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DOI

[10.1111/1467-9248.12074](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12074)

Publication date

2014

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Political Studies

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Rooduijn, M. (2014). The Mesmerising Message: The Diffusion of Populism in Public Debates in Western European Media. *Political Studies*, 62(4), 726-744. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12074>

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The Mesmerising Message: The Diffusion of Populism in Public Debates in Western European Media

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Electorally, Western European populist political parties have been rather successful in the last two decades. But how pervasive is their actual populist message? Although some scholars have looked at the diffusion of this message, they have only focused on the arena of party politics. Research on how widespread populism is beyond the party political sphere is still in its infancy. This study looks at populism in public debates in the media. Based on a content analysis of opinion articles in newspapers in five Western European countries, I demonstrate that these debates have become more populist over the years, and that the degree of populism is strongly related to the success of populist parties. This indicates that populism is more widespread than previously assumed. I also show that letters are more populist than other opinion articles and that debates in tabloid media are not more populist than debates in elite media.

Keywords: populism; media; newspapers; content analysis; public debate

In the last two decades, Western European populist parties have become increasingly successful. When scholars discuss the populist upsurge, they often refer to the increased electoral success of populist parties. Yet the rise of populism involves more than increasing vote shares of specific parties. To understand Western European populism fully, we should not only focus on electoral politics, but also investigate the pervasiveness of the actual populist *message*. Hitherto, some scholars have indeed focused on the diffusion of this message. They have investigated whether mainstream parties have incorporated populism in their own ideas and rhetoric (Mair, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2012). Yet to assess fully how pervasive the populist message is, we should not only look at party politics. The populist message might resonate in other spheres as well.

In this study I focus on two main questions: (1) Does the success of populist parties affect the degree of populism in public debates in the media?; and (2) Have the public debates, as a result, become more populist over the years? These are important questions, because if it is true that the electoral success of populists has spawned a diffusion of the populist message outside the realm of political parties, we can conclude that populism is more widespread than previously assumed.

Moreover, '[a] full understanding of the populist phenomenon cannot be achieved without studying mass communication perspectives and media-related dynamics, especially not without using a comparative approach' (Mazzoleni, 2003, p. 2). Therefore, another aim of the study is to assess whether the degree of populism in public debates can be explained by particular media-related characteristics. First, the literature suggests that it might be the case that debates in tabloid media are more populist than debates in elite media (see Akkerman, 2011; Mair, 2002; Mudde, 2007). And second, it could be expected that the type

of contribution to the debates makes a difference: letters to the editor might be more populist than other contributions to the debates (see Kerr and Moy, 2002; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001; 2004).

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

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

Defining Populism

Scholars increasingly agree on a conceptualisation of populism as a set of ideas¹ concerning the antagonistic relationship between two homogeneous constructs: the (good) people and the (evil) elite (see Abts and Rummens, 2007; Hawkins, 2009; 2010; Mudde, 2004; 2007; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Stanley, 2008). In this study, I employ the particular definition of Cas Mudde (2004, p. 543), who argues that populism is '[a thin-centred] 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'.²

The central elements of this populist ideology are 'people-centrism' and 'anti-elitism'. These elements cannot be understood separately from each other because populism concerns the specific *relationship* between the two (Laclau, 2005; Panizza, 2005). People-centrism means that populists centralise the people and emphasise the idea of popular sovereignty (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969; Mény and Surel, 2002). They see the people as a homogeneous entity, devoid of divisions and argue that the will of the people should be the point of departure of all politics (Taggart, 2000). The 'people' can mean many different things to many different populists in many different circumstances: it could refer, for instance, to the nation, to the electorate, to peasants and to the proletariat (Canovan, 1981; Taggart, 2000). The elite is criticised because it is said to hamper the centrality of the people. It is accused of having no idea what people find important and of being incompetent, arrogant and selfish (Barr, 2009; Canovan, 2002; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Weyland, 2001). The critique could be directed towards the political elite (parties, politicians), the economic elite (bankers, the capitalist system) and/or the cultural elite (writers, academics).

Some scholars have argued that populists also criticise 'dangerous others': groups – other than elites – that are not considered part of what populists see as 'their' people (Albertazzi

and McDonnell, 2008; Taguieff, 1995). Other scholars, however, have argued that exclusionism is a characteristic of the populist *radical right* only, and not of populism as such (Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2007; Taggart, 2000). They argue that populism can be combined with many different ideologies, and that it only becomes exclusionistic once it is combined with a radical right ideology. In this study I concur with this second group of scholars, because I am not only interested in populism on the right side of the ideological spectrum, but also in left-wing populism.

