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A populist Zeitgeist? The impact of populism on parties, media and the public in Western Europe

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

A Populist Zeitgeist in Western Europe?

... today populist discourse has become mainstream in the politics of western democracies. Indeed, one can even speak of a populist *Zeitgeist*.

Cas Mudde, 2004, p. 542.

Introduction

In the last two decades, Western Europe has witnessed the upsurge of various so-called populist political parties and politicians. In Italy, the media-mogul and businessman Silvio Berlusconi and his party *Forza Italia* (FI) won the Italian parliamentary elections in 1994, 2001 and 2008. In the Netherlands, the eccentric politician Pim Fortuyn obtained 26 of the 150 Dutch parliamentary seats in 2002. In France, the nationalist Jean-Marie Le Pen and his *Front National* (FN) managed to reach the second round of the 2002 French presidential elections. These are only three examples. Other well-known Western European right-wing allegedly populist parties are the *Dansk Folkeparti* (DF) in Denmark, the *Vlaams Belang* (VB) in Belgium, and the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) in Austria. Notable left-wing allegedly populist parties are the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) in the Netherlands and *Die Linke* in Germany.

A great deal is already known about the *causes* of the rise of such parties (see Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008a; Mudde, 2004; Mény & Surel, 2002a). Much less is known, however, about the *consequences* of the populist upsurge. This dissertation addresses this topic and focuses on the impact of the rise of allegedly populist parties. The main goal is to assess whether the populist upsurge has caused populism to become mainstream. The study is founded on Mudde's (2004) claim that we are witnessing a populist *Zeitgeist* in western democracies. Mudde argues that populism has not remained restricted to the political rhetoric of allegedly populist parties only. Increasingly, populism has been incorporated by mainstream political parties as well. Although various scholars have made similar claims, and some of them have also supported these claims with examples of speeches of individual politicians (De Beus, 2009; Mair, 2002; Mazzoleni, 2008; Mény & Surel, 2002b), a systematic

comparative investigation across cases and over time is still lacking. Moreover, the *Zeitgeist*-claim has previously only focused on the question of whether populism has become mainstream with regard to *political parties*. Yet in order to speak of an actual all-embracing populist *Zeitgeist*, populism must also have become more widespread beyond the confined realm of party politics. After all, the term populist ‘*Zeitgeist*’ means a populist ‘spirit of the times’, which suggests a more comprehensive pervasiveness of populism. This dissertation expands Mudde’s framework and provides a comparative investigation into the impact of the populist upsurge with regard to three realms: the realm of political parties, the realm of the mass media and the realm of public opinion.

My guiding hypothesis is that the populist *Zeitgeist* is the result of a ‘spiral of populism’, in which the electoral success of allegedly populist parties has fuelled populism and dissatisfaction among all key actors in the electoral process.¹ This is expected to have occurred because the populist idea that the Good, homogeneous people are betrayed by Evil and corrupted elites is potentially very attractive to voters (see Canovan, 1981; De la Torre, 2010; Mény & Surel, 2002b), and thereby also to vote-seeking mainstream political parties and market-oriented mass-media (Mazzoleni, 2003, 2008). Moreover, increasingly populist parties and media might well have fuelled political dissatisfaction among voters (Van der Brug, 2003), and thereby the electoral success of allegedly populist parties again (Betz, 1994; Bélanger & Aarts, 2006).

This dissertation is highly relevant – both academically and politically – as populism is one of the most fervently discussed topics in Western European public debates (Taguieff, 1995). Because populism is often conceived of as a threat to liberal democracy, and therefore as a so-called ‘political pathology’ (Taggart, 2002), ‘[m]ost of [the contributions to the debates] are of an

¹ This idea of the ‘spiral of populism’ is inspired by the ‘spiral of cynicism’ thesis. According to this thesis, which was developed by Cappella and Jamieson (1997), strategic media coverage of politics fuels political distrust and cynicism, which again leads to low levels of engagement and participation.

alarming nature' (Mudde, 2004). For example, within the Dutch language, at least ten well-known political commentators have published books with the words 'populist' or 'populism' in the title.² Indeed, many of these commentators are concerned about the populist upsurge.³

Academic studies take a less alarming tone than these popular books; most of them (at least try to) refrain from moral judgments about populism. However, many scholarly studies also find that populism and liberal democracy are not fully compatible (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Arditì, 2004; Canovan, 1999; Kornhauser, 1959; Mény & Surel, 2002b; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2011; Taguieff, 1995; Urbinati, 1998). Because of this observed tension between populism and liberal democracy, it is important to assess to what extent populism has become mainstream. After all, if populism has remained restricted to the political fringes, it will most likely not be influential enough to affect the functioning of liberal democratic systems. However, if populism has affected other political and non-political actors as well – and thus has become mainstream – the rise of populism might have an impact on the functioning of liberal democracy.

This introductory chapter proceeds as follows. In the next section, I explain my definition of populism as a set of ideas. In the following part, I focus on Mudde's *Zeitgeist*-claim, which I expand to the realm of the mass media and the realm of public opinion. In the next two sections, I discuss the selection of cases and the data I collected. In a final section, I provide an outline of the dissertation.

² Blommaert, 2004; De Mul, 2011; Heijne, 2011; Lucardie & Voerman, 2012; Pels, 2011; Te Velde, 2010; Van Reybrouck, 2011; Van Rossem, 2010; Van der Zwan, 2003; Wagenaar, 2005; Zijderfeld, 2009.

