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

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Conclusion

A growing number of studies investigate explanations for right-wing populist parties' electoral success. This dissertation adds to the knowledge on the emergence of right-wing populist parties by looking at factors that are central to today's mediated and personalized politics. We investigate the key role of right-wing populist leaders for their party's success, shed more light on the relationship between media and populism and examine the extent to which the portrayal of right-wing populist leaders in the mass media shapes the electorate's images of these leaders. Additionally, we do not study these parties in isolation and treat their exceptional character as a given, but address this assumption directly by comparing them with mainstream parties. The findings of our studies indicate that the media play a *significant role* in shaping the success of new right-wing populist parties and their leaders. However, we have not found any clues indicating that this only holds true for these parties, and not for mainstream parties. This concluding chapter presents our main findings, discusses implications and proposes directions for future research.

Summary of findings

Chapter one tested the assumption that voters are only willing to support a right-wing populist party if they see it as a 'normal' party (Van der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2005), i.e., a party that is perceived as legitimate (democratic) and effective (able to affect policies and the public debate). To do so we used direct measurements of the legitimacy and effectiveness of right-wing populist party leaders and examined the extent to which these factors significantly affect the preference for these parties. The stacked data analysis in which we compared between two right-wing populist parties and four established parties and modelled the intra-individual variation, demonstrated that the public image of right-wing populist party leaders contributes significantly to the support for these parties. The results showed that supporters of right-wing populist parties indeed arrived at their party choice through the same ideological and pragmatic considerations that lead others to vote for established parties, *but only if* they were perceived as normal parties.

Chapter two focused on how leaders of new right-wing populist parties are portrayed in the mass media. We assumed that these political outsiders have to reach a very delicate balance between being somewhat unusual and provocative – or populist – (in order to guarantee newsworthiness and therefore prominence) on the one hand and at the same time must assure they are taken seriously as a party (and guarantee authoritativeness). We used systematic content analyses of the appearances of four right-wing populist and seven mainstream party leaders in 17 Dutch media outlets during the eight weeks prior to the 2006 national elections. We assessed their prominence, populism (populist style and populist rhetoric) and their authoritativeness. The results showed that more successful right-wing populist leaders were more prominent during the campaign. Moreover, we found that more successful party leaders appeared to be more populist and that right-wing populist party leaders scored higher on these concepts than mainstream leaders. It is, however, striking that differences regarding the latter distinction were small. Finally, we found that what set the most successful right-wing populist leader apart from the less successful ones was his authoritativeness. So what distinguished him from his direct competitor was not his extraordinariness, but rather what made him more similar to established party leaders.

In *chapter three* we connected the first and the second chapter by estimating the effect of the appearance of right-wing populist party leaders in the mass media on the extent to which they were perceived as legitimate and effective. Again, we made the comparison with mainstream party leaders and tested the assumption that right-wing populist leaders are more than their mainstream counterparts, dependent on the media for their image. The content analysis and panel survey design showed significant effects of the content of media coverage on the public image of political leaders, and the differences between right-wing populist party leaders on the one hand and mainstream leaders on the other, were small. Moreover, we found that the media could exert positive and negative effects on the public image of right-wing populist leaders. First of all, we found that when right-wing populist party leaders were linked to the immigration issue, this negatively affected their perceived legitimacy. Secondly, we found that right-wing populist leaders who were more prominent in the mass media and who appeared to be more authoritative were perceived as being more effective. Finally, we found that the idiosyncratic style used by right-wing populists, did not harm them, but did not help them either.

In the *fourth chapter* we tested the effects of the three populist communication strategies –populist style, populist rhetoric, and authoritativeness – on the perception of right-wing populist party leaders more directly with an experimental setup. This allowed us to look at moderation effects and investigate whether specific voters might feel more attracted to these parties because they are more susceptible to their communication strategies. The results showed that the three communication strategies do indeed resonate with particular parts of the (right-wing populist) electorate. Using a populist style positively affected the perceived legitimacy of the right-wing populist party leader, but only for the lower educated, the politically cynical and the less politically efficacious. However, we found no (positive or negative) effect of using the populist rhetoric on the perception of the right-wing populist leader. And we did find a positive effect of populist rhetoric on the perceived effectiveness of the mainstream leader, among the higher educated. The effect of authoritativeness appeared to be fairly across the board, although it differed between the two party leaders: it was only when the mainstream leader tried to be authoritative, that it had a positive effect on his perceived effectiveness.

Discussion

The results of this dissertation contribute to a number of debates in the literature on the personalization and mediatisation of (populist) politics, the relationship between media and populism, and the presumed peculiarity of right-wing populist parties. Each of these topics will be discussed here.

