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

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Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

The Specter of Populism

A Spectre is haunting the world – populism.
Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, 1969, p. 1.

*... in twenty-first century Europe, in the name of the people, the spectre
continues to pursue the sceptre.*

Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, 2008, p. 11.

Introduction

Allegedly populist parties are on the rise in Western Europe. In many countries, they have managed to obtain seats in the national parliament, and in some countries, they have even assumed office (e.g., Italy, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands). The main question of this dissertation was whether the success of these parties has impacted upon various key actors within the electoral process, and thereby generated a so-called populist *Zeitgeist* (Mudde, 2004). The guiding hypothesis was that the electoral success of allegedly populist parties has affected political parties, mass media and public opinion, and thereby created a ‘spiral of populism’ that has resulted in an all-embracing presence of populism in Western European societies.

This spiral of populism draws on the assumption that populism is attractive to voters. Populism claims to represent the interests of ‘ordinary’ citizens, who are said to be neglected by corrupt and selfish elites (Canovan, 1981; De la Torre, 2010). Because in many Western European countries allegedly populist parties have demonstrated that this populist set of ideas indeed appeals to large numbers of voters (see Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; Mény & Surel, 2002b), I expected that it would also be attractive for vote-seeking mainstream parties to incorporate elements of populism into their discourse (Mair, 2002; Mudde, 2004). Moreover, I expected market-oriented media to be inclined to increasingly provide space for populist messages as well (Mazzoleni, 2003; Plasser & Ulram, 2003). After all, mass media are dependent upon their audience shares and are thus likely to focus on what they think will appeal to their readers or spectators. Finally, the

expression of populism by political parties and mass media was expected to negatively affect the political satisfaction of voters (see Lenz, 2009; Van der Brug, 2003), who would, as a result, increasingly vote for allegedly populist parties again. If all of this does turn out to be the case, we are indeed witnessing a populist Zeitgeist in Western Europe.

In this concluding chapter, I assess whether such a populist Zeitgeist is dawning. In the next section, I first discuss the main findings of this study separately from each other. Then, in the following section, I interpret these results within the broader framework of the research model that I have presented in the introductory chapter. After a discussion of the main contributions of this dissertation, and suggestions for further research, I conclude with a prediction for the near future.

Main findings

Before I began my empirical investigation into the question whether Western Europe is indeed experiencing a populist Zeitgeist, I focused on the conceptual question of how to define populism – see Chapter 2. I demonstrated that prototypical populist actors across three continents and over time all have four elements in common: (1) they emphasize the central position of ‘the people’; (2) they argue that the people constitute a homogeneous entity; (3) they argue that the Good people are exploited by an Evil elite that is corrupt and selfish; and (4) they claim that the exploitation of the Good people by the Evil elite generates a serious political, economic and/or cultural crisis. These four shared characteristics all relate to the *ideas* of allegedly populist actors, and not to their style or organization. This implies that the shared nucleus of populism is of an ideational nature.

That all populist actors share this common core means that it is possible to employ a minimal definition of populism that is valid in the sense that all prototypical populist actors across cases and over time fall within the populist category. We can compare populism in Latin America to populism in the United States and Western Europe on the basis of the discovered lowest common denominator. It turns out that Mudde’s (2004: 543) minimal

definition of populism – according to which populism is ‘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’ – is an appropriate starting point for such a comparative endeavor.

In Chapter 3, I presented an empirical measurement of populism based on this minimal definition. The measurement is the result of a manually coded content analysis of election manifestos of Western European political parties.⁹⁰ The validity of this measurement of populism is rather satisfactory: the *content validity* is good because the systematized concept (populism) is captured rather well by its indicators (people-centrism and anti-elitism); the *face validity* is acceptable as well because allegedly populist parties turned out to be much more populist than mainstream parties; and the *concurrent validity* is adequate because my method generated similar results as another, computerized, content analysis of populism.⁹¹ I conducted two inter-coder reliability tests – one on the national level and one general test across countries. Both tests generated satisfactory reliability statistics. The degree of populism of political parties can thus be measured both validly and reliably by means of a content analysis of election manifestos.

