

*Master Thesis International Relations in Historical Perspectiv*e

**‘Do we really have a democracy, or is that primarily a façade?**

**Let the people speak for they know more than the left’**

Populist parties are globally increasingly participating in national governments, though they are widely perceived as threats to liberal democracies. Under the rise of the PVV, one of Europe’s most successful populist parties in setting up the populist profile, the Netherlands experienced a steady development of populism.

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# Abstract

With populist parties increasingly participating in national governments, the empirical question of whether they undermine ‘real existing democracies’ has gained significance. Yet, the international academic debate on the threats of populism is currently dominated by theoretical and normative arguments. This study investigates the populist features of the Dutch populist party PVV and whether they undermined liberal democracy based on both theoretical and empirical arguments, emanating from the studying of qualitative and quantitative sources, like the PVV’s elections manifestos, website and official statistics on popular sovereignty. It builds upon recent academic findings that at a theoretical level, populism is essentially democratic, but it is ambivalent towards liberal democracy.[[1]](#footnote-1) As the core of populism ‘that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people’, is only democratic in a majoritarian sense.[[2]](#footnote-2) The PVV’s abundant measures to limit those who are not a part of ‘the people’, indeed undermine the liberal democracy, though these measures are recognized as characteristic right-wing parties. This research identifies PVV’s monist populist party structure to have predominantly undermined liberal democracy. Based upon these findings, this study concludes the need for the clear discerning of the populist measures and a focus on the populist party structures in the international debate on the relation between populism and the liberal democracy.

## I. Introduction

 ***‘***Do we really have a democracy, or is that primarily a façade? Let the people speak for they know more than the left’.[[3]](#footnote-3) This was stated by the Dutch Party for Freedom *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV), in preparation to their second participation in the national elections, in which they gained 16 percent of the votes. Contemporary populist movements claim to be truly democratic, ‘setting out to reclaim power for the people’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet they are widely regarded by scholars as threats to democracy.[[5]](#footnote-5) The distrust towards popular sovereignty and direct democracy emanated from the aftermath of World War II, when Western European liberal democracies became deliberately elitists to protect the minority rights and to avoid a new radicalization of the popular will.[[6]](#footnote-6) Nevertheless, Europe has experienced the success of many populist parties and leaders in the last decades, for example Silvio Berlusconi, Matteo Salvini, Geert Wilders, Jörg Haider, Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán. Moreover, populist parties are globally increasingly participating in national governments, recently under Trump in the United States, though predominantly in Europe and Latin America, under leaders like Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro, Evo Morales and Rafael Correa.[[7]](#footnote-7) Scholars, politicians and the media have expressed their concerns or moderate positivity.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yascha Mounk author of *The People vs. Democracy* wrote in *the Guardian* thatthe populist uprisings could bring down liberal democracy, as they willingly challenge democratic norms.[[9]](#footnote-9) On the other hand, James Miller identified in *the Guardian* populist insurrections and revolts to ‘form the heart and soul of modern democracy as a living reality’.[[10]](#footnote-10) There is reason to believe that the relationship between populism and democracy is one which often seems to be one of ‘friend and foe’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

## II. The Academic Debate

‘Populist parties are widely perceived as a threat to liberal democracies. Now that populist parties are increasingly participating in national governments, their impact … should be at the center of scholarly attention’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser identify that this negative position is not shared everywhere and has evolved over time. The academic debate on populism and democracy relationship is very extensive and opinions have differed ‘in all times and across all regions’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Particularly, the early scholarship on populism in the United States - for example by John D. Hicks - was initially very positive about the relationship between populism and democracy until the rise of the negative ‘revisionist’ scholarship in the 1960s, among others by Richard Hofstadter.[[14]](#footnote-14) This was succeeded again by a ‘school of counter revisionists’ more sympathetic towards populism, which was led by Norman Pollack.[[15]](#footnote-15) Amidst the global rise of populism various views persist, as Ernesto Laclau still regards populism positively, in contrast to many scholars.[[16]](#footnote-16) The debate predominantly breaks down into two main groups: on the one hand a group of scholars that perceive populism to undermine democracy and on the other hand a group that argues that populism enhances democracy, rather than undermine or destroy it.
 On the one hand scholars identify the relationship between populism and democracy as ‘straightforward and positive’ because ‘at least in theory, populism supports popular sovereignty and majority rule’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, scholars that view populism positively believe that the rise of populism can detect a democratic crisis, as populists identify a prior unrepresented voice.[[18]](#footnote-18) In the early 2000s Paul Taggart therefore argued that populism is a protentional ‘barometer of the health of representative politics’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Laclau even considered populism to be the result of political logic and indicated populism to be a ‘sine qua non requirement of the political’.[[20]](#footnote-20) On the other hand populism is perceived as threat to democracy, ‘undermining its key values and striving for an alternative, an authoritarian system’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Mark Plattner identifies that the populist pursuit of the ‘general will of the people’ is problematic for liberal democracies, as populism is thereby ‘only democratic in a majoritarian sense’ and does not take into account the will of minorities.[[22]](#footnote-22) Similarly, Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens argue that populists weaken the importance of individual rights in a democracy.[[23]](#footnote-23)
 The above indicated views are all based on theoretical and normative arguments, which acknowledges an important gap in the existing literature, as populist parties are increasingly participating in national governments. Therefore the attention should turn the ‘empirical question of how populist actors can affect ‘real existing democracies’.[[24]](#footnote-24) In the last decade several empirical studies of both European and Latin American countries have been performed to obtain a better understanding of the actual threats the global phenomenon of populism poses to democracies. As this field is still developing, multiple case-studies within this wider international comparative analysis are still lacking. Despite the fact that the Dutch liberal democracy has seen a steady development of populism over the past two decades and managed to cooperate with populist parties and persisted, its relation with populism is predominantly researched theoretically and to a lesser extent empirically. Though, the Netherlands is a very interesting case-study for the international debate, as the Dutch populist party the PVV along with a few other European parties is recognized by scholars as the most successful and viable in setting up a populist profile.[[25]](#footnote-25) Moreover, the PVV is par excellence an example of a populist party that can have different impacts on liberal democracy, as the party has ruled both in opposition and in government.[[26]](#footnote-26) However, the academic debate on the relationship between the PVV’s populism and the Dutch liberal democracy did not launch smoothly.

Academic Debate on the PVV’s populism and Liberal Democracy

Subsequent to the success of Wilders and Rita Verdonk[[27]](#footnote-27) in 2008, coined as ‘the year of populism’ by a Dutch national television program, ‘various Dutch scientists and commentators have expressed their concerns about the threats populism poses to Dutch democracy’.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, Koen Vossen identifies that in most commentaries, ‘it remains unclear what exactly the term populism means and whether it has any explanatory value’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Instead of researching the threat populism poses to the Dutch democracy Vossen primarily researched whether Verdonk and Wilders and their movements can actually be labeled as populist. Later Vossen also wrote a book on *The Power of Populism - Geert Wilders and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands* and writes in detail about the PVV’s populism providing both empirical and theoretical arguments, however, he does not indicate whether it undermined liberal democracy.[[30]](#footnote-30) Nevertheless, Vossen’s work will be valuable for this research as he thoroughly describes the PVV’s populism. In 2014 Pepijn Corduwener investigated how the PVV conceptualized ‘democracy’ and identified how this relates to liberal democracy, thereby he explicitly contributed to the debate as one of the few.[[31]](#footnote-31) His research is based on a discourse analysis of party documents and publications from the PVV. He concludes that ‘notwithstanding the gap between liberal democratic theory and practice, the ‘two conceptions of democracy cannot always easily be juxtaposed, although they do show some remarkable differences’.[[32]](#footnote-32) His study does not elaborately exemplify these ‘differences’ or indicate its evolution over time and is solely based on theoretical arguments. Rummens made a recent contribution to this debate with his article on ‘Populism as a Threat to Liberal Democracy’.[[33]](#footnote-33) He argues that ‘populism can fulfill crucial functions in *signaling* problems with our political system, [though] … the alleged cure is much worse than the illness’.[[34]](#footnote-34) He identifies, explicitly right-wing populist parties like the PVV ‘toadvocate measures that curtail the fundamental rights of Muslim citizens and asylum seekers’.[[35]](#footnote-35) This is the only comment on the PVV’s populism in Rummens study, who also fails to clearly discern its populist features.
 Despite the abundant attention for populism in the Netherlands the overall debate on the relationship between the populism of PVV and liberal democracy is scattered, as most studies seldomly indicate this relationship or discuss the PVV’s populism in detail. This study will identify explicitly the PVV’s populist features and whether they undermine liberal democracy based upon both theoretical and empirical evidence. Identifying the PVV’s impact when ruling both in opposition and in government, which contributes to wider understanding of the impact of populism.[[36]](#footnote-36) This study aims to contribute to the international academic debate as it will foster the knowledge of the global phenomenon of populism and its relationship with liberal democracies. Furthermore, this research will use clearly defined minimal definitions of populism and liberal democracy in order to contribute to the international comparative analysis of populism and its actual threats to liberal democracies.

III. Theoretical framework

### *Defining Liberal Democracy*

Democracy is a highly contested concept in social sciences, though as illustrated above the term is often used without adjectives as it in ‘most day-to-day usage refers to liberal democracy’.[[37]](#footnote-37) However, in order to outline the challenges populism might have posed to liberal democracy, it is of considerable importance to clearly define this concept. Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that it is almost impossible to find a definition that is above debate, though they identify the seminal work of Robert Dahl. His concept of democracy is ‘very elaborate and [a] demanding system of political freedoms and rights’ and suitable for both empirical and comparative research, which is most widely adopted for analyses on democracies worldwide.[[38]](#footnote-38) Dahl built on the work of Joseph Schumpeter, whose understanding of liberal democracy was a competition among political elites for the popular vote.[[39]](#footnote-39) He argued citizens to have a limited, rather passive role, despite the moment of voting.[[40]](#footnote-40) Dahl criticized Schumpeter for devoting more attention on the political competition than on the problem of inclusion. Dahl argues that ‘the people’ should determine who are permitted to participate.[[41]](#footnote-41) Furthermore, Dahl identifies ‘checks and balances’ are vital for the survival of polyarchies, both to guarantee the separation of power and the protection of minority rights, otherwise ‘a minority of citizens is persistently deprived by a majority of a fundamental right, freedom or opportunity’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Based upon the pillars of Dahl, Mudde and Kaltwasser translated this into the following minimal definition of liberal democracy, as a system essentially ‘*characterized not only by free and fair elections, popular sovereignty and majority rule, but also by the constitutional protection of minority rights. Furthermore, it is able to provide both public contestation and political participation*.’[[43]](#footnote-43) The balance in this definition between both majority rule and the constitutional protection of minority rights fits the post-war European liberal democracy well, as outlined in the introduction.[[44]](#footnote-44) Equally important Dahl’s definition is widely accepted and thereby assures its applicability in the international comparative analysis of populism, this will also be pursued in the subsequent definition of populism.

