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## article

# The use and abuse of participatory governance by populist governments

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Populists claim that they alone represent the voice of the people against a corrupt elite. We argue that populist governments augment this claim by appropriating and manipulating the language and methods of participatory governance. Advancing an analytical framework on content, process, effect, resource efficiency and communication dimensions, we illustrate these arguments with the National Consultations in Hungary in 2010–18. Our conclusion for the case study is that these exercises were deeply flawed for securing popular input into policy-making. The implication for scholarship is that participatory governance enthusiasts need to be more aware not just of the uses, but also the abuses, of public input, while scholars of populism should pay more attention to the actual policies and practices populist actors employ to gain or maintain power.

**key words** populism • participatory governance • collaborative governance • Hungary  
• national consultations

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## Introduction

A nation can only build its future on the foundations of the system of democracy if it believes in the common sense and sense of responsibility of its citizens. This is why we civic, national and Christian democrats introduced... the national consultation... to create common areas of understanding; common areas of agreement which allow the people, their elected parliament and government to act with a common will. (Viktor Orbán, 2017b)<sup>1</sup>

These were the words of Hungary's populist leader, Viktor Orbán, upon the conclusion of a so-called national consultation about Hungary's relationship with the EU. One

of seven consultations organised by the Orbán government, this particular exercise in 2017 solicited the opinion of respondents on a range of (alleged) EU policies. The questionnaire mailed to every Hungarian household claimed, for instance, that ‘Brussels wants to force Hungary to let in illegal immigrants’ and sought answers as to whether, in response, illegal immigrants should be detained ‘to keep Hungarian people safe’ or whether ‘illegal immigrants should be allowed to move freely in Hungary’. According to the government, some 1.7 million questionnaires were returned out of approximately 8 million sent out, with an overwhelming majority supporting the position that, indeed, ‘Brussels’ should be stopped, and illegal immigrants should be taken into custody. This enabled the Prime Minister to claim that ‘the Hungarian people’ have spoken and authorised his government’s controversial policies.

The national consultations are interesting not only because they have been employed with such regularity and significant partisan effects since 2010 in Hungary, but also because they allow us to investigate the nexus between the language and practices of populism and participatory governance. Participatory governance has been advocated by many as a potential way to remedy a perceived alienation of voters from politics in western democracies – a sense of disillusionment with the political process that is said to fail to involve citizens in decisions affecting their own lives in a meaningful way. Participatory governance advocates criticise representative democracy as being overly focused on the act of voting – a one-off event once every few years which limits citizens’ ability to control the policy agenda. Others point to a growing gap between political decision-makers and citizens’ concerns, leading to a decline of public trust in government (for example, Marozzi, 2015; Yeo and Green, 2017; Uslaner, 2018). Various forms of public participation on the other hand are expected to educate citizens, help develop a civic culture, and boost the legitimacy of decision-making. In short, “‘participatory democracy’ evokes a conception of democracy that stresses, valorises and (normatively) ‘wishes for’ processes of political decision-making directly involving citizens’ (Florida, 2017, 4).

Scholarship has, however, so far largely overlooked the question what happens when populist actors, rather than mainstream parties, employ and institutionalise inclusive participatory methods. We argue that despite the new opportunity created for citizens to express their opinion, the effects are paradoxical and even perverse in terms of democratic quality, drawing attention to the importance of political actors’ motivations for, seemingly, rallying to the call for more participatory and collaborative policy-making. We focus on the national consultations conducted by Hungary’s Fidesz government between 2010 and 2017, which explicitly justified these exercises as novel ways to give voice to ‘the people’, but will also seek to draw parallels with similar practices elsewhere. We assess the national consultations by employing an analytical framework drawing on five distinct dimensions tapping into content, process, effects on policy, resource effectiveness and communication aspects. The selection of Hungary as our main case study is justified by the national consultations being probably the longest standing and most extensive consultative practices practiced in contemporary Europe. Most consultations yielded over a million responses – more than in the case, for instance, of the well-studied (albeit regional) consultations accompanying devolution in England (for example, Prosser et al, 2017).

In the next section, we first explore participatory, deliberative and collaborative governance and their discontents, then turn to the literature on populism and participation. In the third section, we present our analytical and conceptual framework

as well as methodological information on the data that was used in the analysis. We then turn to the country case and cover the national consultations in light of the analytical framework (the fourth section). The following section discusses the implications of our findings, and finally a brief sixth section concludes.