In Chapter 4, I assessed whether the success of allegedly populist parties has caused mainstream parties to become more populist. The findings indicate that, contrary to the expectations, mainstream parties have not become more populist in the last two decades. Moreover, mainstream parties have not become more populist when confronted with either electoral losses or

⁹⁰ I have focused on political parties in Western Europe only because the geographical focus of the remainder of this dissertation is on this part of the world. Nevertheless, because my measurement is based on Mudde’s definition of populism, which is, as I have shown, also applicable to other parts of the world, I expect that my measurement of populism could also be applied beyond Western Europe.

⁹¹ In the remainder of this dissertation, I have employed the results of the manually coded content analysis only because the content validity and face validity of the computerized method were less satisfactory.

successful allegedly populist parties. However, allegedly populist parties *themselves* have turned out not to be immune to their own electoral success. After having experienced success, they have toned down their populism, most likely in an attempt to become acceptable future coalition partners.

Chapter 5 investigated the realm of the mass media. The findings indicate that the success of allegedly populist parties affects the degree of populism in public debates in newspapers. Moreover, the public debates have become slightly more populist in the last two decades. Apparently, the pervasiveness of populism goes beyond the realm of political parties only. In line with the expectations, the analyses showed that letters to the editor are more populist than other contributions to the debates. Contrary to expectations, however, tabloid newspapers turned out to be not more populist than elite newspapers.

Chapter 6 combined the findings of the previous chapters and investigated the relationship between voters' exposure to populist messages and political satisfaction. The findings indicate that although the degree of populism of the party a person votes for is related to this person's political satisfaction, the degree of populism of the newspaper someone reads is not. The chapter therefore mainly focused on populism among parties. I compared two logics with each other: the 'expressing discontent logic' (political dissatisfaction is cause and populist voting consequence) and the 'fuelling discontent logic' (populist voting is cause and political dissatisfaction is consequence). My findings indicate that both logics are supported by the data: political satisfaction can be modeled as a cause as well as a consequence of populist voting. Hence, it is highly likely that the rise of allegedly populist parties has decreased political satisfaction.

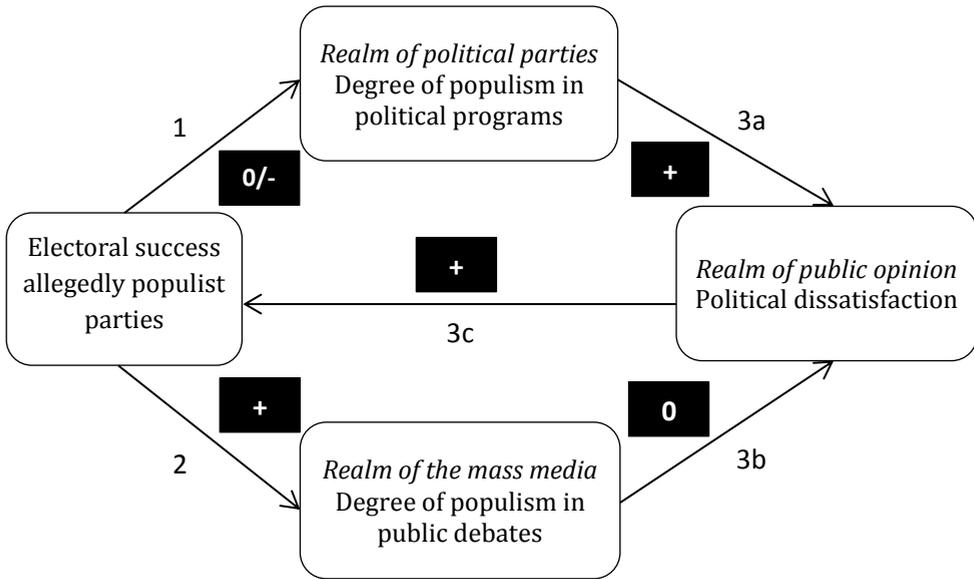
A populist Zeitgeist?