³ Van Rossem (2010: 21, my translation), for instance, refers to populism as 'an ill weed that grows in the cleavage between political promises and political reality'. Zijderfeld (2009: 93-94, my translation) argues: 'Populism is political quicksand. It does not want party formation. It wants a movement; a movement which is based on emotions and impulses. Essentially, populism dismisses representative parliamentary democracy.'

Defining populism

One might distinguish three different approaches toward defining populism (see Jagers, 2006; Pauwels, 2012). Firstly, populism can be conceived of as a particular form of political organization. In the Latin American literature, for example, it is often emphasized that a populist movement is characterized by a strong leader who receives uninstitutionalized support from a heterogeneous group of people (Germani, 1978; Di Tella, 1997; Weyland, 2001). Similarly, in Western Europe, populism has been associated with loose movements with a strong, charismatic leader at the apex (Taggart, 1995, 2000). Secondly, populism can be conceptualized as a political style. Canovan (1999: 5) has argued that ‘Populist appeals to the people are characteristically couched in a *style* that is “democratic” in the sense of being aimed at ordinary people. Capitalizing on popular distrust of politicians’ evasiveness and bureaucratic jargon, they pride themselves on simplicity and directness’ (see also Bos et al., 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni, 2003; Taguieff, 1995). Finally, populism can be defined as a particular ‘thin-centered ideology’ (see Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2004, 2007) or ‘discourse’ (Hawkins, 2009, 2010; Laclau, 1977, 2005). Scholars who employ this latter approach have in common that they conceive of populism essentially as a set of ideas (see Hawkins et al., 2012). They define populism as a Manichaeic way of looking at democracy in which the Good side is equated with the will of the people, and the Evil side is equated with a conspiring elite. In this dissertation, populism is defined in accordance with this third approach – as a set of ideas. More specifically, I employ Mudde’s (2004: 543) definition of populism as ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’. It is important to emphasize that Mudde does not conceive of populism as being a ‘full’ ideology such as liberalism, socialism or conservatism. Following Freedman (1998) and Canovan (2002), he has argued that populism is a ‘thin-centered ideology’: it does not offer an all-inclusive worldview, but only focuses on the

relationship between the people and the elite. It can therefore be easily combined with other ideologies on both the left and the right (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000).

The first reason to employ this definition is that Mudde's *Zeitgeist*-claim is the point of departure for this dissertation. To make sure that I understand populism in a similar way as Mudde does, I employ the same definition. Secondly, and maybe even more importantly, in Chapter 2 of this dissertation I demonstrate that the lowest common denominator that prototypical populist actors across cases and over time share with each other is that they contrast the Good, homogeneous people with the Evil, corrupted elite. This indicates that Mudde's definition of populism is an appropriate 'minimal definition' for the concept, which can be employed in comparative research across cases and over time (see also Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012).

According to Mudde's definition, populism essentially consists of two elements: people-centrism and anti-elitism. Populism is people-centrist because it emphasizes the centrality and the sovereignty of the homogeneous people, and it claims that the general will of the people should be the point of departure for political decision-making (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969b; Mény & Surel, 2002b). The term 'the people' can have different meanings in different circumstances. It could refer, for instance, to the electorate, to farmers, to 'hardworking men' or to the nation (Canovan, 1981; Pasquino, 2008; Taggart, 2000). Often, however, it is rather unclear what populists refer to when talking about 'the people'.

Populism is anti-elitist because it accuses the elites of standing in the way of the centrality of the people (Mény & Surel, 2002b). The elite is accused of being arrogant, selfish, incompetent, and of having no idea of what ordinary people find important (Barr, 2009; Canovan, 2002). According to Mudde (2004: 546): 'In an often implicitly Rousseauian fashion, populists argue that political parties corrupt the link between leaders and supporters, create artificial divisions within the homogeneous people, and put their own interests above those of the people.' Anti-elitism often concerns a political elite, but it could just as well be about a cultural, economic or judicial elite (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Some scholars have claimed that populism opposes not only the elite but also ‘dangerous others’ – groups who are not considered part of ‘the people’, such as immigrants or people of another race (see Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; Panizza, 2005; Taguieff, 1995). In this dissertation, I follow Mudde (2004) and others (Canovan, 1981; Taggart, 2000) who have claimed that although this exclusionistic feature might be a defining characteristic of *radical right-wing* populism, it is not an intrinsic property of populism as such. In fact, one of the essential properties of populism is that it can be combined with various ideologies. Including the exclusionistic feature in my definition would introduce a bias toward right-wing populism.

That populism is defined as a set of ideas means that populism is not understood here as a feature of a specific political actor (such as a political party, a movement, or an individual politician) but as a characteristic of *the message* of such an actor. Because actors can endorse the populist set of ideas to a larger or smaller extent, populism then becomes a matter of degree. Actors who send out many populist messages are more populist than actors who send out only a few such messages. This means that the way in which populism is understood in this dissertation differs from how populism is regularly conceived of. Firstly, the approach in this dissertation is more fine-grained. Generally, political parties are categorized by means of a dichotomous classification system: as either populist or not populist. Although nothing is wrong with this approach as a starting point for empirical analyses, it is a rather rough method of categorization and misses various shades of grey. After all, party A can be more or less populist than party B (see Hawkins, 2009; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Secondly, this dichotomous approach of categorization is generally employed to classify *political parties*, and it does not take into account that populism, as a set of ideas, can also be encountered beyond the realm of party politics. For instance, the messages in the media or the attitudes of citizens can also be populist to a larger or lesser extent (Hawkins et al., 2012; Mazzoleni, 2003). One of the contributions that this dissertation makes to the literature is that it allows for an analysis of the extent to which populism is employed in these realms too.