Populist leadership as personalized politics

The *personalization of politics thesis* describes, among other phenomena, a stronger focus on party leaders instead of parties, and a key role for leader characteristics in determining voters' preferences for these parties (i.e., Kriesi, in press). For new right-wing populist parties additional reasons apply. As new parties with weak and highly centralized party organizations, they need a strong leader to lead the organization and bring across the message of the party. Moreover, because they are known for their idiosyncratic style and behaviour, and are “astute exploiters of personalization” (Akkerman, 2011, p. 934), it is assumed the mass media tend to focus more on these populist party leaders than they do on mainstream party leaders (Art, 2007; Plasser & Ulram, 2003). Or, to put it differently, attention for

individual politicians is in the latter case supposedly more dispersed, also because these parties usually have stronger party organizations and can draw from a larger pool of political talents.

Our analyses show that the perception of their party leaders is indeed a key determinant for the preference of right-wing populist parties. Being perceived as a ‘normal’, i.e., legitimate and effective, party leader is a necessary condition for being successful. These results are in line with the proposition that party leader characteristics are one of the key determinants in the voting booth, in addition to ideological considerations (McAllistar, 2007; Mughan, 2000). Party leader performance is thus an important supply side factor (Mudde, 2010).

However, the results also show that this is not *more* the case for populist parties than for mainstream parties. As the Dutch new right-wing populist parties, and the PVV of Geert Wilders in particular, constitute a most likely case to find leader effects for right-wing populist parties, these results suggest strongly that populist politics is not more personalized than mainstream politics, even though there appears to be a widespread academic and public perception that this is the case. This finding connects to research by Van der Brug and Mughan (2007) who similarly find no disproportionate leader effects for right-wing populist parties. Kitschelt (2007) solves this puzzle by stating that “Certain leadership styles among radical right-wing parties may be an expression, not a net addition to the programmatic message of the party. The party leadership and the organisational structure of a party serve as a signalling device to its voters, underlining the credibility and commitment of the party to its stated objectives” (p. 1195).

With regard to personalization in the mass media the results of our content analysis similarly show that right-wing populist party leaders are indeed prominent in the news, but, again, not disproportionately compared to mainstream party leaders. It is often argued that the mass media, and in particular tabloid or popular media (Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003) would pay more attention to “media-genic” (Mudde, 2007, p. 253) right-wing populist leaders because of their newsworthiness (Plasser & Ulram, 2003), as personalization is a shared trait of media and party populism (Mudde, 2007). Yet, like Akkerman (2011) we find no support for this assumption.

One reservation needs to be made. This thesis departed from the idea that politics is ‘personalizing’. It was for that reason, and because of the central role of

right-wing populist leaders play within and for their parties, that we looked at perceived characteristics of party leaders instead of perceived characteristics of parties, and at prominence of party leaders instead of parties. To investigate whether personalization is taking place we should also have included perceptions and media coverage of parties, and make a direct comparison, preferably in a longitudinal setup. As we have not done that, the first two chapters of this dissertation can and should not be taken as a test of personalization. However, that also was not our intention.

Finally, we do find that visibility in the media is key in determining the image of right-wing populist leaders, as expected. In chapter 2 we have seen that the most successful right-wing populist leader is indeed the one that is most prominent in the news. And the results of the content analysis and panel survey design also demonstrate the importance of ‘having airplay’: being visible in the news has a key impact on the extent to which these leaders are perceived as being effective. As the mass media are the most important “vehicle of communication” (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010) between parties and their electorate, media visibility is a prerequisite in order to be successful. Moreover, in the case of right-wing populist parties it can also be argued that, by granting them attention, the mass media legitimize these parties in the eyes of the electorate (Ellinas, 2010), which makes voters more likely to vote for them. These findings connect to previous research and show that it is not only by paying attention to right-wing populist topics, such as immigration, integration, islam and crime (Boomgaarden & Vliegthart, 2007; Walgrave & De Swert, 2004) that the mass media can indeed ‘make or break’ right-wing populist parties, but also by paying attention to these parties and their leaders in the first place (Koopmans & Muis, 2009; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2001). However, this does not mean that media prominence always leads to an increase in public support: when negative reactions in the media outshine positive attention electoral support can erode (Muis, 2009).

A delicate balance: media strategies or appeal to the voter

If prominence is so important for the electoral breakthrough of right-wing populist parties, the next question is: how can right-wing populists gain this prominence? In mediatized politics it is key to adapt to media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Brants & Van Praag, 2006), or ‘media populism’ (Mazzoleni, 2008),

and take news values into account. Populism can therefore be used as a media strategy (Kazin, 1995) as it matches “quite closely certain key features of present-day mass communications” such as “pressures on media organizations to compete by attuning their fare to popular tastes, concerns, priorities, understandings, and language (...) and (...) the emotive, sensational, hard-hitting, plain-seeking, say-it-as-it-is, black-and-white styles of tabloid journalism” (Blumler, 2003, p. xvii).