The main empirical findings are visualized in the framework of my general model, which is represented in Figure 7.1. If all of the investigated effects (see the arrows) are positive, it would be valid to conclude that a 'spiral of

populism' exists and that Western Europe is experiencing a populist Zeitgeist. This is not the case, however.

Figure 7.1.

The spiral of populism: main findings



For five reasons, the ideational impact of the success of allegedly populist parties is not so comprehensive and persistent that we can speak of a populist Zeitgeist in Western Europe. First, the success of allegedly populist parties has not generated more populism in the messages of mainstream parties (see arrow 1). Second, allegedly populist parties themselves have even become less populist after achieving electoral successes (see arrow 1). Third, I have found no evidence that the degree of populism in the public debates in the media affects the ideas of citizens (see arrow 3b). Fourth, within each country, the electoral success of allegedly populist parties fluctuates over elections, as a result of which the degree of populism in the public debates in the media varies as well. This implies that, within every country, the pervasiveness of populism differs from election year to election year, and it is therefore not

persistent over time. Fifth, the indirect impact of the success of allegedly populist parties on an individual's attitudes is limited because: (1) although the degree of populism of the party a citizen votes for affects this citizen's political satisfaction, mainstream parties have not become more populist and allegedly populist parties have become less populist, as a result of which, the net indirect effect of populist success on public opinion via the realm of political parties is rather small (see the combination of arrow 1 and arrow 3a); and (2) although the success of allegedly populist parties has affected the public debates in the media, no effect is found of the media on political satisfaction among citizens, which means that the net indirect effect of populist success on public opinion via the realm of the mass media is small as well (see the combination of arrow 2 and arrow 3b).

However, the success of allegedly populist parties has nonetheless had a significant ideational impact in four ways. First, the success of allegedly populist parties has an effect on the degree of populism in the public debates in the media. The more successful allegedly populist parties are, the more populist the public debates in the media become (see arrow 2). Second, the public debates have become significantly more populist over the years. Third, populism is a persuasive message that exerts an effect on the ideas of citizens: citizens who support a political party that expresses a populist message are inclined to internalize this message and become politically less satisfied (see arrow 3a). Fourth, the more politically dissatisfied citizens are, the more they are inclined to vote for political parties that express a populist message, and, therefore, the more successful allegedly populist parties will become (see arrow 4).

We can thus conclude that the electoral success of Western European allegedly populist parties has impacted upon various key actors within the electoral process. However, because the spiral of populism is interrupted, we cannot conclude that Western Europe is experiencing an all-embracing populist *Zeitgeist*. At least two correction mechanisms exist that prevent the populist *Zeitgeist* from coming into being – one internal and one external. The internal correction mechanism is that allegedly populist parties become less populist after having been electorally successful. The external mechanism is

that mainstream parties do not incorporate the populist set of ideas into their own discourse to fend off the challenge that allegedly populist parties pose.

Hence, there is no populist *Zeitgeist* if we translate the German word *Geist* as the word 'spirit'. According to this customary translation (which is also employed by Mudde in his *Zeitgeist*-article), a populist *Zeitgeist* refers, in the full Hegelian sense, to the existence of an all-embracing populist 'spirit of the times'. However, *Geist* is not only the German word for 'spirit' but also for 'ghost' or 'specter'. This means that a populist *Zeitgeist* could also be seen as an era that is characterized by a roaming populist specter. Although this much less common perception of 'Zeitgeist' will be encountered more frequently in fairytales than in academic studies, the specter-metaphor does make sense in the context of this dissertation, as it provides the word *Zeitgeist* with a much less comprehensive and persistent connotation: a specter has a large impact, but it will never be omnipresent. Perhaps for this reason, various scholars have indeed employed the metaphor of the populist specter (see Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; Arditi, 2004; Crick, 2005). I therefore conclude that a populist *Zeitgeist* does *not* exist if we conceive of it in the common Hegelian sense of the all-encompassing populist spirit of these times. Yet a populist *Zeitgeist* *does* exist if we conceive of it in a less comprehensive and more metaphorical way: as an era that is characterized by a roaming populist specter.

