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Public images of right-wing populist leaders: the role of the media

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Introduction

During the last few decades several new right-wing populist parties have entered the political stage. They did so, however, with varying success: some are now important political players, while others disappeared quickly. Several explanations have been put forward to account for these differences in electoral success (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Carter, 2005; Eatwell, 2003; Golder, 2003; Van der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2005). Extant literature has focused on demand-side theories such as socio-structural explanations (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006), protest vote (Betz, 1994) and ideological vote (Van der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2003) models, but in recent years more and more attention has been paid to internal and external supply-side factors (Mudde, 2010) as these are crucial in determining the electoral breakthrough of new parties (Carter, 2005; Coffé, 2005; Eatwell, 2003). However, no one systematically pays attention to supply side factors that are central to the current mediatized political environment. In this setting, it are the mass media that can ‘make or break’ these new parties, which forces the latter to adapt to the context of alleged mediatization and personalization and bring their leaders up to the fore. This dissertation fills this void and looks at the *role of political leaders, their representation in the media, and how this affects their public image and electoral support*.

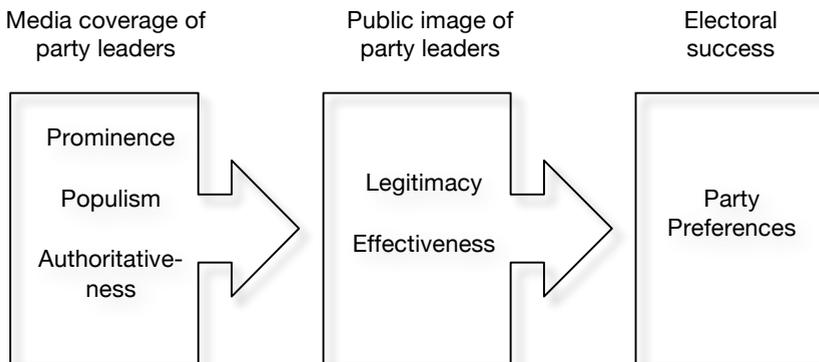
It, first of all, investigates the extent to which the popularity of right-wing populist parties is dependent on the public image of their leaders. Party leaders are often thought to be particularly important for right-wing populist parties, as their political programs are usually limited and their party organizations weak and highly centralized. Consequently, it has been argued that these parties need a strong leader to lead the party organization internally and bring across the message and image of the party (e.g., Carter, 2005; Eatwell, 2003; Kitschelt, 2007; Pappas, 2008; Weyland, 2001). Moreover, in today’s mediatized and personalized democracies it is assumed that party leaders play a crucial role in determining a party’s image, not the parties themselves. Second, because most citizens cannot retrieve their information about politicians from personal encounters, public images of right-wing populist party leaders must derive from how they appear in the mass media: it is through the mass media that voters learn about the political candidates, and it can therefore be expected that the media affect voters’ perceptions of candidates (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof, Oegema, & De Ridder, 2007; Mendelsohn,

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1996) This thesis therefore focuses on media appearances of right-wing populist leaders and investigates the role of the mass media in shaping their public image. Finally, throughout this dissertation right-wing populist parties are studied in comparison with mainstream parties. In doing so, we are able to assess whether these parties are as different as is oftentimes assumed.

Figure I.1 summarizes the conceptual framework of this thesis: it investigates the extent to which the media coverage of right-wing populist party leaders, in terms of prominence, populism and authoritative-ness, affect public perceptions of right-wing populist party leaders, in terms of their perceived effectiveness and legitimacy, and how this in turn affects the preference for these parties. The key concepts are expounded below.

Figure I.1: Conceptual Framework of the Thesis



The public image of right-wing populist leaders

This dissertation focuses on two aspects in the public image of party leaders: *effectiveness* and *legitimacy*.

As for effectiveness, most electoral research indicates that voters make a reasoned choice when they vote, which means that they take into account the consequences of their choice (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998) and prefer party leaders who are able to reach certain goals (Van der Brug et al., 2005). We make a distinction between two types of goals: that a message is heard (expressive goals) and that policies are affected (pragmatic goals). Voters who value pragmatic goals

find it important that a party leader is influential and thus take into consideration whether they think a party leader is able to affect public policies – through participation in government or by being effective as an opposition party. The prime goal of expressive voters is that their voice will be heard. For them it is important that a politician is publicly visible, can be heard in public discussions and sets the media agenda.

