Chapter 5

THE MESMERIZING MESSAGE

Populism in Public Debates in Western European Media

This chapter is a minor revision of a paper that has been accepted for publication in Political Studies.
A full understanding of the populist phenomenon cannot be achieved without studying mass communication perspectives and media-related dynamics, especially not without using a comparative approach.


Introduction

In the previous chapter, I focused on the impact of the electoral success of allegedly populist parties on mainstream parties. However, to fully assess how pervasive the populist message is, we should not only look at party politics; the populist message might resonate in other spheres as well. The present chapter therefore focuses on the question of whether the upsurge of allegedly populist parties has impacted on public debates in the mass media. This is an important question because if it is true that the electoral success of allegedly populist parties is accompanied by a diffusion of the populist message outside the realm of political parties, we can conclude that populism is more widespread than one would otherwise assume.

Another aim of this chapter is to assess whether the degree of populism in public debates can be explained by particular media-related characteristics. First, the literature suggests that it might be the case that the debates in tabloid newspapers are more populist than the debates in elite newspapers (see Akkerman, 2011; Mazzoleni, 2003; Mudde, 2007). Second, it could be expected that the type of contribution to the debates makes a difference: letters to the editor might be more populist than other contributions to the debates (see Kerr & Moy, 2002; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, 2004).

The degree of populism in public debates is measured by means of a content analysis of opinion articles in fifteen newspapers in five Western European countries: France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. These countries were selected because, for the purpose of this study, it was essential to include countries with varying degrees of success of allegedly populist parties. The focus is on opinion articles because they
constitute one of the most central spaces where public debates are carried out (Day & Golan, 2005: 62).

The chapter proceeds as follows. After the presentation of a definition of populism, I focus on the guiding hypotheses of this chapter. In the following section, I focus on my research design, the operationalization strategy and the method of analysis. Extensive attention is paid to the content analysis with which I have measured how populist opinion articles are. After the presentation of the most important descriptive and inferential results, I discuss the implications of my findings and paths for future research.

Defining populism

Scholars increasingly agree on a conceptualization of populism as a set of ideas concerning the antagonistic relationship between two constructs: the (Good) people and the (Evil) elites (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Hawkins, 2009, 2010; Mudde, 2004, 2007; Pauwels, 2011; Stanley, 2008). Here, I employ the definition of Mudde (2004: 543), who argues that populism is ‘[a thin-centered] 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’.  

The central elements of this populist ideology are ‘people-centrism’ and ‘anti-elitism’. These elements cannot be understood separately from each other because populism concerns the specific relationship between the two (Laclau, 2005; Panizza, 2005). People-centrism means that populists centralize the people and emphasize the idea of popular sovereignty (Ionescu 58 Some call it a ‘thin-centered’ ideology, others a discourse or a worldview (see Hawkins, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2012; Mudde, 2004).  

59 As a thin-centered ideology, populism differs from full ideologies such as liberalism, socialism and conservatism. Full ideologies offer an all-inclusive view of the world, whereas thin-centered ideologies focus on a confined range of concepts (e.g., feminism, ecologism and nationalism). Populism is a thin-centered ideology because it focuses on the relationship between the people and the elites.
& Gellner, 1969b; Mény & Surel, 2002b). They see the people as a homogeneous entity, devoid of divisions, and they argue that the will of the people should be the point of departure of all politics (Taggart, 2000). The ‘people’ can mean many different things to many different people in many different circumstances: it could refer, for instance, to the nation, to the electorate, to peasants and to the proletariat (Canovan, 1981; Taggart, 2000). The elite is criticized because it is said to hamper the centrality of the people. It is accused of having no idea of what people find important and of being incompetent, arrogant and selfish (Barr, 2009; Canovan, 2002; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Weyland, 2001). The critique could be directed towards the political elite (parties, politicians), the economic elite (bankers, companies) and/or the cultural elite (writers, academics).

Some scholars have argued that populists also criticize ‘dangerous others’: groups – other than elites – that are not considered part of what populists see as ‘their’ people (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; Taguieff, 1995). Other scholars, however, have argued that exclusionism is a characteristic of the populist radical right only, and not of populism as such (Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2007; Taggart, 2000). They argue that populism can be combined with many different ideologies and that it only becomes exclusionistic once it is combined with a radical right ideology. Here, I concur with this second group of scholars because I am not only interested in populism on the right side of the ideological spectrum but also in left-wing populism.