Contributions to the literature

This dissertation contributes to the extant literature in various respects. It contributes to the conceptual literature on populism in two ways. First, it is one of the first studies that systematically demonstrates that prototypical allegedly populist parties across continents and over time share a number of key characteristics (see also Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). This is an important contribution because it demonstrates that a minimal definition of populism can be formulated according to which all prototypical allegedly populist parties are indeed populist. Although many scholars have already employed such an approach (see Abts & Rummens, 2007; Mudde, 2004;

Stanley, 2008; Weyland, 2001), and some of them have also used it in cross-regionalist comparisons (Hawkins, 2009; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), a systematic justification was still lacking.

Second, I have shown that a minimal definition of populism should be an *ideational* definition of populism – i.e., a definition according to which populism consists of a set of ideas. After all, all discovered common characteristics relate to substantive ideas. This is in contrast with definitions of populism that conceptualize populism primarily as a specific style of practicing politics (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni, 2003; Taguieff, 1995) or as a particular organizational form (Germani, 1978; Di Tella, 1965; Weyland, 2001). This difference might occur because those scholars who have conceptualized populism as a form of organization have mainly focused on Latin America, and those authors who have conceived of populism as a style have primarily investigated populism in Western Europe. These two regions differ significantly from each other with regard to the way in which the party political system works. By transcending continental borders and by focusing on different time-periods, I have demonstrated that definitions of populism as a style or an organizational form are too context-specific to be employed in cross-continental investigations of populism.⁹²

This study also contributes methodologically to the literature on populism. Most empirical studies of populism have employed a dichotomous classification system according to which they have categorized some parties as populist and other parties as not populist. Only a few studies have challenged this dichotomous either/or approach by arguing that populism could better be perceived as a matter of degree (see Hawkins, 2009, 2010; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Pauwels, 2011). Yet none of these studies has fully legitimized this gradual approach by demonstrating that the degree of populism can be measured across cases and over time in both a valid and

⁹² It needs to be emphasized that this does not imply that I repudiate the existence of, for instance, a populist strategy. It only implies that populism is primarily a set of ideas, and that, therefore, a populist strategy will always be based on this particular set of ideas.

reliable way. This dissertation is methodologically and conceptually innovative because it is the first study that has successfully taken on this issue.

My conclusions also contribute to the literature on the strategies of political parties – both the strategies of allegedly populist parties and the tactics of the mainstream parties they challenge. First, my finding that allegedly populist parties moderate their populism after having been electorally successful indicates that populism does not need to be a deeply rooted worldview. As a *thin-centered* ideology instead of a *full* ideology (Freeden, 1998), populism can also be employed strategically to gain votes. This suggests that the distinct approaches of defining populism as either a set of ideas (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2004), or a style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni, 2003; Taguieff, 1995) or strategy (Weyland, 2001), might be less dissimilar from each other than the extant literature suggests (Jagers, 2006; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Pauwels, 2012).

Second, my finding that mainstream parties have not responded to the populist success by incorporating populism in their own messages, and therefore do not employ an accommodative strategy (see Downs, 2001; Meguid, 2005), is an important finding with regard to the debate on how ‘contagious’ allegedly populist parties are (Bale, 2003; Bale et al., 2010; Loxbo, 2010; Minkenberg, 2001; Mudde, 2007; Norris, 2005; Van Spanje, 2010). Various scholars have found that allegedly populist parties are indeed contagious (see Van Spanje, 2010). How, then, is it possible that I have found no effect of the success of allegedly populist parties on the discourse of mainstream parties? The most probable reason is that, in contrast to the existing studies, I have not focused on contamination with the *anti-immigrant* or *nativist* stances of allegedly populist parties, but on contagion with their *populism*. Theoretically, it could well be the case, and it might even be considered probable, that mainstream parties have employed an accommodative strategy with regard to the immigration issue, but they have shunned away from also incorporating elements of populism in their discourse. After all, for an established mainstream party, expressing an anti-establishment message would imply self-critique.