We also know that voters in general prefer party leaders who do not intend to radically change or overthrow the democratic representational system (Van der Brug et al., 2005). However, because of the (fascist) anti-democratic and anti-constitutional legacy of some right-wing populist parties (Carter, 2005), these parties may be identified with the extreme right, which could lead voters to assess some right-wing populists as illegitimate. Even though potential voters for these party leaders may be critical of the political establishment, most of them will not want to see the democratic system endangered. It is therefore important for right-wing populist party leaders “(1) to make clear that they belong neither to the political establishment nor to the camp of anti-democratic forces; (2) to make credible that they do oppose the political elite – but the political elite only and not the liberal democratic system” (Schedler, 1996, p. 302).

The media coverage of right-wing populist leaders

When studying the content of the media appearances of right-wing populist leaders, this dissertation distinguishes between three dimensions that can theoretically be expected to affect their public image: *prominence*, *populism* and *authoritativeness*.

First of all, prominence is important (i.e., Ellinas, 2010), especially for new right-wing populist parties. Within the context of mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), party leaders, right-wing populist or mainstream, must at least *appear* in the mass media in order to make themselves known by the electorate. It is, moreover, generally assumed that more prominent news messages, i.e., news messages that “are allotted more print space or time in broadcasting” (Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1993, p. 415) exert a larger influence on issue (or actor) salience, “that is, the ease with which these issues can be retrieved from memory.” (Scheufele, 2000, p. 300) Therefore, when it comes to these right-wing populist parties and new parties in general, the more prominent a politician is in the mass

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media, the greater the likelihood that voters will know him or her (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Hopmann, Vliegenthart, De Vreese, & Albæk, 2009).

Furthermore, by employing a particular populist style or rhetoric these leaders might try to attract attention and improve their newsworthiness. Characteristic of a populist style is the use of “highly emotional, slogan-based, tabloid-style language” (Mazzoleni, 2003, p. 5) which combines “...verbal radicalism and symbolic politics with the tools of contemporary political marketing to disseminate (...) ideas among the electorate” (Betz, 1998, p. 2). Characteristic of the populist message is its hostility to representative politics and the established order and its identification with the united/our/ordinary people. As a result, when populists engage in politics they employ the language of the common man in order to eschew the ‘elitist’ complex language of representative politics. (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2007; Taggart, 2000). We conceptualize populism as the combination of these style elements and the substantive rhetoric.

However, even though ‘being populist’ might be an effective strategy in gaining (media) attention, these leaders at the same time do not want to be designated as ‘clowns’, and be *authoritative*, or knowledgeable. Since voters (partially) base their electoral preference on ideological grounds, it is also essential for party leaders to get their ideological message across and be able to convey their position on a set of core issues. Moreover, voters will prefer a party leader who is also able to convince others, especially within parliament or within the broader political realm. To be authoritative in this interpretation is thus highly related to being persuasive: to what extent can the party leader convince voters that he or she has a strong case, i.e., is credible (Hovland & Weiss, 1951)?

In sum, this means that right-wing populist party leaders have to find a very delicate balance between being somewhat unusual and provocative – or populist, in style – (in order to guarantee newsworthiness and therefore prominence) and at the same time must assure they are taken seriously (to guarantee authoritativeness).

This dissertation builds on extant literature that focuses on mediatisation and personalization, media and populism, and the right-wing populist party family. The next paragraphs present a short overview of this literature. We then give an overview of the main research questions, after which the Dutch case is presented

and our data are introduced. The introduction ends with an outline of this dissertation.

Mediatization & personalization

It is within what is often called an “audience democracy” (Manin, 1997), or “the third age of political communication” (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999) that right-wing populist parties enjoy their electoral success. This political context has its own rules, characterized among other things by tendencies of mediatization and personalization, to which these parties, as well as their mainstream competitors, have to adapt.

Central are the mass media, whose relay or *mediation* function indirectly bridges the distance between different actors. Today, “the media’s publishing capacity enables citizens to observe the political discourse and thus contributes to the mediation of politics.” (Schulz, 2004, p. 91). As the mass media “have become the most important source of information and vehicle of communication between the governors and the governed” (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010, p. 576), both the people and the elite are dependent upon the media for information about the other side.