Populism as a thin-centered ideology is a set of ideas (Hawkins, 2010). As such, it is a characteristic of a specific message rather than a characteristic of an actor sending that message. A consequence of this conceptualization is that populism can also be studied outside the political realm. The focus of this chapter is on populism in spaces where many messages of many different actors come together: public debates in mass media.
Populism in public debates in the media

Western European allegedly populist parties have had much electoral success in the last two decades (e.g., the Front National in France, the Lega Nord in Italy, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in Austria, the Dansk Folkeparti in Denmark, and the Lijst Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands). However, as a result, has the actual populist message also become more widespread? The evidence so far is inconclusive. Mudde (2004) and Mair (2002) have focused on the diffusion of populism in the realm of party politics and have argued that mainstream parties have incorporated (elements of) populism in their own rhetoric. Yet if we are interested in the diffusion of populism, an exclusive focus on party politics would provide a limited account of the pervasiveness of populism. The populist message might (also) have become more pervasive beyond the party political sphere. It could, for instance, have become more widespread in public debates in the media. If this would turn out to be the case, we should conclude that populism is more prevalent in Western European societies than previously assumed.

The term ‘public debate’ has been employed by different scholars (see Koopmans & Muis, 2009; Nikolaev & Porpora, 2007) and is defined here as the open debate about all ideas and feelings relevant to politics (Bennett & Entman, 2001: 3). The participants are practically anyone who is interested in what happens in the public sphere. One of the most central spaces where the debate is carried out is in the mass media (Roggeband & Vliegenthart, 2007: 525).

Have Western European public debates become more populist in the last two decades? This might well be the case for two reasons. A first reason why we might expect that public debates have become more populist over the years is increased media commercialization. Plasser and Ulram (2003: 21) have argued that the dispersion of the populist message is related to the increased commercial orientation of the mass media. Media are ever more pressured by advertisers to reach large audiences and therefore, they increasingly focus on what they think ordinary citizens deem important. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004: 277-278), the media have therefore
shifted their focus from representatives of political parties and the state to ‘ordinary’ citizens and their ‘common sense’. Because of this increased focus on ordinary citizens, the mass media are said to have changed their style in the sense that they put more emphasis on ‘simple and concrete language, light, bright, and vivid writing, shorter stories, and extensive use of photographs and graphics’ (Norris, 2000: 71). It has also been argued that this changed focus has not only affected the style of media coverage but also the substance (see also Norris, 2000: 71). In their competition for audiences, the media can be expected to increasingly focus on messages that they think will coincide with the ideas of their public. For example, the media are said to pay more attention to political scandals because they believe that the message that corrupt politicians have betrayed the ‘ordinary’ hardworking people sells well (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 278-279; Papathanassopoulos, 2000: 57).

Second, the diffusion of the populist message in the public debates might also be triggered by the electoral success of allegedly populist parties. To understand this, we have to make a distinction between two categories of actors: the ‘speakers’ of messages (the participants in the public debates) and the ‘gatekeepers’ (those who decide which messages are published or broadcasted) (Koopmans, 2004: 372). When the message of allegedly populist parties leads to supportive reactions by other speakers in the debates, we can speak of ‘positive resonance’ (Koopmans, 2004: 374). This can be expected to happen when the popularity of allegedly populist parties increases. After all, the more electorally successful political parties become, the more they are supported by citizens, and the more market-oriented gatekeepers will be inclined to provide space for their people-centrist and anti-elitist ideas. I thus expect that:

**Hypothesis 5.1**: Public debates in the media have become more populist in the last two decades.

However, the relationship between the electoral success of allegedly populist parties and the degree of populism in the public debates is much more complicated than this. Although there is a net growth of the electoral success
of allegedly populist parties, in many countries this growth has been rather capricious from election to election. Therefore, to better understand the relationship between the electoral success of allegedly populists and the degree of populism in the debates, we would have to look at individual elections and answer the question of whether electoral success indeed coincides with increasingly populist public debates in the media. I therefore hypothesize that:

\textit{Hypothesis 5.2:} The electoral success of allegedly populist parties positively affects the degree of populism in public debates in the media.

It is important to note that there might also be a reciprocal effect of the degree of populism in the public debates on the success of populists. Scholars have demonstrated that public debates in the media affect the electoral success of right-wing allegedly populist parties. Art (2006), for example, has shown that the differences in the national public debates in Germany and Austria have affected the successes of radical right-wing allegedly populist parties in these countries. Other scholars have shown that if an issue that is ‘owned’ by an allegedly populist party becomes salient in the media, people are influenced to support this party and to eventually vote for it (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Walgrave & De Swert, 2004).\textsuperscript{60} It might therefore be expected that once populism becomes more salient in the debates, citizens are inclined to support those parties that ‘own’ these populist themes. In the concluding section of this chapter, I focus on the question of what this endogeneity problem means for the possibility of drawing causal inferences from my findings.