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

Populism in Public Debates in the Media

Western European populist parties have had much electoral success in the last two decades (e.g., the *Front National* (FN) in France, the *Lega Nord* (LN) in Italy, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* in Austria, the *Dansk Folkeparti* in Denmark and the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* in the Netherlands). But has, as a result, the actual populist *message* also become more widespread? The evidence so far is inconclusive. Cas Mudde (2004) and Peter Mair (2002) have focused on the diffusion of populism in the realm of party politics and have argued that mainstream parties have incorporated (elements of) the populist message in their own rhetoric. Mudde therefore talks about a populist *Zeitgeist*. Matthijs Rooduijn, Sarah De Lange and Wouter Van der Brug (2012) have found, however, that with regard to their official political *programmes*, mainstream parties have not become more populist over the years. Yet if we are interested in the diffusion of populism, an exclusive focus on party politics would provide a limited account of the spread of the populist message. The populist message might (also) have become more pervasive *beyond* the party political sphere. It could, for instance, have become more widespread in public debates in the media. If this should turn out to be the case, we might conclude that populism is even more prevalent in Western European societies than previously assumed.

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

Have Western European public debates become more populist in the last two decades? This might well be the case for two reasons. A first reason why we might expect public debates to have become more populist over the years is increased media commercialisation. Fritz Plasser and Peter Ulram (2003, p. 21) have argued that the dispersion of the populist message is related to the increased commercial orientation of the mass media. The media are ever more pressured by advertisers to reach large audiences and therefore increasingly focus on what ordinary citizens deem important. According to Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004, pp. 277–8), the media have therefore shifted their focus from representatives of

political parties and the state to 'ordinary' citizens and their 'common sense'. Because of this increased focus on 'ordinary' citizens, the mass media are said to have changed their style, in the sense that they put more emphasis on 'simple and concrete language, light, bright, and vivid writing, shorter stories, and extensive use of photographs and graphics' (Norris, 2000, p. 71). It has also been argued that this changed focus has not only affected the *style* of media coverage, but also the *substance* (see also Norris, 2000, p. 71). In their competition for audiences, the media can be expected to focus increasingly on messages that they think will coincide with the ideas of their public. For example, the media are said to pay more attention to political scandals, because they believe that the message that corrupt politicians have betrayed the 'ordinary' hard-working people sells well (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004, pp. 278–9; Papathanassopoulos, 2000, p. 57).

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

Hypothesis 1. Public debates in the media have become more populist in the last two decades.

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

Hypothesis 2. The electoral success of populist parties positively affects the degree of populism in public debates in the media.

It is important to note that there might also be a reciprocal effect of the degree of populism in public debates on the success of populists. Scholars have demonstrated that public debates in the media affect the electoral success of right-wing populist parties. David Art (2006), for example, has shown that differences in national public debates in Germany and Austria have affected the success of radical right-wing populist parties in these countries. Other scholars have shown that if an issue 'owned' by a populist party becomes salient in the media, people are influenced to support this populist party and eventually to vote for it (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart, 2007; Walgrave and De Swert, 2004).³ It might therefore be expected that once populism becomes more salient in the debates, citizens are inclined to support those parties that 'own' these populist themes. In the concluding section of this study I pay further

attention to the question of what this endogeneity problem means for the possibility of drawing causal inferences.

I expect that the degree of populism in public debates is determined by two media-related characteristics. The first one is the type of medium. Not all media are expected to be equally populist. A distinction can be made between 'elite media' and 'tabloid media' (Mazzoleni, 2003, p. 8). Tabloid media are often identified with populist politics (see Franklin, 1997; Mudde, 2007; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000), which leads to the premise that the coverage in these tabloid media is more populist than in elite media (see Akkerman, 2011, p. 3). This premise is based on the observation that elite media and tabloid media differ from each other in at least two respects: (1) with regard to their relationship with the established, mainstream political parties; and (2) with regard to their market orientation.

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

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

Hypothesis 3. The public debates in tabloid media are more populist than in elite media.

The degree of populism of public debates might also be determined by another factor. Public debates in the media are shaped by many different speakers from many different backgrounds, which might well differ from each other with regard to their inclination to be populist. I focus on opinion pages in newspapers, and I distinguish two types of contribution to the debates: letters to the editor on the one hand, and other opinion articles, such as editorials, op-ed pieces and columns on the other hand. This latter type of opinion article is commonly written by 'opinion leaders' such as editors, journalists, writers, politicians, academics or other professionals. They are generally highly educated, have learned to write nuanced texts, and will therefore not be prone to expressing a populist message. Letters, on the other hand, function explicitly as a stage where, next to opinion leaders, 'ordinary citizens' also participate (see Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004, p. 90). Citizens who

send letters to the editor come from very different backgrounds. On average they are less well educated than opinion leaders, and commonly they feel very strongly about the issues they write about (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001). This means that letters to the editor often represent views that are more radical and provocative than those of the average citizen, and in particular than those of opinion leaders (see Kerr and Moy, 2002). Moreover, editors in their turn tend to prefer letters that are radical and provocative because they are expected to stimulate public debate (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). As populism is a quite radical perspective on the relationship between the good people and the evil elite, which is commonly expressed in a rather provocative language (Taggart, 2000, p. 113), I expect populism to prevail more strongly in letters than in other opinion articles:

Hypothesis 4. Letters are more populist than other opinion articles.

