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A Populist *Zeitgeist*?
Has Populism Become Mainstream in Western Europe (1988-2008)?

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the discursive reactions to the electoral success of populist parties. Our point of departure is Mudde's (2004) claim that populism is not necessarily the prerogative of populist parties; it has been adopted by mainstream parties as well. So, according to him, a populist Zeitgeist has emerged in Western Europe. This paper puts Mudde's claim to the test and investigates whether populism is indeed contagious. On the basis of the results of a content analysis of election manifestos of parties in five Western European countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) we conclude that Mudde's claim is not supported by empirical evidence. Mainstream parties have not become more populist, nor do we find evidence that they change their discourse when confronted with successful populist challengers. Yet, we do find that populist parties change their own discourse after being successful: Their initial success makes them more moderate.

Introduction

Populist parties have become important players in Western European party systems. Over the past decades, radical right-wing populist parties have entered national parliaments in countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, whereas radical left-wing populist parties have gained representation in Germany, the Netherlands and Scotland. Several populist parties, including the *Fremskrittspartiet* (FRP), *Perussuomalaiset* (PS), and the *Schweizerische Volkspartei* (SVP), are supported by more than twenty per cent of the electorate, and others (e.g. the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreich* (FPÖ), the *Lega Nord* (LN) and the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF)) have assumed office in recent years.

Various scholars have examined the way in which mainstream parties have responded to the electoral success of radical right-wing populist parties (Bale, 2003, Bale et al., 2010, Downs, 2001, Heinisch, 2003, Loxbo, 2010, Minkenberg, 2001, Mudde, 2007, Van Spanje, 2010, Van Spanje and Van der Brug, 2009). However, their studies have primarily focused on the extent to which mainstream parties have reacted by copying their anti-immigrant or nativist stances. Far less attention has been paid to populist discourse, which is also characteristic of these radical right-wing populist parties. Moreover, these studies have exclusively focused on radical *right-wing* populist parties, ignoring the radical *left-wing* populist parties that have emerged in recent years as well.

In this paper we analyze the consequences of the rise of both radical left- and right-wing populist parties in Western Europe. We focus, first of all, on the effects of the rise of populist parties on the discourse of mainstream parties. In addition, we will also examine how other parties respond to their rise, and particularly to their electoral success. Our point of departure is Mudde's (2004) claim that populism has become an important feature of Western European politics, because it has become an integral part of the discursive appeal of various types of parties. In addition to radical left- and right-wing populist parties themselves, these include mainstream parties as well. The latter have, according to Mudde, recently adopted a populist discourse in reaction to the emergence of populist parties. In this respect, populism can be considered contagious (Bale, et al., 2010, Mény and Surel, 2002). The spread of populism has led Mudde to conclude that we are witnessing a populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe. However, his conclusion is not based on extensive empirical research. Are we indeed witnessing a populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe? Do mainstream parties react to the rise of populist parties by adopting a populist discourse? In this paper we put Mudde's claim to the test and examine whether mainstream parties have become more populist since the late 1980s.

Several authors have argued that populism constitutes a challenge to liberal democracy (e.g. Abts and Rummens, 2007, Mény and Surel, 2002). They argue that liberal democracy consists of two pillars: a democratic pillar and a liberal pillar (Mouffe, 2005). The notion of popular sovereignty is central to the first pillar, whereas in the second pillar the importance of checks and balances, minority rights, and representative institutions is highlighted. Although populists are supportive of the principles that underpin the democratic pillar, they are highly critical of the ones that underpin the liberal pillar. They believe that checks and balances, minority rights and representative institutions inhibit the direct, unmediated expression of the will of the people (Akkerman, 2003, Mény and Surel, 2002). Because the liberal pillar is an essential component of liberal democracy, a populist *Zeitgeist* might have profound implications for the functioning of this type of democracy. After all, in a populist *Zeitgeist*, mainstream and populist parties alike are sceptical about the value of checks and balances, minority right and representative institutions.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss our definition of populism. Populism is a contested concept, so it is of vital importance to be clear about the way the concept is used in this study. Second, we focus on Mudde's *Zeitgeist* argument and investigate under what conditions mainstream parties are likely to become populist. Third, we pay attention to the design and method used in our study. In particular, we devote attention to the method of content analysis which we employ to establish whether parties are (more or less) populist. Fourth, we analyze whether mainstream parties have become populist since the late 1980s. Finally, we discuss the implications of our analyses for our understanding of the consequences of the rise of populism in Western Europe.