I expect that the degree of populism of the public debates is determined by two media-related characteristics. The first one is the type of medium. Not all media are supposed to be equally populist. A distinction can be made between ‘elite media’ and ‘tabloid media’ (Mazzoleni, 2003: 8). Tabloid media are often identified with populist politics (see Franklin, 1997; Mudde, 2007; Walgrave and De Swert (2004) call this the ‘media-make-the-issue’ hypothesis, in which they combine agenda-setting theory with issue ownership.

\textsuperscript{60}
Sparks & Tulloch, 2000), which leads to the premise that the coverage in these tabloid media is more populist than in elite media (Akkerman, 2011: 3). This premise is based on the observation that elite media and tabloid media differ from each other in at least two respects: (1) with regard to their relationship with the established, mainstream political parties; and (2) with regard to their market-orientation.

Elite media (such as the broadsheet press) tend to be closely aligned with the established political order. Tabloid media (such as the tabloid press), on the other hand, tend to have less intimate connections with the political mainstream (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 279). Because of this absence of strong ties with mainstream parties, it can be expected that tabloid media are more inclined to criticize the political establishment. This is not to say that elite media do not criticize mainstream parties at all. Yet elite media will be less prone to attack them as being part of an ‘established elite’. Moreover, to demonstrate their distance from the political establishment, tabloid media are said to emphasize their closeness to ‘ordinary citizens’ more strongly than elite media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 279). The public debates in tabloid media can therefore be expected to be both more anti-elitist and more people-centrist.

Elite media and tabloid media also differ from each other in another respect. Tabloid media are more market-oriented than elite media, and therefore, they focus more strongly on mass audiences (Mazzoleni, 2003: 8). As a result, they will be much more focused on what they believe that ‘ordinary citizens’ deem important (see also Art, 2007). Because a critical attitude vis-à-vis the established order combined with an emphasis on ‘ordinary citizens’ is expected to sell well (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 279), I expect that this difference in market-orientation is another reason why the public debates in the tabloid media will tend to be more anti-elitist and people-centrist – and thus more populist – than in the elite media.

Hypothesis 5.3: The public debates in tabloid media are more populist than in elite media.
The degree of populism of the public debates might also be determined by another factor. Public debates in the media are shaped by many different speakers from many different backgrounds that might well differ from each other with regard to their inclination to be populist. I focus on opinion papers in newspapers, and I distinguish two types of contributions to the debates: letters to the editor on the one hand, and other opinion articles, such as editorials, op-ed pieces and columns on the other hand. This latter type of opinion article is commonly written by ‘opinion leaders’ such as editors, journalists, writers, politicians, academics and other professionals. They are generally highly educated, have learned to write nuanced texts and will therefore not be prone to express a populist message. Letters, on the other hand, explicitly function as a stage where, next to opinion leaders, also ‘ordinary citizens’ participate (see Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004: 90). Citizens who send letters to the editor come from diverse backgrounds. On average, they are less well educated than opinion leaders, and they commonly feel strongly about the issues they write about (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001). This means that letters to the editor often represent views that are more radical and provocative than those of the average citizen, and in particular, than those of opinion leaders (Kerr & Moy, 2002). Moreover, editors in their turn, tend to prefer letters that are radical and provocative because they are expected to stimulate the public debate (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). As populism is a quite radical perspective on the relationship between the good people and the evil elite, which is commonly expressed with rather provocative language (Taggart, 2000: 113), I expect that populism prevails more strongly in letters than in other opinion articles.

Hypothesis 5.4: Letters are more populist than other opinion articles.
Research design and method

Case selection

The geographical focus of this chapter is 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). Five countries from this region have been selected: France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. These countries have been selected because they differ from each other with respect to the electoral success of allegedly populist parties. In terms of their vote share, allegedly populist parties in France, Italy and the Netherlands have been rather successful, whereas allegedly populist parties in Germany and the United Kingdom have been fairly unsuccessful. See Table 5.1 for an overview. I focus on the last two decades (1988-2008) because the allegedly populist parties that have been selected for this study surged in the 1990s and early 2000s. This implies that I can study the public debates before, during and after the populist upsurge.

To gauge the public debates in the media, I focus on opinion articles in newspapers. Although the opinion section in newspapers is not the only media site where public debates take shape – there are, for instance, also magazines, television programs and discussion forums on the internet (Norris, 2000) – it is one of the most central ones. Its function ‘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, contrary to most other venues, it is both an institutionalized forum, and a place where actors from many different backgrounds (both opinion leaders and ‘ordinary’ citizens) participate (Nikolaev & Porpora, 2007: 8).