Research Design and Method

Case Selection

The geographical focus of this article is on Western Europe because ‘the main area of sustained populist growth and success over the last fifteen years in established democracies has been in Western Europe’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008, p. 1). Five countries from this region have been selected: France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. These countries have been selected because they differ strongly from each other with respect to the electoral success of populist parties.⁴ In terms of their vote share, populist parties in Italy have been very successful; populists in the Netherlands fairly successful; populists in France moderately successful; populist parties in Germany fairly unsuccessful; and populists in the United Kingdom very unsuccessful. See Table 1 for an overview. I focus on the last two decades (1988–2008) because the populist parties that have been selected for this study surged in the 1990s and early 2000s.

To gauge the public debates in the media I look at opinion articles in newspapers. Although the opinion section in newspapers is not the only media site where public debates take shape – there are, for instance, also magazines, television programmes and discussion fora on the internet (see, for instance, Norris, 2000) – it is one of the most central ones. Its function ‘was designed as a forum for the articulation of multiple ideas in an attempt to promote public debate on salient issues’ (Day and Golan, 2005, p. 62). Moreover, contrary to most other venues, it is both an institutionalised forum and a place where actors from many different backgrounds (both opinion leaders and ‘ordinary’ citizens) participate (Nikolaev and Porpora, 2007, p. 8).

In order to be able to assess the difference between debates in elite media and tabloid media, I collected three newspapers in each country.⁵ Because the media pay more attention to politics during election campaigns (Koopmans, 2004, p. 372), I have focused on opinion articles in the four weeks before a general election. For each country I selected four election periods between 1988 and 2008. For a complete overview of selected newspapers and election periods see Table 2. A systematic sample of days has been drawn from every election period, and for every sampled day the opinion articles from the selected newspapers have been collected.⁶ I selected only those opinion articles that concern domestic and EU politics.

Table 1: Selected Populist Parties and Their Electoral Success

<i>Country</i>	<i>Populist parties</i>	<i>Success of populist parties*</i>	<i>Identified as populist party by ...</i>
France	Front National (FN)	Moderately successful (Front National 1997: 15%)	Rydgren, 2008; Surel, 2002
Germany	Die Linke Republikaner (REP)	Fairly unsuccessful (Die Linke 2005: 9%)	Decker, 2008; March, 2007 Betz, 1994; Decker and Hartleb, 2007
Italy	Forza Italia (FI) Lega Nord (LN) Alleanza Nazionale (AN)	Very successful (Forza Italia 2001: 30%)	Tarchi, 2008; Zaslove, 2008 Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2010; Tarchi, 2008 Ruzza and Fella, 2011; Tarchi, 2002
Netherlands	Centrum Democraten (CD) Socialistische Partij (SP) Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	Fairly successful (Lijst Pim Fortuyn 2002: 17%)	Mudde, 2007; Van der Brug and Mughan, 2007 March, 2007; Voerman, 2009 Lucardie, 2008; Van der Brug, 2003 Akkerman, 2011; Vossen, 2010
United Kingdom	British National Party (BNP) United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)	Very unsuccessful (UKIP 2005: 2%)	Fella, 2008; Mudde, 2007 Abedi and Lundberg, 2009; Fella, 2008

*Vote share of most electorally successful populist party in parentheses.

Content Analysis and the Dependent Variable

The degree of populism in the debates has been measured by means of a content analysis.⁷ The unit of measurement is the paragraph, because paragraphs are used to mark thematic discontinuities in texts (Ji, 2008; Koen *et al.*, 1969). As breaks between paragraphs can thus be seen as objectively traceable distinctions between arguments, paragraphs are appropriate units for the measurement of a substantive message such as populism.⁸ The coders were asked to decide for each paragraph whether the two central elements of populism – people-centrism and anti-elitism – were present. People-centrism was measured by the following question: ‘Do the authors of the article refer to the people?’ Coders were asked to include each and every reference to the people, no matter whether it concerned ‘the people’, ‘citizens’, ‘we’ (as in ‘we the people’), ‘our country’ or ‘the society’. I provided the coders with an extensive list of words that *could* refer to the people. Anti-elitism was measured by the question: ‘Do the authors of the article criticise elites?’ Coders were instructed to code only those instances in which elites *in general* were criticised. Critique on

Table 2: Selected Newspapers and Election Periods

<i>Country</i>	<i>Right-wing elite newspapers</i>	<i>Left-wing elite newspapers</i>	<i>Tabloid newspapers</i>	<i>Election periods</i>
France	Le Figaro	Le Monde and Libération	–	1993, 1997, 2002, 2007
Germany	Frankfurter Allgemeine	Süddeutsche Zeitung	Bild (right-wing)	1990, 1994, 2002, 2005
Italy	Corriere della Sera and La Stampa	La Repubblica	–	1992, 1994, 2001, 2008
Netherlands	NRC Handelsblad	De Volkskrant	De Telegraaf (right-wing)	1989, 1994, 2002, 2006
United Kingdom	The Telegraph	The Guardian	The Sun (right-wing)	1992, 1997, 2001, 2005

specific parties or politicians was not general enough to be coded as anti-elitism. So critique on, for instance, 'the establishment', 'the old parties', 'the rich' and 'European technocrats' was coded as anti-elitism; critique on, for instance, Jacques Chirac or the Labour Party was not. This measurement of populism is very similar to the classical content analysis that Matthijs Rooduijn and Teun Pauwels (2011) have employed in their measurement of election manifestos. They have demonstrated that this approach yields valid results. I have no reason to suspect that this would be different for an analysis of opinion articles.