In this dissertation, I refer to populism in two different ways. Firstly, to assess whether mainstream parties and mass media have become more populist over the years, I employ this fine-grained gradual approach: parties and media can be more or less populist. Secondly, to assess the effect of the success of allegedly populist parties on the degree of populism among mainstream parties and in media, I also make use of the dichotomous either/or classification system according to which parties are classified as populist or not in the scholarly literature. Because this either/or classification is often not based on systematic empirical investigations (Hawkins, 2009), I employ the term *allegedly* populist parties every time I refer to populism in this sense.

A populist Zeitgeist?

Mény and Surel (2002b: 19) have argued that allegedly populist parties can ‘contaminate’ other parties by influencing their political discourse. According to Mudde (2004: 551), ‘at least since the early 1990s populism has become a regular feature of politics in western democracies. While populism is still mostly used by outsider or challenger parties, mainstream politicians, both in government and opposition, have been using it as well – generally in an attempt to counter the populist challengers’. Examples of mainstream politicians who have incorporated populism in their rhetoric are, according to Mudde (2004: 550-551), William Hague (the former leader of the British Conservatives) and Steve Stevaert (the former vice-prime minister of Flanders in Belgium). Mair (2002) has demonstrated that the rhetoric of the British former Labour leader Tony Blair contains populist elements as well. In a speech, Blair argued: ‘Arrayed against us: the forces of conservatism, the cynics, the elites, the establishment ... On our side, the forces of modernity and justice. Those who believe in a Britain for all the people.’⁴ According to Mair (2002: 92), ‘[o]ne of the first things this rhetoric reveals is the extent to which a populist language has now become acceptable within what has long been

⁴ See www.guardian.co.uk/lab99.

perceived as a decidedly non-populist political culture'. Other scholars have claimed that mainstream political leaders, such as Nicolas Sarkozy and Jacques Chirac in France, Gerhard Schröder in Germany and Wouter Bos in the Netherlands, can, to a certain extent, also be qualified as populist (De Beus, 2009; Jun, 2006; Mény & Surel, 2002b).

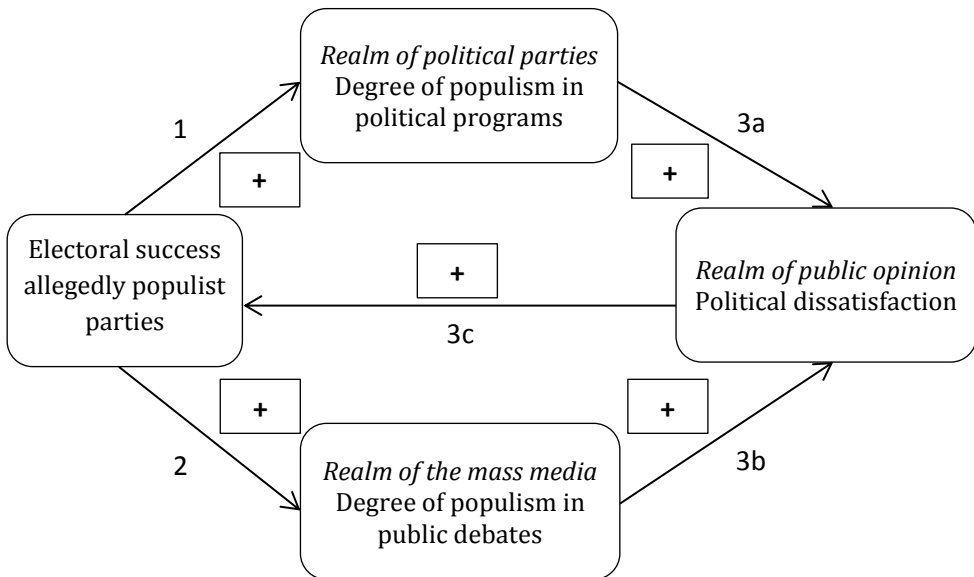
Although many scholars thus have given examples of populist rhetoric employed by mainstream parties, systematic studies across cases and over time are still lacking. Moreover, existing examples of the populist *Zeitgeist* pertain to party politics only. Yet it might well be the case that populism has become more pervasive in other realms as well. In fact, in a footnote in his *Zeitgeist*-article, Mudde has argued that populist arguments have become increasingly prominent in the media as well. Although various scholars have claimed that this 'media populism' should be further investigated in future studies (see Jagers, 2006; Mazzoleni, 2003; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), research on this topic is still in its infancy (but see Akkerman, 2011). Furthermore, it could also be expected that populism has impacted, beyond parties and media, upon attitudes of individual citizens. Van der Brug (2003), for instance, has argued that an allegedly populist party's message can affect the political satisfaction of a citizen who supports this party. Lenz (2009) has demonstrated that individuals indeed incorporate the ideas of the parties that they identify themselves with. Hence, it might be expected that populism has transcended the realm of party politics and has become more pervasive in other realms as well.