## Participatory governance and populism

Much normative and empirical research has been carried out over the past decades on participatory, deliberative and collaborative forms of democracy and governance. The terms cover partially overlapping phenomena that nonetheless have distinctive focus areas and are subject to somewhat different literatures. Participatory democracy and governance studies start from the premise that representative democracy's mechanisms, notably elections, do not (fully) ensure that the input from those affected by policies, especially marginalised or vulnerable groups in society, is effectively channelled into the political process. This is seen as harmful, both normatively, in terms of democracy not living up to its own ideals, and practically, in terms of output, since channelling multiple perspectives into policy-making are expected to lead to better outcomes (for example, Bherer et al, 2016; Ansell et al, 2017). In the participatory democracy literature, examples often come from the local level, and in studies emphasising governance rather than democracy the whole vertical and horizontal spectrum of policy activity is considered for existing or potential participatory practices rather than just core political institutions.

Deliberative democracy and governance perspectives share these views regarding the importance of broad participation, but emphasize the process of arriving at decisions in which reciprocal and gradual exchanges of views and perspectives play a key role (Fung and Wright, 2003; Ackerman and Fishkin, 2004; Fung, 2006; Newman et al, 2004; Wright, 2010; Fischer, 2012). The research on collaborative governance incorporated much of the same themes (for example, Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson et al, 2012; Ansell et al, 2017), but focused more on inter-organisational arrangements than the involvement of citizens (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003; Bingham and O'Leary, 2015).

Common in the participatory, deliberative and collaborative democracy literature is the – often implicit – assumption that popular involvement is normatively desirable as something that enhances the legitimacy and democratic quality of policy-making. This does not mean that the possible downsides of participatory practices have been entirely neglected. Already in the 1960s Arnstein (1969) highlighted that participation without redistribution of power risks becoming tokenism or even manipulation. Potential adverse effects of collaborative arrangements, such as detrimental effects on transparency and legitimacy or bias towards participants with greater resources or incapacity to deal fairly with (re)distribution issues, have also been noted, as well as a general failure to live up to expectations of efficiency improvements (for example, Kester, 2011; Purdy, 2012; Silvia, 2018). Fung (2006) pointed out that citizen participation is not necessarily always useful in an instrumental sense.

Nonetheless, as for example, Polletta (2016), Dean (2017) or Ganuza et al (2016) observe, much of the literature is characterised by a normative bias: it tends to presume that a transformation towards participatory, deliberative and collaborative governance is overall positive. It also tends to be assumed that when such arrangements are advocated by policy-makers it is for the sake of altruistic objectives (for example,

giving voice to constituents or improving public services) rather than partisan goals (see also Batory and Svensson, 2017).

In contemporary politics, calls for popular involvement in public life seem to be more and more common – at least in part because of the powerful wave of populist mobilisation in the last decades. The election of Donald Trump in the US, and in Europe Brexit in the UK, and the coming to power of Syriza in Greece, Fidesz in Hungary, Law and Justice in Poland and the Five Star Movement–League coalition in Italy showed populism to be, in some countries, a dominant political force. There is much academic debate about whether populism should be seen as an ideology, a discourse, a form of organisation, or a political style (for example, Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). However, consensus seems to be emerging to suggest that populism is first and foremost a set of ideas (Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016; Hawkins et al, 2018), or as Müller (2014, 485) put it, ‘a particular moralistic imagination of politics’. In ideational terms, populism is a ‘thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004, 254).

The central tenet of populism, according to which nothing can stand in the way of the will of the people as interpreted by the populist leader, is in inherent conflict with pluralist notions of democracy, whereby majority rule is constrained by constitutional checks and balances, rights protecting minorities and the rule of law. The idea that politics should be about the unmediated expression of the popular will also puts populism at odds with representative democracy (Canovan, 1999, 14; Abts and Rummens, 2007; compare Müller, 2014; Taggart, 2004, 278). The language of popular sovereignty appeals to ‘the common man and his allegedly superior common sense’, often in contrast with experts and (other) members of the elite who are portrayed as out of touch and/or irrelevant (Betz, 1993). This aversion to representation applies, to some extent, even to populists in government despite the fact that they, after all, gained power in elections. Populist leaders overcome this contradiction by ‘claim[ing] to present and proclaim, not to represent, the essentialist will of the people’ (Abts and Rummens, 2007, 408).