The results of our content analysis indeed show that right-wing populists gain prominence in the mass media, and we also find mass media attention for the populist style, and less for the populist rhetoric, of these party leaders. When a certain media strategy connects to present-day news values, this should also be represented in the mass media. Because the results do not show much attention for populist rhetoric, it could be argued that the substantive aspects of the populist message are less popular among journalists. This dissertation shows that it is the simplistic language, or the populist style, that strikes a chord with media logic, not the populist rhetoric.

However, it has also often been assumed that the populist communication strategy is not only a means to attract media attention, it is also supposed to strike a chord with the potential constituency of these parties (Albertazzi, 2007). The results of the content analysis show that the populist style is indeed a characteristic that sets more successful right-wing populists apart from less successful ones. Yet, when we look at the media effects analysis we find no positive effect over the course of an election campaign: using a populist style or employing a populist rhetoric does not have a positive impact on the image of right-wing populist leaders. The survey experiment adds a caveat to this. There we *do* find a positive reception of the populist style by voters, but only by certain parts of the electorate: the lower educated, the cynical, the less efficacious. This does indicate that the ‘simplistic language’ populists use indeed strikes a chord with parts of their constituency.

That the populist style and rhetoric do not have a widespread positive impact does not make them bad media strategies. It will, after all, lead to prominence (Ellinas, 2010; Mazzoleni, 2008; Mudde, 2004) which is key for right-wing populist party success. However, in the future we should be careful in treating the populist style and rhetoric as an appeal to the voter. It is, at best, a populist marketing tool (Busby, 2009), of which the populist style seems to be the most effective.

With regard to their media appearance, right-wing populists might employ a second media strategy, maybe not to achieve airplay, but more to strike a chord with the electorate, and make sure to appear authoritative (or knowledgeable) in the media. The content analysis shows that indeed the most successful right-wing populist leader is also the one that is the most authoritative in the mass media. And the results of the media effects analysis add to this: here it is shown that a right-wing populist party leader also has to be taken seriously by the electorate, and has to be ‘normal’ in order to be perceived positively. This finding refines the image of the right-wing populist electorate: apparently these voters attach significance to the content of the populist message and are not just swayed by the populist protest rhetoric (Bergh, 2004; Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 2003).

However, the results of the survey experiment point into a different direction. Whereas we find a positive impact in chapter 3, chapter 4 finds no effect of the authoritativeness of right-wing populist leaders on their image, not even for certain parts of the electorate. This might be due to the experimental setup as this is only a minimal one-shot manipulation. Maybe only the repeated exposure to the authoritativeness of right-wing populist leaders exerts a strong, significant effect as the one we have found in chapter 3, which tested the effects of an entire election campaign.

Differences & similarities

This dissertation also studied the alleged distinctiveness of right-wing populist parties by directly comparing them with mainstream parties. This connects to a prominent debate in extant literature on the right-wing populist party family. On the one hand there is a strand of literature that argues that we need different theories to study these parties, as they differ from mainstream parties in their issues and in the organization of their parties (Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 2002; Zaslove, 2008). Accordingly, voters for these parties are also assumed to be intrinsically different (e.g., Betz, 1994). On the other hand, there is the strand of research that assumes that mainstream and right-wing populist parties are not poles apart and that the latter “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). The results of our four studies connect to the last body of research.

First of all, with regard to the electoral preference for these parties, the results of the first study show that it is the extent to which right-wing populist parties are perceived as 'normal' parties that is key in determining their electoral success. So it is not the idiosyncrasy (e.g., charisma: Van der Brug & Mughan, 2007) of these leaders that shapes their future, it is the extent to which they are perceived as legitimate and effective. Moreover, the results also support the view that voters for right-wing populist parties base their decisions largely on the same kind of considerations as voters for other parties do, as the party-voter relationship is similar (Mughan & Paxton, 2006; Norris, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2001; Van der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2000; Van der Brug & Mughan, 2007).

Second, with regard to the portrayal of right-wing populist and mainstream leaders in the mass media there are several striking results. First of all, our content analysis shows that mainstream leaders also are portrayed using a populist style, which could be interpreted as a strategy to connect to media populism (Mazzoleni et al., 2003). However, it are, as expected, the right-wing populists that score the highest on populist style as well as populist rhetoric, which distinguishes them from their mainstream counterparts. This finding shows that right-wing populist party leaders do stand out with their communication strategies (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Taggart, 2000). Secondly, regarding the authoritativeness of right-wing populist and mainstream leaders, we find that what sets the most successful right-wing populist apart from the less successful ones is his authoritativeness: on this dimension his score approaches 'normality', the average score of mainstream leaders: what distinguishes him from his direct competitor is not his anti-establishment position (Fennema, 2005), but rather that which makes him more similar to the establishment.