---

61 A party has been classified as an allegedly populist party only when at least two scholars of populism have identified it as such. In Chapter 3, I showed empirically that the election manifestos of these selected parties are strongly populist.

62 Allegedly populist parties are assumed to be successful in a certain country when the most successful allegedly populist party received 15 per cent of the votes or more at least once.
**Table 5.1**  
*Successes of populist parties and losses of mainstream parties*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Allegedly populist party*</th>
<th>Electoral success</th>
<th>Identified as allegedly populist party by…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Front National (FN)</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>Rydgren, 2008; Surel, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Die Linke</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>March, 2007; Decker, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Alleanza Nazionale (AN)</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>Ruzza &amp; Fella, 2011; Tarchi, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forza Italia (FI)</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>Albertazzi &amp; McDonnell, 2010; Tarchi, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lega Nord (LN)</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>Tarchi, 2008; Zaslove, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Centrum Democraten (CD)</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>Mudde, 2007; Van der Brug &amp; Mughan, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF)</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>Lucardie, 2008; Van der Brug, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>Akkerman, 2011; Vossen, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socialistische Partij (SP)</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>March, 2007; Voerman, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>British National Party (BNP)</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>Fella, 2008; Mudde, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>Abedi &amp; Lundberg, 2009; Fella, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independence Party (UKIP)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Only those parties have been selected which have been represented in either the national or the European parliament  
** Highest percentage of votes gained by allegedly populist party in parliamentary or presidential elections, 1988-2008
Table 5.2
Selected newspapers and election periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Right-wing elite</th>
<th>Left-wing elite</th>
<th>Tabloid</th>
<th>Election periods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
To be able to assess the difference between the debates in the elite media and the tabloid media, I collected three newspapers in every country. Because media pay more attention to politics during election campaigns (Koopmans, 2004: 372), I have focused on opinion articles in the four weeks before a general election. For every country, I selected four election periods between 1988 and 2008. For a complete overview of the selected newspapers and election periods, see Table 5.2. A systematic sample of days has been drawn from every election period, and for every sampled day, the opinion articles from the selected newspapers have been collected. I selected only those opinion articles that concern domestic and EU politics.

The goal was to collect two elite newspapers (one left-wing and one right-wing), and one tabloid newspaper. However, it was not possible to find a national tabloid newspaper to analyze in Italy. This might be the case because in Italy the development of commercial media came relatively late and because the press is strongly elite-oriented with a strong focus on political life. See Hallin & Mancini (2004: 730). I have therefore collected a third elite newspaper: La Stampa. In the French case, I could not find a real national tabloid either. I have therefore included the newspaper Liberation as a third newspaper. Although Liberation can best be described as a (left-wing) elite newspaper, it differs from the more established elite newspapers Le Monde and Le Figaro. For this reason, I have also investigated the outcome of dropping Liberation from the analysis. This does not affect the main findings. In the Netherlands, I have analyzed the Telegraaf as a functional equivalent of a tabloid. Although it is less sensationalist than, for instance, The Sun and Bild, it is certainly not an elite newspaper and it comes closer to a tabloid than any other newspaper in the Netherlands (see, for instance, Gleissner & De Vreese 2005; Pfetsch et al. 2008). Because of the difficulty of finding national tabloids in these countries, I have also investigated the outcome of dropping all tabloids from the analysis. This does not affect the results.

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, and as a result, every day of the week (except Sunday) is sampled twice.
Content analysis and the dependent variable

The degree of populism in the debates has been measured by means of a content analysis. The unit of measurement is the paragraph because paragraphs are used to mark thematic discontinuities in texts (Ji, 2008; Koen et al., 1969). As breaks between paragraphs can thus be seen as objectively traceable distinctions between arguments, paragraphs are appropriate units for the measurement of a substantive message such as populism. The coders were asked to decide for every paragraph whether the two central elements of populism – people-centrism and anti-elitism – were present. People-centrism was measured by the following question: ‘Do the authors of the article refer to the people?’ The coders were asked to include each and every reference to the people, regardless of whether it concerned ‘the people’, ‘citizens’, ‘we’ (as in ‘we the people’), ‘our country’ or ‘the society’. I provided the coders with an extensive list of words that could refer to the people. Anti-elitism was measured by the following question: ‘Do the authors of the article criticize elites?’ The coders were instructed to code only those instances in which the elites in general were criticized. A critique on specific parties or politicians was not general enough to be coded as anti-elitism. Therefore, the critiques of, for instance ‘the establishment’, ‘the old parties’, ‘the rich’ and ‘European technocrats’ were coded as anti-elitism; critiques of, for instance, Jacques Chirac or the Labour party were not. This measurement of populism is identical to the content analysis that I have employed in the previous chapters. I have demonstrated that this approach yields valid results and have no