The invocation of popular sovereignty, the impatience with representation, and the desire to do away with allegedly outdated political institutions create a natural affinity between populism and calls for more participation by citizens. This can be seen, on the one hand, in populists’ oft-declared admiration for direct democracy, generally advocated as a way to allow the ‘pure’ people to express policy preferences without the meddling corrupt elite (Canovan, 1999, 2; Barney and Laycock, 1999, 319). On the other hand, populists often use novel methods of mobilisation and participation that set them apart from ‘old style politics’, to differentiate themselves from traditional, mainstream or conventional political forces (Taggart, 2004, 284). Indeed, this participatory aspect is sometimes seen to make populism both a threat and a corrective to democracy (Kaltwasser, 2011). As Abts and Rummens (2007, 416) argue, the ideal style participation for populists may involve gatherings or political meetings, where ‘the people express their will by cheering their leaders and acclaiming the proposals put forward’ – or, in modern times, more conveniently, public opinion polls or digital/new media technologies. New plebiscitarian methods may include, for instance, televotes or electronic town hall meetings (Barney and Laycock, 1999, 319).

As this discussion illustrates, much of the literature considers the nexus between populism and participatory democracy in abstract. However, even participatory enthusiasts acknowledge that assessments of actual participatory arrangements are in short supply: only by probing the range of outcomes can we ‘move beyond the sometimes florid claims made both by critics and by champions of participatory decision-making’ (Polletta, 2016, 234). It is thus crucial to consider actual forays into popular involvement in politics. The next section outlines the analytical and methodological approach employed below for assessing Hungary’s national consultations against the ideals and expectations commonly attributed to participatory processes in the literature.

### Assessing national consultations as participatory instruments

Participatory practices and instruments are frequently evaluated against implicit or explicit normative standards. For instance, Smith (2009) evaluates a range of institutions for citizen participation based on inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, transparency, efficiency and transferability. There is also a rich scholarship on EU practices of participatory democracy, which is seen as enshrined in EU law through Article 11 of the Treaty of Lisbon (Busschaert, 2016, 5). Participation is frequently evaluated on whether it draws in new voices, allows for the balanced representation of all affected groups, and ensures transparency and outreach (for example, Quittkat, 2013; Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2013). Rather than directly utilising either of these existing benchmarks, the analytical framework laid out in Table 1 represents a synthesis. This framework is not only more comprehensive but also has the advantage that the dimensions are void of normative connotations in themselves, but nonetheless allow outcomes to be linked to salient normative concepts such as democratic quality (the content and process dimensions) and legitimacy (especially the effects, use of resources and communication dimension).

In the following, we apply this framework to national consultations carried out in Hungary in the period 2010–17. However, before proceeding, it is worth clarifying what type of practices may qualify as (national) consultations, since the term can be applied to arrangements ranging from routine external feedback in the legislative

**Table 1: Analytical framework**

Dimension	Normative standard
Content	Captures the extent to which the consultation is designed to allow for autonomous choices that reflect a wide range of possible perspectives on the topic/s. The inclusion/exclusion of inter-related topics is covered, as are issues of potential bias.
Process	Captures the extent to which responses/inputs are processed transparently and fairly and the capacity of the instrument to give voice to people and social groups that do not participate, or are not heard in regular representative democracy practices.
Effect	Captures the extent to which the exercise has an impact on actual policy design and decision-making.
Use of resources	Captures the extent to which the goals of other dimensions can be achieved at reasonable cost.
Communication	Captures the extent to which the exercise is communicated/portrayed as a way to improve democratic standards and enhance the legitimacy of the political system.

process, meetings with stakeholders on a specific topic, to opinion polls among voters or supporters of a specific party. For the purposes of this article, national consultations are considered to be nation-wide in scope, open to all citizens (rather than organised interests or stakeholder groups), and involve communication in writing (rather than oral input in meetings, hearings, or deliberate forums). At first glance, practices that fit this definition may appear similar to the most established form of direct democracy, namely referendums. However, the national consultation is a more flexible instrument with respect to all dimensions in our analytical framework: it offers more leeway in terms of formulating questions and format (content); unlike referendums, it is not subject to stringent procedural safeguards in constitutional law (process). While referendums may have binding results, consultations are always advisory (effect), and may potentially be framed in more ‘creative’ ways, again due to less legal regulation, the lack of path-dependency or other factors (communication). Consultations are also quicker and cheaper to organise and allow for the use of new technology, particularly ICT (use of resources).

As for the case study at hand, the key material for the analysis with respect to the first two dimensions (content and process) consists of the records of the consultations themselves. For both these dimensions and the remaining three (effects, use of resources and communication) the analysis also relies on media coverage and party and government documents contemporary to the consultations to support interpretations. For the category of communication, a separate text analysis was performed on all of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speeches in Parliament that touched on the consultations (18 in total), identified through key-word search using the verbatim records of Parliament’s plenary sessions in the 2010–14 and 2014–18 terms. Detailed information on the sources and the timeline of consultations is provided in Annex 1.