Third, my finding that mainstream parties have not become more populist over the years contradicts the argument that mainstream parties have increasingly incorporated populism in their own discourse (De Beus, 2009; Jun, 2006; Mair, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Mény & Surel, 2002b). This is most likely due the exemplar nature of the empirical evidence of these studies. The argument that populism has become mainstream is based on loose examples of speeches by Bos in the Netherlands and Sarkozy in France (De Beus, 2009), Schröder in Germany (Jun, 2006), Blair in the UK (Mair, 2002), Hague in the UK and Stevaert in Belgium (Mudde, 2004), and Chirac in France (Mény & Surel, 2002b). My evidence, however, is based on a systematic comparison across parties, countries and over time, and might therefore be considered to be based on a more appropriate methodology for answering the question of whether populism has become mainstream. The difference between our conclusions might also be caused by the fact that I have investigated election manifestos, whereas the existing studies have focused on speeches. However, although it might be true that populism manifests itself more clearly in speeches than in manifestos, the manifestos of allegedly populist parties turned out to contain many more populist messages than the manifestos of mainstream parties. Moreover, the manifestos of mainstream parties also display variation with regard to the degree of populism. Therefore, if a populist *Zeitgeist* were present in Western Europe, a shift to more populism would most likely also have become apparent in these election manifestos.

This dissertation also contributes to the literature on populism and the media. First, several scholars have hinted that, over the years, populism might have become more prominent in the mass media (Jagers, 2006; Mazzoleni, 2003; Mudde, 2004). Some of them have also argued that, to fully understand the impact of populism, scholars should therefore start focusing on this 'media populism' (Jagers, 2006; Mazzoleni, 2003). To the best of my knowledge, this dissertation is the first investigation into the question of whether media populism has indeed increased over the years. My finding that the public debates in media have indeed become more populist is an important finding because it means that populism has become more widespread than previously

assumed. Apparently, the pervasiveness of populism transcends the realm of political parties.

Second, although various studies have been published about the effect of media coverage on the success of allegedly populist parties (Art, 2006; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007, 2009; Bos et al., 2011; Mazzoleni, 2003, 2008; Walgrave & De Swert, 2004), only a few studies have been conducted with regard to the reverse effect of the success of allegedly populist parties on the degree of populism in media coverage. This dissertation is one of the first studies to do so. The finding that the success of allegedly populist parties positively affects the degree of populism in the public debates in newspapers adds significantly to our still rather scarce knowledge about the relationship between allegedly populist parties and the mass media. It indicates that populism is an attractive message for the market-oriented mass media, especially when allegedly populist parties are electorally successful and seem to appeal to a large number of people.

This dissertation also adds to the literature on voting behavior. To start with, this is the first investigation that conceives of populist voting as a matter of degree (i.e., one does not vote for either a populist party or a non-populist party, but one votes for a *more* or *less* populist party), and it demonstrates that populist voting in this gradual sense is significantly related to individuals' political satisfaction. This is an innovative approach because it incorporates the *actual messages* of political parties.

This study also contributes to this literature in another respect. Many previous empirical studies have found a relationship between populist voting and political (dis)satisfaction. Most of these studies have modeled political satisfaction as the independent variable and populist voting as the dependent variable and concluded that political satisfaction exerts a causal effect on populist voting: citizens vote for allegedly populist parties because they are politically dissatisfied (Betz, 1994; Bélanger & Aarts, 2006; Norris, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2001). I have shown that the causal effect can also be modeled in the opposite direction: the degree of populism of a political party also affects the political satisfaction of someone who supports this party (see Van der Brug, 2003). This is an important finding because it suggests that the

populist message is a persuasive message that affects the ideas of citizens. An important implication is that the effect of political satisfaction on populist voting has been overestimated in previous studies in which scholars have employed cross-national data (e.g., Betz, 1994; Norris, 2005). After all, the correlations they have found are mainly interpreted in terms of unidirectional causal effects, whereas these correlations are most likely due to causal effects in both directions.