### *Defining Populism*

‘One of the most used and abused terms inside and outside of academia is undoubtedly *populism*.’[[45]](#footnote-45) The aforementioned variety of populist leaders, indicated that term populism can apply both to left- and right-wing leaders, varying from moderate to more extreme movements. The concept dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, when both in the United States and Russia a populist party emerged. However, the experiences of these parties, who described themselves as populist, were very different. They were either led by farmers or middle-class intellectuals.[[46]](#footnote-46) Later populist groups appealed to the lower-class groups called ‘the people’.[[47]](#footnote-47) This wide range of historical examples of populist manifestations, made it difficult to develop a useful definition of populism. Whilst it is not possible to discuss the entire populist debate, Mudde and Kaltwasser’s search for a minimal definition will be discussed, in order to contribute to conceptual clarity, foster cumulative knowledge and make the empirical research of populism feasible for comparative studies (in time and place). Three notions of populism will be disused that are influential inside and outside of academia.[[48]](#footnote-48) The three main conceptual approaches are: populism as a movement, as a political style, and as a discourse. The perception of populism as a ‘multi-class’ movement organized around a charismatic leader, does not suffice, as Alan Knight pointed out that similarly organized successful political parties are not identified as examples of populism.[[49]](#footnote-49) The second approach defines a populist style, in order to win ‘the people’, a formerly depoliticized electorate, according to Peter Mair.[[50]](#footnote-50) However, this is such a broad concept of populism, which especially in campaign periods, would label almost all political actors as populist.[[51]](#footnote-51) Thirdly populism is perceived as a discourse, chiefly advocated by Laclau.[[52]](#footnote-52) He considers populism to be the result of political logic, namely the quest by ‘the people’ for homogeneity in a society characterized by heterogeneity, which creates through a discursive construction links between the socially divided ‘power bloc’ and ‘the people’.[[53]](#footnote-53) This theory is extremely abstract and thereby makes the concept of populism so vague that it is not possible to use for empirical research.[[54]](#footnote-54) All the above identified concepts of populism at least implicitly share the idea that there is a confrontation between ‘the people and ‘the establishment’.[[55]](#footnote-55) Margaret Canovan confirms that ‘all forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation of and appeal to ‘the people’, and all are in one sense or another anti-elitist’.[[56]](#footnote-56) In 2000, Taggart was one of the first to define populism in a more general way. He defined populist parties to ‘mobilize itself in the name of the people’, in order to defend the imagined ‘heartland’, which is endangered by elitist politicians, who distanced themselves from the citizens.[[57]](#footnote-57) In 2002, Canovan narrowed the core of the populist ideology down to pursuing the will of the people, which should determine the outcome of the political discourse.[[58]](#footnote-58) A few years later Mudde identified, since populism is almost always combined with one or more other ideologies, so called ‘host ideologies’, populism is a ‘thin-centered’ ideology’.[[59]](#footnote-59) Though, the clear distinctive ideology of populism is concerned with three core concepts (the people, the elite, and the general will) and two direct opposites (elitism and pluralism).[[60]](#footnote-60) Thereupon, he aptly defined populism as a‘*a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous 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’,* which became one of most used definitions.[[61]](#footnote-61) Building on the findings of Canovan, Taggart and Mudde, this definition appears to be an adequate minimal definition of populism, as it aptly identifies the confrontation between the elite and the people. This also becomes apparent from its widespread use, for example by Dutch scholars studying populism like, Vossen and Stijn van Kessel.[[62]](#footnote-62) From the populist ideology based on its distinctive core emanates a particular view on democracy, which will be discussed in following section.

### *Defining the Populist Democracy*

Building on the previously identified definition on populism provided by Mudde, he identified the core element of populist democracy as ‘the belief that the *volonté générale* should be implemented without any restrictions’.[[63]](#footnote-63) This is based on ‘essentially a monist ideology’, which challenges the protection of minority rights and ‘division and pluralism’, though most European democracies are party democracies.[[64]](#footnote-64) Mudde indicates that the populist perception of democracy is based upon three key features: ‘plebiscitary politics, personalization of power, and primacy of the political’.[[65]](#footnote-65)
 Populist democracy primarily makes a crucial claim for *plebiscitary politics*, in which people are involved in the decision making.[[66]](#footnote-66) This stems from the populist belief that the contemporary political system is not really democratic. The populists claim that the political elite control all the power and that only ‘through the introduction of elements of plebiscitary democracy can power be given (back) to the people’.[[67]](#footnote-67) Therefore, arguments for ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ are often accompanied by expressions ‘denunciating the elite’ and ‘glorifying the people’. The most frequently championed plebiscitary element is the referendum.[[68]](#footnote-68)
 The second feature is the *personalization of power*, in which populists ‘call for an increase of the power of the main political figure’, for example the president, which is an expression of their preference for monism and would create a more personalized political system. Therefore, populists are strong proponents of direct democracy, at various political levels. ‘This is also the basis of its aversion to intermediate bodies, which are generally seen as artificial divisions or representatives of special interests’.[[69]](#footnote-69) However, Mudde argues that this does not mean they are incompatible with liberal democracy.
 The last feature *the primacy of the political* is identified by Mudde as a key notion of populist ideology of democracy. This entails that everything is subordinated to ‘the will of the people [as it] cannot be limited by anything’.[[70]](#footnote-70) Predominantly, legalism and the rule of law are perceived to hinder the will of the people. This results in proposals that limit the independence of the judiciary in order to obtain independent and uncolored institutions that represent the will of the people.[[71]](#footnote-71)
 The theoretical framework has identified that in a populist democracy everything should be subordinated to the ‘general will of the people’ and is thus ‘only democratic in a majoritarian sense’, whereas a liberal democracy aspires to constitutionally protect minority rights.[[72]](#footnote-72) This raises an important question, which will be subsequently discussed.

IV. Research Question and Sub-topics

From the academic debate and theoretical framework it became apparent, that at least in theory populism and liberal democracy both pursue ‘popular sovereignty’ and ‘majority rule’.[[73]](#footnote-73) Though, liberal democracy does not allow a majority to deprive a minority of any fundamental political rights, because this would be contrary to a democratic process, whereas populism only defends minority rights and constitutional provisions as long as the majority supports them*.*[[74]](#footnote-74) It was indicated above that the international academic debate on the threats that populism poses to liberal democracies remains predominantly based on theoretical or normative arguments. The last decade more empirical studies were executed to identify the actual relationship between populism and liberal democracy. Though, a study of the Dutch liberal democracy that saw a steady development of populism and managed to cooperate with one of Europe’s most successful populist parties was identified to still be lacking.[[75]](#footnote-75) This study will research the PVV’s populism from its rise in 2006 until the parliamentary elections of 2017, in order to identify variations in the relationship between the PVV and the liberal democracy, specifically by including both the period prior and subsequent to the PVV’s participation in government. This results into the following research questions: *Did the PVV’s populism undermine liberal democracy from its rise until the parliamentary elections of 2017?* To identify whether the Dutch liberal democracy was previously undermined by populism, this study will primarily outline its historical context. Subsequently, in line with Mudde and Kaltwasser’s proposal this research will be based on both theoretical and empirical arguments, divided into a chapter on the PVV’s populist perceptions and the PVV’s populist performance, inspired by Vossen’s study of populism.[[76]](#footnote-76) The method and the sources that are used to execute this research, will be identified in the following section.

V. Method

To identify whether the PVV’s populism undermined liberal democracy, it is of primary importance to discern the PVV’s populism. Vossen studied the PVV’s populism by identifying its populist features both in its discourse and performance.[[77]](#footnote-77) Corduwener similarly focused on the PVV’s discourse to identify its populist perceptions and executed a discourse analysis.[[78]](#footnote-78) The PVV’s populist perceptions on democracy are not straightforward and must be deduced from multiple expressions. Therefore a discourse analysis fits this approach very well, as its core is concerned with the understanding of the spoken or written language.[[79]](#footnote-79) The discourse evolves from an interaction between the individual use of language, the PVV’s language, in relation to an already constructed framework of communication, the populist discourse.[[80]](#footnote-80) Building on Michael Freeden’s *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach,* Corduwener provided a thematic framework to execute a discourse analysis on the PVV’s populist perception of democracy.[[81]](#footnote-81)
 The thematic framework consists of ‘both criticisms of the functioning of contemporary democracy and the solutions [the PVV] proposes’.[[82]](#footnote-82) The key subject areas are the above indicated features of a populist democracy, namely ‘plebiscitarypolitics’, the personalization of power and the primacy of the political.[[83]](#footnote-83) This thematic framework will be used to collect data on the PVV’s populist perceptions of democracy. The presence and the development of these features will be both discussed and presented in tables. Subsequently, it will be identified whether these perceptions undermine the previously defined concept of liberal democracy. Building on the framework provided by Mudde and Kaltwasser these findings will be reinforced by empirical studies and official statistics that identify the impact and resonance of the PVV’s populist perceptions.[[84]](#footnote-84) A further extensive emphasis will be on the empirical evidence and existing empirical studies when discussing the PVV’s populist performance, in which the PVV’s populist features will be discerned using the previously identified thematic framework.[[85]](#footnote-85)
 The above identified methodology, shows that this study will triangulated its arguments by executing qualitative analysis of the PVV’s populism and consulting existing quantitative (and qualitative) analyses and sources. By providing both theoretical and empirical arguments based on quantitative and qualitive research, the validity of the thesis’ arguments as to whether the PVV’s populism undermined democracy will be enhanced.

VI. Sources

The prime focus of this research will be on the PVV’s election manifestos, as Matthijs Rooduijn, Sarah L. de Lange and Wouter van der Brug argue that the election manifestos are ‘par excellence’ the place where parties capture their ideas and the ‘manifestos seems to catch populism rather well’.[[86]](#footnote-86) Although it is often argued that the voters may not read these manifestos, these manifestos are of considerable importance to parties themselves.[[87]](#footnote-87) Michael Laver and John Garry point out that electoral manifestos are authoritative documents, as politicians are often bound to the promises the made in these manifesto, thereby they give a representative overview of the ideas of parties.[[88]](#footnote-88) Furthermore, these documents are appropriate for comparative content analyses over time and countries, which is an advantage considering that this study is a contribution to a wider cross-regional research on the impact of populism. An extensive discourse analysis of the election manifestos of 2006, 2010, 2012 and 2017 will be executed and references will also be made to the ‘Declaration of Independence’, a document written by Wilders Group *Groep Wilders* in 2005, indicating the ideological pillars for the PVV.[[89]](#footnote-89)
 The following set of sources will concern the PVV’s populist performance that will reinforce the analysis about the PVV’s populism undermined liberal democracy. A prime concern of the populist democracy is the involvement of the people with politics, however, due to security precautions Wilders hardly appears in public which means that the PVV’s principal engagement with its supporters happens online. [[90]](#footnote-90) The PVV thoroughly uses its social media channels and Wilders’ Twitter behavior has been studied several times.[[91]](#footnote-91) However, there appears to be a knowledge gap as the PVV’s website is an understudied medium and a Synovate study indicates that 11 percent of its voters regularly visit the website.[[92]](#footnote-92) Websites can be subjected to both qualitative and quantitative forms of analysis.[[93]](#footnote-93) The study of the PVV’s website will concern a content analysis to identify whether the PVV enhanced and advocated ‘plebiscitarypolitics’, therefore the previously identified methodology of the discourse analysis will be used. The limitations of researching a website are that the content might (have) change(d) or disappear(ed).[[94]](#footnote-94) This hampers a precise identification of how the PVV’s usage of the website as a medium for involving the people with politics evolved over time. Though, all the content on the PVV’s website has a date and the website contains a dense archive of ‘all’ the content that has been uploaded, which goes back to December 12, 2007.[[95]](#footnote-95)

 In addition, as previously indicated this study will make use of official statistics. The advantages of using existing secondary analyses and official statistics are that they provide high-quality data, are less time-consuming to gather and provide the possibility for cross-sectional and over time (longitudinal) analyses.[[96]](#footnote-96) This research will take into account that all social measurements and official statistics are prone to error and that the set of statistics serves the purposes the research.[[97]](#footnote-97) This study will use the statistics provided by the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* (CBS) and the rapport of the National Voters Research *Nationaal Kiezers Onderzoek* (NKO).[[98]](#footnote-98) These statistics indicate both the Dutch voter’s perception of ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ and the Dutch voting behavior, which is connected to the ‘personalization of power’. To reinforce and test my argument this study will also rely on secondary literature. Furthermore, the secondary literature is consulted to identify the historical context of the relationship between the PVV’s populism and liberal democracy, which will be subsequently discussed.