In a context in which the mass media increasingly constitute a dominant source of information in society (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010) the *mediatization* of politics describes the process in which “political institutions are increasingly dependent on and shaped by mass media” (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999, p. 247). Parties have to accommodate to the way the media operate (Schulz, 2004): they have to take news values into account in their day-to-day work (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), deal with the fact that media select and frame events and build and set the agenda, adapt themselves to “a media logic” (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Brants & Van Praag, 2006) by adopting the language of commercial media, and try to stage or fashion events in order to get media attention (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). As a consequence, political marketing is very important for all political parties: their spin doctors have to come up with media strategies to achieve the media coverage they need in order to connect with their voters.

Another consequence of this adaptation to the media’s storytelling techniques (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010), as well as the increasing dealignment of party systems (Kriesi, in press), is that politics is assumed to be *‘personalizing’*. Personalization is a

process that refers to two phenomena, namely “a stronger focus on candidates/politicians instead of parties, institutions or issues; and a change in the criteria for the evaluation of politicians, from features regarding their professional competence and performance to features concerning non-political personality traits.” (Kriesi, in press, p. 2) Even though the empirical evidence regarding this *personalization of politics-thesis* is still inconclusive as results are mixed (Adam & Maier, 2010; Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002; Kriesi, in press; McAllistar, 2007), it is within this context that one might expect parties to rely increasingly on the performance of their leaders. As party leaders are the primary representatives of their party in the public realm their image becomes a guidance in the voting booth (McAllistar, 2007; Mughan, 2000), an image that is to a large extent formed by their performance in the mass media.

It is against this theoretical background that right-wing populist parties have enjoyed varying degrees of success. This thesis therefore focuses on the public image and media coverage of party *leaders*, instead of the parties themselves, and investigates the extent to which this public image affects their electoral success. Moreover, because of the mediatization of politics we look deeper into the role of the media in shaping this image.

Media & populism

According to Ellinas (2010, p. 220) mediatization and personalization not only results in more attention for leadership in general,

“it rewards a certain kind of leadership, elevating telegenic populists to a position of power and control within the party. (...) market pressures compel media outlets to continuously search for political actors that are likely to generate public interest and attract new audiences. Media spotlights tend to reward good public performers, especially those with an unconventional rhetorical style like Haider, who can stir controversy by breaking taboos or attacking the establishment.”

Similarly, Mudde (2004, p. 553-554) argues that the independence from political parties and the commercialization of mass media have created a perfect stage for populist actors “who found not just a receptive audience, but also a highly

receptive medium”. This is supposedly especially the case among the tabloid media (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 52) that focus to a greater extent on the “eccentric aspects of social reality” and as a consequence “give passionate attention to what happens in the usually animated precincts of populist movements”. The specific style of populist leaders connects to what Mazzoleni (2008) calls “media populism”. However, it is important to note that evidence for this thesis is lacking (Akkerman, 2011).

By giving them media access (illustrated by e.g., Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003; Rydgren, 2004; Statham, 1996) the media “confer legitimacy and authority to political newcomers and (...) dispel voter doubts about their electoral viability” (Ellinas, 2010, p. 210). Yet, Mudde (2007) in this regard also argues that the media can be both a “friend *and* foe” (p. 248) of these new parties, by either granting them positive media coverage, which can be crucial for their electoral breakthrough (Art, 2007; Deutchman & Ellison, 1999; Mudde, 2007), or by being highly critical of them (Art, 2007; Mudde, 2007).

Along these lines, empirical research has indicated that there are several ways in which the media can ‘make or break’ right-wing populist parties. Based on the so-called ‘issue ownership thesis’, the salience of right-wing populist topics in the media such as immigration or integration, islam, and crime can contribute to the electoral success of these parties, as is shown by Walgrave and de Swert (2004) and Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2007). Moreover, following agenda setting theory, it can be argued that the salience of parties or their leaders in the news increases party support (Hopmann, Vliegenthart, De Vreese, & Albaek, 2010). Results in this regard are, however, inconclusive as in some cases visibility of right-wing populist parties or their leaders does lead to more popular support (Koopmans & Muis, 2009; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2001), and in other cases, such effects were not found (Muis, 2009; Van der Pas, de Vries, & Van der Brug, in press).