The inter-coder reliability of the content analysis of opinion articles was assessed with Klaus Krippendorff's reliability statistic alpha (see Krippendorff, 2004). To assess general reliability, the coders had to analyse a sample of articles from British newspapers. The results are satisfactory: $\alpha = 0.81$ for people-centrism and $\alpha = 0.72$ for anti-elitism. I also assessed the inter-coder reliability for each country separately by letting the coders analyse a sample of articles from their own country. The results are acceptable as well; the alphas range from 0.72 to 0.92.⁹

The dependent variable is the degree of populism of individual opinion articles on a scale from 0 to 100. This scale has been constructed as follows. For every article, paragraphs in which people-centrism is combined with anti-elitism have been selected as populist paragraphs. The presence of only people-centrism or only anti-elitism is not enough to mark a paragraph as populist. It is, after all, the *combination* of people-centrism and anti-elitism that defines the populist ideology. Only if a critique on the (bad) elite coincides with an emphasis on the (good) people can we speak of populism.¹⁰ Therefore it was decided to operationalise populism as the percentage of populist paragraphs in each opinion article. It is important to note that the populism score thus refers to the extent to which *the authors* of opinion articles employ a populist discourse themselves. A mere reference to the populist message without a clear endorsement of it by the author is therefore not coded.

Independent Variables

To test whether public debates have become more populist (Hypothesis 1), I have used a time variable which ranges from 1 to 20, in which 1 refers to 1989 and 20 to 2008. To assess whether the electoral success of populist parties affects the degree of populism in public debates (Hypothesis 2), the predicted vote shares (by opinion polls) for allegedly populist parties have been used.¹¹ Because I have modelled electoral success of populists as an independent variable, and my focus is on the four weeks before a general election, the success of populists must precede these four weeks. I therefore looked at polls from at least four weeks and no more than six weeks before the election.¹² Because I expect that after a certain amount of populist success the degree of populism in opinion articles will not increase any more, I do not expect electoral success to be related linearly to the degree of populism in the debates. I therefore took the natural log of the predicted success of populists.¹³ To test whether elite media differ from tabloid media (Hypothesis 3), a dummy variable has been included in which 0 refers to an elite newspaper and 1 to a tabloid. To distinguish opinion leaders from 'ordinary' citizens (Hypothesis 4), I have included a range of dummies that measure the type of opinion article. I made a distinction between five types of article: editorials (written by the editor[s]); op-ed articles (written by guest contributors);

columns (written by journalists who have their own periodical 'column' in the newspaper); letters (regularly written by ordinary citizens who do not [openly] represent an elite); and other opinion articles where it is unclear to which category they belong. Because letters are usually much shorter than other opinion articles, I controlled for the length of an article by means of a variable that measures the number of paragraphs of each article. Finally, a left–right dummy has been included to control for the influence of the ideological affiliation of newspapers (0 = left; 1 = right).