In this dissertation, I assess whether Western Europe is facing a populist *Zeitgeist* by focusing on the impact of the rise of allegedly populist parties on: (1) the realm of party politics; (2) the realm of the mass media; and (3) the realm of public opinion. My study departs from the assumption that populism could be a highly attractive message for the electorate (Canovan, 1981; Mény & Surel, 2002b; De la Torre, 2010). After all, populists claim to stand up for the powerless ordinary people whose interests are said to be neglected by corrupt elites, which are supposed to represent these interests, but, instead, only think about their own well-being (see Barr, 2009). It can be supposed that this popular attractiveness and the success of allegedly populist parties have

triggered vote-seeking mainstream political parties to become more populist (Mair, 2002; Mudde, 2004) and market-oriented mass media to increasingly provide space for populist messages as well (Mazzoleni, 2003; Plasser & Ullram, 2003). Political parties and mass media are, after all, interested in appealing to a large audience. Moreover, because of the attractiveness of populism, I also expect that the extent to which parties and media incorporate populism in their own messages affects citizens' ideas about politics: the more populist the party that one votes for or the newspaper that one reads, the less politically satisfied this person will be (Van der Brug, 2003; Mazzoleni, 2003). Finally, this declined political satisfaction will motivate voters again to vote for allegedly populist parties (Betz, 1994; Bélanger & Aarts, 2006; Norris, 2005). This 'spiral of populism' can be expected to bring about an all-encompassing populist Zeitgeist, according to which the whole electoral process is permeated with populism. The spiral of populism is summarized in Figure 1.1. In the remainder of this section, I will pay more specific attention to the expectations within this model.

Figure 1.1

The spiral of populism: main expectations



Let me start with the realm of political parties (see arrow 1). Little is currently known about how allegedly populist parties affect the ideas of mainstream parties. Although various scholars have focused on how the anti-immigrant or nativist stances of so-called populist radical right parties affect the political mainstream (Bale, 2003; Bale et al., 2010; Downs, 2001; Loxbo, 2010; Minkenberg, 2001; Van Spanje, 2010), much less is known about the effect of the *populist* stances of these parties (see Mudde, 2012). Have mainstream parties incorporated the populist set of ideas in their programs to counter the success of their challengers?

Mainstream parties can respond to the rise of allegedly populist parties in various ways (see Meguid, 2005). First of all, they can decide to employ a dismissive strategy, which basically means that they ignore the populist challenger. Second, mainstream parties can adopt an adversarial strategy and oppose the allegedly populist party's populist stances. In both cases, mainstream parties will not incorporate the populist set of ideas in their own discourse. Finally, mainstream parties can adopt an accommodative tactic. Mainstream parties hope that by partially adopting the populist ideas of the successful competitor, they can undermine the distinctiveness of the allegedly populist party, and voters will decide to return to the more familiar mainstream party.

I expect mainstream parties to adopt such an accommodative strategy under two circumstances: when they have lost seats and when allegedly populist parties are on the rise (see Harmel & Janda, 1994: 267).⁵ When mainstream parties have lost seats, they will be inclined to change their political strategy (Panebianco, 1988; Schlesinger, 1984). They may expect to gain their votes back by criticizing the 'established order' and by emphasizing the importance of the power of the people. However, as long as allegedly populist parties are unsuccessful, mainstream parties will have no incentive to

⁵ These two circumstances have to be distinguished from each other because mainstream parties can lose seats without allegedly populist parties being successful, and because the electoral success of allegedly populist parties does not necessarily imply electoral loss of every mainstream party.

employ this strategy. They may expect that by ignoring their challengers (and thus adopting a dismissive strategy), the threat they pose will eventually disappear. However, as soon as allegedly populist parties become successful, mainstream parties could think that incorporating the populist set of ideas in their own discourse will fend off the challenge. After all, by incorporating the central message of allegedly populist parties into their own discourse, they undermine the allegedly populist party's issue ownership of populism (see Downs, 2001; Meguid, 2005). Mudde (2004: 563) has argued that:

'[w]hen explicitly populist outsider groups gain prominence, parts of the establishment will react by a combined strategy of exclusion and inclusion; while trying to exclude the populist actor(s) from political power, they will include populist themes and rhetoric to try and fight off the challenge.'

It is more difficult to theorize with regard to the realm of the media (see arrow 2). Although various scholars have focused on the relationship between the success of allegedly populist parties and media coverage, their studies have only modeled the electoral success of allegedly populist parties as a dependent variable – and thus as a *consequence* of media coverage (Art, 2006; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Bos et al., 2010; Mazzoleni, 2008; Mudde, 2007; Walgrave & De Swert, 2004). With regard to the reverse effect, i.e., the effect of the success of allegedly populist parties on media coverage, we know virtually nothing. In fact, only a very few studies have looked at populism in the media at all (Akkerman, 2011; Bale et al., 2011; Mazzoleni, 2003, 2008). In one of the scarce contributions to this debate, Mazzoleni (2008: 64) has argued that 'media populism' has diffused political discontent and thereby facilitated 'the circulation of populist streams in the democratic body'.

It remains unclear how the success of allegedly populist parties could have fuelled this media populism. Given the lack of studies on this topic, we might find some clues elsewhere. Koopmans (2004) has argued that in order to understand public debates in the media, we have to distinguish two different categories of involved actors: the 'speakers' of messages (the participants in the debates in the media) and the 'gatekeepers' (those who

decide which contributions will be published or broadcasted). It might be expected that when allegedly populist parties are electorally successful, market-oriented gatekeepers will be inclined to broadcast or publish the messages associated with these successful parties (see Plasser & Ulram, 2003). After all, gatekeepers may well expect that the populist message will appeal to many citizens, and that, therefore, attention to this topic will increase their audience shares. This will motivate participants in the debates (the 'speakers') again to incorporate the populist set of ideas in their contributions.