Third and finally, we have also compared mainstream and right-wing populist party leaders in our media effects analysis and in our survey experiment. The media effects analysis shows no evidence for the assumption that right-wing populists are more dependent on the media than others (Mazzoleni et al., 2003): There are no differences between right-wing populists and leaders of mainstream parties when it comes to the extent to which they depend on the mass media. There is, however, one important difference: whereas mainstream leaders are evaluated negatively when they act in a populist manner, right-wing populists are not punished for it. And the survey experiment confirms these findings and shows that when a

mainstream politician uses a populist style this negatively affects his perceived effectiveness, especially among his own electorate: the highly educated, the less cynical, and the efficacious.

Overall, the results of the four studies show two characteristics in which right-wing populist parties and their leaders *are* extraordinary. The first is their extensive use of the populist style and rhetoric as communication strategies. And the second is the reception of this style by the overall electorate in general, and their own constituency in particular. We interpret this as a different (effective) communication strategy on the part of these parties: nothing more, nothing less.

Directions for future research

This dissertation has made several contributions to the literature on (right-wing) populist parties, by studying factors that are central to the current age of mediatisation and personalization, as substantiated above. We hope this will be a point of departure for further research on these topics, and give some first leads below.

First of all, it can be argued that the operationalization of our explanatory variable populist rhetoric is lacking an indicator, such as ‘exclusionism’. In fact, in one of the main studies in the field of media and populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) the ‘populist communication style’ contains three elements: reference to the people, an anti-establishment appeal, and homogeneity/exclusionism. However, because we wanted to compare between right-wing populists and mainstream politicians we felt it would be more useful to make use of the concept of ‘thin’ instead of ‘thick’ populism, and exclude the most ideological part (also see Cranmer, 2011). In future research it could be useful, nevertheless, to include this ideological element and investigate to what extent mainstream parties have incorporated this into their messages, to what extent the mass media adopt this, and how this is received by voters.

An issue that relates to this is the distinction between media populism and political populism. Because we have only included the mass media’s coverage of (populist) leaders and have only investigated the extent to which the media portray them as populists, we cannot distinguish between media and political populism. We are therefore unable to know whether for instance mainstream politicians are

actually using populism as a strategy, or as a style in their outgoing messages, or whether it are the media who single out certain aspects in their communication. Future research could look into this, by comparing unmediated messages of politicians with messages that appear in the media.

Another line of research that connects to this is the longitudinal aspect. The content analysis of the Dutch 2006 election campaign shows that mainstream leaders have, some more than others, adopted a populist style. It might be interesting to investigate when, for instance, mainstream parties started to adopt this style, whether this practice increases over time, whether populism in that regard spreads and ‘becomes mainstream’ (Mudde, 2004), and in what regard we see differences between media outlets.

Finally, and most importantly, the role of political leaders, their media performance and how this affects their electoral support was studied in a singly-country research setting. This ensures high validity, the opportunity to do more in-depth research, and it overcomes the problem of heterogeneity of cases (Gerring, 2007). Yet, the Dutch case constitutes a most likely case so that we do not know whether our results would be replicated in other settings. Moreover, it could be considered a limitation that we have primarily studied one election campaign in one country. The Dutch case is, after all, an exceptional case in which we subsequently witnessed the success of two different new right-wing populist parties, first Pim Fortuyn’s LPF in the elections of 2002, and then Geert Wilders’ PVV in 2006. Even though these parties can be considered right-wing populist, they do differ from other “national populist parties” in various respects (Vossen, 2011). Finally, it could be argued that our results are influenced by specific Dutch circumstances, such as the Fortuyn revolt and the subsequent assassination of Fortuyn, or the specific Dutch media landscape. It would, therefore, be interesting to see whether our results would uphold in a comparative setup, studying more countries, more parties, and studying these parties during election campaigns and in non-election periods (Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009). A comparative study would also give the opportunity to ask new questions, such as whether there are differences between different media systems or between countries with more or less commercialized media? Do we find different leader effects when we compare more and less flamboyant or media-genic (Mudde, 2007) right-wing populist party leaders? Do we

find differences between new parties and parties that have been around for some time? These are only some of the questions that can, and should, be raised.

Despite these limitations we are confident this thesis makes an important contribution to extant literature on right-wing populist parties by studying factors that are central to the current mediatized political environment. With regard to the key role of right-wing populist leaders for their party's success, the relationship between media and populism, and the extent to which mass media coverage of right-wing populist leaders shapes the public images of these leaders, the overall conclusion has to be that these parties are not in a league of their own, as is often assumed.