Method

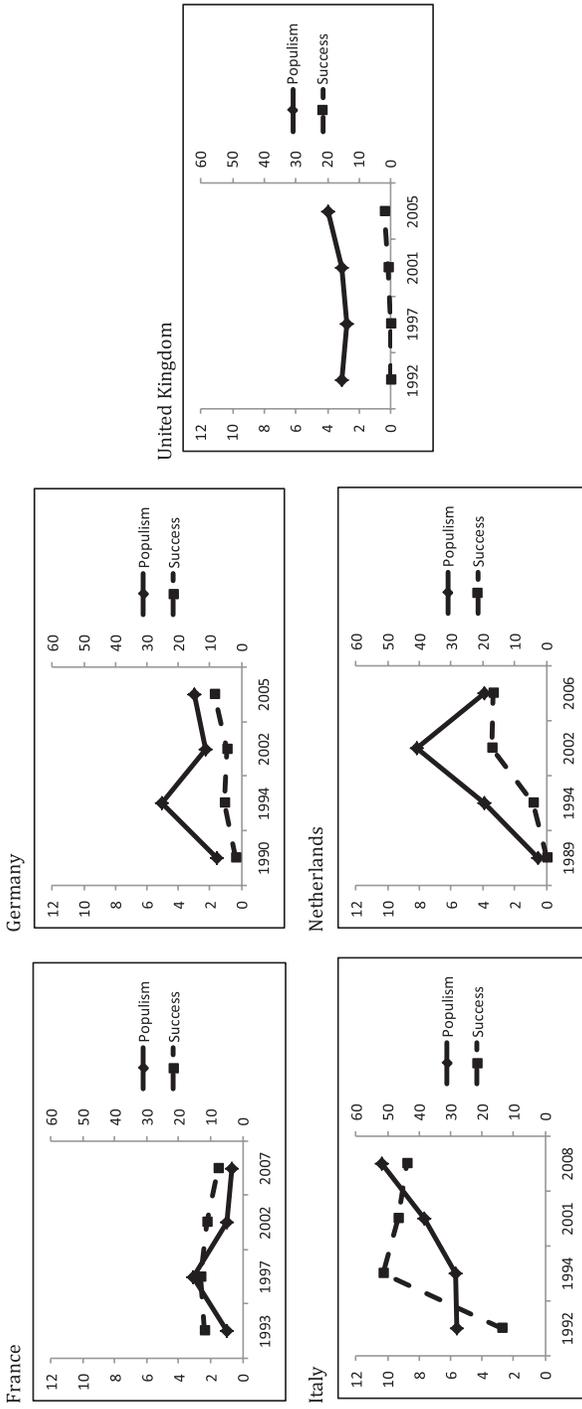
The units of analysis in this study are the individual opinion articles (N = 3,315). Because the opinion articles are not independent from each other, I employ multi-level models to test the hypotheses (Hox, 2010). The articles are nested in newspapers which are again nested in countries. Moreover, the articles are also nested in time. Because of this complicated data structure, a cross-classified model was designed in which the articles are nested in fifteen newspapers and twenty country–year combinations. The program MLwiN was used to conduct the analyses. The estimation method is restricted maximum likelihood (RML), because RML estimates have less bias than the 'regular' full maximum likelihood (FML) estimates. Most importantly for this particular study, RML is a better procedure than FML when the sample size (on the second level) is small (Hox, 2010, p. 41). I have included country dummies to take into account the nesting of both newspapers and country years in countries.¹⁴ I included the independent variables step by step in the model: first the time variable (model 1; Hypothesis 1) and then the polled success of populist parties (model 2; Hypothesis 2). Next, I included the variables on the newspaper level (model 3; Hypothesis 3) and the variables on the article level (model 4; Hypothesis 4). All variables have been introduced as fixed effects.

Results

Figure 1 displays the mean populism score for each country over time. In France it increased between 1993 and 1997, to plunge again in 2002 and in 2007. The German picture is more capricious: the score grew between 1990 and 1994. Yet in 2002 it dropped, to increase again in 2005. In Italy we see a steady growth between 1992 and 2008. The Dutch mean populism score describes a steep growth between 1989 and 2002, to drop again in 2006. The mean populism score in the UK is pretty poised: after a small decrease between 1992 and 1997, it increased in 2001 and in 2005. These first results show a pretty clear net picture: in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK opinion articles have become more populist over the years, whereas in France this has not been the case.

There is some interesting cross-national variation in the degree of populism in the public debates. The most remarkable cases are probably Italy, the Netherlands and France. The debates in Italy are much more populist than in other countries. This might well be due to widespread corruption scandals in the early 1990s (see Tarchi, 2003). Yet also in the 2000s many Italians seem to have had enough of their political parties – especially in 2008. Various opinion articles in Italian newspapers reveal a sense of powerlessness among Italian people. The following fragment from a letter to the editor of *La Repubblica*, in which the writer asks for advice on whether to vote or not, is illustrative: 'I'm fed up with the absence of ideology

Figure 1: Mean Populism Scores (Left Axis) and Success of Populists* (Right Axis) over Time per Country



* In predicted vote share.

in the election campaigns. ... Politicians barricade themselves in their distant palaces of the political caste’.

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

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

Figure 1 also shows, next to the degree of populism of public debates, the predicted successes of populist parties. In France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, the predicted vote shares for populists coincide with the degree of populism in opinion articles. When the parties were more electorally successful in the polls, the debates became more populist. When the parties were less successful, the debates became less populist. In Italy the electoral success of populists and the degree of populism in opinion articles do not seem to coincide. It is important to emphasise, however, that although the vote shares of Forza Italia (FI), LN and Alleanza Nazionale (AN) dropped in 2001 and 2008, these parties were still very successful in these years (in fact, in both 2001 and 2008 they won the elections and also formed a government coalition together). These first results indicate that there is a correlation between the success of populists in the polls and the degree of populism in opinion articles: the more success there is for populist parties, the more populism there is in public debates.

Figure 2 indicates that public debates in Italy are the most populist, followed by public debates in the Dutch media. The tabloid newspaper *De Telegraaf* is much more populist than the elite newspapers *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Volkskrant*. The UK and Germany are very similar to each other regarding their mean populism scores. Moreover, in both cases, and this is rather unexpected, tabloid newspapers (*The Sun* and *Bild*) are less populist than elite newspapers (*The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, respectively). Public debates in France are the least populist, but *Libération* is more populist than the more established elite newspapers *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*. These findings indicate that the opinion articles in tabloids are not more populist than the opinion articles in elite newspapers.