However, the mass media can also be hostile to these parties by ‘demonizing’ them or using a cordon sanitaire. Again, previous research has lead to equivocal results: two studies on the framing of, and the substantial coverage of Pim Fortuyn in the mass media come to divergent conclusions. Bosman and d’Haenens (2008) conclude that one Dutch newspaper demonized Fortuyn, whereas Schafraad, Scheepers, and Wester (2010) find no evidence for this proposition. On the other hand, two studies on the German far right do point in the same direction and

conclude that the populist radical right in Germany (and Austria) is victim of a cordon sanitaire of the (tabloid) press (Art, 2007; Schafraad, Scheepers, & Wester, 2008).

A final strand of research focuses on the specific style or discourse populists allegedly use to attract attention and appeal to their electorate. Although only a handful of scholars have tried to describe this communication style so far, and methods differ widely, there are some recurring themes. Populists try to celebrate and appeal to the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; McCarthy, 2001; Vossen, 2010), denunciate the elite (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Vossen, 2010), and use 'language of the streets' (Albertazzi, 2007) or adopt a 'folksy style' (Vossen, 2010).

Even though a number of scholars have examined the relationship between media and populism in the last decade, a number of very relevant questions remain unanswered. First of all, while several scholars describe the specific populist style and discourse of populist leaders, none of them has investigated to what extent the mass media are really receptive to this and give these leaders the opportunity to use this style in the mediated contact with their voters. Does the populist style really connect to media populism, and are there differences between outlets in this regard, as Mazzoleni (2008) assumes? Second, one would assume that the way political leaders appear in the mass media predominantly determines the electorates' image of these leaders, especially within the context of the mediatization of democracy. In research on (right-wing) populism it is often assumed that the specific style used by right-wing populists appeals to their potential voters, yet this has never been directly tested by means of empirical research. Third and finally, several studies show that the media contribute substantially to either the success or failure of right-wing populist parties (Bosman & d'Haenens, 2008). However, in most cases these parties are studied in isolation and it is therefore unclear whether mass media effects occur because of the special character of these parties, or whether the effects are somehow generic for all parties, right-wing populist or mainstream. This dissertation will shed light on these new questions.

Differences with mainstream parties

This dissertation also connects to a debate that features prominently in the literature on right-wing populist parties: are these parties really different from their mainstream, or established, counterparts, or is it just more of the same?

First of all, extant literature argues that we need different theories to study these parties, as they differ from mainstream parties in their political position at the extreme right of the political spectrum, their ambiguous attitude towards the political establishment and/or constitution, and in their harsh opposition to immigration (Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 2002; Zaslove, 2008). Accordingly voters for these parties are intrinsically different: they do not base their electoral preference on substantial grounds, but use their vote as a sign of protest (Betz, 1994). Moreover, these parties are assumed to have different, charismatic party leaders who present themselves as outsiders. The populist style and rhetoric they use contains the key traits of media logic (Plasser & Ulram, 2003) and can therefore lead to disproportional media attention (Mudde, 2007), which makes these parties more dependent on the mass media than others (Mazzoleni et al., 2003).

Yet, there are also reasons to expect these parties not to be so different, as party leaders are crucial for all parties in today's personalized politics, and all political parties have to adjust themselves to the mediatization of democracy. Mudde (2004) even substantiates the claim that the populist discourse has become mainstream in the politics of contemporary democracies and that right-wing populism "should be seen as a radical interpretation of mainstream values, [...] more akin to a pathological normalcy" (Mudde, 2010, p. 1167) instead of a 'normal pathology' (Scheuch & Klingemann, 1967). Scientific evidence also points into this 'six and two threes'-direction, as support for right-wing populist parties is motivated by the same ideological and pragmatic considerations as support for other parties is (Van der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2000; Van der Brug et al., 2003), leader effects are of the same magnitude or smaller (Van der Brug & Mughan, 2007), and government participation of these parties is "a relatively ordinary phenomenon" (de Lange, 2008, p. 224). Moreover, it can also be argued that these right-wing populist parties and their leaders cannot afford to be too deviant in order for them to be taken seriously.