---

65 This content analysis has been carried out by ten coders with two native coders for every country.

66 Other units of measurement, such as ‘themes’ (also referred to as statement or appeals), are less appropriate because it is rather difficult to extract them from texts (Weber, 1990: 22). This can lead to problems with the reliability of the measurement. Measurement units such as words or sentences are also less appropriate than paragraphs because these units are more limited than paragraphs to be employed for the measurement of a set of ideas. After all, most ideas require more than one word or one sentence to be expressed in full detail. See Chapter 3.

112
reason to suspect that this would be different for an analysis of opinion articles.

The inter-coder reliability of the content analysis of opinion articles was assessed with Krippendorff’s reliability statistic alpha (Krippendorff, 2004). To assess the general reliability, the coders had to analyze a sample of articles from the British newspapers. The results are satisfactory: $\alpha = 0.81$ for people-centrism and $\alpha = 0.72$ for anti-elitism. I also assessed the inter-coder reliability for every country separately by letting the coders analyze a sample of articles from their own country. The results are acceptable as well; the alphas range from 0.72 to 0.92.\(^67\)

The dependent variable is the degree of populism of individual opinion articles on a scale from 0 to 100. This scale has been constructed as follows. For every article, paragraphs in which people-centrism is combined with anti-elitism have been selected as populist paragraphs. The presence of only people-centrism or only anti-elitism is not enough to mark a paragraph as populist. It is, after all, the combination of people-centrism and anti-elitism that defines the populist ideology. Only if a critique on the (Evil) elite coincides with an emphasis on the (Good) people, can we speak of populism.\(^68\) Therefore, I decided to operationalize populism as the percentage of populist paragraphs in each opinion article. It is important to note that the populism score thus refers to the extent to which the authors of opinion articles employ a populist discourse themselves. A mere reference to the populist message without a clear endorsement of it by the author is therefore not coded.

\(^67\) For people-centrism: $\alpha = 0.81$ (FR), $\alpha = 0.79$ (GE), $\alpha = 0.84$ (IT), $\alpha = 0.83$ (NL) and $\alpha = 0.92$ (UK). For anti-elitism: $\alpha = 0.74$ (FR), $\alpha = 0.80$ (GE), $\alpha = 0.72$ (IT), $\alpha = 0.78$ (NL) and $\alpha = 0.87$ (UK). For the reliability test, I selected about five per cent of the sampled articles.

\(^68\) It needs to be emphasized that a reference to the people does not necessarily imply that the people are conceived of as a ‘pure’ and ‘homogeneous’ actor. However, a close reading of the results of the content analysis indicates that when a reference to the people is accompanied by an anti-elitist claim, the writer of the text almost always argues that the people are, in one way or another, betrayed by the elites. The argument that the people (singular) are betrayed by the elites, implies that the people are conceived of as a unified actor and thus as a homogeneous entity – at least with regard to its relationship with the elites.
Chapter 5

Independent variables

To test the hypothesis of whether the public debates have become more populist (hypothesis 5.1), I used a time variable that ranges from 1 to 20, in which 1 refers to 1989 and 20 to 2008. To assess whether the electoral success of allegedly populist parties is related to the degree of populism in the public debates (hypothesis 5.2), the (by opinion polls) predicted vote shares for allegedly populist parties have been used. Because I have modeled electoral success of populists as an independent variable, and my focus is on the four weeks before a general election, the success of populists must precede these four weeks. I therefore looked at polls from at least four weeks and a maximum of six weeks before the election. Because I expect that after a certain degree of populist success, the degree of populism in opinion articles will not increase anymore, I do not expect electoral success to be linearly related to the degree of populism in the debates. I therefore took the natural log of the predicted success of populists. To test the hypothesis that elite media differ from tabloid media (hypothesis 5.3), a dummy variable was included in which 0 refers to an elite newspaper and 1 to a tabloid. To distinguish opinion leaders from ‘ordinary’ citizens (hypothesis 5.4), I have included a range of dummies that measure the type of opinion article. I made a distinction between five types of articles: editorials (written by the editor(s)); op-ed articles (written by guest contributors); columns (written by journalists who have their own periodical ‘column’ in the newspaper); letters (regularly written by ‘ordinary’ citizens who do not (openly) represent an elite); and other opinion articles of which it is unclear to which category they belong. Because the letters are usually much shorter than other opinion articles, I

---

69 Allegedly populist parties are parties that have been labeled as populist by various scholars. See the parties that have been mentioned in the section on case selection.