## The national consultations in Hungary

National consultations in Hungary arguably represent the most established participatory exercises employed by populist actors in contemporary EU countries, but they are clearly not the only ones. The populists’ proclivity for (claiming to) listen to ‘the people’ is also illustrated by Italy’s Five Star Movement, which ‘criticises representative democracy in the name of direct and deliberative democracy to be practised through the Internet’ (Diamanti, 2014, 20). Indeed, Gianroberto Casaleggio, co-founder of the movement, envisaged ‘a kind of web-based direct democracy’ to replace traditional party politics altogether, and used a social networking site to launch what became the Five Star Movement (Natale and Ballatore, 2014, 107). More widely, technology and especially ICT often ‘becomes a tool (and a storyline) to facilitate the use of direct democracy and the rise of a new form of ‘hyper-representation’ for populists (De Blasio and Sorice, 2018). In 2018, Polish President Andrzej Duda of the populist Law and Justice Party called for a constitutional referendum (later vetoed by the Senate) based on input from public consultations. More traditional calls for direct democracy have also contributed to electoral gains for populist parties in the Czech Republic, where the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy Party was unexpectedly successful in 2017 elections, and for Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (Schmitt-Beck, 2017, 140). Outside Europe, recent examples of populist actors using digital participatory mechanisms include Donald Trump’s online consultation to inform his 2018 State of the Union Address, with questions

such as ‘Do you feel the mainstream media is actively working against the Trump Administration?’ (Trump, 2018).

Turning to Hungary, the political context in which the national consultations took place needs some elaboration. The country has attracted wide scholarly attention in recent years as a prime example of democratic backsliding (for example, Sedelmeier, 2014; Kelemen and Blauburger, 2016; Mechkova et al, 2017). When Hungary joined the EU in 2004, it was considered as one of the leading reformers among former communist countries in Central and Easter Europe – a position it has clearly lost since 2010, when Fidesz entered office in a landslide electoral victory. Hungary’s party system had been traditionally characterised by bipolar competition between two roughly evenly matched camps, one on the centre-right, led since the late 1990s by Fidesz, and one on the centre-left, with the Hungarian Socialist Party at its core. Following the 2010 elections, Fidesz became the dominant player, with the Socialists’ splitting and in disarray, and the parliamentary opposition divided between a number of left/liberal parties on the one hand, and the extreme-right Jobbik on the other. Having won a qualified majority in the 2010 election, Fidesz lost no time in augmenting its advantage by completely redrawing the country’s constitutional order, including the adoption of a new fundamental law, curbing the power of the constitutional court, appointing Fidesz loyalists to head most nominally independent agencies, and adopting a new electoral law. The latter was a key ingredient for Fidesz maintaining power after the 2014 and 2018 elections with a qualified majority in parliament.

Fidesz’ electoral victories, however, were also undoubtedly a result of longstanding party leader and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s masterful reading, and manipulation of, public opinion, positioning himself and his party as the true defender of ‘the people’ against a corrupt, liberal-cosmopolitan elite. Although the party is often referred to as ‘national-conservative’, Fidesz’ status as a leading populist party in Europe is well-established in the literature (for example, Batory, 2016; Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016; Enyedi, 2016; Lendvai-Bainton, 2017; Bozoki and Hegedűs, 2018). It was while in opposition between 2002 and 2010 that, in line with populist actors’ characteristic critique of representative democracy, Fidesz discovered direct participatory mechanisms as a rewarding mobilisation strategy: the party organised an early form of nation-wide consultation and initiated a number of referendums.

Coming to power in 2010, however, the party tamed its enthusiasm for direct democracy – to the extent that the new constitution it alone supported in Parliament was not put to a popular vote. Instead, a series of national consultations were launched (altogether four in the term) (Annex 1), including one on the principles of a new basic law in February 2011. In an address to Parliament on 28 March 2011, Viktor Orbán justified this as follows:

[A]t a referendum, what happens is just that people, in a single decision, say yes or no to a 60-page document without any detailed questions because there is no opportunity for this. However, in a national consultation there is the possibility to have, in this case, 12 or 13 questions where they can say in detail whether they want something or not. In my opinion, a national consultation involves people in a meaningful way in the making of the constitution. (Orbán, 2011b)

