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

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Citation for published version (APA):

Rooduijn, M. (2013). A populist Zeitgeist? The impact of populism on parties, media and the public in Western Europe.

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Chapter 4

POPULIST ‘CONTAGION’?

Allegedly Populist Parties and Mainstream Parties in Western Europe

This chapter is a minor revision of a paper entitled ‘A populist Zeitgeist? Programmatic contagion by populist parties in Western Europe’. This paper, which was co-authored by Sarah de Lange and Wouter van der Brug, has been accepted for publication in *Party Politics*.

... 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.

Cas Mudde, 2004, p. 551

Introduction

Allegedly populist parties have become important players in Western European party systems. Over the past decades, radical right-wing parties have entered national parliaments in countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, whereas radical left-wing parties have gained representation in Germany, the Netherlands and Scotland. Several allegedly populist parties, including the *Fremskrittspartiet* (FRP), *Perussuomalaiset* (PS), and the *Schweizerische Volkspartei* (SVP), are supported by more than twenty per cent of the electorate, and others (e.g., the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreich* (FPÖ), the *Lega Nord* (LN) and the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF)) have assumed office in recent years. In this chapter, the main focus is not on these allegedly populist parties themselves. Instead, the aim is to assess to what extent the electoral success of these parties has impacted on the mainstream parties that they have challenged. How did the political mainstream respond to the populist upsurge?

Various scholars have examined the way in which mainstream parties have responded to the electoral success of radical right-wing allegedly populist parties (Bale, 2003; Bale et al., 2010; Downs, 2001; Heinisch, 2003; Loxbo, 2010; Minkenberg, 2001; Mudde, 2007; Van Spanje, 2010; Van Spanje & Van der Brug, 2009). However, their studies have primarily focused on the extent to which mainstream parties have reacted by copying these parties' anti-immigrant or nativist stances. Far less attention has been paid to populism, which is also a component of the ideology of radical right-wing

allegedly populist parties. Moreover, these studies have exclusively focused on contagion by radical *right-wing* parties, ignoring the radical *left-wing* allegedly populist parties that have emerged in recent years as well.

According to Mudde (2004), we are witnessing a populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe. He has claimed that radical left- and right-wing allegedly populist parties are gaining support and that, in response to this development, mainstream parties are increasingly using populist *rhetoric*. Thus, populism can be considered contagious (Bale et al., 2010; Mény & Surel, 2002b). In this chapter, I analyze mainstream parties' *programmatic* reactions to the rise of both radical left- and right-wing allegedly populist parties in Western Europe. The reason for this choice for programmatic reactions is that most scholars have defined populism as a 'thin-centered ideology', that is, a particular set of ideas about the relationship between 'the people' and 'the elites' (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; Canovan, 2004; Hawkins, 2009, 2010; Mudde, 2004, 2007; Stanley, 2008). In line with this definition, I examine whether the programs of mainstream parties have become more populist over the years.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I discuss my definition of populism. Populism is a contested concept, so it is of vital importance to be clear about the way the concept is defined here. Second, I investigate the conditions under which the programs of mainstream parties are likely to become populist. Third, I pay attention to the design and method used in this chapter. In particular, I devote attention to the method of content analysis that I employed to establish to what extent the programs of parties can be qualified as populist. Fourth, I analyze whether mainstream parties have become (more) populist since the late 1980s. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings for our understanding of the rise of populism in Western Europe.

Defining populism

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars seem to agree that populism can best be defined as a 'thin-centered ideology' in which the Good people are positioned against the Evil elites (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; Canovan, 2004; Hawkins, 2009, 2010; Mudde, 2004, 2007;

Pauwels, 2011; Stanley, 2008).³⁷ In this chapter, I build on this agreement and 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'.

I conceptualize populism as being essentially a property of a message rather than a property of the actor sending the message. This difference may appear pedantic, yet I believe it is important. By conceptualizing populism as a characteristic of a message, politicians, parties, newspaper articles, party programs, or speeches cannot be qualified as being either populist or not populist. Instead, populism then becomes a matter of degree. A politician who sends out many populist messages can thus be classified as more populist than a politician who sends out few such messages.

My definition of populism has two core elements, 'the people' and 'the elites'. Populism relates to the antagonistic *relationship* between these two groups (Laclau, 2005; Panizza, 2005). Populists define the people in opposition to the elites and the elites in opposition to the people. They worship the 'people' – who are believed to be homogeneous – and emphasize that any democracy is built on the idea of popular sovereignty (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969b; Mény & Surel, 2002b). The 'people', however, may mean different things to different people in different circumstances (Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2004). It can refer, for instance, to the electorate, to the nation, to the peasants, or to the working class (Canovan, 1981; Pasquino, 2008; Taggart, 2000).³⁸

³⁷ Alternatively, populism can be conceptualized as a discourse. The differences between a discourse and a thin-centered ideology are minimal because both concepts highlight that populism refers to a set of ideas (Hawkins, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2012). The 'ideational approach' should be distinguished from the 'stylistic approach', in which populism is conceived of as a political style or strategy (Bos et al., 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni, 2003) and the 'organizational approach', in which populism is seen as an organizational form (Taggart, 1995).