# Chapter 1: The Dutch Liberal Democracy Under the Rise of Populism

When the PVV entered the political scene in 2006, several populist manifestations that questioned the Dutch liberal democracy had preceded. This chapter will identify the familiarity of the Dutch liberal democracy with the challenges of populism prior to the PVV. For a long time, the Dutch democracy had been shaped by the pillarization. This type of democracy was coined by Arend Lijphart a ‘consociational democracy’, in which the government entails ‘a grand coalition of political leaders of all significant segments of the plural society’.[[99]](#footnote-99) Corduwener acknowledges that ‘cultural and socioeconomic cleavages ran through the country’s socialist and protestant and Catholic subcultures, and as a result, the social democrats and the confessional parties divided key positions in the state media, labour unions and government agencies’.[[100]](#footnote-100) On the one hand this consensual system created social stability, on the other hand it started to ‘bred latent discontents with a closed political system’, that was ‘unable to keep up with the pace of a quickly changing society’.[[101]](#footnote-101)
 Towards the end of the pillarization, the first populist parties had sporadically emerged in the Netherlands. The Farmer’s Party in 1960s and the ethno-nationalist xenophobic parties led by Hans Janmaat in the 1980s and 1990s, although these parties never became successful for an extended period of time.[[102]](#footnote-102) Vossen argues that the Dutch parties were unwilling to cooperate with Janmaat, which resulted into the ‘excessive neglect of the problems of immigration and integration raised by Janmaat’.[[103]](#footnote-103) In the 1990s the left-wing Socialist Party (SP) emerged, which is recognized as a ‘social-populist’ party.[[104]](#footnote-104) After the elections of 1994 the SP, as an opposition party, entered The House of Representatives for the first time. In the elections of 1994 a major shift occurred in Dutch politics, as the Christian Democrat Appeal (CDA) lost twenty out of 150 seats and the Labour Party (PvdA) lost twelve seats.[[105]](#footnote-105) After the Second World War these parties had provided for the creation of the welfare state.[[106]](#footnote-106) However, in the neo-liberal paradigm at the end of the twentieth century, a prominent role of the government within the economy was perceived as problematic.[[107]](#footnote-107) In the competitive global economy, the Dutch government started to work towards the privatization of government services and ongoing austerity.[[108]](#footnote-108) Though, this was perceived by the citizens as a lack of defense that was offered against globalization and the power of capital.[[109]](#footnote-109) Furthermore, events like the end of the Cold War and 9/11 had reordered world politics and revealed the limits and failures of various governments in protecting its citizens. Piet de Rooy identifies that people felt powerless and were dissatisfied with the response of politics, as ‘The Hague was letting major matters drift’.[[110]](#footnote-110) He indicates that across the world faith in parties, politicians and parliaments had diminished, arguing ‘millions of people around the world sensed trouble in the house of democracy’.[[111]](#footnote-111) Near the end of the twentieth century these national and international developments and instable electorate had paved the road for populism resisting ‘neo-liberalism’ in the Netherlands.

#### Eruption of Populism in the Netherlands

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In the early 2000s the discontents with the closed political system erupted and the diminishing popularity of the CDA and PvdA had created an electoral vacuum, which Pim Fortuyn with his newly created political party Liveable Netherlands *Leefbaar Nederland*, successfully stepped into.[[112]](#footnote-112) He denounced the disappointing performance of the public sector and argued for a drastic reorganization of the national administration. De Rooy identifies Fortuyn to owe much of his electoral success to this.[[113]](#footnote-113) By this time the Socialist Party (SP) had largely rid itself of the populist rhetoric and turned into ‘into a more conventional social democratic party’, according to van Kessel.[[114]](#footnote-114) On 9 February 2002, Fortuyn appeared in *De Volkskrant* expressing the party’s primacy of the political views on multiculturalism, immigration and Islam arguing, championing ‘the primacy of the political’ ‘I’ll say it for the Dutch people – that’s what I stand for’.[[115]](#footnote-115) Issues that were previously raised by Janmaat, though, were neglected, which enabled Fortuyn to breakthrough in order ‘to break the left church taboos’.[[116]](#footnote-116) In May, a few days prior to the elections of 2002, Fortuyn was murdered by the activist Volkert van der Graaf, who argued in trial Fortuyn posed a threat to society, especially to minority groups.[[117]](#footnote-117) In consultation with Fortuyn’s party, now named Pim Fortuyn List *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF), the elections were held. This resulted into a sudden victory of 26 seats for the LPF, which is known as the ‘Fortuyn Revolt’ in parliament. The LPF was expected to be very successful, however, their parliamentary presence only lasted one term, due to the lack of qualified successors. De Rooy identifies the ‘loss of the stable middle ground in the political order was followed by fragmentation and turbulence’.[[118]](#footnote-118) Though, he argues that this was not the consequence of the increasing populism, but was predominantly caused by the difficulties the welfare state faced namely, an over-demand of citizens, a structural reduction of economic growth and a changing population as a result of immigration.[[119]](#footnote-119) In the midst of which, Europe was no longer viewed as ‘a solution to this, but an additional problem’.[[120]](#footnote-120) This played an important role in the push for a new populist party, which will be discussed in the section below.

## 1.1 The Rise of the PVV

After 2002, Wilders stepped into the populist void and made fighting Islam his key point, causing him to become an important voice in the debate on integration, immigration and Islam, which moved towards a neo-conservative direction.[[121]](#footnote-121) His controversial views had repeatedly put him at odds with the leaders of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD).[[122]](#footnote-122) The disagreement on whether Turkey could become a member of the EU was the breaking point between Wilders and his party the VVD.[[123]](#footnote-123) The VVD supported the admission, whereas, Wilders argued ‘an Islamic country like Turkey should never be allowed to become a member of the European Union’.[[124]](#footnote-124)
 Wilders continued as an independent member of parliament (MP), under the name the *Groep Wilders*. Wilders promised to start a campaign against the European Constitution and membership for Turkey and extended his party’s name with Party for Freedom. His party was not expected to be successful, as the majority of new parties fail to persist. Moreover, amidst the progressive discourse that had characterized the Netherlands for a long time, Wilders push towards conservatism was not very promising.[[125]](#footnote-125) This radically changed after the murder of Theo van Gogh, one of the best-known critics of Islam, which made Wilders’ party extremely relevant.[[126]](#footnote-126) The Wilders Group published in 2005 its first political manifesto the Declaration of Independence O*nafhankelijkheidsverklaring,* arguing that the Netherlands has been taken hostage by political elite with their ‘so-called progressive spirit of time’ and promised to return the country to its citizens.[[127]](#footnote-127) This declaration indicated the party’s future political program and was largely written by Bart Jan Spruyt.[[128]](#footnote-128) The ideas presented in the declaration were largely in line with the ideas Wilders held towards the end of his time at the VVD.[[129]](#footnote-129) Though, the suggestions for political reform, which concerned the majority of populist measures, for example the implementation of direct elections, were largely the contribution of Spruyt.[[130]](#footnote-130) As Wilders had declared in 2004 that any changes in the electoral system were ‘of no importance’, it’s all about having firm and brave politicians’, moreover in 2005 he opposed the planning of a referendum on the constitution of Europe.[[131]](#footnote-131) Thereby he initially contradicted two main features of a populist democracy, namely ‘plebiscitary politics’ and ‘personalization of power’. Furthermore, Wilders diametrically opposed the ‘typical populist’, a reluctant politician without any political background, as he was a very experienced and passionate politician, who started his political career at the age of 27 and has been the mentor of Mark Rutte.[[132]](#footnote-132)
 Thus far, the Netherlands had seen no strong manifestation of populism. Fortuyn did suggest the reorganization of the national administration, though he proposed no tangible initiatives, as he was predominantly occupied with his anti-Islam agenda. In the first years after Wilders left the VVD, this also seemed to be his major concern. However, Spruyt incorporated many populist measures into Wilders’ Group, though he already left the party in 2006. In the subsequent chapter, it will be analyzed whether the PVV upheld Spruyt’s populist measures and if they undermined liberal democracy.

# Chapter 2 - The PVV’s Populist Perceptions and Liberal Democracy

The following chapter will entail a discourse analysis of the PVV’s election manifestos of 2006, 2010, 2012 and 2017. These manifestos were built upon - in chronological order - the following topics: ‘A Better and Stronger Netherlands’, ‘Hope and Optimism’: choosing for a multicultural ‘abyss’ or to restore our traditional norms and values, ‘Their Brussel, Our Netherlands’: combating the European Union (EU) and ‘The Netherlands ours again’: the de-Islamization of Netherlands.[[133]](#footnote-133) The PVV’s populist perception of democracy will be revealed by discerning the three main features of a populist democracy.[[134]](#footnote-134) The analysis will point out whether these perceptions undermined the liberal democracy. To reinforce the argument on whether these perceptions undermined liberal democracy, it will be identified whether these perceptions were adopted by the Dutch political parties and electorate.

## 2.1 Plebiscitary Politics and Liberal Democracy - ‘The People Know Better’

As identified in the theoretical framework, ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ is concerned with the involvement of ‘the people’ in the decision making process and the glorification of the people and the denunciation of the elite.[[135]](#footnote-135) Indeed, populism ‘conceptualizes democracy primarily in terms of popular sovereignty’.[[136]](#footnote-136) In the previous chapter predominantly Spruyt was identified to advocate for ‘plebiscitarypolitics’. This chapter will illustrate whether the PVV, after Spruyt left the party, still championed ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ and how this relates to liberal democracy. Primarily the introductions to the election manifestos will be discussed, as they usually contains the core message of the party.[[137]](#footnote-137)
 The PVV commenced its first election manifesto by stating: ‘The political elite in the Netherlands systematically ignores the interests and problems of the citizen’, arguing the political elite should listen to its citizens and the civil organizations should get more to say.[[138]](#footnote-138) The PVV also expressed their criticism towards the people, arguing that ‘decency must return to our society’.[[139]](#footnote-139) Though, the PVV strongly denunciated the elite they did not glorify the people, in strong contrast to the election manifesto of 2010. This manifesto commenced by stating ‘the Dutch are a people who have no equal’ and glorifying their solidarity, tolerance and history, ‘for centuries our people determined their own destiny’.[[140]](#footnote-140) Though, the PVV argued that was a long time ago. The PVV questioned ‘Do we really have a democracy, or is that primarily a facade?’.[[141]](#footnote-141) They stated the Dutch democracy was facing a big crisis, as ‘the elites have become detached from reality and have started doing things on their own that do not benefit ordinary people’.[[142]](#footnote-142) The fault was not with ‘Henk and Ingrid’ - a neologism invented by Wilders for the average Dutch couple - but with the leftist elite. The PVV argued the elites had ‘converted to the illusion that all cultures (and associated values) are equal to each other’.[[143]](#footnote-143) This shows that the PVV’s denunciation of the progressive elite is connected to their aversion to multiculturalism. The PVV argued in the manifesto of 2010, ‘we are ordinary citizens who come to The Hague to make the square kilometer of the Inner Court *Binnenhof* part of the Netherlands again’ and they called upon all the people to join.[[144]](#footnote-144) The PVV anew declared themselves independent of the elite and their ideals, in pursuit of a ‘sparkling democracy, with plenty of referenda. Let the people speak, for they know more than the left’, which is evidently a claim for ‘plebiscitarypolitics’.[[145]](#footnote-145)
 In contrast to the glorifications in the manifesto of 2010, the PVV criticized the people for being stupid to continuously transfer money to the EU in 2012.[[146]](#footnote-146) The PVV identified a national loss of sovereignty: ‘Are we still a country that wants to govern itself? Are we still forming a people who are in control of their own territory?’.[[147]](#footnote-147) The PVV identified an erosion of freedom and independence, as they pointed out regardless of the outcome of referenda that ‘they will push us it down our throat anyway. Because the will of the people is not relevant to the elite.’[[148]](#footnote-148) Thus, the PVV argued ‘that you cannot be a Europhile and democrat at the same time’.[[149]](#footnote-149) According to the PVV the Netherlands should only cooperate with Europe in terms of trade, as the PVV glorified the ‘historical’ Dutch citizens that had made the Netherlands into an international trading nation.[[150]](#footnote-150)
 In the one-pager election manifesto of 2017, the PVV neither glorified the contemporary nor historical Dutch people, as it entirely focused on the de-Islamization of the Netherlands.[[151]](#footnote-151) Though, in the accompanied letter the PVV did express its discontent with the contemporary elite, as they identified the political elite do not lead, they mislead, with lies and deceit. The PVV indicated to have learned from ‘Rutte’s mess’ that ‘the people must be able to pull the emergency brake when the political elite go against its will. And not just once every four years’.[[152]](#footnote-152) The paragraph below will outline the actual measures the PVV initiated to implement ‘plebiscitarypolitics’.