The mean populism scores per type of opinion article are presented in Figure 3. In all countries the letter is the most populist type of opinion article. In France, Germany and the Netherlands, op-eds are the second most populist articles. In most countries, editorials have very low mean populism scores.

The more formal test of the hypotheses is presented in Table 3. In model 1 the time variable is entered as a fixed effect. It significantly affects the degree of populism in opinion articles. Moreover, the regression coefficient is in the predicted direction ($B = 0.13$,

Figure 2: Mean Populism Scores per Newspaper

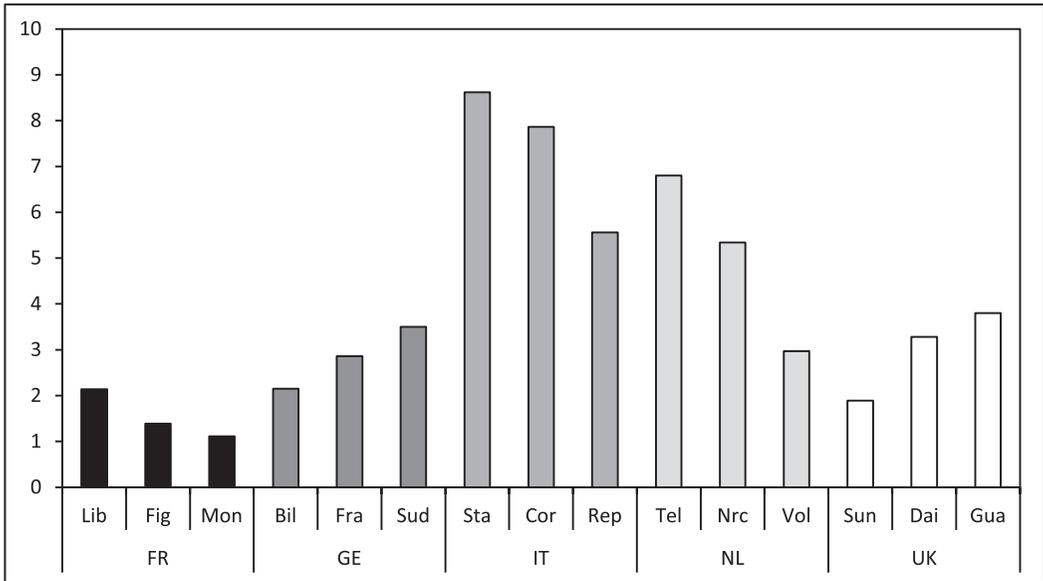


Figure 3: Mean Populism Scores per Article Type

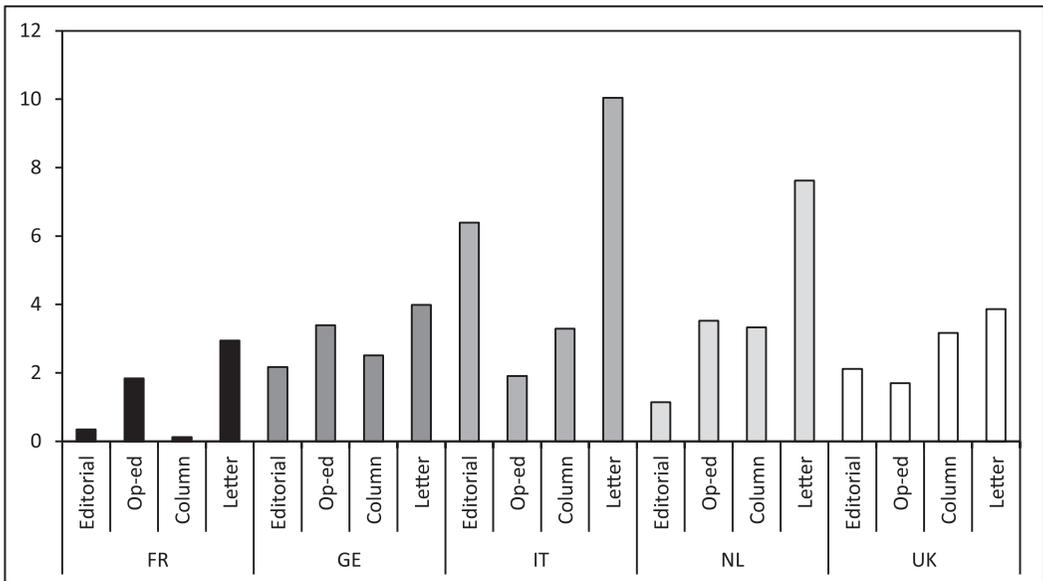


Table 3: Cross-Classified Multi-level Models Explaining the Degree of Populism in Opinion Articles (with Country Dummies)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)
Intercept	-0.12	(1.13)	-3.14*	(1.44)	-3.45*	(1.51)	-3.50**	(1.60)
Country-year variables (N = 20)								
Time	0.13*	(0.06)	-0.04	(0.07)	-0.04	(0.07)	-0.05	(0.07)
Success populists			2.09**	(0.62)	2.11**	(0.62)	1.98**	(0.62)
Newspaper variables (N = 15)								
Left/right					0.71	(0.96)	0.48	(0.92)
Tabloid					-0.04	(1.25)	0.48	(1.20)
Article variables (N = 3,315)								
Article type (ref = editorial)								
Op-ed							1.22	(0.97)
Column							0.47	(0.91)
Letter							2.99**	(0.66)
Other							2.05	(3.43)
Article length							-0.08	(0.05)
Variance components								
Country-year level	1.27	(1.10)	0.16	(0.80)	0.12	(0.79)	0.08	(0.77)
Newspaper level	0.62	(0.79)	1.15	(0.85)	1.50	(0.98)	1.30	(0.90)
Article level	220.68**	(5.46)	220.67**	(5.46)	220.71**	(5.46)	219.12**	(5.42)
Deviance	27,313.02		27,303.59		27,303.73		27,264.90	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

significant at $p < 0.05$). This means that opinion articles indeed have become more populist over the years. In model 2 the success of populists in the polls is introduced. This variable significantly affects the degree of populism ($B = 2.09$, $p < 0.01$): the bigger the polled success for populists, the more populist are the opinion articles. The newspaper variables are entered in model 3. The debates in tabloids turn out not to be more populist than the debates in elite newspapers, and the left/right affiliation of a newspaper does not significantly affect the populism score either. In model 4 I introduced the variables that are measured on the article level. The coefficients clearly indicate that letters are more populist than editorials ($B = 2.99$, $p < 0.01$). Op-eds, columns and other opinion articles do not differ significantly from editorials, which form the reference category. I have also estimated the same model with other reference categories (not shown here). It turns out that letters significantly differ from all other articles, whereas none of the other articles significantly differs from the others. To make sure that the difference between letters and other articles

is not due to the length of articles (letters are usually much shorter than other opinion articles), I controlled for article length. The length of an article has no significant effect on its degree of populism.