Defining populism

Since the 1960s, there has been a fierce debate about how populism should be defined. Already in 1969 Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner organized a conference

aimed at identifying a core set of characteristics of populism. After the conference, however, they concluded that no consensus could be found (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969). More than forty years later, scholars still experience difficulties when defining populism (Laclau, 2005). The concept has “an essential impalpability, an awkward conceptual slipperiness” (Taggart, 2000). However, in recent years an increasing number of scholars seems to agree that populism can best be defined as a discourse or thin-centred ideology in which the good people are positioned against the bad elite (Abts and Rummens, 2007, Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008, Canovan, 2004, Hawkins, 2009, Hawkins, 2010, Mudde, 2007, Mudde, 2004, Pauwels, 2011, Rooduijn and Pauwels, forthcoming, Stanley, 2008). The differences between populism conceptualized as a discourse and as a thin ideology are minimal, since both conceptualizations highlight that populism refers to a set of ideas (Hawkins, 2010). This ideational approach should be distinguished from the stylistic approach, in which populism is conceived of as a political style or strategy (Bos et al., 2011, Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, Mazzoleni, 2003, Weyland, 2001) and the organizational approach, in which populism is seen as an organizational form (Taggart, 2000).

The central elements of the populist discourse or ideology are people-centrism and anti-elitism. These two elements cannot be understood separately from each other as populism specifically concerns the antagonistic *relationship* between the two (Laclau, 2005, Panizza, 2005). ‘The people’ is defined in opposition to the elite, and the elite is defined in opposition to the people. Populists worship the people, which is believed to be homogeneous, and emphasize that any democracy is built on the idea of popular sovereignty (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, Mény and Surel, 2002). The ‘people’, however, may mean different things to different people in different circumstances (Canovan, 1981,

Mudde, 2004). It can refer, for instance, to the electorate, to the nation, to the peasants, or to the working class (Canovan, 1981, Pasquino, 2008, Taggart, 2000).¹

Populists accuse the elite of being alienated from the people, and of being arrogant, incompetent and selfish (Barr, 2009, Canovan, 2002, Laclau, 2005, Mudde, 2004, Weyland, 2001). The elite is believed to have no idea what ordinary people deem important, and to only focus on its own interests. Anti-elitism can be directed at the cultural elite, including intellectuals, journalists and judges, or at the economic elite, including businessmen and the capitalist system. Most often, however, anti-elitism is directed at the political elite, which is portrayed as corrupt and out of touch with reality. The elite is accused of ignoring the will of the man in the street and of only implementing policies that benefit themselves (Mudde, 2004). Or, in the words of Mény and Surel (2002: 13): “Elites are accused of abusing their position of power instead of acting in conformity with the interests of the people as a whole.”

Some scholars argue that populists do not only criticize elites, but also target ‘outsiders’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008, Taguieff, 1995). According to Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008), populists attempt to exclude ‘dangerous others’ – individuals or groups who are not part of what populists consider to be ‘the people’. They contend that populists try to defend the collective identity and interests of the ‘true’ people against enemies from outside. Depending on the context, these outsiders can be immigrants, religious groups, or the unemployed. Consequently, populism is often associated with exclusionary ideas, such anti-Americanism, anti-Islamism, nativism, and xenophobia.

Other scholars dispute that populism is inherently exclusionary (Canovan, 1981, Mudde, 2007, Taggart, 2000). They claim that exclusionism is a central

¹ Taggart (2004, 2002, 2000) therefore proposes to use the term ‘heartland’ instead of ‘people’. The heartland refers to an idealized conception of the people and is thus a tool to describe the discourse or ideology of populist parties in more detail. In this paper, however, we are not interested in specific conceptions of the people, but in the *degree* of populism of political parties across cases and over time. Therefore we do not employ the term ‘heartland’ here.

feature of the discourse of *radical right-wing* populist parties, but that it is not part of the core characteristics of populism as such. Whether or not populists are exclusionary depends on the ideology they adhere to. Populism can be combined with ideologies of both the left and the right (March, 2007), which gives it a chameleonic quality (Taggart, 2000). Following these authors, we do not consider exclusionism to be a constitutive component of populism. We believe that including exclusionism in the definition of populism would lead to a bias towards radical right versions of populism, whereas we are explicitly interested in both left- and right-wing populism.

We thus define populism as a discourse or thin-centred ideology, the core of which is the antagonistic relationship between the good ‘ordinary’ people and the bad ‘corrupt’ elite.