³⁸ Taggart (2000) therefore proposes to use the term 'heartland' instead of 'people'. The heartland refers to an idealized conception of the people and is thus a tool to

Populists accuse the elites of being alienated from the people and of being arrogant, incompetent and selfish (Barr, 2009; Canovan, 2002; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Weyland, 2001). The elites are believed to have no idea what ordinary people deem important and to only focus on their own interests. Anti-elitism can be directed at the cultural elite, including intellectuals, journalists and judges, or at the economic elite, including businessmen and bankers. Most often, however, anti-elitism is directed at the political elite, which is portrayed as corrupt and out of touch with reality. The elites are accused of ignoring the will of the 'man in the street' and of only implementing policies that benefit themselves (Mudde, 2004; Mény & Surel, 2002b).

Some scholars have argued that populists not only criticize elites, but they also target 'outsiders' (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; Taguieff, 1995). They are believed to exclude 'dangerous others' – individuals or groups who are not part of what populists consider to be 'the people', such as immigrants, or religious or ethnic minorities. However, several scholars have claimed that while exclusionism is a central feature of *radical right-wing* populism, it is not part of populism per se (Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2007; Taggart, 2000). Whether populists are exclusionary depends on the ideology that they adhere to, which can be either left- or right-wing (March, 2007). Thus, populism is inherently chameleonistic (Taggart, 2000). Following these authors, I do not consider exclusionism to be a constitutive component of populism. Including it in my definition would produce a bias towards radical right-wing populism, whereas I am explicitly interested in both left- and right-wing populism.

Is populism contagious?

Mudde (2004: 550) has argued that mainstream parties in Western Europe have increasingly resorted to using populist rhetoric: 'While populism has

describe the discourse or ideology of allegedly populist parties in more detail. In this chapter, however, I am not interested in specific conceptions of the people, but in the *degree* to which parties can be qualified as populist. Therefore I do not employ the term 'heartland'.

been less prominent in mainstream politics in Western Europe, the last decade or so has seen a significant change in this. Various mainstream opposition parties have challenged the government using familiar populist arguments'. To substantiate his point, Mudde (2004: 550) discussed a statement made by William Hague, leader of the Conservatives, during the British election campaign in 2001. In a speech Hague accused the leadership of New Labour of being part of 'the condescending liberal elite' in an attempt to construct an image of a left-wing metropolitan elite that was completely out of touch with ordinary Brits. Examining a speech that Tony Blair delivered to the British Labour Party Conference in 1999, Mair (2002: 92) has come to a similar conclusion. He noted that '[o]ne of the first things [this speech] reveals is the extent to which a populist language has now become acceptable within what has long been perceived as a decidedly non-populist political culture'. Other Western European political leaders of mainstream parties, such as Nicolas Sarkozy in France, Steve Stevaert in Flanders and Wouter Bos in the Netherlands (De Beus, 2009; Mudde, 2004), have also been qualified as populists. Mudde (2004: 563) has argued that:

'When 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. This dynamic will bring about a populist *Zeitgeist*, like the one we are facing today, which will dissipate as soon as the populist challenger seems to be over its top.'

Although Mudde primarily observed changes in the *rhetoric* of mainstream parties, it is plausible that the responses of mainstream parties to the rise of allegedly populist parties have been more substantive. Given that populism is often defined as a thin-centered ideology, it can be expected that mainstream parties have not only changed the way they *speak* about, for example, the people in their speeches, but that they have also changed the way they *think* about the people. I believe it is important to examine how pervasive the

populist Zeitgeist is and investigate whether mainstream parties' ideas, as laid down in their manifestos, have become more populist over time. I therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4.1: The programs of mainstream parties in Western Europe have become more populist since the late 1980s.

Why would mainstream parties have become more populist in recent years? Harmel and Janda (1994) have argued that parties are conservative organizations that only change when they are under pressure. The motto of most parties is 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' (Harmel & Svåsand, 1997: 316). The pressure that will drive parties to change might come from within (e.g., a leadership change), but in most cases it will result from external developments, such as electoral losses and the rise of new parties (Harmel & Janda, 1994: 267).

Several authors (Harmel et al., 1995; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Janda et al., 1995) have demonstrated that electoral losses are among the most important causes of party change. According to Schlesinger (1984: 390), political parties might best be described as 'forms of organized trial and error'. They respond to the political market: when they lose seats, they realize that they are doing something wrong and therefore change their strategy (see also Panebianco, 1988). I therefore expect that mainstream parties that lose seats will revise their political programs. In an era of increasing levels of political cynicism, distrust, and personalization of politics, they might believe that an appeal to the man in the street and a critical stance towards elites might be a remedy to electoral decline. In other words, mainstream parties that experience electoral setbacks might resort to populism. Thus, I hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 4.2: The greater the electoral losses of a mainstream party, the more populist the programs of this party become.