The questionnaire sent to all citizens contained 12 statements on issues of various political or constitutional salience, including some probably intended as red herrings, with three or four reaction options to each of them. For instance, one statement probed attitudes to the idea that parents raising minors should get the right to vote on behalf of their children. Another suggested that opinion is divided on whether the new constitution should ‘express the value of Hungarians living across the border for national cohesion’ and include an obligation for future governments to defend this value. Nearly one million people returned the questionnaires, with results that showed some diversity among responses, including some questions not gaining the support of the majority.<sup>2</sup>

A few months later citizens had a new chance to provide input through the ‘Social Consultation’, followed by the ‘Economic Consultation’ in 2012 (Annex 1). Both contained statements related to a broad spectrum of issues within the respective domains and resulted in more than a million responses for the first and 700,000 for the latter. Many of the questions seem to have been designed not simply to solicit self-evident answers but also to tap into or reinforce common prejudices. For instance, in Hungary, for many the notion of welfare scrounger is identified with the large Roma minority (which is overrepresented among the unemployed); similarly, a not uncommon sentiment is that large multinational companies exploit Hungarian employees and squeeze out SMEs. The corresponding questions in the consultations were: ‘There are those who suggest that the country should help the unemployed by giving them work rather than by giving them benefits. Others think that benefits are the solution to the problem of unemployment. What do you think?’ (Social Consultation). ‘There are those who think that the state has to restrain big companies which are in a monopoly situation. Others think that there is no need for this; it is ok that the big fish eats the small fish. What do you think?’ (Economic consultation).

Having won another term in 2014, the practice of soliciting public input continued with three consultations, all relating in various ways to migration and refugee policy against the backdrop of the refugee crisis that engulfed the EU in 2015. The aim to connect migration with negative consequences was evident already in the name of the first consultation, the ‘National Consultation about Immigration and Terrorism’, which was sent out in May 2015. Unlike the previous consultations this was not phrased as statements (Some say..., others think...) but as questions, all framed to be highly prejudicial. For instance, the document (and government spokespeople) consistently referred to ‘migrants’ or ‘economic migrants’ and not to refugees or asylum-seekers, thereby diverting attention from the humanitarian crisis unfolding and portraying people arriving in the EU as invaders or opportunists. A question asked: ‘Do you agree with the government that instead of allocating funds to immigration we should support Hungarian families and those children yet to be born?’, thus construing voters’ economic interests as being directly opposed to those of the asylum-seekers. This consultation also differed from previous ones in that there could not be any doubt to anyone which answer was the ‘correct’ one, which was always listed as the first among three options. Fidesz claimed that about one million responses arrived to the questionnaire.

These tendencies – leading questions, more and more evident bias in possible answers, and a clear partisan agenda of mobilisation – continued and strengthened in the 2017 consultations. The government’s reliance on the accompanying campaigns may have been reinforced by a, to some extent unsuccessful, experiment with the



legally more constraining form of participatory exercise: a referendum in October 2016 on the EU's mandatory distribution scheme for the relocation of 120,000 asylum-seekers. Given that there was a binding Council decision on the issue, the referendum was known to directly lead to a situation where, in case of a valid outcome against the relocation scheme, the government would be 'forced' to disregard the country's EU obligations. And the latter is precisely what the intention seems to have been, since the government's main campaign slogan was 'let's send a message to Brussels they can understand'. In line with the government's expectations, an overwhelming majority of votes cast rejected the possibility for the EU to 'prescribe the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens without Parliament's authorisation'. However, turnout was well below the required 50 per cent for a valid result, which was widely seen as a failure for the government, despite the Prime Minister's celebratory reception of the 'excellent outcome' (Nepszabadsag Online, 2016).

The government followed up the mixed result with two more consultations in the term. These contained only six and seven statements respectively, each with two options out of which the first was 'correct'. The 2017 'Let's stop Brussels' National Consultation was formulated to create or reinforce perceptions of 'EU meddling' by attributing competences and actions to European institutions that, in many cases, were simply untrue or at least not backed by any evidence. The European Commission (2017) took the highly unusual step of a public rebuttal, pointing out that 'several of the claims and allegations made in the consultations are factually incorrect or highly misleading'. However, Fidesz claimed that 1.7 million questionnaires were filled out and returned, the vast majority supporting the government's positions.

The autumn 2017 consultation contained seven questions about the alleged activities of Hungarian-born American investor and philanthropist George Soros, which set the tone for the spring 2018 parliamentary elections. The 'National Consultation on the Soros Plan' included statements such as 'The aim of the Soros Plan is that the languages and culture of European countries is pushed to the background, in order to further the integration of illegal immigrants', and invited respondents to indicate whether they supported this part of 'the plan' or not. Urging people to participate in the consultations, Orbán claimed that 'the bureaucrats in Brussels are working on implementing this [Soros] plan point-by-point' (Prime Minister's Office Hungary, 2017). The government proclaimed this to be 'the most successful consultation of all times' since 2,356,811 opinions were received (2,178,320 by post and 178,491 online). George Soros (2017) himself stated that 'the national consultation contains distortions and outright lies that deliberately mislead Hungarians about [his] views on migrants and refugees' and a Hungarian NGO that the Consultation claimed to have assisted the 'Soros Plan' won a court case for defamation.