Is populism contagious?

Mudde (2004) argues that mainstream parties in Western Europe have increasingly resorted to using populist rhetoric.

“While populism has been less prominent in mainstream politics in Western Europe, the last decade or so has seen a significant change in this. Various mainstream opposition parties have challenged the government using familiar populist arguments” (Mudde, 2004: 550).

To substantiate his point, Mudde (2004: 550) discusses a statement made by William Hague, leader of the Conservatives, during the British election campaign in 2001. In a speech Hague accused the leadership of New Labour of being part of ‘the condescending liberal elite’ in an attempt to construct an image of a left-wing metropolitan elite that was completely out of touch with ordinary Brits. Examining a speech that Tony Blair delivered to the British Labour Party Conference in 1999, Mair (2002) comes to a similar conclusion. He notes that “One of the first things [this speech] reveals is the extent to which a populist language

has now become acceptable within what has long been perceived as a decidedly non-populist political culture” (Mair, 2002: 92). Other Western European political leaders of mainstream parties, such as Nicolas Sarkozy in France and Wouter Bos in the Netherlands, have also been qualified as populists (De Beus, 2009). We therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: the discourse of mainstream parties in Western Europe has become more populist since the late 1980s

However, Mudde remains rather vague when he discusses the underlying causes of the dawning of a populist *Zeitgeist*. Why would mainstream parties have become more populist in recent years? Harmel and Janda (1994) argue that parties are conservative organizations that only change their discourse when they are under pressure. The motto of most parties is ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ (Harmel and Svåsand, 1997: 316). The pressure that will drive parties to change their discourse might come from within (e.g. a leadership change), but in most cases it will result from external developments, such as electoral losses and the rise of new parties (Harmel and Janda, 1994: 267).

Several authors (Harmel et al., 1995, Harmel and Janda, 1994, Janda et al., 1995) have demonstrated that electoral shocks are among the most important causes of party change. According to Schlesinger (1984: 390), political parties might best be described as “forms of organized trial and error”. They respond to the political market: When they lose seats, they realize that they are doing something wrong and therefore change their strategy. By means of several case studies, Panebianco (1988) shows how the British Conservatives, the French Gaullists, and the German Christian Democrats changed their discursive strategy because they suffered severe electoral losses. We therefore expect that mainstream parties that lose seats will adjust their political discourse. In an era of increasing levels of political cynicism, distrust, and personalization of politics, they might

believe that an appeal to the man in the street and a critical stance towards cultural, economic, and political elites might be a remedy to electoral decline. In other words, mainstream parties that experience an electoral setback might resort to populism. Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2: the greater the electoral losses of a mainstream party, the more populist the discourse of this party becomes

It is also possible that mainstream parties respond more specifically to the electoral threat of populist parties. Mudde (2007: 283) argues that mainstream parties will become more populist when they have to compete with (radical right-wing) populist parties “in an attempt to keep or regain their electorate”. As long as populist parties are relatively unsuccessful, mainstream parties might not be inclined to adjust their discursive strategies. Instead, they might opt for a dismissive strategy and hope that by ignoring populist contenders, they will disappear (cf. Bale et al 2008, Downs 2001, Meguid 2005). However, when populist parties become successful, mainstream parties may respond by incorporating the populist discourse in their own programmes (Mény and Surel, 2002). If they think that populist discourse is one of the drivers of populist parties’ success, they may likewise think that the use of this discourse will help them winning back these votes. So, when populist parties are on the rise, mainstream parties are likely to adopt an accommodative strategy and copy their populist discourse (cf. Bale, et al., 2010, Downs, 2001, Harmel and Svåsand, 1997, Meguid, 2005). They will react more strongly when the populist party is seen as a credible threat than when it is seen as a mere nuisance (Otjes, 2010: 6). These observations lead us to formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: the more successful populist parties, the more populist the discourse of mainstream parties becomes

Design and method

Because Mudde's *Zeitgeist* argument concerns Western Europe, we focus on five countries from this region: France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. We have selected these countries, because the electoral success of populist parties varies strongly across these countries. France, Italy and the Netherlands have experienced the upsurge of electorally successful populist parties, whereas the electoral success of populist parties in Germany and the United Kingdom is smaller (see Table 1). We focus on the period between 1988 and 2008, because populist parties in Western Europe surged mainly in this period. In each country we selected two elections in the 1980s or 1990s and two elections in the 2000s.