It is also possible that mainstream parties respond more specifically to the electoral threat of allegedly populist parties. Mudde (2007: 283) has argued that mainstream parties will become more populist when they have to compete with allegedly populist parties 'in an attempt to keep or regain their

electorate'. As long as allegedly populist parties are relatively unsuccessful, mainstream parties might not be inclined to adjust their programs. Instead, they might opt for a dismissive strategy and hope that by ignoring allegedly populist contenders, they will disappear (Downs, 2001; Meguid, 2005). However, when allegedly populist parties become successful, mainstream parties may respond by incorporating populism into their own programs (Mény & Surel, 2002b). If they think that populism is one of the drivers of allegedly populist parties' success, they may think that including anti-establishment rhetoric and references to the man in the street in their programs will help them win back these votes. So, when allegedly populist parties are on the rise, mainstream parties are likely to adopt an accommodative strategy (see Bale et al., 2010; Downs, 2001; Harmel & Svåsand, 1997; Meguid, 2005) and become more populist. Moreover, they will react more strongly when the allegedly populist party is seen as a credible threat than when it is seen as a mere nuisance (Otjes, 2010: 6). These observations lead me to formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4.3: The more successful the allegedly populist parties are, the more populist the programs of the mainstream parties become.

It might be expected that mainstream parties will only change their programs when they face competition from an ideologically proximate populist party. Right-wing parties may be most inclined to adapt their policy positions on immigration when confronted with a successful radical right-wing allegedly populist party (e.g., Harmel & Svåsand, 1997: 317). However, in a recent article, Van Spanje (2010: 578) demonstrated that 'rightist parties are not more likely to co-opt the policies of the anti-migration parties than leftist parties are'. Because populism itself is neither left nor right, I do not expect left-wing mainstream parties to differ from right-wing mainstream parties in their responses to the successes of left- and right-wing populists.³⁹

³⁹ I nevertheless empirically test whether mainstream left and mainstream right parties respond differently to left- and right-wing allegedly populist parties. This is not the case.

Design and method

To test my hypotheses, I need to select cases with sufficient variation on two variables: (1) the electoral losses of mainstream parties and (2) the electoral successes of allegedly populist parties. Moreover, because I explicitly aim to examine whether left- and right-wing populism is contagious, I have also sought to select countries in which both types of populism are present. I have therefore selected five Western European countries: Italy, the Netherlands and France (where allegedly populist parties have been rather successful), and Germany and the United Kingdom (where allegedly populist parties have been fairly unsuccessful).⁴⁰

In these five countries, I identified eleven allegedly populist parties⁴¹: the *Front National* (FN) (Rydgren, 2008; Surel, 2002) in France; *Die Linke* (Decker, 2008; March, 2007) in Germany; *Forza Italia* (FI) (Tarchi, 2008; Zaslove, 2008), the *Lega Nord* (LN) (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2010; Tarchi, 2008) and the *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) (Ruzza & Fella, 2011; Tarchi, 2002) in Italy; the *Centrum Democraten* (CD) (Van der Brug & Mughan, 2007; Mudde, 2007), the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF) (Van der Brug, 2003; Lucardie, 2008), the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) (Akkerman, 2011; Vossen, 2010) and the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) (March, 2007; Voerman, 2009) in the Netherlands; and the *British National Party* (BNP) (Fella, 2008; Mudde, 2007) and the *United Kingdom Independence Party* (UKIP) (Abedi & Lundberg, 2009; Fella, 2008) in the United Kingdom. The largest electoral successes of allegedly populist parties and the aggregated electoral losses of mainstream parties are listed in Table 4.1.⁴²

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ I have classified parties as being populist if at least two scholars of populism have identified them as such. I only included parties that have been represented in either the national or European parliament in the period under investigation (1988-2008).

⁴² I am aware of the fact that the selected countries differ from each other in terms of historical backgrounds, as well as party and political systems. I have therefore performed extensive robustness checks, during which I have controlled for country effects, among others, by jackknifing (see the results section).

Table 4.1*Case details*

Country	Allegedly populist party	Electoral success allegedly populist party*	Electoral loss mainstream parties**
France	Front National (FN)	17.8%	-0,02
Germany	Die Linke	8.7%	-0,13
Italy	Alleanza Nazionale (AN)	15.7%	+2%
	Forza Italia (FI)	29.4%	
	Lega Nord (LN)	10.1%	
Netherlands	Centrum Democraten (CD)	2.5%	-0,25
	Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF)	17.0%	
	Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	5.7%	
	Socialistische Partij (SP)	16.6%	
United Kingdom	British National Party (BNP)	0.7%	-0,01
	United Kingdom	2.2%	
	Independence Party (UKIP)		

* Highest percentage of votes gained by allegedly populist party in parliamentary or presidential elections, 1988-2008

** Total percentage of votes lost by mainstream parties, 1988-2008

I focus on the period between 1988 and 2008 because allegedly populist parties in Western Europe surged mainly during this time-span. In each country, I selected two elections in the 1980s or 1990s and two elections in the 2000s and analyzed the programs of mainstream (i.e., Christian-democratic, conservative, liberal, and social democratic parties) and non-mainstream parties.⁴³

⁴³ Parties have been classified using the coding scheme of the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006).