#### Measures Initiated by the PVV to Implement Plebiscitary Politics

The election manifesto of 2006 primarily dealt with proposals on tax reduction, reduced criminality, improving education and family-life and halting immigration. The later topic, which preceded the topic on direct democracy, included several measures that would limit the involvement of citizens with politics, for example the PVV pleaded to deprive ‘non-Dutch nationals of their voting-right for municipal councils’.[[153]](#footnote-153) In the election manifesto of 2012 the PVV even pleaded for the general deprivation of the right to vote for non-Dutch nationals, which would include the European elections and water boards.[[154]](#footnote-154) This identifies the PVV’s problematic understanding of an ‘exclusive’ majority rule, which is at odds with ‘political participation’ and the ‘protection of minority rights’, as aspired in a liberal democracy.
 The measures in the manifesto of 2006 that dealt with direct democracy, concerned the implementation of binding referenda, though the PVV also already highlighted the subjects they desired to be discussed.[[155]](#footnote-155) Whereas in the manifesto of 2010, the PVV explained the implementation of binding referendum would entail that each citizen with a certain number of signatures could request a referendum on every decision, as the PVV argued an ‘enormous’ difference exists between what the elite and the Dutch people think.[[156]](#footnote-156) The PVV pleaded for ‘radical democratization’ to ‘break the dominance the left-wing elites’.[[157]](#footnote-157) In the manifesto of 2012, democratization was no longer a separate topic but discussed as a part of the fifth topic ‘Our Safety’. The PVV addressed, ‘The citizen must be given more input. Our crown jewel is called the binding referendum’.[[158]](#footnote-158) They assumed that if ‘the people’ were in charge to vote on matters, like multiculturalism or the European Union, ‘the left would always loose’.[[159]](#footnote-159) In one-pager election manifesto of 2017, the third topic entailed ‘Direct democracy: implementing the binding referendum, citizens obtain the power’.[[160]](#footnote-160) The PVV explains in the accompanied letter, that they will, in contrast to the elite, listen to the people. However, the PVV explicitly identifies that they will listen to the people, who believe that Islam is not an enrichment for Dutch culture.
 In addition to national infringements of the sovereignty of ‘the people’ the PVV identified the EU as the ‘EUssr’, as they argued it to resemble the Soviet Union ‘a super state with extensive power, without sufficient democratic control’.[[161]](#footnote-161) The PVV pleaded for ‘the Dutch interests to become leading again in foreign policy.’[[162]](#footnote-162) In the subsequent manifesto the members of the House of Representatives were identified as ‘puppets mainly serve the EU and not the citizen’.[[163]](#footnote-163) Thereupon, the PVV for the first time pleaded ‘The Netherlands leaves the EU. Our Sovereignty back’, which is also the second topic on the election manifesto of 2017.[[164]](#footnote-164)

Results from the Analysis on the PVV’s Perceptions of Plebiscitary Politics

The analysis above has indicated that the PVV recurrently argued for the implementation of binding referenda (see table 2), though in terms of championing ‘popular sovereignty’ this measure received alternating attention. In 2010 the implementation of the referenda was fiercely championed in order to ‘let the people speak’, whereas the other manifestos predominantly presented the referenda to be useful for pushing the PVV’s own arguments.[[165]](#footnote-165) Despite the PVV’s suggestion for the people to ‘pull the emergency brake’ in politics, they did not initiate a measure to improve this.[[166]](#footnote-166) Indeed, over the years the PVV did not initiate any further measures in addition to the binding referenda to enhance the ability for the people to be involved with politics. In contrast to the measures that were previously initiated in the Declaration of Independence, which pleaded for a system in which the voters would be able to hold the elected accountable.
 Perhaps the absence of measures to involve ‘the people’ with politics stems from the fact that the PVV is not a sincere believer in ‘the people’. This becomes apparent from the PVV’s alternating and often absent glorification of the people.[[167]](#footnote-167) The PVV is often either critical towards the people or merely glorifies the historic Dutch people.[[168]](#footnote-168) Vossen confirms that the amount of glorifications of the people by the PVV is not to the degree that belongs to populist politicians.[[169]](#footnote-169) On the other hand the PVV proved very capable of denunciating the political elite both in the national parliament and in the EU. In order to preserve national sovereignty the PVV was willing to initiate drastic measures, for example to leave the EU, in contrast to popular sovereignty. Thus, the PVV’s weak measures to enhance popular sovereignty and ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ do not seem to have undermined liberal democracy, however, the PVV’s exclusive perception of ‘majority rule’ and ‘political participation’ did undermine liberal democracy, for example by depriving certain minorities of their right to vote. Despite the identified moderate populist measures, scholars perceived the PVV’s populism to have been contagious in politics.[[170]](#footnote-170) To reinforce the argument on whether the PVV’s perceptions on ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ in politics undermined liberal democracy, the next paragraph will outline the adoption of these perceptions.

### 2.1.1 The Adoption in Politics of the PVV’s Perceptions of Plebiscitary Politics

The general assumption of scholars is that ‘the discourse of established parties in Western Europe has become more populist in the last two decades’.[[171]](#footnote-171) Rooduijn et al., tested this hypothesis by measuring the amount of populist thematic paragraphs in the electoral manifestos of political parties in the Netherlands, France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom in between 1988 and 2008. The research showed that of all countries, the PVV’s election manifesto of 2006 had the highest proportion of populist paragraphs, namely 23,1 percent. Against all expectations, none of this was reflected in the manifestos of the other established Dutch parties, that scored CDA 0,0, D66 2,64, PvdA 0,61 and VVD 0,0 percent.[[172]](#footnote-172) The research proved the hypothesis wrong, identifying the majority of the established parties make (virtually) no populist statements in their election manifestos, the percentages remained the same regardless of an electoral populist success.[[173]](#footnote-173) The same result was found a few years later when the election manifestos of 2006, 2010 and 2012 were reviewed in a subsequent study performed by Rooduijn, van der Brug and de Lange, arguing ‘the populism scores of parties are assumed to be constant over time’.[[174]](#footnote-174)
 On the basis of these research results the PVV’s populist perceptions do not seem to have undermined liberal democracy, as they were not adopted in the election manifestos of the established parties.[[175]](#footnote-175) It is important to note that the above stated only holds true for the PVV’s populist perceptions, as a lot of studies have proven that established parties changed their dialogue on topics as ‘immigration and integration’ in response to the rise of radical right-wing populist parties.[[176]](#footnote-176) Rooduijn et al. identified that once a populist parties has gained electoral success they become themselves less populist and if they have been unsuccessful, they will increase their populist discourse. Rooduijn et al. explain that this is predominantly the case in countries with a multi-party system, as the populist parties have reasons to temper their criticism, since they must form a coalition if they want to rule.[[177]](#footnote-177) This might explain the decrease of the PVV’s championing of ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ after its electoral victory of 24 seats in parliament in 2010.[[178]](#footnote-178) Another possibility for the decreased attention for ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ in the election manifesto of 2012 is the fact that this manifesto was entirely focused on the EU, with which the PVV lost nine seats.[[179]](#footnote-179) In the subsequent manifesto of 2017 the PVV emphasized more on the denunciation of the national political elite, though they predominantly focused on denunciating the contemporary immigration policy, which resulted in the electoral victory of five seats, in total they gained 13,5 percent of the votes.[[180]](#footnote-180) In the following section it will be discussed whether the PVV’s voters and the electorate adopted the PVV’s perceptions on ‘plebiscitarypolitics’.

### 2.1.2 The Adoption by the People of the PVV’s Perceptions of Plebiscitary Politics

To identify whether the PVV’s voters adopted the PVV’s perceptions is not easy to say, as ‘plenty of interviews indicate that PVV voters do not think much of politicians or politics’ and none of them plead for more direct democracy.[[181]](#footnote-181) Chris Aalberts, who thoroughly interviewed PVV voters with a team of students, concluded that most PVV supporters want to send out a signal with their vote for PVV, to express their discontent with the current policy to wake up the politicians and make them listen to their problems.[[182]](#footnote-182) Therefore, ‘a vote for the PVV is to be perceived as an alarm bell to show that things need to change, not as a statement of support for Wilders’ solutions’.[[183]](#footnote-183) However, a study of the PVV and SP from 2008 until 2013 also indicates that the people who support populist parties are likely to be influenced by the of these parties that message the political elite is corrupt or incompetent and fails to represent the interests of ‘ordinary people’.[[184]](#footnote-184) Therefore, ‘political discontent is not only a cause, but also a consequence of supporting populist parties’.[[185]](#footnote-185) Roy Kemmers et al. point out that in 2011 CBS statistics had identified that the highest levels of distrust in politics were found among PVV voters and nonvoters.[[186]](#footnote-186) Therefore, it is to be expected that subsequent to the several electoral victories of the PVV the distrust in politics increased. If the PVV’s denunciation of the political elite became broadly adopted, this could have affected the general perception of ‘popular sovereignty’ in the Netherlands, which is an important aspect of liberal democracy.
 The CBS provides statistics on the adoption of political cynicism and the faith in the Dutch government.[[187]](#footnote-187) The degree of political cynicism was measured by the CBS, based upon a number of questions, for example whether politicians are believed to pursue self-interest. Between 1998 and 2010, the statistics of the CBS show that the degree of political cynicism remained virtually unchanged.[[188]](#footnote-188) Notable, the statistics on the faith of the Dutch people in politicians, parliament and political parties, measured yearly from 2002 up until 2016, prove equally to have been rather stable, despite the electoral successes of the PVV (see table 1).[[189]](#footnote-189) Moreover, the amount of people having faith in politicians, parliament and political parties even increased over the years, for example regarding parliament the amount of people having faith raised from 53 percent in 2006 to 60 percent in 2016. In 2006 when the LPF was defeated and the newly created PVV participated for the first time in the elections the trust in political parties devaluated, however, seemingly contradictory the trust in politicians and parliaments nevertheless did slightly increase.[[190]](#footnote-190) After an initial increase of the amount of people having faith in the government, this decreased again in 2010 and 2012, which is most likely explained by the then ruling unstable minority cabinet that was supported by the PVV. Though, in 2016 faith is restored again, even higher than before.
 To conclude this review on whether the PVV’s populist perceptions of the denunciation of the elite were adopted by the Dutch people, the statistics of the CBS indicate, despite the political discontent of the PVV’s voters, that there are in general no changes with regard to political cynicism and the faith in government even increased. This reinforces the previous conclusions that the PVV’s populist perceptions on ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ most likely did not undermine liberal democracy. However, it did enable the people to express their political discontent, which is an important aspect of liberal democracy, namely the providence of the possibility for ‘public contestation’. Moving on now to consider whether the PVV pleaded for a ‘personalization of power’, which would allow the voter to hold the elected accountable.

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| Table 1 Valued Trust in ‘Politicians, Parliament and Political Parties’ and the Amount of People Having Trust.[[191]](#footnote-191)  |
| Subject | Degree of trust in | Percentage of people having faith in |
|  | Politicians | Parliament | Political Parties | Politicians | Parliament | Political Parties |
| Period | Scale from 1-10 (1 is lowest) | % |
| 2002 | 4,9 | 5,2 | . | 42 | 50 | . |
| 2004 | 4,7 | 4,7 | 4,8 | 40 | 39 | 41 |
| 2006 | 5,0 | 5,3 | 3,5 | 46 | 53 | 47 |
| 2008 | 5,2 | 5,6 | 5,2 | 52 | 60 | 52 |
| 2010 | 5,2 | 5,4 | 5,3 | 52 | 55 | 53 |
| 2012 | 5,1 | 5,3 | 5,1 | 50 | 52 | 48 |
| 2014 | 4,9 | 5,2 | 4,9 | 46 | 53 | 45 |
| 2016 | 5,1 | 5,6 | 5,2 | 50 | 60 | 52 |

## 2.2 Personalization of Power and Liberal Democracy - ‘Smaller and Less Patronizing’

The second feature of the populist perception of democracy is the ‘personalization of power’. This emanates from the populist preference for monism and results into the pursuit of an increase of the power of the main political figure and a narrower gap between the rulers and ruled.[[192]](#footnote-192) This narrower gap entailed the direct election of representatives of the state and the possibility to hold them accountable and up to ‘democratic’ control, which would create a more personalized system.[[193]](#footnote-193) The following section will identify the suggestions the PVV made for the ‘personalization of power’ and whether they undermined liberal democracy.
 The PVV commenced the election of manifesto of 2006 and 2010 arguing the Dutch government is too big and pleaded for a smaller, more effective and ‘less patronizing’ government.[[194]](#footnote-194) In the manifesto of 2012 the emphasis was on the flaws of the EU, the PVV called for a ‘personalization of power’ by highlighting ‘we are the only ones that say to the unelected Eurocraten: your ending is our beginning. Our country must be in power again.’[[195]](#footnote-195) As previously identified the PVV suggested in 2017, that the people should be able to ‘pull the emergency brake when the political elite go against its will’.[[196]](#footnote-196) Furthermore, this letter is written from the first person perspective and presents ‘Plan Wilders for the Netherlands. The Netherlands is being taken from us. And I will take it back’.[[197]](#footnote-197) Wilders pushed himself forward as the political leader, who should be in power arguing ‘I will protect our beautiful country’ and will listen to the people.[[198]](#footnote-198) The PVV identified a few recurring measures regarding the ‘personalization of power’, which will be identified in the paragraph below. However, none of these measures were included in the manifesto of 2017 despite the general measure on implementing direct democracy, as the prime focus was on de-Islamization.