70 The polls were executed by CSA and Ipsos in France; by the Politbarometer of the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen in Germany; by Swg and Ipsos-explorer in Italy; by Interview/NSS and Peil.nl in the Netherlands; and by Ipsos-mori in the UK.

71 Because this variable contains some zeros and it is not possible to take the natural log of zero, I have added 1 to the variable before taking the natural log.
controlled for the length of an article by means of a variable that measures the number of paragraphs of each article. Finally, a left-right dummy has been included to control for the influence of the ideological affiliation of newspapers (0 = left; 1 = right).

**Method**

The units of analysis in this study are the individual opinion articles (N = 3315). Because the opinion articles are not independent from each other, I employed multilevel models to test the hypotheses (Hox, 2010). The articles are nested in newspapers, which are again nested in countries. Moreover, the articles are also nested in time. Because of this complicated data structure, a cross-classified model was designed in which the articles are nested in fifteen newspapers and twenty country-year combinations. The program MLwiN was used to conduct the analyses. The estimation method is restricted maximum likelihood (RML) because RML estimates have less bias than the ‘regular’ full maximum likelihood (FML) estimates. Most importantly for this particular study, RML is a better procedure than FML when the sample size (on the second level) is small (Hox, 2010, p. 41). I included the independent variables step by step: first the time variable (model 1; hypothesis 5.1), and then the other variable on the country-year level: the polled success of allegedly populist parties (model 2; hypothesis 5.2). Next, I included the variables on the newspaper level (model 3; hypothesis 5.3) and the variables on the article level (model 4; hypothesis 5.4). All variables have been introduced as fixed effects. I included country-dummies to take into account the nesting of both newspapers and country-years in countries.  

---

72 Because of the low N on this country level (N = 5) it was impossible to add an extra level in the multilevel analysis.
Chapter 5

Results

Figure 5.1 displays the mean populism scores for each country over time. In France, this score increased between 1993 and 1997 and declined again in 2002 and in 2007. The German picture is more capricious. The score grew between 1990 and 1994, it dropped in 2002, and it increased again in 2005. In Italy, we see a strong growth between 1992 and 2008. The Dutch mean populism score reveals a steep growth between 1989 and 2002 and a drop in 2006. The mean populism score in the UK is rather stable: after a small decrease between 1992 and 1997, it increased in 2001 and in 2005. These first results show a clear net picture: in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK, the opinion articles have become more populist over the years, whereas in France this has not been the case.

There is some interesting cross-national variation in the degree of populism in the public debates. The most remarkable cases are most likely Italy, the Netherlands and France. The debates in Italy are much more populist than in other countries. This might well be due to widespread corruption scandals in the early nineties (see Tarchi 2003). However, also in the 2000s, many Italians seem to have had enough of their political parties – especially in 2008. Various opinion articles in Italian newspapers reveal a sense of powerlessness among the Italian people. This is illustrated by the following excerpt from a letter to the editor of *La Repubblica* in which the writer asks for advice on whether to vote or not: ‘I’m fed up with the absence of ideology in the election campaigns. [...] Politicians barricade themselves in their distant palaces of the political caste.’

In the Netherlands, the degree of populism in the public debates strongly peaked in 2002. This peak can most likely be explained by the impact of the sudden political upsurge and the murder of the populist politician Pim Fortuyn. One day after Fortuyn was killed, a Dutch commentator honored Fortuyn by expressing his agreement with Fortuyn’s populist message and wrote: ‘Political power resides in a group of regents that are linked to each other by common interests. They share positions, jobs and money, and

---

73 My translation.
communicate in an enciphered language which is incomprehensible for outsiders.\textsuperscript{74}

The debates in France are much less populist than one might expect regarding the success of Le Pen during the first round of the presidential elections in 2002. This low degree of populism in the public debates is most likely due to the isolation of the FN: the FN was widely conceived of as radical, and many of its standpoints have long been ignored in the debates (see Hainsworth 2000).

Figure 5.1 also shows the predicted successes of allegedly populist parties. In France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the predicted vote shares for allegedly populist parties coincide with the degree of populism in opinion articles. When the parties were more electorally successful in the polls, the debates became more populist as well. When the parties were less successful, the debates became less populist. In Italy, the electoral success of allegedly populist parties and the degree of populism in opinion articles do not seem to coincide. It is important to emphasize, however, that although the vote shares of FI, LN and AN dropped in 2001 and 2008, these parties were still highly successful in these years (in fact, in both 2001 and 2008 they won the elections and also formed a government coalition together). These first results indicate that there is a correlation between the success of populists in the polls and the degree of populism in opinion articles: the more success that is attained by allegedly populist parties, the more populism is observed in the public debates.