I have measured how populist the programs of parties are by means of a content analysis of election manifestos. Although an election manifesto is only one type of document in which a party's ideology can be observed, I decided to use election manifestos for two reasons. First, an election manifesto can be seen as an authoritative document that gives a clear overview of the ideas of a party at a certain point in time. In most cases, politicians are bound to the policy promises laid down in an election manifesto. 'As an official document, it will be difficult for party members to resile from policies in the party manifesto, while party leaders can be charged with failure to implement published manifesto pledges when given the chance to do so' (Laver & Garry, 2000: 620). Second, election manifestos are appropriate documents for comparative content analysis because they are reasonably comparable between countries and over time. In fact, 'The best-known time series data on party positions are derived from party election manifestos' (Klemmensen et al., 2007: 747).

The populist ideology consists of a set of claims about the relationship between the good people and the bad elite. Because these claims are usually presented in multiple sentences, the sentence is not an appropriate unit of measurement in this study (see Guthrie et al., 2004). 'Themes', also referred to as 'appeals' or 'statements', do represent clearly delineated arguments. It is, however, difficult to extract them from texts (Weber, 1990: 22), which makes it difficult to obtain reliable results when using the theme as unit of measurement. I have therefore decided to code paragraphs. It has been established that authors use paragraphs to mark thematic discontinuities in texts (Ji, 2008; Koen et al., 1969), and it can therefore be expected that breaks between paragraphs represent objectively traceable distinctions between arguments.

The manifestos have been analyzed by extensively trained coders who used a codebook to determine whether paragraphs were populist or not. More specifically, the coders were asked to determine whether paragraphs contained indications of people-centrism and anti-elitism. People-centrism was operationalized by the following question: 'Do the authors of the manifesto refer to the people?' Coders were instructed to look at every

reference to the people, no matter whether it concerned, for instance, 'citizens', 'our country', or 'the society'.⁴⁴ Anti-elitism was measured by means of the question: 'Do the authors of the manifesto criticize elites?' The critique had to target elites *in general*. Criticism directed towards individual parties (e.g., Labour in Britain) or individual politicians (e.g., Sarkozy in France) was not coded as anti-elitism.⁴⁵

To assess the inter-coder reliability of the results of the content analysis, the coders analyzed a sample of paragraphs from the British election manifestos. I used Krippendorff's alpha to calculate the reliability scores. The reliability scores are $\alpha = 0.72$ for people-centrism and $\alpha = 0.69$ for anti-elitism, which is satisfactory by the standards normally applied (Krippendorff, 2004: 241). To assess the inter-coder reliability of the country teams, coders analyzed a sample of paragraphs from manifestos from their own country.⁴⁶ The alphas range from 0.66 to 0.89, showing that the inter-coder reliability within the various country teams is also satisfactorily.⁴⁷

The dependent variable in this study is the extent to which party programs can be qualified as populist, which is measured on a scale that ranges from 0 to 100. To construct this scale, every paragraph in which anti-establishment critique is combined with a reference to the people has been

⁴⁴ The coders were provided with a comprehensive list of words that could be indicative of people-centrism, which included words such as all of us, citizen(s), community, country, direct democracy, each of us, electorate, everyone, nation(al), our, people, population, public, public opinion, referenda, society, voter(s) and we. The coders were instructed to take the context in which these words were used into consideration to determine whether the parties were indeed referring to the people.

⁴⁵ Anti-elitism is present if the parties criticize, for instance, our politicians, the old parties, the political establishment, European technocrats, Brussels (as being the symbol for European politics), the rich, the business elite, multinationals, intellectuals, the media, judges.

⁴⁶ The sample consisted of roughly five per cent of the total number of paragraphs that had to be coded by the country teams.

⁴⁷ The results for people-centrism are: $\alpha = 0.75$ (FR), $\alpha = 0.74$ (GE), $\alpha = 0.89$ (IT), $\alpha = 0.78$ (NL) and $\alpha = 0.73$ (UK). The results for anti-elitism are: $\alpha = 0.69$ (FR), $\alpha = 0.79$ (GE), $\alpha = 0.84$ (IT), $\alpha = 0.84$ (NL) and $\alpha = 0.66$ (UK).

classified as a populist paragraph. After all, it is the *combination* of people-centrism and anti-elitism that defines populism. Only if a critique of the (Evil) elite coincides with an emphasis on the (Good) people, can we speak of populism.⁴⁸ So, populist rhetoric is defined as the *combination* of a focus on the people and anti-elitism. For every manifesto, I have computed the percentage of populist paragraphs. I have taken into account that the introduction of an election manifesto usually contains the core message of a party. The remainder of the text is often a detailed and technical elaboration of the arguments that are made in the introduction. I have therefore counted the introductory paragraphs twice (see Van der Pas et al., 2012; Vliegenthart, 2007).⁴⁹ Moreover, because I expect that detailed manifestos to contain less populism than concise texts, I have assigned the paragraphs in long manifestos more weight than paragraphs in the short manifestos.⁵⁰

The face validity of this measurement of populism is quite good: the manifestos of the mainstream parties listed in Table 4.2 contain only a few populist paragraphs (the party means range from 0.00 to 2.34). The *Liberal Democrats* (UK) have the highest mean populism score of the mainstream

⁴⁸ The decision to only count paragraphs as populist when both people-centrism and anti-elitism are present does not affect the results of my analyses. The vast majority of references to anti-elitism are made in paragraphs in which people-centrism is present as well and there is a correlation of $r = 0.86$ between anti-elitism and populism. Moreover, if I performed the same analyses with anti-elitism as the dependent variable, the results did not change substantively.