Measures Initiated by the PVV to Implement the Personalization of Power

Since the Declaration of Independence the PVV has recurrently proposed to abolish the Dutch Senate and to reduce the amount of MPs from 150 to 100 in the House of Representatives.[[199]](#footnote-199) The PVV argued it would make the government more democratic and effective and difficult topics could also be submitted to the people, through binding referenda. In 2012 the PVV argued, that the abolishment of the Senate would make the Dutch politics more decisive and democratic, arguing for ‘fewer members in the House of Representatives, fewer civil servants, fewer levels of government’.[[200]](#footnote-200) The PVV also used this argument to elucidate that some municipalities in their opinion possessed too much freedom, ‘conducting their own immigration policies and refusing to deport out-processed asylum seekers’.[[201]](#footnote-201) With these measures the PVV pursued the increase of the power of the elected main political figures. However, the example of the municipalities illustrated that the closer relation between the ruler and the ruled, was also advocated from the believe that (elitists) actors in state institutions enjoy too much freedom and keep a political agenda.[[202]](#footnote-202) Although, the reduction of MPs does not directly undermine liberal democracy, it entails a smaller representation of ‘political participation’, whereas the abolishment of the Senate could enhance ‘popular sovereignty’, as they are not elected. Moving on now to consider whether the PVV advocated for the implementation of direct election.
 The PVV pleaded in all election manifestos for an increase of direct democracy. The PVV alternatively championed the direct election of the prime-minister and the mayors, see table 2.[[203]](#footnote-203) Compared to the Declaration of Independence the PVV identified in the election manifestos fewer people to be ‘directly elected’, however, they added the direct election of the prime-minister, which could enhance ‘popular sovereignty’. The Declaration of Independence also aspired that the voter and the candidate would have a more direct relation.[[204]](#footnote-204) In the manifesto of 2006 this initiative was amplified by pleading for a constituency voting system, however, this proposal disappeared in the subsequent manifestos.[[205]](#footnote-205) A reduced gap between the ruler and the ruled could have enhanced ‘public contestation and political participation’ and reduced ‘public apathy towards politics’ within a liberal democracy.[[206]](#footnote-206) On the other hand, an extensive reduced gap would undermine a liberal democracy, in which representatives are somewhat protected from electoral scrutiny.[[207]](#footnote-207) In the manifesto of 2010, the PVV introduced a new measure to enhance the democratization, namely the removal of the king from the government.[[208]](#footnote-208) Though, this was not motivated by the PVV’s aspiration of the ‘personalization of power’. The PVV’s sudden discomfort with the Dutch monarchy most likely emanated from the annual Christmas speech given by Queen Beatrix in 2009, in which she had advocated tolerance towards cultural differences during. Subsequently, Wilders had irreversibly linked the royal family to ‘the left-wing elite that was trying to cross him’.[[209]](#footnote-209)
 In summary, the PVV pleaded for a smaller government, though did not initiate any measures for a more direct relation between the ruler and the ruled. This undermines the ‘political participation’, as aspired in liberal democracy. Furthermore, the PVV predominantly seems to champion direct election in order to prevent the (elitists) actors and politician, ‘who enjoy too much freedom’ from executing their ‘progressive’ political agenda. It seems that the PVV attempts to undermine the ‘protection of minority rights’ through a means of ‘majority rule’. This also stems from the election manifesto of 2017, which predominantly entailed measures to ‘block’ the progressive elite.[[210]](#footnote-210) To reinforce the argument on whether the PVV’s perceptions on the ‘personalization of power’ undermined liberal democracy, the subsequent section will consider whether the people adopted these perceptions.

### 2.2.1 The Adoption by the People of the PVV’s Perceptions of the Personalization of Power

The above indicated presentation of Wilders as a strong leader, who would protect the Netherlands, appears to fit very well in the then identified ‘audience democracy’in the Netherlands.[[211]](#footnote-211) This entails a democracy, in which the main feature is the passive reaction of voters to issues raised by politicians.[[212]](#footnote-212) Vossen points out, ever fewer Dutch citizens show an interest in ‘political life outside parliament, as memberships of political parties and social organizations have dropped significantly and the willingness to engage in political activism has declined’.[[213]](#footnote-213) A Synovate study shows that the PVV’s voters indeed feel more for a strong leader with additional authority to exercise power and ‘who instinctively knows what its voters want, without having to bother them too much for their opinions’.[[214]](#footnote-214) By championing the decrease of ‘popular sovereignty, political participation and public contestation’ the PVV’s voters undermine the aspirations of a liberal democracy. Though, Aalberts’ study showed that Wilders is not perceived by the PVV’s voters as a strong leader or to make a good prime-minister.[[215]](#footnote-215) Furthermore, the previous section showed that the PVV’s voters did not engage with the PVV’s stances on direct election. Thus, considering that the PVV’s perceptions on the ‘personalization of power’ were not adopted by the PVV’s voters and that their desire for a strong leader remained unmet, these populist perceptions do not seem to have undermined liberal democracy. Turning now to the analysis of the last key feature ‘the primacy of the political*’,* to identify whether the PVV did advocate the will of the people outside of politics.

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| Table 2 Measures on Direct Democracy – Plebiscitary Politics, Personalization of Power |
| **Declaration of Independence - 2005[[216]](#footnote-216)** | **Election manifesto - 2006[[217]](#footnote-217)** | **The Agenda of Hoop and Optimism** **- 2010[[218]](#footnote-218)** | **Their Brussels, Our Netherlands** **- 2012[[219]](#footnote-219)** | **The Netherlands Ours Again!** **- 2017[[220]](#footnote-220)** |
| *10. Voters and the elected* | *5. Direct democracy: more influence for the people*  | *3. Choosing democratization*  | *4. Our Freedom*  | *3. Direct democracy: the people receive power* |
| Depriving non-Dutch nationals of their voting right for municipal councils. | “ | “ | Deprivation of the voting right of non-Dutch nationals. | X |
| Implementation binding referenda. | “ | “ | “ | “ |
| Reducing the amount of MP from 150 to 100. | “ | “ | “ | X |
| Implementing a more transparent, and responsive voting system with a more direct relation between the voter and the elected.  | Implementing a constituency voting system.  | X | X | X |
| A political system in which the elected can be hold accountable by its voters. | X | X | X | The people receive power. |
| Direct election of: powerful mayors. | Direct election of: the prime-minister and mayors. | Direct election of: the prime-minister and mayors. | Direct election of: the prime-minister. | X |
| Primacy of the Political |
| Direct election of: police chiefs in big cities and members ofCourts. Introduction of a Jury, to let the voice of the people be heard in court. | X | Direct election of: chief positions in the judiciary and Public Prosecution Service. | Direct election of: judges at the supreme court. | X |

## 2.3 Primacy of the Political and Liberal Democracy - ‘Christian, Jewish and Humanistic’

The notion of ‘the primacy of the political’ entails that everything, especially state institutions, should be subordinated to the will of the people.[[221]](#footnote-221) As populism believe that the ‘extension of the political sphere in society’ and fosters national cohesion.[[222]](#footnote-222) By bringing both individual and collective desires into politics and politicizing ever-greater parts of society, the ‘populists cancel the public-private divide’. [[223]](#footnote-223) This is done from the perception that ‘equality fosters national cohesion’, as populism argues that ‘democratic control can only be enforced by culturally homogeneous people’.[[224]](#footnote-224) Though populism perceives the ‘general will’ to be unilateral and thus ‘defends an extreme form of majoritarian democracy’, in which minority rights and constitutional provisions can exist only as long as the majority supports them*.*[[225]](#footnote-225) The following section will analyze whether the PVV’s perceptions on ‘the primacy of the political’ were at odds with liberal democracy.
 Prior to identifying the politically colored institutions that the PVV foresaw to ‘neutralize’ for the sake of the will of the people, the analysis will identify what the PVV meant by ‘the people’ and its associated ‘general will’. In the election manifesto of 2006 the PVV identified the culture of ‘the people’ to be ‘Christian, Jewish and Humanistic’ and that the Netherlands should be ‘a country that is proud of its own identity, names that identity and defends it’.[[226]](#footnote-226) This was repeated in the election manifesto of 2010, in which the PVV stated ‘We are a country with Judeo-Christian and humanistic roots. Everything we have originates from that: our prosperity, democracy and separation of church and state.’[[227]](#footnote-227) Whereas, the PVV focused in 2010 on the perceived merits of these roots, in 2017 these roots were introduced by stating ‘Our values are not Islamic-based, but based on the Judeo-Christian and humanistic civilization.’[[228]](#footnote-228) Thus the PVV holds a mono-cultural conception of ‘the people’**,** based on cultural ties that supposedly connect and constitute ‘a people’ and is therefore by nature exclusive.[[229]](#footnote-229)
 In 2010 the perception of ‘the people’ was expanded by championing ‘the rights of women, Jews and homosexuals’, which was repeated in the subsequent manifestos.[[230]](#footnote-230) The addition of this set of modern values appears rather random, however, these values are often the rights that a populist party feels are threatened by those who do not belong to ‘the people’.[[231]](#footnote-231) With the inclusion of these minority rights a populist party can foster ‘the existence of a shared world view and cultural values among the people and [thereby] challenge the tolerance for different customs and opinions customary in liberal democratic practices in Western Europe’.[[232]](#footnote-232) This exclusive cultural notion of ‘the people’ is challenging liberal democracy, which aspires inclusiveness through the ‘constitutional protection of minority rights’. This also becomes apparant from the PVV’s perception of the Dutch citizens that, according to their judgement do not belong to ‘the people’. The PVV expressed its criticism towards the presence of foreigners, Muslims and people from non-western descent, especially Islamic countries and eastern-European countries. In the manifesto of 2012 the PVV argued, ‘Islam does not belong to the Netherlands’.[[233]](#footnote-233) The PVV’s indication of those, who do not belong to ‘the people’ is far more elaborately discussed than the identification ‘the people’ (see table 3). Moving on now to discuss the measures the PVV initiated to realize ‘the primacy of the political’, this will predominantly concern measures that restrict the will of those, who are not part of ‘the people’.