Consequently, it can be expected that the increasingly commercial orientation of the mass media has fuelled the degree of populism in the public debates as well (Plasser & Ulram, 2003: 21). It has been argued that, as a result of the increased focus of the media on large audiences, the media have shifted their attention from parties and the state to 'ordinary' citizens and their common sense (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 277-278). It can be expected that, therefore, the media have increasingly espoused messages that include the populist set of ideas. The populist claim that people are exploited by elites is, after all, an attractive message for 'ordinary' citizens and thus for the market-oriented media as well (Papathanassopoulos, 2000).

For rather similar reasons, it can also be expected that tabloid media are more populist than elite media (Akkerman, 2011; Mazzoleni, 2003; Mudde, 2007; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Because elite media are closely aligned with the established political order and are less focused than tabloid media on mass audiences, they will not be strongly inclined to criticize political elites and to emphasize the interests of 'ordinary' citizens. The tabloid media, on the other hand, are not closely aligned with the established political parties. Moreover, they are strongly focused on mass audiences and therefore tend to focus on what they think citizens find important. As a result, they can be expected to be more inclined to express populist messages (Art, 2006; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mazzoleni, 2003).

What then would be the effect of populism among parties on the attitudes of the public (see arrow 3a)? I focus on the effects of populism on the specific attitude of political satisfaction because it has been argued that, from a

theoretical point of view, the populist message is related to political dissatisfaction among citizens (see Taggart, 2000). Moreover, various scholars have empirically confirmed this relationship (Betz, 1994; Bélanger & Aarts, 2006; Mayer & Perrineau, 1992; Norris, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2001). Most of these scholars have argued that political dissatisfaction is a reason for citizens to vote for an allegedly populist party – so, political dissatisfaction is the cause and populist voting is the consequence. Yet there are reasons to expect that the causal direction of this relationship could also be reversed. Van der Brug (2003), for instance, has demonstrated that citizens who supported the LPF were affected by the populist message of this party. This implies that political dissatisfaction can also be a consequence instead of a cause of populist voting. This argument is supported by Cohen (2003), who has demonstrated that party identification strongly affects citizens' attitudes. In a similar vein, other scholars have shown that someone who supports a certain party will be more strongly affected by the messages of this party than someone who does not support this party (Bartels, 2002). In fact, supporters of a party adapt their ideas to the party line when they are exposed to messages in which the party reveals its position (Lenz, 2009). It could therefore be expected that citizens who support a party claiming that ordinary people are exploited by the corrupt elite, will be inclined to incorporate this message into their own way of thinking about politics and therefore become less politically satisfied.

Populist messages are not just conveyed by political parties but also by other actors, such as the mass media. What then would be the effect of populism in the public debates in the media on citizens' attitudes (see arrow 3b)? Early studies of voting behavior expected that persuasive media would directly impact on citizens' attitudes (Lasswell, 1927; Lippmann, 1922). Empirical studies, however, found only little evidence in support of these expectations (Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Yet since the 1990s, news effects research has started to re-appreciate the direct, persuasive influences of the media (e.g., Bartels, 1993; Dalton et al., 1998; Zaller, 1992, 1996), and in recent years, a growing body of research has addressed the direct effects of media messages on public opinion (see Brandenburg & Van Egmond, 2011). Studies have focused, for instance, on

voting behavior (Druckman & Parkin, 2005), candidate preferences (Dalton et al., 1998; Lodge et al., 1995), policy preferences (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Zaller, 1996) and attitudes (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009). Hence, we can conclude that there is ample evidence that citizens are directly affected by messages in the media. I therefore expect that the more populist the messages in a newspaper are, the more the readers of this newspaper will incorporate the populist set of ideas into their own thinking, and the more politically dissatisfied they will be (Mazzoleni, 2008: 64).

Finally, as I have already indicated, it can also be expected that the attitudes of citizens affect the electoral success of allegedly populist parties again (see arrow 3c). It has, after all, been demonstrated that politically dissatisfied citizens are inclined to vote for allegedly populist parties (Betz, 1994; Bélanger & Aarts, 2006; Norris, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2001).

To sum up, I expect that the success of allegedly populist parties has ideational consequences for political parties, the mass media and public opinion. For every separate realm, I have presented 'realm-specific' arguments for why this would be the case. The more general claim, however, is that populism, by arguing that it represents the interests of ordinary people against corrupt and powerful elites, is an attractive message for many citizens. Therefore, vote-seeking parties and market-oriented media can be expected to be inclined to incorporate this populist set of ideas into their own messages. Once these messages are expressed by parties and the media, they will exert a negative effect on the political satisfaction of citizens. Declining political satisfaction will, finally, spur the success of allegedly populist parties again. If all of this would indeed turn out to be the case (i.e., all effects in Figure 1 turn out to be positive), we could speak of a 'spiral of populism', which would ultimately result in an all-embracing populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe.

Case selection and data

Case selection

Regarding the selection of cases, this dissertation consists of two parts. In the first part I develop a 'universal' minimal definition of populism that can be employed for analyses across countries and over time. This part of the dissertation is based on a comparison of strongly divergent cases across various continents. In the second part of the dissertation, I apply this minimal definition to a specific region – Western Europe – and a specific time-period – 1988-2008 – to assess whether a populist *Zeitgeist* is dawning in this part of the world. Hence, the first and second parts of this dissertation are based on different case selections. In this section, I discuss each of them in turn.