⁴⁹ I have also performed the analyses with weights of 1 and 3, which did not change the results.

⁵⁰ First, I computed the mean length of the manifestos (number of paragraphs) per country. Second, I computed the Z-scores for every manifesto per country. If the Z-score of a manifesto was between 1 and 2, I gave the paragraphs from this manifesto a weight of 1.5. If the Z-score was 2 or larger, I gave the paragraphs a weight of 2. If the Z-score ranged between -1 and -2, I weighted the paragraphs with a factor 0.67, and if the Z-score was -2 or lower, I gave them a weight of 0.5. When I run the analyses without weighting the paragraphs, the results do not change substantively. Finally, I have multiplied the weight for the introduction with the weight for the length of the manifesto.

parties (2.34 per cent), while a number of mainstream parties have no populist paragraphs in their manifestos at all. The populist manifestos contain much more populism (the party means range from 1.61 to 23.08) (see Table 4.3). Among the allegedly populist parties, the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) has the highest mean score, and the *Partido della Liberta* (PdL) has the lowest mean score.⁵¹

Table 4.2

Populism in the programs of mainstream parties

Country	Party	Election 1	Election 2	Election 3	Election 4	Average
France	PS	0.00	1.53	0.00	0.00	0.38
	RPR	0.50	0.00	0.62	-	0.37
	UDF	0.00	-	0.80	-	0.40
	UMP	-	-	0.00	0.00	0.00
Germany	CDU/CSU	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	SPD	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	FDP	0.00	0.50	0.00	0.00	0.13
Italy	DC/PP	0.13	1.67	-	-	0.90
	PD/Ulivo	-	-	0.34	0.00	0.17
Netherlands	CDA	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	D66	-	0.65	0.00	2.64	1.10
	PvdA	0.00	1.03	0.85	0.61	0.62
	VVD	1.75	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.44
UK	Cons	0.24	0.31	3.10	1.43	1.27
	Labour	0.00	0.53	0.58	0.90	0.50
	LibDems	1.13	5.45	1.00	1.76	2.34
Average		0.29	0.90	0.49	0.56	

The election years are: 1993, 1997, 2002 and 2007 in France; 1990, 1994, 2002 and 2005 in Germany; 1992, 1994, 2001 and 2008 in Italy; 1989, 1994, 2002 and 2006 in the Netherlands; and 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005 in the United Kingdom.

⁵¹ See for more information on the validity of this measurement the previous chapter.

Table 4.3*Populism in the programs of non-mainstream parties*

Country	Party	Election 1	Election 2	Election 3	Election 4	Average
France	FN*	-	15.79	2.59	4.08	7.49
	PCF	2.89	3.33	6.45	-	4.22
Germany	Die Linke/PDS*	2.67	0.69	1.14	2.82	1.83
Italy	AN/MSI*	17.44	7.29	-	-	12.37
	CdL/FI/PdL*	-	3.80	1.39	1.82	1.61
	LN*	2.10	2.47	-	-	2.29
	DS	10.07	3.76	-	-	6.92
Netherlands	CD*	-	12.50	-	-	12.50
	LPF*	-	-	10.53	-	10.53
	PVV*	-	-	-	23.08	23.08
	SP*	-	16.41	5.04	1.43	7.63
UK	BNP*	19.51	-	-	10.64	15.08
	UKIP*	-	8.54	-	8.02	8.28
Average		8.44	7.08	4.83	7.41	

* Allegedly populist party.

The election years are: 1993, 1997, 2002 and 2007 in France; 1990, 1994, 2002 and 2005 in Germany; 1992, 1994, 2001 and 2008 in Italy; 1989, 1994, 2002 and 2006 in the Netherlands; and 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005 in the United Kingdom.