#### Measures Initiated by the PVV to Implement the Primacy of the Political

In the manifesto of 2006 and subsequent manifesto, the PVV primarily pleaded for the revision of ‘Article 1 of the Constitution: Christian, Jewish and Humanistic culture must remain dominant in the Netherlands’.[[234]](#footnote-234) Thereafter, the PVV pleaded for a multitude of measures limiting the freedom of minorities. For example, to the keep borders closed for as long as possible to workers from Eastern Europe, to halt immigration from Morocco and Turkey, to put a moratorium of five years on the building of mosques and Islamic schools and to prohibit the wearing a hijab in public offices.[[235]](#footnote-235) These measures aggravated in 2010, as the PVV argued ‘Islam is primarily a political ideology and therefore cannot claim the privileges of a religion’.[[236]](#footnote-236) The PVV demanded a full stop of immigration from Islamic countries, allowing no new mosques or Islamic schools, to close the borders for the Polish, Romanians and Bulgarians and a set of other restrictive measures were added.[[237]](#footnote-237) In the subsequent manifesto the PVV pleaded for the overall closing of the Dutch labor market to Eastern Europe.[[238]](#footnote-238) Furthermore, in all election manifestos the PVV had pleaded for a ban on double nationalities, as they argued in 2012 ‘Anyone who has a dual nationality does not irrefutably choose the Netherlands and such a person also owes obedience to another country’.[[239]](#footnote-239) Thus, they are ‘useless’ to the Dutch parliament or any another representative body the PVV argued. And the PVV pleaded for the deprivation of the right to vote from people with a double nationality.[[240]](#footnote-240) These measures that limit the freedom of minorities strongly undermine liberal democracy in terms of the ‘constitutional protection of minority rights’. Furthermore, over the years these measures were revised, extended and became more discriminating (see table 3). The following paragraph will analyze the PVV’s suggestions to neutralize the ‘colored state institutions’, that are believed by the PVV to privilege minorities.[[241]](#footnote-241)
 In the manifesto of 2010 the PVV argued the judiciary to be naïve and pleaded ‘not only politicians should be elected, but also judges and prosecutors’, as the punishments would ‘be more in line with the will of the people’.[[242]](#footnote-242) In the subsequent manifesto, the PVV suggested the people should be able to ‘recall’ an existing underperforming member of the magistrate, arguing the judiciary has tilt to the left.[[243]](#footnote-243) Stating this to be the reason the leader of the PVV was persecuted for his critical views on Islam.[[244]](#footnote-244) To enhance ‘the primacy of the political’ with regard to the judiciary, the PVV solely proposed measures on direct election (see table 2). This contrasts the ambitious proposal that was made in the Declaration of Independence to implement a Jury in court, which would have enhanced the ‘popular sovereignty’ in court.[[245]](#footnote-245)
 Another area identified by the PVV to have been heavily colored and biased by the progressive left is the Dutch public broadcasting. The PVV argued the state media pretends to be have different colors, ‘but they are all left’ and that they excel in warning against their party.[[246]](#footnote-246) These ‘left journalists’ are identified to hinder the will of the people, as they label the people that criticize progressive measures as ‘xenophobic, populist or hiding behind the dikes’.[[247]](#footnote-247) ‘Every night left wing people are invited by left wing broadcasters to share their politically correct views, all on the costs of the tax payer’.[[248]](#footnote-248) A repeated measure in the election manifestos, with the exception of 2006 and 2017, was the proposal to only subsidize one public broadcaster, predominantly motivated by financial considerations. Though in the Declaration of Independence the PVV also argued that only the NOS would be allowed to use it.[[249]](#footnote-249) Thus, the PVV signaled the problem that the Dutch public broadcasting to their judgement solely represents leftist opinions, however, they did not initiate any measures to improve this.
 Intrinsically, the PVV’s criticism on ‘politically colored state institutions’ could have enhanced liberal democracy, as the liberal democratic theory argues that state, or state funded institutions should not reflect politically biased messages.[[250]](#footnote-250) Though the analysis above has shown that the PVV’s measures on ‘the primacy of the political’ were fain and some even became less extensive over the years. In contrast to the measures the PVV initiated to limit the freedom of those, who they perceived not to belong to ‘the people’. These measures rapidly grew and radicalized over the years (see table 3). The PVV’s exclusive perception of ‘the people’ endangered the rights of minorities and thereby undermined liberal democracy. In the following paragraph the argument on whether the PVV’s perception of ‘the primacy of the political’ undermined liberal democracy will be reinforced by reviewing its adoption in the media.

### 2.3.1 The Adoption by the Media of the PVV’s Perceptions on the Primacy of the Political

Despite the above indicated experience of the PVV that the media had solely negatively portrayed them, scholars assumed that the perceptions in the media had become more populist over the years. Against many expectations Linda Bos and Kees Brants identified that populism in the Netherlands had become more prevalent in the controlled expressions of politicians than in the media. Moreover, Bos and Brants identify that populism in 2012 ‘disappears almost completely from the media, except for the [political party broadcasts] PPBs’.[[251]](#footnote-251) In this year the PVV broke with the minority coalition and had its first electoral loss of nine seats. Subsequently, the state media on populism appeared ‘at an all-time low’, which seems ‘to indicate a general tiredness of its style and rhetoric and ambivalence towards anti-immigration policies within some parties’.[[252]](#footnote-252) Bos and Brants specify with regard to the media portrayal that they did not find ‘a general, significant spread of populism to other political parties after 2006’, as ‘the outspoken style and anti-immigration rhetoric are (still) more characteristic of right-wing parties’.[[253]](#footnote-253) Bos and Brants conclude that the PVV’s populist policies itself proved not to be contagious for the media.[[254]](#footnote-254) Furthermore, they even indicate that the media image of populist parties has become less populist over time. Thus, at least up until 2012 the media proved resilient to the PVV’s populist perceptions. In the subsequent years the PVV focused predominantly on their radical right perceptions, therefore it is likely that the PVV’s already moderate populist perceptions did not become more impactful. Though, as previously indicated scholars have identified that the PVV’s right-wing anti-immigration perceptions were impactful.[[255]](#footnote-255) That might emanate from the PVV’s exclusive populist perception of ‘the people’, as indicated in the analysis above, though are predominantly a characteristic of right-wing party.

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| Table 3 Measures Violating Minority Rights – Primacy of the Political |
| **Declaration of Independence - 2005[[256]](#footnote-256)** | **Election manifesto - 2006[[257]](#footnote-257)** | **The Agenda of Hoop and Optimism** **- 2010[[258]](#footnote-258)** | **Their Brussels, Our Netherlands** **- 2012[[259]](#footnote-259)** | **The Netherlands Ours Again!** **- 2017[[260]](#footnote-260)** |
| *7. Immigration and integration* | *4. Halting immigration and integration* |  *2. Choosing to combat Islam and Mass immigration* | *6. Our immigration policy* | *1. De-Islamization of the Netherlands* |
| Radical mosques are closed and Islamic schools should not be built. | Moratorium of 5 years on the building of 5 mosques and Islamic schools. | Prohibition to build mosques, and close mosques that propagate violence. Close Islamic schools. Prohibit burqa’s, the Quran and impede hijabs.  | " | “Close all mosques. And preventive imprisonment of Muslims. |
| A maximum of 5,000 refugees a year, exclusively political refugees.  | “ | A maximum of 1,000 refugees a year. | “ | 0 refugees a year. Withdraw all temporary residence permits of asylum seekers. Close all asylum seekers centers. |
|  | *6. Healthcare / Social Affairs* | *4. Choosing a social Netherlands* | *1. Their Brussels* |  |
| X | Keep borders closed for as long as possible for Eastern European employees. | No access to the Dutch labor market for Romanian and Bulgarian and revoke the access for Poland. | “No access to the Dutch labor market from Eastern Europe ‘for cheap labor’.  | X |

2.4 Conclusion of the PVV’s Populist Perceptions

The above analysis has indicated that the PVV’s populist perceptions are only moderately concerned with the ultimate populist goal that ‘politics should be an expression of the volonté général of the people’.[[261]](#footnote-261) The PVV’s perceptions in the election manifestos were more concerned with limiting those, who they perceive are not part of ‘the people’ Muslims, immigrants from Islamic and Eastern European countries. This is confirmed by Vossen, who argued Wilders was more concerned with the by him perceived international conflict between Islam and a Western society, rather than ‘a national conflict between the people and the elite, which is the core of populism’.[[262]](#footnote-262) This resulted into an exclusive perception of ‘popular sovereignty’ and ‘political participation’ and violation of the ‘protection of minority rights’, which undermined liberal democracy. On the other hand the PVV was concerned with limiting those who keep a left leftist political agenda and ‘enjoy too much freedom’, especially the progressive political elite and the judiciary, which resulted into the PVV’s half-hearted pursuit of direct democracy. The above analysis showed that the PVV is not a sincere believer in ‘the people’, therefore their moderate attempts to enhance ‘plebiscitarypolitics’, a ‘personalization of power’ and ‘the primacy of the political’ for ‘the people’ did not undermine liberal democracy, especially since these perceptions were not adopted by the PVV’s voters, the people, politicians and the media. [[263]](#footnote-263) The PVV’s voters are identified to vote for the PVV to express their political discontent, which does not undermine liberal democracy, as a liberal democracy should provide for the possibility to express ‘public contestation’. In the following chapter will consider whether the PVV’s populist performance did pursue ‘the will of the people’.

# Chapter 3 The PVV’s Populist Performance and Liberal Democracy

In the previous chapter it was identified that the PVV’s populist perceptions were more concerned with restricting the will of those who were perceived by the PVV not to be part of ‘the people’ rather than implementing the will of the people. To reinforce the argument that this exclusive perception of ‘the people’ undermined liberal democracy, this chapter will identify how the PVV’s perceptions were translated in the PVV’s performance, by discerning the previously identified three main features of the populist understanding of democracy.[[264]](#footnote-264)

## 3.1 Plebiscitary Politics in Politics - A Half-hearted Believer in Direct Democracy’

During the initial years of the PVV’s participation in parliament, the party stood out for its ‘fanaticism, work ethic and strict almost military discipline’, speaking in one voice. ‘Like a greedy child in a sweet shop the party also made enthusiastic use of the various powers of the House of Representatives, such as the right to put verbal and written questions to cabinet members’.[[265]](#footnote-265) In between 2007-2010 the PVV, with only nine seats, put 1,313 questions in writing to parliament of the total of 8,702. Furthermore, the PVV multiple times submitted a vote of no confidence, either against the entire cabinet or an individual cabinet member. None of them achieved a majority, like most of their submitted motions. Between 2006-2010 the PVV had by far the most motions rejected of all parties in the House of Representatives. This, however, was not necessarily to be considered a failure. Indeed, as Vossen argues that, ‘many of those motions were not intended to achieve a majority, but to provoke debate both inside and outside the House of Representatives, often demanding impossible measures and worded in such a way as to force a prompt reaction.’[[266]](#footnote-266) Wilders behavior and that of the PVV was ‘a constant source of disquiet’.[[267]](#footnote-267) The PVV managed very well to crank up the debate and to make topics such as immigration and integration rise on the agenda.[[268]](#footnote-268) However, Simon Otjes and Tom Louwerse, who researched the voting behavior of the PVV in debates on democratic reform and governance, observed that the PVV does not consistently sets itself apart from other parties, thereby arguing that direct democracy is not a major concern for the PVV.[[269]](#footnote-269) Despite the PVV’s proposals on the implementation of elements of direct democracy in the election manifestos, Wilders does not in parliament or interviews refer to them as part of his program.[[270]](#footnote-270) Therefore, Vossen argues that he is at best ‘a half-hearted believer’ in direct democracy.[[271]](#footnote-271) Christian democrat Jan Schinkelshoek stated that ‘the PVV seemed to see the parliament as ‘a political café, a platform for mobilizing dissatisfaction among voters’, rather than seeing the *Binnenhof* as ‘a market where you negotiate, where you have to make decisions’.[[272]](#footnote-272) PVV MP Hero Brinkman argued in defense that it is ‘precisely our job in parliament to give voice to what you pick up in cafés, on the shop floor, in the street. Citizens make politics, we carry it out.’[[273]](#footnote-273) However, the PVV’s concern for the people’s opinion did not stem from their voting in parliament. Furthermore, in the following section will disclose that the PVV did not pursue a close relationship with its voters.
 To this date Wilders is the sole member of his party, which Takis Pappas identifies as a meaningless party organization.[[274]](#footnote-274) This corresponds with the Dutch law that only qualifies political parties with a minimum of a thousand members for government grants, ‘This is based on the idea that a member organization represents a certain social embedding’.[[275]](#footnote-275) Josje den Ridder argues the PVV to be ‘a closed bastion over which citizens have no influence, even if they want to’.[[276]](#footnote-276) Thereby making it only possible to participate at elections. If it became the norm for parties not to have members, den Ridder foresees this would entail fundamental changes in the way a representative democracy functions.[[277]](#footnote-277) This undermines the aspirations of a liberal democracy, as the PVV’s party organization does not provide for ‘both public contestation and political participation’ and thereby also seems to undermine the ‘popular sovereignty’.[[278]](#footnote-278) Without a member association, the people cannot formally exert any influence on the representatives of the democracy. Some scholars point to the fact that the supporters of the PVV are not interested to be involved with politics, as indicated in the previous chapter.[[279]](#footnote-279) However, the PVV had neither championed nor provided a platform for its voters. To reinforce the argument that the PVV’s performance of ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ undermined liberal democracy, the subsequent paragraph will identify the PVV’s engagement with ‘the people’ outside of politics.