The goal of the first part of this dissertation is to develop a minimal definition of populism based on the lowest common core of what all allegedly populist actors share with each other and to develop a methodology to measure the degree of populism empirically. Ideally I would study *all* allegedly populist actors. However, because this is practically impossible, I have employed a 'most different systems design' and selected a sample of six prototypical populist actors from backgrounds as divergent as possible in terms of time, space and ideology. Only those actors have been included about whom a general consensus exists in the literature that they can be labeled populist. I guaranteed spatial diversity by selecting allegedly populist actors from various continents: Western Europe, Latin America and the United States. To safeguard temporal variation I have included both present-day actors as well as historical cases. I aimed at ideological variation by including prototypical populists from various ideological backgrounds. The selected prototypical populist actors are the following: Tom Watson's *United States People's Party* and Ross Perot's *Reform Party* in the United States, Juan Perón's *Justicialist Party* in Argentina, Hugo Chávez's *MVR/PSUV* in Venezuela, Jean-

Marie Le Pen's *Front National* in France, and Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* in Italy.⁶ See Table 1.1 for an overview.

Table 1.1

Case selection for the conceptual part of the dissertation

Space			
Time	United States	Latin America	Western Europe
Classical	Watson	Peron	Le Pen
	People's Party	Justicialist Party	Front National
	1890s (Farmers interests)	1940s-1970s (Social-democratic)	1970s-2000s (Far right)
Modern	Perot	Chávez	Berlusconi
	Reform Party	MVR / PSUV	Forza Italia
	1990s (Liberal)	2000s (Far left)	1990s-2000s (Conservative)

As argued, this selection of cases is aimed at identifying the lowest common denominator that all populists share with each other. It is unrelated to the case selection for the second part of the dissertation, in which I employ the identified minimal definition to assess whether Western Europe is witnessing a populist *Zeitgeist*. In this part of the dissertation, I focus on Western Europe because 'the main area of sustained populist growth and success over the last fifteen years in established democracies has been in Western Europe' (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b: 1). In particular, I focus on five specific

⁶ These populist actors have been labeled as populist by various authors. Watson/United States People's Party: Goodwyn, 1976, Hicks, 1961, Kazin, 1995; Perot/Reform Party: Canovan, 2004, Kazin, 1995, Taggart, 2000; Perón/Justicialist Party: De la Torre, 2010, Roberts, 1995, Weyland, 2001; Chávez/MVR/PSUV: Hawkins, 2010, Roberts, 2007, Weyland, 2003; Le Pen/Front National: Betz, 1993, Rydgren, 2008, Surel, 2002; Berlusconi/Forza Italia: De Beus, 2009, Tarchi, 2008, Zaslove, 2008.

countries that have been selected on the basis of two criteria. The first criterion is that variation is required in the electoral success of allegedly populist parties. After all, to assess the impact of the electoral success of allegedly populist parties, it is essential to include both cases in which these parties have been successful and cases in which their success has been limited. I have selected three countries in which allegedly populist parties have been successful (France, Italy and the Netherlands) and two countries in which populists have been relatively unsuccessful (Germany and the United Kingdom).⁷ The second reason to focus on these cases is that I explicitly focus on populism on both the left and the right. Finding right-wing allegedly populist parties to include in my analysis is not a large challenge; after all, these parties have emerged in many Western European countries. This is different, however, for populism on the left. Left-wing populism is not as widespread (yet) as right-wing populism. The most notable cases of allegedly left-wing populism can be found in Germany (*Die Linke*) and the Netherlands (*Socialistische Partij, SP*) (see Hakhverdian & Koop, 2007; Hough & Koß, 2009; March, 2007, 2011; March & Mudde, 2005).

To study the causal relations implied by the ‘spiral of populism’ (see Figure 1), the study requires not only variation in the success of allegedly populist actors across the cases but also variation over time. Therefore, I selected election years in each country before, during and after the largest electoral successes of allegedly populist parties. Because most populist successes took place in the mid-nineties and early 2000s, I decided to focus on the last two decades: 1988-2008.⁸ In every country, I focus on four elections within this time frame.

The most notable populist success in France dates back to the end of the nineties and the early 2000s. In 1997, the *Front National* (FN) obtained its best result ever with regard to parliamentary elections: the party received 15

⁷ Allegedly populist parties in a country are assumed to be successful when the most successful allegedly populist party received a vote share of 15 per cent or more at least once.

⁸ 2008 is the final year I focus on because I began the data collection in 2009.

per cent of the votes. Moreover, in 2002, the leader of the FN, Jean-Marie Le Pen, defeated the socialist presidential candidate in the first round of the presidential elections. In comparison with 1997 and 2002, I consider the elections of 1993 (which was the election before FN's biggest success period) and 2007 (which is the last election before I began my data collection).

Although right-wing allegedly populist parties have been rather unsuccessful in Germany, the left-wing allegedly populist party *Die Linke* has become increasingly successful over the years. However, before 2008, the success of *Die Linke* remained limited. Because there has not been one particular moment in which the party had been successful, I decided to select two elections in the 2000s (2002 and 2005) and two elections in the 1990s (1990 and 1994). This means that within the time frame of 1988-2008, I have only excluded the elections of 1998.