Figure 5.2 indicates that the public debates in Italy are the most populist, followed by the public debates in the Dutch media. The tabloid newspaper \textit{De Telegraaf} is much more populist than the elite newspapers \textit{NRC Handelsblad} and \textit{de Volkskrant}. The UK and Germany are similar to each other regarding their mean populism scores. Moreover, in both cases, and this is rather unexpected, the tabloid newspaper (\textit{The Sun} and \textit{Bild}) is less populist than the elite newspapers (\textit{The Daily Telegraph} and \textit{The Guardian}, and the \textit{Frankfurter Allgemeine} and the \textit{Süddeutsche Zeitung}, respectively). The public

\textsuperscript{74} My translation.
Figure 5.1

Mean populism scores (left axis) and success of populists* (right axis) over time per country

* In predicted vote share
debates in France are the least populist. *Liberation* is more populist than the more established elite newspapers (*Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*). The findings indicate that the opinion articles in tabloids are not more populist than the opinion articles in elite newspapers.

The mean populism scores per type of opinion article are presented in Figure 5.3. In all countries, the letter is the most populist type of opinion article. In France, Germany and the Netherlands, op-eds are the second most populist articles. In most countries, editorials have low mean populism scores. A more formal test of the hypotheses is presented in Table 3. In model 1, the time variable is entered as a fixed effect. It significantly affects the degree of populism in opinion articles. Moreover, the regression coefficient is in the predicted direction ($b = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$). This means that opinion articles indeed have become more populist over the years. In model 2, the success of populists in the polls is introduced. This variable significantly affects the degree of populism ($b = 2.09$, significant at $p < 0.01$): the larger the polled success for populists, the more populist the opinion articles. The newspaper variables are
Figure 5.3

Mean populism scores per article type

entered in model 3. The debates in the tabloids turn out not to be more populist than the debates in elite newspapers, and the left/right affiliation of a newspaper does not significantly affect the populism score either. In model 4, I introduced the variables that are measured on the article level. The coefficients clearly indicate that letters are more populist than editorials ($b = 2.99$, significant at $p < 0.01$). Op-eds, columns and other opinion articles do not significantly differ from editorials, which form the reference category. I have also estimated the same model with other reference categories (not shown here). It turns out that letters significantly differ from all other articles, whereas none of the other articles significantly differ from each other. To make sure that the difference between letters and other articles is not due to the length of articles (letters are usually much shorter than other opinion articles), I controlled for article length. The length of an article has no significant effect on its degree of populism.  

---

75 I conducted two types of robustness checks. First, I made use of the jackknife procedure and estimated the regression models for different subsets of the sample. I
Table 5.3

Cross-classified multilevel models explaining the degree of populism in opinion articles (with country dummies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 B (SE)</th>
<th>Model 2 B (SE)</th>
<th>Model 3 B (SE)</th>
<th>Model 4 B (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intercept</strong></td>
<td>-0.12 (1.13)</td>
<td>-3.14* (1.44)</td>
<td>-3.45* (1.51)</td>
<td>-3.50** (1.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country-year variables (N=20)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>0.13* (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.05 (0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success populists</td>
<td>2.09** (0.62)</td>
<td>2.11** (0.62)</td>
<td>1.98** (0.62)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Newspaper variables (N=15)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left/right</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.71 (0.96)</td>
<td>0.48 (0.92)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>-0.04 (1.25)</td>
<td>0.48 (1.20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Article variables (N=3315)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article type (ref = editorial)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Op-ed</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.22 (0.97)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.47 (0.91)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.99** (0.66)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.05 (3.43)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article length</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.08 (0.05)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Variance components</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country-year level</td>
<td>1.27 (1.10)</td>
<td>0.16 (0.80)</td>
<td>0.12 (0.79)</td>
<td>0.08 (0.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper level</td>
<td>0.62 (0.79)</td>
<td>1.15 (0.85)</td>
<td>1.50 (0.98)</td>
<td>1.30 (0.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article level</td>
<td>220.68** (5.46)</td>
<td>220.67** (5.46)</td>
<td>220.71** (5.46)</td>
<td>219.12** (5.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviance</td>
<td>27313.02</td>
<td>27303.59</td>
<td>27303.73</td>
<td>27264.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01.