3.1.1 Plebiscitary Politics Outside of Politics - ‘Become a Volunteer’

The PVV’s principal form of engagement with its audience happens online, as Wilders hardly appears in public due to security precautions.[[280]](#footnote-280) Though, Iris Muis et al. argue that Wilders also for strategical reasons limits the access to him, so that ‘both traditional media and the electorate are essentially forced to meet him on his social media, where he controls the frame and broadcasts solely his message’.[[281]](#footnote-281) Wilders is very successful at engaging with his followers on social media, Muis et al. identify him as ‘one of the most mediagenic flag bearers of Europe’s new right’.[[282]](#footnote-282) The comparative analysis of Andre Gonawela et al. identified that Wilders in comparison to Narendra Modi, Nigel Farage and Donald Trump, was the most active on Twitter in the run-up to elections.[[283]](#footnote-283) Wilders mainly communicates with his audience through social media, as Gonawela et al. point out that ‘social media are now the cornerstone of any well-run political campaign’.[[284]](#footnote-284) Wilders predominantly uses Twitter ‘as an avenue for political opposition to ruling coalitions’ and for his right-wing outlets, like ‘#2017in3words No More Islam’, which garnered the most engagement.[[285]](#footnote-285) Thus, Wilders does voice the PVV’s populist expression of the denunciation of the elite, but omits to champion ‘plebiscitarypolitics’. Moreover, the emphasis is again on those, who the PVV perceived not to belong to the ‘the people’.
 Another frequently used, though understudied, medium through which the PVV engages with its audience is the PVV’s website. A Synovate study shows that 11 percent of the PVV’s voters regularly visits the PVV’s website.[[286]](#footnote-286) In the section below a discourse analysis of the PVV’s website will be executed, as previously performed on the election manifestos, by discerning the feature of ‘plebiscitarypolitics’.
 On the PVV’s website the PVV only moderately champions the implementation of ‘plebiscitarypolitics’. This results from the fact that the PVV’s website solely presents the election manifesto of the 2017, in which the measures to improve direct democracy were not included. A dated news article on the website from September 2016 does disclose some of the PVV’s perceptions on democracy. In this article the PVV presented the report ‘Real Democracy‘, which was commissioned by the PVV and written by the political party Forum for Democracy. This report identified the pitfalls of a representative democracy and portrayed referenda as the perfect fit and necessary solution to it.[[287]](#footnote-287) Wilders argued to want a people's initiative, a direct democracy along the lines of the Swiss Model, this model was described in the report.[[288]](#footnote-288)
 Despite the moderate championing of the measures to implement ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ on the PVV’s website, the PVV did attempt to engage its voters with politics by providing information on the PVV’s (political) activities. For example, there is a possibility to sign up for their newsletter, to watch their campaigning videos, read press releases and opinion articles. However, these media outlets are not kept up to date the most recent newsletter in the presented archive is from 2014 and the latest video and opinion article are from 2012.[[289]](#footnote-289) This might have a number of reasons, for example a focus on other social media channels and Vossen also identified the PVV’s financial shortcomings.[[290]](#footnote-290) Though, the PVV’s front-page of the website does keep its visitors up-to-date on all the PVV activities and invites its supporters to engage with party by downloading the latest campaign poster *Nederland Weer van Ons* (the Netherlands Ours Again), which is already two years old and sets the overall tone to what extent the voter is invited to engage with the party.[[291]](#footnote-291) The PPV’s voters are invited to become a ‘volunteer’ to ‘contribute to a better Netherlands’, though it is not specified what that might entail and no events or gatherings are identified.[[292]](#footnote-292) Thus, the PVV’s efforts to enhance the involvement of the people with politics was both in and outside of politics weak. The PVV’s performance of ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ therefore did not enhance ‘popular sovereignty’ it rather undermined liberal democracy, as the PVV’s ‘meaningless’ party structure did not provide for ‘public contestation and political participation’.[[293]](#footnote-293) Moving on now to consider whether the PVV succeeded in reducing the gap between the ruler and the ruled, through a ‘personalization of power’.

## 3.2 The Personalization of Power in Politics - ‘Treading on Eggshells’

The previous section identified the pitfalls of the PVV’s party structure in terms of ‘plebiscitarypolitics’, as it only allows one member. However, this ‘personalization of power’ also had big impact on politics, as it is hard for parties that are built around a single leader to make a connection between the different political levels, especially on the local level which involves more people.[[294]](#footnote-294) Vossen confirms that it is difficult to settle succession for these parties and that they are rather vulnerable for internal dispute due to lack of joint decision-making.[[295]](#footnote-295) Sarah de Lange et al. also pointed out that ‘the party’s autocratic rule does not tie in with the prevailing views of a democratic party organization’.[[296]](#footnote-296) However, through this ‘personalization of power’ the PVV also attempted to narrow the gap between the ruler and the ruled. In the following section the PVV’s performance of the ‘personalization of power’ will be discussed and whether it undermined liberal democracy.
 The PVV was previously identified to have a meaningless party organization in terms of ‘plebiscitarypolitics’, however, this also proved right regarding their role in parliament .[[297]](#footnote-297) Louis Bontes, previous member of the PVV’s party board, indicated prior to the elections of 2012 Wilders ‘had no idea who might become a minister of the PVV if it came to it: there weren’t that many good people and Wilders is scared to death of people he can’t control’.[[298]](#footnote-298) Wilders’ cling to power undermines the aspiration of ‘political participation’ within a liberal democracy. MP Hero Brinkman left the PVV arguing that the party lacked democracy.[[299]](#footnote-299) After the electoral victory of 2012, Wilders had the greatest difficulty with finding competent cabinet members. The new MPs of the PVV that Wilders had appointed were discredited and he publicly had to admit the screening was not done properly.[[300]](#footnote-300) Providing incompetent candidates undermines the pursuit of ‘fair elections’, as aspired in a liberal democracy. Furthermore, nearly all provincial parliamentary groups, in which the PVV participated fell apart prematurely and 31 of the 69 elected members of state withdrew.[[301]](#footnote-301) As former Provincial Executive Theo Krebber said ‘There are nice people within the PVV, but they are useless’.[[302]](#footnote-302) An exhaustive reconstruction in the national newspaper *De Volkskrant* reveals that ‘the coalition was treading on eggshells for eighteen months due to Wilders’.[[303]](#footnote-303) The PVV’s unpredictable and disruptive behavior and sudden abandonment of the coalition, resulted into Wilders no longer being perceived a trustworthy partner by the other MPs.[[304]](#footnote-304) Thus, the PVV’s poor representation of its voters and deterioration of ‘fair elections’ and ‘political participation’ caused the PVV’s performance of the ‘personalization of power’ to undermine liberal democracy. The subsequent paragraph will discuss whether the PVV’s ‘personalization of power’ outside of politics reduced the gap between the ruler and the ruled.

### 3.2.1 Personalization of Power to the People - ‘A Populist Folksy Style’

The PVV’s voters were previously identified not to champion the populist measures, however, their main point of criticism regarding politics was ‘the accusation that politicians beat about the bush rather than communicating clearly‘.[[305]](#footnote-305) A PVV voter once addressed in an interview with a MP that ‘the decisions should be better substantiated for the people to understand them’.[[306]](#footnote-306) Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille explain this is the result of a democratic system, in which the ‘contemporary political elites are educational elites’.[[307]](#footnote-307) Bovens and Wille, point out that in 2012 in the House of Representatives 97 percent of the 150 MPs had ‘attended college or graduate school and 91 percent had formally acquired at least a college degree’ identifying this to be the highest percentage since 1918.[[308]](#footnote-308) They argue that this ‘Diploma Democracy’ is at odds with a representative democracy, since more than 70 percent of the voters are lesser educated.[[309]](#footnote-309) Linguists argue Wilders adapted since 2007 a populist ‘folksy style’, which entailed a simple, direct, vulgar and blunt discourse to show his loyalty to the common people.[[310]](#footnote-310) The following examples of the PVV’s ‘folksy style’ emanate from election manifestos: the neologism of ‘Henk and Ingrid’ and use of staccato sentences, like ‘The Netherlands leaves the EU. Our Sovereignty back’.[[311]](#footnote-311) Another example of a simple and understandable expression is the reference to the EU as ‘Holle Bolle EU’ to indicate that the EU always demands more money. Holle Bolle Gijs is a character from the Efteling, a Dutch theme park, of which Wilders is known to be a fan.[[312]](#footnote-312) Furthermore, Wilders created in 2017 a Twitter account for his cats Snoetje and Pluisje @Wilderspoezen, which he uses to alternate his political messaging.[[313]](#footnote-313) The PVV managed to popularize politics due to its ‘biting satire’, which was shared largely on social media.[[314]](#footnote-314) Thereby, the PVV reduced the gap between the voters and the elected. In 2007, Wilders was awarded by Dutch citizens with the prize of best politician of the year.[[315]](#footnote-315) Vossen identifies, that PVV especially appealed to and got its main votes from the less educated people, who had longed for politics that was more understandable.[[316]](#footnote-316) Teun Pauwels points out ‘those with only elementary or less vocational schooling are almost four and even eleven times more likely to support the PVV, compared to the higher educated’.[[317]](#footnote-317) Therefore, the PVV could be identified as a new ‘peoples party’ because their rise to a certain degree also entails ‘the political emancipation of the less educated’.[[318]](#footnote-318) As the PVV made ‘the less and secondary educated people politically visible and gave them a voice in the political landscape’.[[319]](#footnote-319) This enhances the aspiration of ‘political participation’ within a liberal democracy. However, this is not clearly reflected in the statistics. Despite the PVV's various electoral victories gaining up to 16 percent of the votes in 2010, the voting turnout of the less educated people did not increase and even decreased in 2010 in contrast to the previous elections (see table 5).[[320]](#footnote-320) However, the rapport of the NKO does identify a slight increase of political interest of the less educated in 2010 (see table 4), which seems slightly contradictory to the voting turnout, which had decreased.[[321]](#footnote-321) In 2012 the political interest had diminished again.[[322]](#footnote-322) Furthermore, at least up until 2012 the PVV did not meet the same level of political interest that was reached under the rise of the LPF in 2002.[[323]](#footnote-323) In addition to the absence of a clear positive effect of the PVV’s populist ‘folksy style’ it is also identified to undermine liberal democracy, which will be discussed in the paragraph below.
 The previous executed discourse analysis of the election manifestos showed that the PVV also used this folksy style to spread hatred against minorities, predominantly Muslims and migrants from Islamic countries. For example, in addition to ‘Henk and Ingrid’ the PVV also created ‘Ali and Fatima’, whom he identified as ‘Muslim immigrants loafing around’.[[324]](#footnote-324) This is at odds with the ‘protection of minority rights’, as aspired in a liberal democracy. In politics the PVV similarly used offensive terms and expression. For example, PVV MP Dion Graus made the suggestions that a MP was ‘beginning to suffer from Alzheimer’s’, was a ‘liar’ and should ‘go to hell’.[[325]](#footnote-325) Wilders offended the Turkish president Abdullah Gül when he visited the Netherlands and denounced the then Queen Beatrix for wearing a headscarf in Oman.[[326]](#footnote-326) Furthermore, the PVV used discriminating terms like ‘hate palace’ for a mosque and *kopvoddentaks* (tax on head rags) for a submitted motion to tax people for wearing headscarves, ‘to the disgust of many MPs’.[[327]](#footnote-327) Most PVV voters also ‘considered many of the PVV’s proposals extremely radical’.[[328]](#footnote-328) ‘Many politicians and opinion-formers felt that [the PVV’s] members were violating a certain Dutch standard of behavior in their choice of language and style of discussion’.[[329]](#footnote-329) Many politicians and commentators perceived this was ‘bad for the image of politics’ and felt that ‘the PVV was increasingly distracting attention from the content of the debate’.[[330]](#footnote-330) Thus, despite the reduced gap between the ruler and the ruled, the PVV’s personalization of the power predominantly undermined liberal democracy because of the PVV’s party structure and its offensive populist ‘folksy style’. In the following paragraph it will be discussed whether the PVV also championed ‘the primacy of the political’ outside of politics.