I conducted two types of robustness check. First, I made use of the jackknife procedure and estimated the regression models for different sub-sets of the sample. I re-estimated the models after first dropping the country years one at a time, and then dropping the newspapers one after another. This gives an indication of how sensitive the results are for outlying country years and newspapers. The results indicate that the findings are robust. Second, because the dependent variable in this study is not normally distributed (it is strongly inflated by zeros), I also tested how sensitive the results are to different model specifications. I employed different procedures to estimate the regression coefficients and the corresponding standard errors, such as robust standard errors, bootstrapping and negative binomial regression models. They all lead to the same substantive conclusions.¹⁵

Conclusion and Discussion

Although a lot has been written about the electoral success of Western European populist political parties (e.g., Betz, 1994; Decker, 2008; Lucardie, 2008; Pauwels, 2010; Rydgren, 2008; Tarchi, 2008), less is known about the diffusion of the actual populist *message*. Mair (2002) and Mudde (2004) have argued that the populist message has become increasingly widespread because mainstream political parties have incorporated elements of populism in their own political rhetoric. Mudde therefore speaks of a populist *Zeitgeist*. But how widespread is this *Zeitgeist*? Has the populist message transcended the arena of party politics and has it become more prevalent than before in general public debates in the media?

In this study I have demonstrated that this is indeed the case. The public debates in Western European countries have become more populist in the last two decades. This is an important finding because it indicates that participants in public debates have increasingly employed the populist message in their media contributions. The analyses also show that there is a strong correlation with the electoral success of populist parties. This means that it is probable that the electoral success of populists affects the degree of populism in public debates in newspapers. However, it is also likely that public debates have a feedback effect on the success of populist parties. Once people-centrism and anti-elitism have become more salient in the debates, citizens are inclined to support those parties that 'own' these populist themes.

Although my analyses have only shown that a *correlation* exists between the success of populists and the degree of populism in public debates, the empirical results nonetheless indicate that it is plausible that there is *at least* a causal effect running from the success of populist parties to public debates. The reason is that it is unlikely that the correlating fluctuations of the success of populist parties and the degree of populism in the debates (see Figure 1) are the result of *only* a reversed unidirectional causal effect of the degree of populism in the debates on the success of populists. After all, populist success depends on much more than favourable public debates in the media. Supply-side factors, such as an appealing party leader and a good party organisation (see Taggart, 2000; Van Kessel, 2011), exert a decisive effect on party success as well. It would be highly unlikely that favourable conditions on the supply side were present every time public debates became more populist unless there was not also an effect running from the success of populist parties to the degree

of populism in the debates. Further research on the basis of time-series analysis could provide more insights into these causal effects.