In this dissertation we directly address the alleged differences or similarities between right-wing populist and mainstream parties. We do so in two ways. First, by incorporating mainstream parties in the analyses and comparing between the two we are able to investigate whether right-wing populist parties really are in a league of their own. In extant literature, it is often assumed that right-wing populist parties are successful *because* they are different. To test whether this is actually the case it is most important to include predictors of party support and image formation that are specific to these parties, as well as predictors that are generic to all parties. We therefore do not only incorporate measurements of the perceived legitimacy of right-wing populist leaders in our analyses, but also perceptions of effectiveness. The latter is especially assumed to be important for all leaders: voters prefer party leaders that are influential. If our analyses show that party support for right-wing populist parties is not predicted by perceived effectiveness, whereas party support for mainstream parties is, this indicates a different voter-party relationship. Similarly, with regard to media coverage we do not only look at the extent to which right-wing populists are portrayed by using a populist style. We also incorporate measurements of authoritativeness, as we assume all voters base their vote choice to a large degree on ideological grounds and therefore want to be convinced by arguments, not (only) by a striking populist style.

Research questions

The above leads to four key research questions this dissertation aims to answer.

First of all, following the *personalization of politics thesis* the first study investigates the important role of party leaders for these parties:

1. *To what extent does the perception of right-wing populist party leaders affect the electoral preference for these parties?*

Second, the second study sheds more light on the relationship between media and populism and examines the extent to which the populist style connects to media populism:

2. *How are these right-wing populist party leaders portrayed by the mass media? Is it true that certain outlets are more receptive to the populist style because of media populism?*

Third, in study 3 and 4 we investigate the extent to which the picture the mass media paint of right-wing populist leaders forms the electorates' image of these leaders:

3. *To what extent and how does the portrayal of right-wing populist leaders in the mass media affect the perception of these leaders?*

And finally, as stated above, all studies look at the differences between right-wing populist and mainstream parties:

4. *Does the role of political leaders, their media performance, and the relationship with voter support differ between right-wing populist and mainstream parties, and if so, how?*

The Dutch case

This thesis focuses on the Dutch case, where four, ideologically similar, new right-wing populist parties participated in the elections of 2006. Two of these parties, Pim Fortuyn's renamed party Lijst Vijf Fortuyn (LVF: 'List Five Fortuyn'), led by Olaf Stuger, and Hilbrand Nawijn's Partij voor Nederland (PVN: 'Party for the Netherlands') were quite unsuccessful. Marco Pastors' EenNL ('One NL') did not fail until Election Day. Only Geert Wilders' Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV: 'Party for the Freedom') experienced electoral success, winning nine seats in parliament in 2006, and 24 in 2010. This thesis investigates whether the public image of the leaders and their representation in the media helps to explain why only one of these four new parties was successful and the others were not.

All four parties satisfy the two most important criteria Mudde (2007) outlines for defining right-wing populist parties. They all addressed nativism in their programs by, for instance, proposing to halt immigration, sending back sentenced immigrants or fundamentalists, and promoting or defending the Dutch identity or culture. All parties can, moreover, be considered to be populist. They all propose measures to simplify the representative democratic order by, for example, decreasing the scope of the government, reducing the number of seats in parliament or in the senate (or abolishing the latter), and introducing more direct democratic measures (i. e. referenda). As the ideological differences between the parties are very small it is unlikely that voters would be aware of these differences. We therefore assume that differences in success have to be attributed to other 'supply side factors' such as leader performance and media appearances.

This single-country study allows us to “know more about less” (Gerring, 2007) and shed light on causal mechanisms we cannot study in a comparative context when cases are too heterogeneous to collapse. The four Dutch right-wing populist parties, and the PVV of Geert Wilders in particular, constitute an outstanding case to study the factors explaining the success and failure of *new* right-wing populist parties. As the four parties under study seemingly appeared out of nowhere they are even more dependent upon their media performance than mainstream parties. Media performance for these parties determines if they can get their message to the voter in the first place. Moreover, these parties have or had no real party structure or membership and are formed around their leader, which gives these leaders a central role in constituting the image of these parties. Both considerations make ‘the Dutch case’ a *most likely case* (Gerring, 2007) to find media and leader effects.

Data

This dissertation uses three data collections to explore the role of the mass media in the image formation of leaders of right-wing populist parties.

A panel survey study was collected by TNS NIPO in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam and the Dutch newspaper the Volkskrant, within the framework of the 2006 ASCoR Election study. With these survey data ($n = 382$) the influence of the public image of right-wing populist party leaders on the electoral preference formation for these parties is established.

