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

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Summary

Over the past decades several new right-wing populist parties have entered the political stage in the Netherlands, as well as in other Western Democracies. They did so 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. In this dissertation we pay attention to supply side factors that are central to the current mediatised 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 mediatisation and personalization and bring their leaders up to the fore. This dissertation therefore looks at the *role of political leaders, their representation in the media, and how this affects their public image and electoral support.* More specifically, it investigates the extent to which the media coverage of right-wing populist party leaders, in terms of prominence, populism and authoritativeness, affects 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.

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, 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 and mainstream party leaders and examined the extent to which these factors significantly affect preferences for these parties. The stacked data analysis 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 argued 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). The results of an extensive content analysis 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. Finally, we found that what set the most successful right-wing populist leader apart from the less successful ones was his authoritativeness (i.e., how knowledgeable a politician appears to be): 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 estimated 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. We 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 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. These findings connect to previous research and show that the mass media can indeed 'make or break' right-wing populist parties, not only by paying attention to right-wing populist topics, but also by paying attention to these parties and their leaders in the first place.

In the *fourth chapter* we tested the effects of 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 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. The effect of authoritativeness appeared to be fairly across the board, although it was only

when the mainstream leader tried to be authoritative, that it had a positive effect on his perceived effectiveness.

The most important theoretical implications of these findings are threefold.

First of all, with regard to the personalization thesis, both the first and the second study show no indication that populist politics is more personalized than mainstream politics. After all, the results of the first study show that party leader performance is an important supply side factor in determining the preference for right-wing populist parties, but not *more* than for mainstream parties. And the results of the 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.

Second, our results show that the populist communication strategy, or more specifically, the populist style, is not only a means to attract media attention, it also strikes a chord with the potential constituency of these parties: the lower educated, the politically cynical and the less efficacious. However, the content analysis and the media effects analysis also show that a right-wing populist party leader also has to be taken seriously by the electorate. 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[i]. Overall, these findings do indicate that right-wing populist party leaders have to reach a delicate balance between using a populist style in order to gain prominence on the one hand, and appear authoritative, in order to be taken seriously, on the other hand.

Third, and finally, this dissertation also studied the alleged distinctiveness of right-wing populist parties by directly comparing them with mainstream parties. 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, as opposed to their idiosyncrasy, that is key in determining their electoral success. Yet, the content analysis shows that right-wing populist party leaders do stand out with their communication strategies: even though mainstream leaders are also portrayed in the mass media using a populist style, 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. On the other hand, we also 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. Similarly, the media effects analysis shows no evidence for the assumption that right-wing populists are more dependent on the media than others. There is, however, one important difference between the two leader types: 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.

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[i] That the results of the survey experiment do not corroborate this, might be due to the one-shot manipulation as opposed to the repeated exposure in an election campaign.