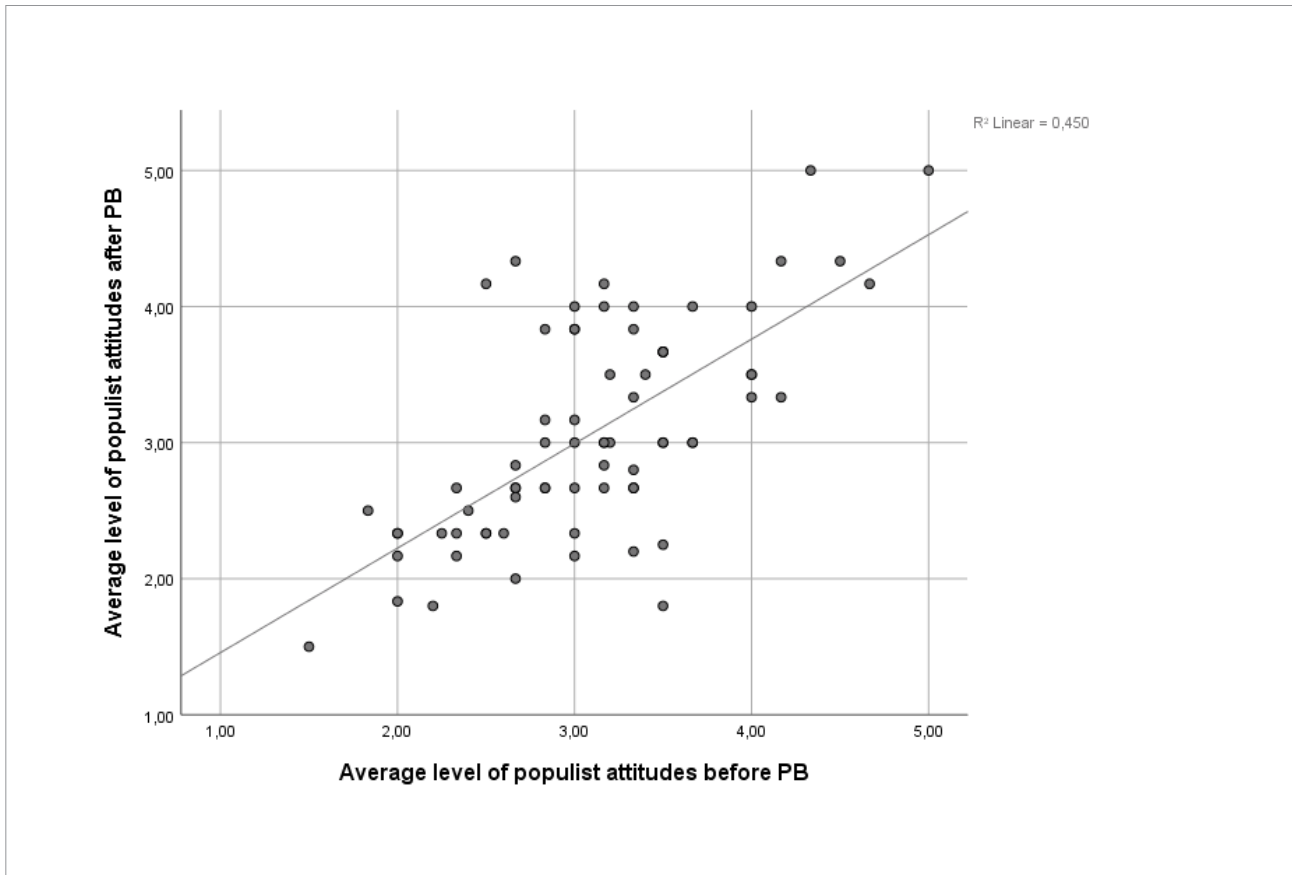
First, we tested whether our observed effect could be explained by regression to the mean. For doing so, we conducted the same regression analysis but replaced the variable of interest with a continuous variable.

**Table 9.** *Models including demographic and case variables*

	Change in populist attitudes		
	I	II	III
<b>Age</b>	.002 (.006)	.002 (.006)	.002 (.005)
<b>Female (ref: male)</b>	-.138 (.146)	-.165 (.164)	-.106 (.161)
<b>Education</b>	-.076 (.084)	-.070 (.093)	-.117 (.092)
<b>Duiven (ref: Maastricht)</b>		.029 (.234)	-.017 (.228)
<b>Amsterdam Old-East (ref: Maastricht)</b>		.167 (.202)	.157 (.195)
<b>Amsterdam IJburg (ref: Maastricht)</b>		-.037 (.240)	-.043 (.232)
<b>Populist attitudes pre</b>			-.253 (.108)*

**Note.** Regression coefficients are unstandardised and shown with robust standard errors in parentheses. Models are linear regressions where the dependent variable is the change in average populist attitudes (-4; 4) from before to after the PB. Education (1=primary education; 2=lower secondary education; 3=higher secondary education; 4=vocational training; 5=university college education; 6=university education); Populist attitudes pre (1-5).

### C.3 Ceiling effect



**Figure 1.** Scatter plot of average level of populist attitudes after PB vs. average level of populist attitudes before PB





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