Future research

There are various avenues for future research with regard to the ideational impact of populism. One pressing issue that should be addressed in future investigations is the issue of causality. This study is based on comparative data with only a few time points, and therefore, the causal claims are less strong than they would have been if they were based on panel data or experimental data. Unfortunately, such data were not available for this study. It is therefore impossible to fully rule out that the relationships between the electoral success of allegedly populist parties and the pervasiveness of populism in the realm of party politics, the mass media and public opinion are spurious or that the causal effects run in the opposite direction. Future studies might therefore focus on the impact of populism on the basis of panel data or experiments. It needs to be noted, however, that the collection of cross-sectional panel data would be very costly and that the strong internal validity of experiments goes at the expense of their external validity.

With regard to the realm of political parties it might be interesting to look beyond election manifestos and to focus on comparative analyses of other sources, such as the speeches of politicians (Hawkins, 2009), party broadcasts on television (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), or interviews with party officials. Because it might be expected that political parties' behavior will differ from one communication channel to another, analyzing other sources than party manifestos would provide a more comprehensive picture with regard to the impact of populism. It may also be interesting to focus on the degree of populism among radical left-wing parties in particular (see March &

Mudde, 2005; Mudde, 2004). This study has demonstrated that these party families tend to be rather populist. More systematic research into these specific party families might further our knowledge of populism.

With regard to the realm of the mass media, research on populism is still in its infancy. Future studies might focus more specifically on the relationship between the success of allegedly populist parties and the degree of populism in the public debates in the media (Mazzoleni, 2003). One may collect data over a longer period of time and/or make use of time-series analysis to better assess causality. Another avenue for further research could be to conduct in-depth interviews with editors, or, even better, participant observation at the editorial office of the opinion page of a newspaper, to see how editors are affected by the success of allegedly populist parties. Further research into the degree of populism in the media should also extend the focus from opinion articles in newspapers to other newspaper articles (Akkerman, 2011) and other types of media, such as television (Plasser & Ulram, 2003) and/or the internet. Finally, much more research is needed into the remarkable finding that tabloid media are not more populist than the elite media. Although this finding is in line with a previous study (Akkerman, 2011), it still remains unclear as to why this is the case.

Finally, much more work needs to be done to better understand the relationship between public opinion and the success of allegedly populist parties. Although I have demonstrated that it is likely that the degree of populism of a party affects the ideas of supporters of this party (see also Van der Brug, 2003), more research must be conducted to further disentangle the relationship between public opinion and populist voting. As argued before, one might collect panel data (Bélanger & Aarts, 2006) or conduct experiments (Schumacher et al., 2012) to be able to better assess the causal direction of the relationship. Furthermore, future studies should also look at the degree to which populist attitudes actually exist among the public. After all, as a set of ideas, populism is not only a prerogative of political parties and mass media; it can exist as a set of ideas in the minds of citizens as well (Akkerman et al., 2012; Hawkins et al., 2012).

The impact of populism in the near future

Will the specter of populism remain with us? On the basis of my findings, it can be supposed that, in the near future, the pervasiveness of populism within the realm of political parties will be limited. I have demonstrated that mainstream parties do not incorporate the populist set of ideas in their own discourse and that allegedly populist parties themselves moderate their populism after having been electorally successful. Still, the breeding ground for allegedly populist parties seems to become more fertile every day – especially with regard to the European Union. With the current problems of the economic and political institutional design of the EU on the one hand, and the skepticism of Western European citizens about the EU on the other hand (see, for example the referendums in France and the Netherlands in 2005 and the recent support for euroskeptical parties in various countries), the populist message that an elitist European super-state has taken over political power and neglects the interests of ordinary people can be expected to be(come) very attractive to voters.

I therefore believe that, although it is unlikely that we will witness an all-encompassing populist Zeitgeist in the near future, the less comprehensive and metaphorical populist ‘specter’ will remain with us for a while.