In every country we analyze the discourse of mainstream (i.e. Christian-democratic, conservative, liberal, and social democratic parties) and non-mainstream parties.² A number of non-mainstream parties have been described as 'populist' by country experts (see Table 1). This is the case for the *Front National* (FN) in France, which was elected to the *Assemblée Nationale* on a radical right-wing populist program in 1986. The electoral support for the party grew steadily until 2002, when its leader Jean-Marie Le Pen became the first runner-up in the presidential election. In Germany the radical left-wing populist *Die Linke* has seen a sharp increase in its support after the 2002 elections to the *Bundestag*. Radical right-wing populist parties, such as the *Deutsche Volksunion* (DVU), the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD), and the *Republikaner* (REP) have not (yet) made it into the federal parliament. Some of the most successful populist parties can be found in Italy. In 1994, businessman Silvio Berlusconi decided to compete in the parliamentary elections with two electoral coalitions, the one composed of his neo-liberal populist party *Forza Italia* (FI) and the neo-

² Parties have been classified using the coding scheme of the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006).

fascist party *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), the other of FI and the radical right-wing populist *Lega Nord* (LN). Together the two electoral coalitions won the elections and Berlusconi formed a short-lived cabinet. Although his cabinet had to resign after six months, subsequent electoral victories allowed him to return to power in 2001 and 2008. The Netherlands has also experienced the breakthrough of a number of populist parties, most notably the *Centrum Democraten* (CD) in 1981, the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) in 1994, the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF) in 2002, and the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* in 2006. Finally, in the United Kingdom the populists – the eurosceptic *United Kingdom Independence Party* (UKIP) and the radical right-wing populist *British National Party* (BNP) – have not made it into House of Commons yet, but the parties are represented in the European Parliament. For a complete overview of the parties included in the analysis see Appendix 1.

[Table 1 about here]

We have measured how populist the discourse of parties is by means of a content analysis of election manifestos. Although an election manifesto is only one type of document in which a party's discourse can be observed, we have chosen to focus on election manifestos for two reasons. First, an election manifesto can be seen as an authoritative document that gives a clear overview of the ideas of a party at a certain point in time. In most cases, politicians are bound to the policy promises laid down in an election manifesto. "As an official document, it will be difficult for party members to resile from policies in the party manifesto, while party leaders can be charged with failure to implement published manifesto pledges when given the chance to do so" (Laver and Garry, 2000: 620). Second, election manifestos are appropriate documents for comparative content analysis, because they are reasonably comparable between countries and over time. In fact, "The best-known time series data on party positions are derived from party election manifestos" (Klemmensen et al., 2007: 747).

The populist discourse or ideology consists of a set of claims about the relationship between the good people and the bad elites. Because these claims are usually presented in multiple sentences, the sentence is not an appropriate unit of analysis in this study (cf. Guthrie et al., 2004). Themes, also referred to as ‘appeals’ or ‘statements’, do represent clearly delineated arguments. It is, however, difficult to extract them from texts (Weber, 1990: 22), which makes it difficult to obtain reliable results when using the theme as unit of analysis. We have therefore decided to code paragraphs. It has been established that authors use paragraphs to mark thematic discontinuities in texts (Ji, 2008, Koen et al., 1969) and it can therefore be expected that breaks between paragraphs represent objectively traceable distinctions between arguments. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that reliable and valid results can be obtained by coding paragraphs (Rooduijn and Pauwels, forthcoming).

The manifestos have been analyzed by extensively trained coders, who used a codebook to determine whether paragraphs were populist or not. More specifically, the coders were asked to determine whether paragraphs contained indications of people-centrism and anti-elitism. People-centrism was operationalized by the following question: ‘Do the authors of the manifesto refer to the people?’ Coders were instructed to look at every reference to the people, no matter whether it concerned, for instance, ‘citizens’, ‘our country’, or ‘the society’. Anti-elitism was measured by means of the question: ‘Do the authors of the manifesto criticize elites?’ The critique had to concern elites *in general*, criticism directed towards specific parties or specific politicians was not coded as anti-elitism.