Second, a comprehensive quantitative content analysis conducted within the framework of the 2006 ASCoR Election Study ($n = 1,001$) sheds more insight in the appearance of these leaders in the mass media. We include seven national newspapers (three broadsheet, two tabloids, and two freelies), three evening news programs (one public news program, and the two main private news programs), the two main public TV current affairs programs, and five infotainment programs (four public, one private).

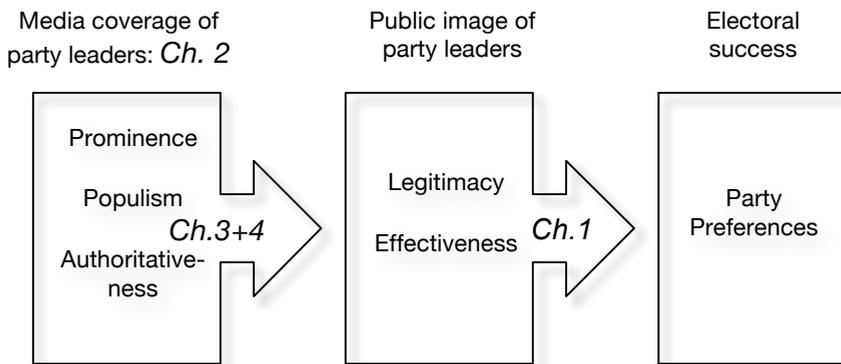
To assess the effects of the media coverage of right-wing populist leaders on their perception by the electorate, the panel data and the content analysis are linked so that the individual exposure to the media coverage can be estimated: “these variables were constructed by bringing together data on exposure to specific news

media outlets with a content analysis of the volume and tone of news (...) in each (...) outlet” (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004, p. 708).

Finally, we test the same causal relationships, but this time using an on-line survey experiment ($n = 3,125$). A disadvantage of the *content analysis and panel survey design* is that we are dependent upon the journalistic coverage of, in this case, right-wing populist leaders. It is therefore difficult to fully distinguish between media effects and reality: right-wing populist party leaders are not only presented differently by the mass media, they objectively differ in style, personality and capacities, which in turn affects their media coverage. An experimental set-up can overcome these problems by directly manipulating the stimuli. Because we make use of an online representative sample of the Dutch electorate of the LISS Household Panel we are able to look deeper into moderation effects and investigate whether and to what extent different voters receive the populist message differently.

Outline of the dissertation

Figure I.2: Outline of the Dissertation



A key component of the conceptual framework of this thesis is the public image of political leaders. This study focuses on two important aspects of this public image: legitimacy and effectiveness. The dissertation traces the model in Figure I.2 backwards. Chapter 1 focuses on legitimacy and effectiveness as independent variables, explaining party preference. After establishing that legitimacy and effectiveness are important predictors of party preference, we shift our focus to explaining the role of the media in contributing to legitimacy and effectiveness.

Chapter 2 deals with the measurement of the independent variables – prominence, populist rhetoric, populist style and authoritativeness – and describes how leaders of (right-wing populist) parties are portrayed in the mass media. We compare between parties and media outlets.

In chapter 3 and 4 mass media effects are estimated, once in a real-life setting and once in an on-line experiment. In chapter 3 the panel study and the content analysis are combined. It demonstrates the extent to which perceptions of right-wing populist party leaders are affected by the media coverage of these leaders. The chapter shows whether right-wing populist party leaders are (more than their established counterparts) dependent on the mass media.

In the final empirical chapter of this dissertation, chapter 4, the media effects found in chapter 3 are investigated more thoroughly using an experimental set-up with a large-n representative sample of Dutch voters. This allows us to conduct a strong causal test and examine the effects of the populist style or rhetoric and authoritativeness on the perception of a right-wing populist leader on the short term. Moreover, we test the role of possible individual-level moderators in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of why and whether certain individuals are more prone to be affected by (specific) right-wing populist communication strategies.

Since the four empirical chapters were originally written in the form of articles, they can be read as stand alone papers. As a consequence there is some overlap between the theoretical introductions of the four studies. However, the chapters do investigate different elements of the model outlined in figure I.2.

In the concluding chapter we elaborate on the theoretical and political implications of the four studies.