## Assessing the national consultations

Returning to our analytical framework to assess the Hungarian experience, the consultations clearly did not live up to common normative benchmarks for how participatory mechanisms should be designed in order to allow for meaningful input. All seven consultations were plagued by increasing bias in terms of questionnaire methodology. The questions were framed to make it obvious how the respondent is supposed to react; some of the questions contained deliberately misleading or false information (and, as referred to above, were refuted as such by authoritative sources);

and they probed for a mix of opinion, factual knowledge and prediction, pointing to severe deficits of *content*.

The weakness or absence of procedural guarantees is also evident (*process*). There was no information on methodology available to the public and no public archive of previous consultations. The portal where questions could be submitted online reportedly allowed multiple submissions by the same individual and did not conform even to basic data protection standards – to the extent that, unbeknown to users, a Russian ‘analytical code’ was running on the site (as later established by the National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information). Information released by the government on the number of responses was often contradictory and could not be verified by independent actors or opposition parties, thus raising doubts about whether the claimed high response rates were actually truthful or made up. As to the use of *resources*, all consultations were accompanied by massive, costly media campaigns promoting the ‘desired’ outcome, mostly financed from public resources as public information campaigns, while opponents’ or independent actors’ campaigns received no public funding, thus further distorting the public debate.

In terms of partisan *effects*, the consultations were highly successful for Fidesz. The publicly funded campaigns played a key role in pushing migration to the top of the political agenda, and keeping it there even after the EU-wide migration crisis subsided. The consultations drove home a number of messages: one, that ‘migrants’ were undesirable and dangerous; two, that EU criticism of Hungary’s dealing with the issue was an attack on Hungary’s sovereignty and the ‘Hungarian people’; three, the EU itself was inept at dealing with the migration crisis; and finally, that an international conspiracy was in progress to obstruct the will of the Hungarian people (the will being, according to the government, to prevent in-migration altogether). Support for Fidesz in opinion polls strengthened considerably from a low point in April 2015 (when the rival Jobbik party seemed to threaten to overtake Fidesz in popularity) throughout the year, coinciding with the 2015 national consultation and the refugee crisis. For instance, in the wake of the May 2015 consultation on ‘migration and terrorism’, the party’s popularity received a major boost (from 24 per cent in March to 32 per cent of respondents by September); Viktor Orbán’s approval ratings shot up (from 38 to 44 per cent between May and September); and confidence in the government strongly improved (from 36 to 43 per cent in the same period) (Hann and Rona, 2015). In spring 2018, Fidesz won another election following a campaign almost solely focusing on an anti-immigrant message.

One other long-term effect of the consultations was their contribution to rising xenophobia. Public sentiment echoed the exact lines propagated by the consultations, for example, overwhelming majorities agreeing that immigration ‘significantly increases the risk of terrorism’ or that ‘migrants don’t respect our laws and customs, they riot, subvert, and act violently’ (78 per cent and 67 per cent respectively). Up from 66 per cent a year before, 79 per cent of respondents would have liked to be more restrictive about accepting refugees (Hall and Rona, 2015). By spring 2016, 86 per cent of Hungarian respondents – the highest among the ten EU countries surveyed – believed refugees are a burden because they take Hungarians’ jobs and social benefits (Pew Research Center, 2016).

The effects on policy are less clear. The consultations at best seem to have validated policies already decided on or pursued by government. Nonetheless, Orbán did try to demonstrate that the national consultations provided actual policy input. For

instance, in 2017, after the first five consultations, he claimed that in the consultation on migration ‘nine tenths of people returning the questionnaire wanted stricter laws enabling us to take into custody immigrants illegally crossing the border, and this is how it is today’ (Orbán, 2017b). He also emphasised that the idea that parents should be able to vote on behalf of their children was not pursued further as a direct result of opinion expressed in a consultation (Orbán, 2011b).