In Italy, the most notable populist successes took place in 1994 and in 2001. In 1994, amid a wide-scale political corruption scandal, the populist politician Silvio Berlusconi participated in the elections for the first time and immediately obtained 15 per cent of the seats in the House of Representatives. During the 2001 general elections he obtained his best result ever: approximately 30 per cent of the seats. The election years I focus on in Italy are 1994 and 2001 in comparison with 1992 (just before the populist upsurge) and 2008 (the latest election before my data collection).

The most significant populist upsurge in the Netherlands took place in 2002, when Pim Fortuyn participated in the national elections for the first time and immediately gained 17 per cent of the votes. I also included the election year of 1994 because it was the first year that the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) made it into the national parliament, and it was the year in which the radical right-wing *Centrumdemocraten* (CD) obtained their best result (3 out of 150 seats). I also included the elections of 1989 because allegedly populist parties had not yet been successful, and the elections of 2006, which were the latest elections before my data collection began (and during which the SP obtained its best result so far, and the populist radical right *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) of Geert Wilders made it into the national parliament for the first time).

In the United Kingdom, populists have not been successful so far, so my case selection is not based on populist successes. I selected 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005 as the election years because those are the only years in which elections were held within the time-frame under investigation.

Data

To assess whether populism has become more pervasive in the messages of mainstream political parties and in public debates in the mass media, I organized a large-scale content analysis of election manifestos and opinion articles from newspapers within the selected election years. Election manifestos were chosen because: (1) they are authoritative documents that party leaders can only depart from with great difficulty (Laver & Garry, 2000: 620); and (2) they are reasonably comparable across cases and over time (Klemmensen et al., 2007: 747). Opinion articles were chosen because the opinion section in newspapers (the section of a newspaper that contains the editorials, columns, op-ed pieces and letters) ‘was designed as a forum for the articulation of multiple ideas in an attempt to promote public debate on salient issues’ (Day & Golan, 2005: 62). Moreover, it is an institutionalized forum, as well as a place where people from different backgrounds can participate and a place in which both the views of opinion leaders and ‘ordinary citizens’ are paid attention to.

For every election I analyzed the manifestos of the mainstream parties (Christian-democratic, conservative, liberal, and social-democratic parties) and those allegedly populist parties that have gained seats in either the national or the European parliament during the time-span under investigation.⁹ I collected three newspapers in every country. I focused on

⁹ The classification of mainstream parties is based on the coding scheme of the comparative manifesto project (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006). Parties were classified as allegedly populist when at least two experts have identified them as such. All radical *right-wing* parties from the countries under investigation (which have gained seats in either the national or the European parliament) were classified as populist. However, only the Dutch and German radical *left-wing* parties were classified

'election periods' (the four weeks before the general elections) because the media focus more on politics during election campaigns (Koopmans, 2004: 372). A systematic sample of days was drawn from every election period, and for every sampled day, the opinion articles from the selected newspapers were collected.¹⁰ Only opinion articles that concerned domestic or EU politics were selected.

The election manifestos and opinion articles have been analyzed by extensively trained coders who have determined for every single paragraph whether it contained people-centrism and anti-elitism.¹¹ Every paragraph in which people-centrism was combined with anti-elitism was classified as a populist paragraph. After all, it is the combination of people-centrism and anti-elitism that defines populism. For every manifesto and every opinion article, I have computed the percentage of populist paragraphs.

To assess whether the degree of populism in election manifestos and newspaper articles affects citizens' political satisfaction, I linked the populism scores of the manifestos and the newspapers to information about citizens' political attitudes. This was done by combining the populism scores with survey data from the European Elections Studies (EES) of 1999, 2004 and 2009. The technical details of how this is done are explained in Chapter 6. For an overview of the case selection and the data with regard to the second part of my dissertation, see Table 1.2.

as populist in the scholarly literature. For reasons of comparison, I have also included the radical left-wing parties that have gained parliamentary seats in the other countries. These parties are the PCF in France and the DS in Italy.

¹⁰ Every election period consists of 4 weeks of 6 days. (Many newspapers do not have a separate Sunday issue, so I excluded the Sunday issues from my sample.) Every other day was selected, as a result of which every day of the week (except Sunday) is sampled twice.

¹¹ People-centrism was operationalized with the question: 'Do the authors of the text refer to the people?' Anti-elitism was operationalized by the following question: 'Do the authors of the text criticize elites?' See for more information on my measurement Chapter 3.

Table 1.2*Case selection and data for the empirical part of the dissertation*

Country	Success of allegedly populist parties ¹	Election years	Allegedly populist parties ²	Best electoral result ³	Mainstream parties ⁴	Newspapers
FR	Yes	93/97/02/07	FN	17.8%	PS RPR UDF UMP	Le Figaro Le Monde Liberation
GE	No	90/94/02/05	Die Linke	8.7%	SPD CDU/CSU FDP	Frankfurter Allgemeine Süddeutsche Zeitung Bild
IT	Yes	92/94/01/08	FI LN AN	29.4% 10.1% 15.7%	DC/PP PD/Ulivo	Corriere della Sera La Stampa La Repubblica
NL	Yes	89/94/02/06	CD SP LPF PVV	2.5% 16.6% 17.0% 5.7%	PvdA CDA VVD D66	NRC Handelsblad de Volkskrant De Telegraaf
UK	No	92/97/01/05	BNP UKIP	0.7% 2.2%	Cons Labour Libdem	The Daily Telegraph The Guardian The Sun

¹ Allegedly populist parties are successful when the most successful allegedly populist party in a country received more than 15 per cent of the votes at least once (1988-2008).