To test the hypotheses, I measured various independent variables. Based on a typology that distinguishes between mainstream parties, non-populist non-mainstream parties and populist non-mainstream parties, I constructed two dummy variables. The first one measures whether a party is mainstream or not, and the second measures whether a party is non-populist-non-mainstream or not. In the analysis, the allegedly populist parties are thus the reference category. To determine whether there is a populist *Zeitgeist*, I included a time variable that ranges from 1 to 20, in which 1 represents 1989 and 20 represents 2008. The success of the allegedly populist parties is

measured by the percentage of votes that the allegedly populist parties in a country received in the previous national election. The extent to which parties have experienced electoral loss is measured by the percentage of seats that they lost during the previous national election.⁵²

The unit of analysis in the analyses is the election manifesto. There are 83 election manifestos nested in 31 parties, which are themselves nested in 5 countries. Given this low N , I was not able to estimate a multilevel model. I have therefore used clustered standard errors for an accurate estimation of the regression coefficients: the 83 manifestos are clustered in 31 political parties.⁵³

Results

Table 4.2 shows that mainstream parties in the United Kingdom score much higher on the populism scale than the mainstream parties in France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. Differences in the extent to which mainstream parties can be qualified as populist might be explained to some extent by the type of party system. In the British two-party system, the competition between the Conservatives and Labour is likely to be framed in terms of opposition versus government and therefore of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ or ‘the ruling party’. In a multi-party system, mainstream parties have the possibility to criticize some specific parties, without criticizing the establishment as such. Moreover, they have incentives to tone down their criticism because they have to form coalition governments. It might well be that the British exception is not the result of populist contagion, but of a divergent model of political competition.

If I compare the 1990s with the 2000s, mainstream parties do not seem to have become more populist (see Table 4.4). The average level of populism in the manifestos of mainstream parties was 0.59 in the 1990s and 0.52 in the

⁵² Election results were obtained from Döring and Manow (2010), elezionistorico.interno.it, and www.parliament.uk.

⁵³ To prevent multicollinearity problems, all continuous independent variables were centered around their means before constructing interaction terms.

2000s. Instead of an increase in populism, we thus witness a small decrease. If we look at the countries individually, we see a strong decline in France (from 0.41 to 0.24) and Italy (from 0.90 to 0.17), and a more moderate decline in Germany (from 0.08 to 0.00). In the Netherlands we see a rather negligible increase from 0.49 to 0.51. Only the United Kingdom has experienced a substantial increase of the extent to which mainstream parties use populism in their manifestos (from 1.28 to 1.46). On the basis of these descriptive accounts, one is inclined to conclude that there is no populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe.

Table 4.4

Populism scores of mainstream parties, 1988-2008

	1990s	2000s	Average
France	0.41	0.24	0.31
Germany	0.08	0.00	0.04
Italy	0.90	0.17	0.54
Netherlands	0.49	0.51	0.50
United Kingdom	1.28	1.46	1.37
Average	0.59	0.52	

A more formal test of the *Zeitgeist* hypothesis is presented in Table 4.5.⁵⁴ Model 1 estimates which parties are more populist than others. The results demonstrate that mainstream parties are significantly less populist than allegedly populist parties ($b = -7.02$, $p < 0.01$). Yet there is no evidence that non-populist non-mainstream parties are less populist than allegedly populist parties. Although the regression coefficient is negative (-2.27), it is not

⁵⁴ Because of the low N , I decided not to include control variables, such as the left-right position of a party, its size, and whether it is in government or not. I have estimated the effects of these variables in a separate analysis. None of these variables exert a significant effect on populism. I have therefore not included these variables in the analyses presented in this chapter.

significant. It can thus be concluded that mainstream parties differ from allegedly populist parties and non-populist non-mainstream parties in regard to the extent to which their manifestos can be qualified as populist.⁵⁵

In model 2, I estimate the effect of time to examine whether the three types of parties mentioned above have become more populist over time. The time variable has no significant effect on the extent to which parties use populism. Adding time to the model does not change the effects found in the first model. Moreover, the interactions between 'mainstream' and 'time' and 'non-populist non mainstream' and 'time' are not significant (see model 3). I can therefore reject my first hypothesis. The programs of mainstream parties in Western Europe have not become more populist since the late 1980s, nor have those of non-populist non-mainstream and allegedly populist parties. So, these formal tests confirm my initial observation that there is no evidence for a populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe.

So far, the analyses focused on *general* patterns in the extent to which parties use populism. I now turn to more *specific* patterns, in particular how parties react to electoral success or defeat. I hypothesized that mainstream parties will be more likely to resort to populism when they are confronted with either electoral defeat or with successful allegedly populist parties. These hypotheses are tested in models 4, 5, 6 and 7 shown in Table 4.5. We can conclude that electoral losses during previous elections do not influence the extent to which parties include populist paragraphs in their manifestos. Moreover, the effect of electoral loss does not vary between mainstream parties, non-populist non-mainstream parties, and allegedly populist parties because none of the interactions is significant. I therefore have to reject my second hypothesis. Mainstream parties that lose seats do not become more populist.

⁵⁵ On the basis of the results presented in Table 4.5, it cannot be concluded that mainstream parties differ from non-populist non-mainstream parties. I have, however, also estimated the regression coefficients using non-populist non-mainstream parties as the reference category. The results of this analysis demonstrate that mainstream parties also differ from non-populist non-mainstream parties.