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| --- |
| Table 4 Average Political Interest Arranged by the level of Education[[331]](#footnote-331) |
|  *Average political interest (min.=0; max.=4)* |
| Year | 1998 | 2002 | 2003 | 2006 | 2010 | 2012 |
| Level of education |
| 1 (Less educated) | 1.2 | 1.8 | 1.4 | 1.2 | 1.4 | 1.3 |
| 2 | 1.4 | 1.7 | 1.5 | 1.3 | 1.3 | 1.4 |
| 3 | 1.6 | 2.0 | 2.0 | 1.7 | 1.6 | 1.6 |
| 4 | 1.5 | 2.0 | 1.9 | 1.6 | 1.7 | 1.6 |
| 5 (High educated; University) | 2.0 | 2.2 | 2.1 | 2.2 | 2.1 | 2.2 |

|  |
| --- |
| Table 5 Voting Turnout Arranged by Political Interest, 1998-2012[[332]](#footnote-332) |
|  *Voting turnout percentage* |
| Year | 1998 | 2002 | 2003 | 2006 | 2010 | 2012 |
| Level of political interest |
| 0 (Low) | 44 | 33 | 44 | 57 | 46 | 43 |
| 1 | 70 | 73 | 77 | 76 | 73 | 68 |
| 2 | 81 | 86 | 79 | 87 | 80 | 83 |
| 3 | 90 | 88 | 88 | 87 | 85 | 88 |
| 4 (High) | 97 | 89 | 99 | 96 | 94 | 94 |

## 3.3 The Primacy of the Political - ‘Promoting the Anti-Islamic Agenda Worldwide’

In the previous section the PVV’s disruptive behavior was identified, both emanating from their party structure and ‘folksy’ discourse. Reinhard Heinisch identifies that this is characteristic for right-wing populist parties that ‘as relatively de-institutionalized parties oriented towards charismatic personalities’ seek to maintain ‘movement-character’ and engage in ‘spectacular acts of self-presentation’.[[333]](#footnote-333) The following section will identify that the PVV performed radical acts to accomplish the ‘will of the people’ both ruling in opposition and in government.
 During the period that the PVV was a supporter of the minority cabinet, the PVV caused great fuss by launching in 2011 ‘an online registration center for problems with employees from central and eastern European countries’, coined *Polenmeldpunt*.[[334]](#footnote-334) Subsequently the Dutch diplomatic services had the greatest difficulty with convincing the Eastern European diplomats that this was not cabinet policy. Subsequent to the PVV’s break with the coalition most parties were no longer keen to cooperate with the PVV, which is fatal in a coalition country like the Netherlands and ‘a cordon sanitaire was placed around Wilders and his party’.[[335]](#footnote-335) Thereupon, Wilders radicalized his anti-Islam agenda in the Netherlands and concentrated on his international pursuit of ‘warning the entire world of the dangers of Islam’.[[336]](#footnote-336) He focused on international cooperation with other European populist parties, some of which he had previously explicitly distanced himself from.[[337]](#footnote-337) He created together with Marie le Pen and other nationalist parties the party ‘Europe of Nations and Freedom’ in the European parliament, consisting of 37 members.[[338]](#footnote-338) Wilders managed to become a figurehead of anti-Islam alarmism and thereby the most famous Dutch politician.[[339]](#footnote-339) Former PVV MP Marcial Hernandez suspected that ‘Wilders sees his parliamentary membership first and foremost as a platform necessary for ‘promoting his anti-Islam agenda worldwide [in order subsequently] to go down in history as a great seer’.[[340]](#footnote-340) The most controversial case in the Netherlands of the PVV’s pursuit of ‘the will of the people’ outside of politics, emanated from their anti-Islam agenda, when Wilders asked a crowd of followers whether they wanted more or fewer Moroccans in April 2014. His followers chanted ‘fewer, fewer’ and Wilders said to them that he would make sure of that.[[341]](#footnote-341) This strongly undermines the ‘protection of minority rights’, as aspired in a liberal democracy. In response to this an online petition was initiated to press charges against Wilders, this petition ‘I press charges against Geert Wilders’was signed 22,740 times.[[342]](#footnote-342) In addition, more than 5,000 people reported Wilders for discrimination.[[343]](#footnote-343) Thereupon, Wilders was prosecuted for discrimination and hate speech.
 Already prior to Wilders prosecution the PVV had accused the judiciary of being too leftist, as was identified in the discourse analysis of the election manifestos.[[344]](#footnote-344) Wilders elucidated in the manifesto of 2017, ‘a politician like me who speaks the truth is being dragged to court’.[[345]](#footnote-345) In September 2015, amidst the refugee crisis, Wilders called the House of Representatives a ‘fake parliament’ and appealed to the Dutch citizens ‘to actively resist the arrival of asylum seeker centers in their communities’.[[346]](#footnote-346) This resulted into a lot of turmoil and protests at local meetings on the housing of asylum seekers. This goes beyond providing for ‘public contestation’ and undermines the ‘protection of minority rights’, as aspired in a liberal democracy. Wilders also expressed the politically biased media to undermine the will of people.[[347]](#footnote-347) For example, Wilders criticized We Netherlands *Wij Nederland* *(WNL)* after giving an interview in the tv-program stating it lack to neutrality and to be ‘Trump bashen. Wilders bashen. Lefter than left’.[[348]](#footnote-348) This is one of the few examples that the PVV gives an interview in the media, as previously indicated Wilders limited the access of the media to him so he could control the frame of his messaging.[[349]](#footnote-349) Despite the PVV’s attempt to control the frame of their messaging, their radical outlets and acts against ‘minorities’ were revoked by Dutch citizens and the judiciary and most political parties indicated that they no longer would cooperate with the PVV. This testifies that the PVV’s performance of ‘the primacy of the political’ was perceived to undermine liberal democracy and therefore was called to account for its actions. However, these kind of ‘check and balances’ of the PVV’s perceptions and performance are to lesser extend present on the international level at which Wilders also promotes his anti-Islam agenda. The PVV’s international undermining of liberal democracies will be considered in the conclusion of this research.

### 3.4 Conclusion of the PVV’s Populist Performance

The PVV’s weak championing of direct democracy and ‘plebiscitarypolitics’ and their undemocratic and problematic party structure had undermined the providence of ‘public contestation’, ‘political participation’, ‘fair elections’ and ‘popular sovereignty’, as aspired in a liberal democracy.[[350]](#footnote-350) As den Ridder argued if memberless parties would become the norm this would entail fundamental changes in the way a representative democracy functions.[[351]](#footnote-351) The PVV’s ‘personalization of power’ did succeed in reducing the gap between the ruler and the ruled within the identified ‘Diploma Democracy’ through their ‘folksy’ discourse, though the PVV did not provide its voters with a platform to express their will.[[352]](#footnote-352) Furthermore, this ‘folksy’ discourse predominantly undermined liberal democracy, as it was also used in an offensive way too excessively express ‘contestation’, which harmed the image of Dutch politics and undermined ‘the protection of minority rights’.[[353]](#footnote-353) Similar to the PVV’s ‘folksy’ discourse the PVV’s acts to accomplish the ‘will of the people’ outside of politics – ‘the primacy of the political’ – were offensive and violated the ‘minority rights’ and thereby undermined liberal democracy. The dangers of the PVV’s international pursuit of ‘the primacy of the political’, will be subsequently considered.

## Conclusion

Upon the rise of the PVV, Angela Merkel, stated publicly that Germany was ‘following the developments in the Netherlands with serious concern’.[[354]](#footnote-354) *The Guardian* argued populist uprisings, like the PVV, could bring down a liberal democracy.[[355]](#footnote-355) Populism is widely perceived to threaten liberal democracies and amidst the global rise of populism the international academic debate pursues clarity on the actual impact of populism.[[356]](#footnote-356) This study has contributed to this debate by showing that the PVV’s measures that violate minority rights and its party structure have predominantly undermined liberal democracy.
 During the rise of populism the Dutch democracy was characterized by ‘fragmentation and turbulence’, however, den Rooy identifies this not to have been the consequence of the increasing populism but was due to difficulties the welfare state faced.[[357]](#footnote-357) The primary populist party that broke through, the LPF, quickly fell apart and the populist void was ‘successfully’ filled by Wilders and his party.[[358]](#footnote-358) Although, already from the rise of the PVV, questions were raised about the sincerity and frequency of Wilders’ populist arguments.[[359]](#footnote-359)

The PVV’s Populist Perceptions and Liberal Democracy

The discourse analysis of the PVV’s elections manifestos showed that despite their frequent denunciation of the contemporary political elite, the PVV’s populist perceptions are only moderately concerned with the core of populism the ‘volonté générale of the people’.[[360]](#footnote-360) The mapping of the PVV’s populist policies in the different election manifestos over the years, showed that the PVV recurrently proposed the identical measures to enhance direct democracy, most of which became less extended over the years or even disappeared.[[361]](#footnote-361) This suggests that the PVV’s populist policies did not have a high priority. Therefore, it is not surprising that the impact of these policies were minor and were not resonated by the PVV’s voters, politicians or the media. Even the frequent denunciation of the political elite does not seem to have affected the people’s general trust in the government.[[362]](#footnote-362) Therefore the PVV’s moderate populist perceptions do not seem to have undermined liberal democracy.
 On the contrary, the PVV’s primary concern was limiting those who they perceive are not part of ‘the people’. This resulted into an exclusive perception of ‘popular sovereignty’ and ‘political participation’ and a violation of the ‘protection of minority rights’, which undermined liberal democracy. In the international debate the threats populism poses must therefore be carefully discerned, as the above indicated measures might stem from the populist monist ideology, though the measures itself are recognized as characteristic of right-wing parties.[[363]](#footnote-363) Furthermore, after a ‘cordon sanitaire’ was placed around the PVV, these measures limiting the rights of minorities radicalized, whereas the PVV’s populist measures diminished.[[364]](#footnote-364) This demonstrated a change in the relationship between populism and liberal democracy, in response to, as a populist party, being treated as a ‘pariah or partner’. This is an important aspect to consider more thoroughly in the international debate on populism, this is done already in the debate on right-wing parties.[[365]](#footnote-365)

The PVV’s Populist Performance and Liberal Democracy

The analysis of the PVV’s populist performance disclosed that Wilders was, in politics, at best ‘a half-hearted believer’ in direct democracy.[[366]](#footnote-366) More striking was the PVV’s undemocratic ‘monist’ party structure, which caused many problems in parliament and gave no voice to ‘the people’.[[367]](#footnote-367) Thus, the PVV had undermined the providence of ‘public contestation’, ‘political participation’, ‘fair elections’ and ‘popular sovereignty’, as aspired in a liberal democracy.[[368]](#footnote-368) The PVV’s populist ‘folksy’ discourse seemed to respond well to the problem of the contemporary ‘Diploma Democracy’, though statistics indicate that the less educated people did not become more politically engaged.[[369]](#footnote-369) Furthermore, the ‘folksy’ discourse was increasingly used to offend politicians and minorities, which was perceived to be ‘bad for the image of politics’ and undermined ‘minority rights’.[[370]](#footnote-370) Outside of politics the PVV’s effort to enhance the ‘general will of the people’ was likewise occupied with restricting Islam, the rights of Muslims and other minorities.[[371]](#footnote-371) Thus, the PVV strongly undermined liberal democracy by jeopardizing ‘the protection of minority rights’, though the associated measures, as indicated above, are predominantly characteristic of right-wing parties.[[372]](#footnote-372) Therefore, this research concludes that regarding populism the PVV’s monist party structure has predominantly undermined liberal democracy, particularly when the PVV ruled in government and failed to adequately support the minority cabinet.[[373]](#footnote-373) Furthermore, the PVV’s populist party structure has undermined popular sovereignty as they gave their voters no platform.[[374]](#footnote-374) Until today this remains the paradox of the PVV as a populist party, as they led a heavy loss in the latest elections against the new populist party FVD, because, by their own account, they did not go out and meet ‘the people’.[[375]](#footnote-375) Therefore, it has become apparent that it is important for the international debate to further study the impact of a populist party structure to identify the threats populism might have posed to liberal democracies.
 Although this research has attempted to aptly make use of both qualitative and quantitative sources and thereby has trusted in the quality of secondary analysis, it was often difficult to trace how the statistics were precisely generated. As it seems at least remarkable that the trust in the government increased and the political participation of the less educated decreased under the rise of the PVV. To obtain a better understanding of the impact of PVV’s populism on liberal democracy, the motivations for voting the PVV should be studied both qualitatively and quantitively. In addition, I have pursued to provide a comprehensive understanding on whether the PVV's populism undermined liberal democracy, though the various aspects could not always be discussed thoroughly, due to the limited amount of available studies. Particularly, from the analysis of the PVV’s performance it became apparent that an important addition to the international debate on populism would be the studying of the global threat a populist party might pose to different democracies. This is because the PVV and other populist parties are increasingly acting and cooperating on the international stage where the 'checks and balances' are absent.

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