² Only those allegedly populist parties have been selected that have gained seats in either the national or the European parliament during the time-span under investigation. A party is classified as allegedly populist when at least two experts have identified it as such. FN: Rydgren, 2008; Surel, 2002. Die Linke: March, 2007; Decker, 2008. FI: Tarchi, 2008; Zaslove, 2008. LN: Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2010; Tarchi, 2008. AN: Ruzza & Fella, 2011; Tarchi, 2002. CD: Mudde, 2007; Van der Brug & Mughan, 2007. SP: March, 2007; Voerman, 2009. LPF: Lucardie, 2008; Van der Brug, 2003. PVV: Akkerman, 2011; Vossen, 2010. BNP: Fella, 2008; Mudde, 2007. UKIP: Abedi & Lundberg, 2009; Fella, 2008.

³ Highest percentage of votes in either national parliamentary or presidential elections (1988-2008).

⁴ Christian-democratic, conservative, social-democratic and liberal parties as defined by the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, & Tanenbaum, 2001; Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, Budge, & McDonald, 2006).

* Only the Dutch and German radical left-wing parties have been labeled as 'populist' in the literature. However, for reasons of comparison, I have also included radical left-wing parties (or 'communist' parties, according to the Comparative Manifesto Project) that have gained parliamentary seats in the other countries. These parties are the DS in Italy and the PCF in France.

Outline of the dissertation

This dissertation is a collection of five articles (and an introductory and a concluding chapter). Although the separate chapters are all parts of a larger piece (see Figure 1.1), they can also be read independently from each other. An unfortunate consequence is that the chapters contain some repetition with regard to their conceptual and methodological sections. In this section, I describe the main questions that are the focus of each of the following chapters.

The next chapter concerns the conceptualization of populism. The main question of this chapter is: do allegedly populist actors across countries and over time share a common core with each other, or does the label 'populism' only cover 'a multitude of unconnected tendencies' (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969b:

1)? To answer that question, I compare several ‘prototypical’ populist actors with each other from backgrounds as divergent as possible in terms of time, space and ideology. If indeed there is a lowest common denominator that all these parties share, this would imply that it is possible to formulate a valid minimal definition of populism according to which all prototypical populist actors across cases and over time indeed fall within this populist category. We can then ‘travel’ (see Sartori, 1970) between different continental contexts to compare populism in the United States with populism in Latin America and populism in Western Europe.

In Chapter 3, I focus on how to measure populism.¹² The chapter is based on a comparison between my own content analysis method of measuring populism and a computerized content analysis of populism. I pay extensive attention to the validity and reliability of my measurement. I assess three types of validity: content validity (is the concept adequately captured by its indicator or indicators?), face validity (does the concept measure what it is supposed to measure?) and concurrent validity (are the results of a measurement of the concept in one study empirically related to the results of a different measurement of the same concept in another study?).

Chapter 4 (which is co-authored with Sarah de Lange and Wouter van der Brug) focuses on the impact of the success of allegedly populist parties within the realm of party politics (see arrow 1). Is populism contagious and have mainstream political parties become more populist over the years? Various researchers have studied the way in which mainstream parties have responded to the electoral success of populists (see Mudde, 2007; Van Spanje, 2010). Yet these studies have primarily looked at radical right parties, and therefore focused on the extent to which mainstream parties have incorporated their *anti-immigrant* stances. In this chapter, I look at the reactions of mainstream parties regarding their *populism*.

In Chapter 5, I argue that, to fully understand how pervasive the populist message is, we should not only focus on party politics; populism

¹² An earlier version of that chapter is an article, which is co-authored by fellow PhD-candidate Teun Pauwels. This article did not include the French election manifestos.

might resonate in other spheres as well. In this chapter, I look at the effect of the success of populists on public debates in the media (see arrow 2). I focus on two main questions: (1) has the electoral success of allegedly populist parties impacted on the degree of populism in public debates in the media?; and (2) have the public debates, as a result, become more populist over the years? I have also assessed whether tabloid media are more populist than elite media (see Akkerman, 2011; Mazzoleni, 2003) and whether letters are more populist than other opinion pieces (see Kerr & Moy, 2002; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004).

Chapter 6 (which is co-authored with Wouter van der Brug and Sarah de Lange) looks at the relationship between the populist message and public opinion (see arrows 3a, 3b and 3c). Many researchers have demonstrated that voting for allegedly populist parties goes hand in hand with political dissatisfaction. Most of them have made a unidirectional, causal claim about this association: political dissatisfaction is the cause, and voting for populists is the consequence (see Betz, 1994; Bélanger & Aarts, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2001). I pose the question whether the causal argument could also be turned around: is it possible that voting for allegedly populist parties is the cause of increasing political dissatisfaction? Are voters affected by the populist messages they are exposed to (Van der Brug, 2003)? To assess whether this is the case, I compare two logics with each other: the ‘expressing discontent logic’ (political dissatisfaction is the cause, and populist voting is the consequence) and the ‘fuelling discontent logic’ (populist voting is the cause, and political dissatisfaction is the consequence). Moreover, building on existing research on direct media effects (see, for a recent example, Brandenburg & Van Egmond, 2011), I also assess to what extent populism in the public debates in the media affects political satisfaction.

In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I focus on the main findings of the separate studies within the broader *Zeitgeist*-framework. Has the rise of allegedly populist parties created a populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe? In this final chapter, I also discuss the contributions of this dissertation to the scholarly literature. Finally, I discuss possible avenues for further research.