Table 4.5
The effects on the degree of populism of election manifestos

	Model 1		Time Model 2		Model 3		Electoral loss Model 4		Model 5		Success of allegedly populist parties Model 6		Model 7	
	b	(CRSE)	b	(CRSE)	b	(CRSE)	b	(CRSE)	b	(CRSE)	b	(CRSE)	b	(CRSE)
Mainstream	-7.02**	(1.61)	-7.04**	(1.62)	-7.10**	(1.69)	-7.02**	(1.60)	-7.08**	(1.60)	-7.26**	(1.64)	-7.28**	(1.71)
NPNM	-2.27	(1.85)	-2.45	(1.87)	-2.53	(1.69)	-2.27	(1.87)	-2.09	(2.02)	-2.15	(1.74)	-1.51	(1.82)
Time			-0.05	(0.08)	-0.19	(0.27)								
Electoral loss							0.00	(0.00)	0.01	(0.02)				
Success allegedly populists											-0.09	(0.05)	-0.18*	(0.07)
Mainstream * Time					0.19	(0.27)								
NPNM * Time					0.13	(0.41)								
Mainstream * Loss									-0.01	(0.02)				
NPNM * Loss									0.02	(0.02)				
Mainstream * Success													0.17*	(0.08)
NPNM * Success													-0.19	(0.15)
N	83		83		83		83		83		83		83	
Adjusted R ²	0.42		0.41		0.41		0.41		0.40		0.44		0.46	

CRSE = clustered robust standard errors. *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$

Model 6 shows that parties in general do not respond to the electoral success of allegedly populist parties by adopting a more populist program. Yet the interaction effect between 'mainstream' and 'success' in model 7 is significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, suggesting that the success of allegedly populist parties affects mainstream parties in a different way than it affects non-populist non-mainstream and allegedly populist parties. More specifically, the regression coefficient of 'success' in model 7 is -0.18 ($p < 0.05$), while the coefficient for the interaction between 'mainstream' and 'success' is 0.17 ($p < 0.05$). This means that the regression coefficient for mainstream parties is $-0.18 + 0.17 = -0.01$, indicating that mainstream parties do not change their manifestos when challenged by successful allegedly populist parties. I can thus reject my third hypothesis. Mainstream parties do not become more populist when they are confronted with successful populist challengers.⁵⁶

The main effect of the previous success of allegedly populist parties is significant and negative, which means that allegedly populist parties become less populist when they have been successful in previous elections. Hence, the model shows that allegedly populist parties moderate their populism after populism has been electorally successful. Given that the interaction effect between 'non-populist non-mainstream' and 'success' is not significant, it can be concluded that non-populist non-mainstream parties also become less populist in response to the success of allegedly populist parties. We should, however, be careful of reading too much into this finding because the number of non-populist non-mainstream manifestos in the analysis is very low ($N = 5$).⁵⁷

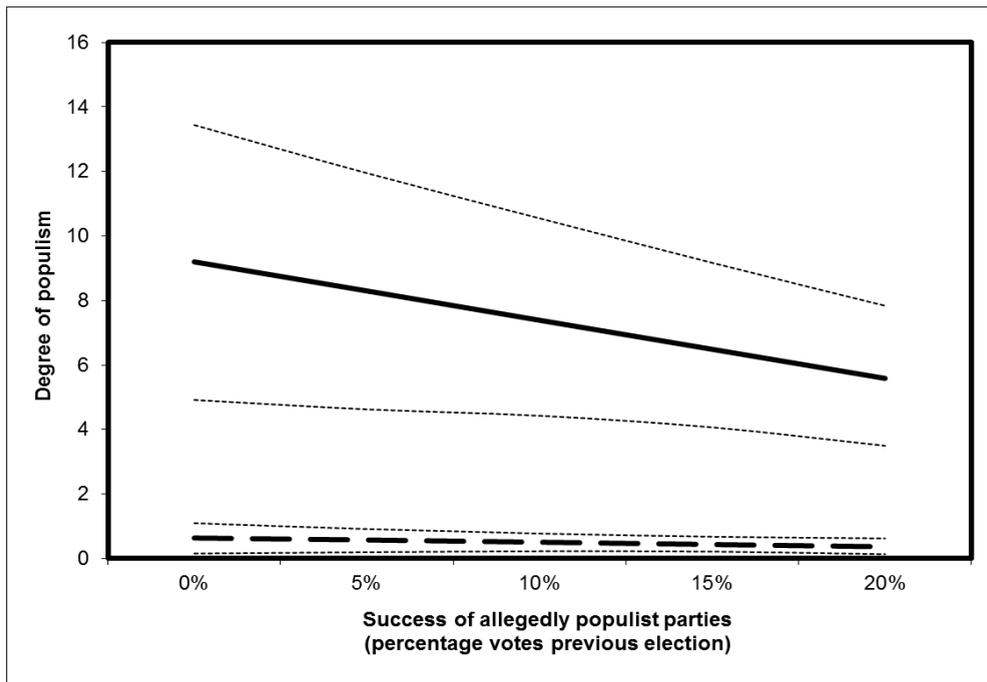
⁵⁶ I also tested whether left-wing mainstream parties react primarily to the success of left-wing populists and whether right-wing mainstream parties respond to the success of right-wing populists. The analyses demonstrate that this is not the case, left- and right-wing mainstream parties do not react differently to left- and right-wing allegedly populist parties.