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

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

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

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

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

(Accepted: 18 November 2012)

(Published online: 13 September 2013)

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Notes

Previous versions of this article have been presented at the Department of Political Science at the University of Southern Denmark (2012), the Comparative Politics PhD Club at the University of Amsterdam (2012), the MPSA Annual National Conference in Chicago (2012) and the IPSA World Congress in Madrid (2012). The author would like to thank the participants and in particular Lutz Hofer, Duncan McDonnell, Tom van der Meer, Benno Netelenbos and Gijs Schumacher. Special thanks to Wouter Van Der Brug and Sarah De Lange for their valuable feedback. Finally I would like to thank the reviewers for their useful comments.

- 1 Some call it a 'thin-centred' ideology, others a discourse or a world view (see Hawkins, 2010; Mudde, 2004).
- 2 As a *thin-centred* ideology, populism differs from *full* ideologies such as liberalism, socialism and conservatism. Full ideologies offer an all-inclusive view of the world, whereas thin-centred ideologies focus on a confined range of concepts (e.g. feminism, ecologism and nationalism). Populism is a thin-centred ideology because it focuses on the relationship between the elite and the people.
- 3 Walgrave and De Swert (2004) call this the 'media-make-the-issue' hypothesis, in which they combine agenda-setting theory with issue ownership.
- 4 Parties have been classified as populist only when at least two scholars of populism have identified them as such. It has been shown empirically that the election manifestos of these selected parties are strongly populist (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011).
- 5 The goal was to collect two elite newspapers (one left wing and one right wing), and one tabloid newspaper. However, it was not possible to find a national tabloid newspaper to analyse in Italy. This might be the case because in Italy the development of commercial media came relatively late, and because the press is strongly elite oriented with a strong focus on political life. See Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p. 730. I have therefore collected a third elite newspaper: *La Stampa*. In the French case, I have not found a real national tabloid either. I have therefore included the newspaper *Libération* as a third newspaper. Although *Libération* can best be described as a (left-wing) elite newspaper, it differs from the more established elite newspapers *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*. For this reason, I have also checked what happens when I drop *Libération* from the analysis. This does not affect the main findings. In the Netherlands I have analysed *De Telegraaf* as a functional equivalent of a tabloid. Although it is less sensationalist than, for instance, *The Sun* and *Bild*, it is certainly not an elite newspaper and it comes closer to a tabloid than any other newspaper in the Netherlands (see, for instance, Gleissner and De Vreese, 2005; Pfetsch *et al.*, 2008). Because of the difficulty in finding national tabloids in these countries, I have also checked what happens when I drop all tabloids from the analysis. This does not affect the results.
- 6 Every election period consists of four weeks of six days. (Many newspapers do not have a separate Sunday issue, so I excluded the Sunday issues from my sample.) Every other day was selected, as a result of which every day of the week (except Sunday) is sampled twice.
- 7 This content analysis has been carried out by ten coders: two native coders for every country.
- 8 Other units of measurement such as 'themes' (also referred to as statements or appeals) are less appropriate, because it is rather difficult to extract them from texts (Weber, 1990, p. 22). This can lead to problems with the reliability of the measurement. Measurement units such as words or sentences are also less appropriate than paragraphs because these units are too limited to be employed for the measurement of a set of ideas. After all, most ideas require more than one word or one sentence to be expressed in full detail.
- 9 For people-centrism: $\alpha = 0.81$ (FR), $\alpha = 0.79$ (GE), $\alpha = 0.84$ (IT), $\alpha = 0.83$ (NL) and $\alpha = 0.92$ (UK). For anti-elitism: $\alpha = 0.74$ (FR), $\alpha = 0.80$ (GE), $\alpha = 0.72$ (IT), $\alpha = 0.78$ (NL) and $\alpha = 0.87$ (UK). For the reliability test I selected about 5 per cent of the sampled articles. For more information about the content analysis contact the author.
- 10 It needs to be emphasised that a reference to the people does not necessarily imply that the people is conceived of as a 'pure' and 'homogeneous' actor. However, a close reading of the results of the content analysis indicates that when a reference to the people is accompanied by an anti-elitist claim, the writer of the text almost always argues that the people is, in one way or another, betrayed by the elite. The argument that the people (singular) is betrayed by the elite implies that the people is conceived of as a unified actor and thus as a homogeneous entity – at least with regard to its relationship with the elite.
- 11 Allegedly populist parties are parties that have been labelled populist by various scholars. See the parties that have been mentioned in the section on case selection.
- 12 The polls have been executed by CSA and Ipsos in France; by the Politbarometer of the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen in Germany; by Swg and Ipsos-explorer in Italy; by Interview/NSS and Peil.nl in the Netherlands; and by Ipsos MORI in the UK.
- 13 Because this variable contains some zeros, and it is not possible to take the natural log of zero, I have added 1 to the variable before taking the natural log.
- 14 Because of the low N on this country level (N = 5) it was impossible to add an extra level in the multi-level analysis.
- 15 For the results of these robustness checks contact the author.

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