re-estimated the models after first dropping the country-years one at a time and then dropping the newspapers one after another. This gives an indication of how sensitive the results are for outlying country-years and newspapers. The results indicate that all findings are robust. Second, because the dependent variable in this study is not normally distributed (it is strongly inflated by zeros), I also tested how sensitive the results are to different model specifications. I employed different procedures to estimate the regression coefficients and the corresponding standard errors, such as robust standard errors, bootstrapping and negative binomial regression models. They all lead to the same substantive conclusions. See Appendix D.
Conclusion and discussion

Although many studies have been published on the electoral success of allegedly populist political parties (e.g., Betz, 1994; Decker, 2008; Lucardie, 2008; Pauwels, 2010; Rydgren, 2008; Tarchi, 2008), less is known about the impact of the populist upsurge beyond the realm of party politics. In the previous chapter, I have assessed to what extent the rise of allegedly populist parties has affected the ideas of mainstream parties. In the present chapter, I focused on the question of whether the populist message has transcended the arena of party politics. Has the populist message become increasingly prevalent in the public debates in the media?

The analyses demonstrated that this is indeed the case. The public debates in Western-European countries have become more populist in the last two decades. This is an important finding because it indicates that participants in the public debates have increasingly employed the populist message in their media contributions. The analyses also show that there is a strong correlation with the electoral success of allegedly populist parties. Although I have only shown that a correlation exists, it is plausible that there is at least a causal effect running from the success of allegedly populist parties to the public debates. The reason is that it is unlikely that the correlating fluctuations of the success of allegedly populist parties and the degree of populism in the debates (see Figure 5.1) are the result of only a reversed unidirectional causal effect of the degree of populism in the debates on the success of populists. After all, populist success depends on much more than favorable public debates in the media. Supply side factors, such as an appealing party leader and a good party organization, exert a decisive effect on party success as well (carter, 2005; Taggart, 2000; Van Kessel, 2011). It would be highly unlikely that favorable conditions on the supply side were present every time the public debates became more populist if there is not also an effect of the success of allegedly populist parties on the degree of populism in the debates. We can therefore infer that there is at least a causal effect of the success of allegedly populist parties on the degree of populism in the debates.
I expect that the participants in the debates (the so-called ‘speakers’, see Koopmans, 2004: 372) become sensitive to the populist message once the actors who express it (seem to) become successful. After all, the more successful allegedly populist parties become, the more they are supported by the public, and the more it is in the interest of market-oriented gatekeepers to provide space for their ideas. Further research on the basis of time-series analysis or experiments could provide more insights into the causal mechanisms behind the correlation between the success of allegedly populist parties and the degree of populism in the public debates.

It has been suggested that tabloid media are more inclined to express the populist message than the elite media because they have less intimate connections with established parties and they focus more strongly on mass audiences (Art, 2007; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mazzoleni, 2003; Mudde, 2007). The data suggest, however, that this is not the case. This finding is in concordance with the results of a recent study by Akkerman (2011). Based on an analysis of *The Sun* in the United Kingdom and *De Telegraaf* in the Netherlands, she concluded that tabloids do not share a populist anti-elitist bias with allegedly populist parties. In regard to populism, the difference between tabloid media and elite media is apparently not as clear-cut as some scholars tend to believe. Future studies might focus on the question of why this is the case.

The results also indicate that letters to the editor are more populist than other opinion articles. Writers of letters are on average more radical and provocative than writers of other opinion articles. I have demonstrated that they are also more prone to express a populist message. These findings raise many questions about the way in which opinion articles are selected. Future research might focus on this process by examining the role of gatekeepers in providing a stage for the populist message, as well as by looking at the question how gatekeepers of tabloid media differ from gatekeepers of elite media.

It is important to emphasize that the findings of this study only pertain to newspapers and not to other media outlets. Further research might indicate whether the same conclusions can be drawn with respect to, for instance,
television or the internet. Nonetheless, this study is an important first step for two reasons. First, newspapers often function as agenda setters for other media (Kleinnijenhuis, 2003; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). Second, populism is often expressed using provocative and colorful language (Taggart, 2000: 113). Such a language is more common on television and on the internet than in newspapers. It might therefore well be that what counts for newspapers will count even more so for other media outlets.

Future studies might also focus on media messages during ‘routine times’ – i.e., outside election campaigns. My analysis is fully based on newspaper articles during election times, when public debates are strongly focused on party competition and the relationship between voters and parties. It might well be the case that the media behave differently during routine times. Adding articles from routine times would make the conclusions about the relationship between the success of populists and the degree of populism in public debates in the media more externally valid.

The results of this investigation indicate that populism is more widespread than previously assumed. Not only have allegedly populist parties become more electorally successful in the last two decades; the populist message itself has also become more pervasive in Western European public debates. Populism appears to be a mesmerizing message that transcends the realm of party politics.