⁵⁷ I have executed different robustness checks, which substantiate these findings. First, I estimated the models for 83 subsets of my sample (jackknifing). Second, I controlled for country effects in two ways: (1) by clustering the standard errors on the country level instead of the party level; and (2) by including country dummies. The direction and significance of the results remain the same, and I therefore conclude that my findings are robust.

The magnitudes of the estimated effects for mainstream and allegedly populist parties are visualized in Figure 4.1. The dotted line in the figure highlights that the extent to which mainstream parties' manifestos include populist paragraphs is not influenced by the electoral success of allegedly populist parties. Whether an allegedly populist party receives 0 or 20 per cent of the votes does not matter; mainstream parties manifestos always include less than 1 per cent populist paragraphs. The solid line in the figure shows that allegedly populist parties do become less populist when they have been successful in previous elections. If allegedly populist parties have had hardly any success in previous elections, an allegedly populist party will campaign on a manifesto that is highly populist, while if allegedly populist parties have received more than 15 or 20 per cent of the vote in previous elections, an allegedly populist party will reduce its populism.

Figure 4.1

The effect of the success of allegedly populist parties on the degree of populism



Solid line : effect for allegedly populist parties (with 95% confidence interval)
 Dotted line : effect for mainstream parties (with 95% confidence interval)

Conclusion

Several scholars have argued that the rhetoric of Western European mainstream parties has become more populist over the years (De Beus, 2009; Mair, 2002; Mudde, 2004), and the idea that we live in a populist *Zeitgeist* has therefore become popular. Yet, the claim has not been tested systematically. This chapter investigated whether evidence for the existence of a populist *Zeitgeist* can be found in party programs. More specifically, I examined whether populism is contagious, that is, whether mainstream parties make more populist statements in their programs in response to the success of allegedly populist parties. The results indicate that the manifestos of mainstream parties in Western Europe have not become more populist in the last two decades and hence that populism is not particularly contagious.

I realize that a study of party programs has its limitations. One could argue that populist statements are not always included in party programs because the appeal of these programs is not particularly large and voters are often not aware of their contents. Additionally, even though no indications for a populist *Zeitgeist* were found in party programs, there might still be an increase in populist statements in the media or in political speeches. While I admit that party programs only tell a partial story, I want to stress that many party manifestos do contain populist statements. First of all, there is much more populism in the programs of parties that are generally seen as 'populist', and secondly, there is substantial variation in the *degree* to which mainstream parties use populist statements in their programs. Another possible criticism of the use of manifestos is that mainstream parties change their manifestos less easily than allegedly populist parties do because they have longer histories, and therefore more groups and factions to address when they write their programs. While this may be true, mainstream parties have responded to the success of radical right-wing allegedly populist parties by adapting their position on immigration, also in their manifestos (Van der Brug et al., 2009). Therefore, the fact that their party programs have not become more populist is a significant finding.

It turned out to be quite difficult to explain the variation in populism contained in party programs. Mainstream parties do not become more populist when they are confronted by electoral losses, nor do they include more populist statements in their programs when they are challenged by allegedly populist parties. In other words, mainstream parties are no copycats that – pressured by their own electoral failure or the success of allegedly populist parties – adopt an accommodative strategy and cut and paste from the manifestos of their rivals. Although there is a large amount of evidence that mainstream parties have adjusted their positions on immigration and integration issues as a consequence of the emergence of *radical right wing* allegedly populist parties, my findings show that mainstream parties have not responded in a similar fashion regarding their populism. Yet the question of why some mainstream parties are more populist than others remains unanswered. Future research could focus more on contextual factors, such as the party system and the political system, and on agency and leadership (Van Kessel, 2011).

Interestingly, allegedly populist parties themselves are not immune to their own electoral success. Contrary to mainstream parties, they *do* adjust their political programs once they have experienced electoral growth. If allegedly populist parties have gained seats during previous elections, an allegedly populist party tones down its populism, most likely in an attempt to become an acceptable coalition partner to mainstream parties. One of the allegedly populist parties that most clearly illustrates this finding is the Dutch SP. The populism score of this party plummets from 16.4 in 1994 to 1.4 in 2006, making it difficult to still label the party populist. De Lange and Rooduijn (2011) argue that the moderation of the manifestos of the SP is due to the desire of the party to assume office. Their argument supports Heinisch's (2003) claim that allegedly populist parties will face numerous challenges in office and are therefore likely to tone down their populism before making the transition from opposition to government.

That some allegedly populist parties become less populist and some mainstream parties become more populist indicates that it might be a good idea to discard the dichotomous approach according to which we classify

parties as *either* populist *or* not populist. As I have shown, parties can be classified as *more* or *less* populist.

The fact that allegedly populist parties moderate their populism after their electoral success suggests that populism need not be a deeply rooted worldview. As a *thin-centered* ideology (instead of a *full* ideology), it can also be used more strategically to gain votes. This is done by parties that believe that appealing to the 'man in the street' and bashing elites might help them to achieve electoral breakthrough. This does not mean that populism should be conceived of as (merely) a style. After all, it is not just their *rhetoric* that populists adjust; they change their *programs* just as well.