The claim that controversial policies have been enacted as the ‘will of the people’ is the main characteristic of *communication* around the consultations – and it is of course also a hallmark of populism. On the government’s side, there was a clear tendency to conflate respondents of the national consultations, and within that those expressing an opinion in line with the government’s, with ‘the people’ or ‘the Hungarians’. For instance, following the consultation on migration and terrorism, the Prime Minister evaluated the outcome as ‘over 80% of Hungarians believe that the immigration rules of Brussels have failed and regulation needs to be tightened’ (2015). Even if the accuracy of the figures reported by the government is to be believed, actual responses to the national consultation numbered about one million in a country of about 10 million citizens. Interpreting this as the ‘common will’ clearly speaks of populism’s tendency of projecting an image of ‘the people’ as a homogeneous group which, as in this case, excludes or ignores those members of the national community who disagree with the populist leader.

The ‘proclamation’ of the general will as expressed by the national consultations also allowed Viktor Orbán to claim that criticism of his government, and particularly criticism from abroad, notably the EU, is in fact an attack on ‘the people’, and consequently that any pressure to change his policies – for instance to comply with obligations arising from EU membership – was not just unacceptable but also illegitimate. As he said in Parliament in 2017, ‘[w]e live in times when in Europe the mainstream political class that considers power as its due condemns [our practice of] asking questions from the citizens as populism. We Hungarians are again and again surprised by this [attitude]’ (2017b). He made use of the national consultations vis-à-vis the EU institutions where he referred to the strong mandate granted to him by ‘the people’: ‘a National Consultation will serve to improve the Hungarian national position in this battle’, he declared, because it would ‘reinforce the general mandate given to the governing parties in the last election’ (Government of Hungary, 2017).

Conceptually, the strong link Orbán and his colleagues made between the national consultations and the ideals of participatory governance is instructive. The Prime Minister repeatedly justified the practice as an effort to renew outdated political models and revitalise democracy. In his own words, national consultations ‘have become a new form of participating in public affairs’; and even the most powerful social ‘movement’ in Hungary (Orbán, 2011b). He also referred to his conviction that democracy needs to rely on a strong, constant participatory component which is not confined to the act of delegation through elections. As he said in Parliament, ‘without the participation of people democratic politics cannot be conducted. For this reason... political forces that make efforts even between elections to somehow involve people in deciding the important business of the country should be congratulated, not looked down on or criticised’ (Orbán, 2011b). This participatory ideal was contrasted with the ‘elitist line’ which Orbán claimed characterised the opposition Socialists while in government prior to Fidesz, which he summed up as ‘we reform you, even if it kills you’ (2011a). In other words, the language and ideals of participatory governance

have been appropriated by the ruling party and put to the service of partisan goals – without any evidence that the commonly assumed benefits for democratic quality or policy efficiency would have materialised.

## Conclusion

Participatory governance enthusiasts often expect, and perhaps with good reason, that identifying new innovative methods of channelling popular preferences into the policy process would not only improve policy outcomes but also rejuvenate western democracies – seen by many as struggling with normative and practical problems arising from citizens' alienation from politics. From this point of view, any attempt to give voice to the people should be seen as welcome, particularly when it comes to practical ways of ensuring citizen engagement between elections, which, as critics claim, may be insufficient for connecting the voters with their representatives in a meaningful way. Indeed, existing scholarship demonstrated that participatory practices can give a boost to democratic quality and legitimacy, notwithstanding the potential downsides concerning the capacity of particular actors in collaborative and participatory arrangements to take advantage of the situation.

In this study, we advanced an analytical framework that is well-suited for assessing whether actual governmental practices in a range of contexts can live up to the normative ideals associated with participatory governance. The framework taps into five dimensions that are associated with democratic quality and legitimacy but usefully break down these concepts into empirically detectable standards. The content criterion maps the possibility for autonomous choice; the process dimension investigates transparency and inclusiveness; effect ascertains actual influence on policy-making; the use of resources considers the costs of the exercise; and, finally, communication aspects assess the interpretation of the practice's results by its instigators.

This analytical framework was utilised to review an, in contemporary Europe, uniquely large-scale and well-established practice explicitly established to provide a new channel for citizens to provide input into policy-making. The national consultations in Hungary involved sending out, repeatedly, over 8 million questionnaires to every household in the country, inviting citizens to express their opinion on burning issues of the day, which clearly created a potentially important method to give people voice and enhance legitimacy. However, as designed and practised, the consultations were deeply flawed with respect to content, process, policy impact and resource efficiency. To mention just the most important shortcomings, the weakness of procedural guarantees and built-in bias in the framing of questions marks out the consultations as a political marketing tool rather than a genuine instrument for participation.

Of course, it is no accident that these practices have been observed in a country which has become a key European example of a populist party in power. However, the extent to which the country's government justified the national consultations through the narrative of participatory governance is perhaps more unexpected: the Prime Minister insisted that the practice grew out of a desire to improve democratic quality and policy-making through bringing the citizens into the political process. The Hungarian case suggests that manipulated consultation processes can serve at least three political purposes: they lend (more) credibility and authority to governments' claims of merely serving the popular will while following their essentially partisan agenda; they provide effective ammunition against criticism, particularly from the

international arena; and they provide opportunity for shaping public opinion through propaganda and political marketing ‘dressed up’ as participatory governance. The case is also instructive in terms of machine politics: the actual methods through which populist leaders can get the upper hand over mainstream parties by (better) responding to the genuine desire of ordinary people to be heard. What the national consultations provided was an outlet for this desire, which explains why so many people did indeed fill in the questionnaires.

A broader lesson to be drawn from this analysis is that participation is normatively neutral: it can be a boost to legitimacy, democratic quality, and policy responsiveness, but also the opposite. In particular, participatory exercises married with populism can have large-scale effects on national policy and politics that empty out and manipulate the ‘will of the people’ for partisan goals. Indeed, it is only in their proper context that participatory processes can be convincingly evaluated and interpreted: in Hungary, recent sweeping changes to the country’s constitutional order, the practices and institutions of democracy, policy-making and public administration are key to understanding how national consultations could come to replace ‘ordinary’ policy-making and accountability mechanisms.

Thus, our conclusion is that scholars of participatory governance need to be more aware not just of the uses, but also the abuses, of public input, while scholars of populism should pay more attention to the actual practices populist actors employ in order to gain or maintain power. Indeed, a key question for scholarship is to ascertain the extent to which populists’ claims to be more responsive to public preferences on particular policy issues is instrumental in these actors’ (continuing) electoral success. More rigorous assessments of the political and policy consequences of specific participatory practices, particularly when employed by populist actors, would likewise be worthwhile avenues for further research.

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### **Conflict of interest statement**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Viktor Orbán are all from Parliament’s records for the given date, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> Since there is no official archive of national consultation results, the response rates are from various news items referring to figures mentioned by government spokesmen (see Annex 1).

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## Annex 1

### National consultations in Hungary, 2010–18: Timeline and sources

Date	Consultation	Scope/issue	Sources and analysed material
September 2010	Consultation about Pensions	An open question to 1.7 million households with pensioners asking them to return their opinions on what social policies the government should pursue.	Origo, 2010; Kovacs, 2017; Origo, 2017
February 2011	Citizen Questionnaire about the Fundamental Law	Twelve questions about the new constitution being drafted, for example whether the new constitution 'should express the value of the Hungarians living across the border for national cohesion'.	Government of Hungary, 2012; Index, 2011; Origo, 2017; Szájer, 2011
May 2011	Social Consultation	Ten questions concerning elderly care and pensions, mortgage, public service, employment and education. For example, 'There are those who suggest that the country should rather help the unemployed by giving them work than by giving them aid. Others think that aid is the solution to the problem of unemployment. What do you think?'	Government of Hungary, 2012; Origo, 2017; Szijjártó, 2011; Orbán, 2011d
September 2012	Economic Consultation	Sixteen questions on broad set of policy issues, including raising minimum wages, family support, what forms social assistance at the local level should take, and the value of pensions. For example, 'There are those who think that the state has to restrain the big companies which are in a monopoly situation. Others think that there is no need for this; it is ok that the big fish eats the small fish. What do you think?'	Government of Hungary, 2012; Fidesz, 2012; Origo, 2017; Orbán, 2011c
May 2015	National Consultation about Immigration and Terrorism	Twelve questions, for example, whether the respondent 'supports the Hungarian government's efforts to introduce stricter immigration policies despite the easy politics of Brussels'.	Fidesz, 2015; Origo, 2017; Orbán, 2015
April 2017	Let's Stop Brussels	Six questions, on different policy areas, regarding plans attributed to the EU. For example, 'Recently one terror attack followed another in Europe. Despite this, Brussels wants to force Hungary to let in illegal immigrants. According to you, what should Hungary do?'	European Commission, 2017; 24.hu, 2017; Kolozsi, 2017; Domschitz, 2017; Orbán, 2017a and 2017b
October 2017	National Consultation about the Soros Plan	Seven questions with two answer options related to George Soros' alleged activities. For example, 'The aim of the Soros Plan is that the languages and culture of European countries is pushed to the background, in order to further the integration of illegal immigrants. You support this part of the Soros Plan?' Questionnaire also offered online.	Government of Hungary, 2018; Orbán, 2018