To assess the inter-coder reliability of the results of the content analysis, the coders analyzed a sample of paragraphs from the British election manifestos. We used Krippendorff’s alpha to calculate reliability scores. The reliability scores are $\alpha = 0.72$ for people-centrism and $\alpha = 0.69$ for anti-elitism, which is satisfactory by the standards normally applied (Krippendorff, 2004: 241). To assess the inter-

coder reliability of the country teams, coders analyzed a sample of paragraphs from manifestos from their own country.³ The alphas range from 0.66 to 0.89, showing that the inter-coder reliability within the various country teams is also satisfactorily.⁴

The dependent variable in this study is the extent to which parties can be qualified as populist, which is measured on a scale that ranges from 0 to 100. To construct this scale, every paragraph in which anti-establishment critique is combined with a reference to the people has been classified as a populist paragraph. After all, it is the *combination* of people-centrism and anti-elitism that defines the populist discourse. For every manifesto we have computed the percentage of populist paragraphs. We have taken into account that the introduction of an election manifesto usually contains the core message of a party. The remainder of the manifesto is often a detailed and technical elaboration of the arguments that are made in the introduction. We have therefore counted the introductory paragraphs twice (see Van der Pas et al., forthcoming, Vliegthart, 2007).⁵

The face validity of this measurement of populism is quite good.⁶ The manifestos of the populist parties listed in Table 1 contain relatively high percentages of populist paragraphs (between 1.4 and 23.1 per cent, with an average of 9.2 per cent) and are much more populist than the manifestos of the mainstream parties (between 0 and 5.5 per cent, with an average of 0.6 per cent) (see Figure 1). Among the populist parties the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) has the highest (23.1

³ The sample consisted of roughly five percent of the total number of paragraphs that had to be coded by the country teams.

⁴ The results for people-centrism are: $\alpha = 0.75$ (FR), $\alpha = 0.74$ (GE), $\alpha = 0.89$ (IT), $\alpha = 0.78$ (NL) and $\alpha = 0.73$ (UK). The results for anti-elitism are: $\alpha = 0.69$ (FR), $\alpha = 0.79$ (GE), $\alpha = 0.84$ (IT), $\alpha = 0.84$ (NL) and $\alpha = 0.66$ (UK).

⁵ We have also performed our analyses with weights of 1 and 3, which did not change the results.

⁶ For a more extensive discussion of the validity of the measurement see Rooduijn and Pauwels (forthcoming).

per cent) and the *Partido della Liberta* (PdL) the lowest mean score (1.6 per cent). The *Liberal Democrats* (UK) have the highest mean populism score of the mainstream parties (2.3 per cent), while a number of mainstream parties have no populist paragraphs in their manifestos at all.

[Figure 1 about here]

To test the hypotheses, we measured various independent variables. Based on a typology that distinguishes between mainstream parties, non-populist non-mainstream parties and populist non-mainstream parties, we constructed two dummy variables. The first one measures whether a party is mainstream or not, and the second measures whether a party is non-populist-non-mainstream or not. In the analysis the populist parties are thus the reference category. To determine whether there is a populist *Zeitgeist* we included a time variable that ranges from 0 to 19, in which 0 represents 1989 and 19 represents 2008. The success of populist parties is measured by the percentage of votes populist parties in a country received in the previous national election. The extent to which parties have experienced electoral loss is measured by the percentage of seats they have lost during the previous national election.⁷

The unit of analysis in the statistical analysis is the election manifesto. There are 87 election manifestos nested in 33 parties, which are themselves nested in 5 countries. However, given the low N , we are not able to estimate a multilevel model. We have therefore used clustered standard errors for an accurate estimation of our regression coefficients: the 87 manifestos are clustered in 33 political parties.⁸

⁷ Election results have been obtained from Döring and Manow (2010), elezionistorico.interno.it, and www.parliament.uk.

⁸ In order to prevent multicollinearity problems, all continuous independent variables were centred around their means before constructing interaction terms.

Results

Table 2 shows that the average mainstream manifesto contains a low percentage of populist paragraphs. The percentages range from 0.00 (Germany in the 1990s) to 1.46 (United Kingdom in the 2000s). Interestingly, the mainstream parties in the United Kingdom score much higher on the populism scale than the mainstream parties in France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. It might therefore not be a coincidence that most examples of mainstream parties using a populist discourse mentioned in the literature come from this country. Arguably, differences in the extent to which mainstream parties can be qualified as populist might be explained to some extent by the type of party system. In the British two-party system the competition between the Conservatives and Labour is likely to be framed in terms of opposition versus government and therefore of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ or ‘the ruling party’. In a multi-party system mainstream parties have the possibility to criticize some specific parties, without criticizing the establishment as such. Moreover, they have incentives to tone down their criticism, because they have to form coalition governments. A possible explanation for the rather high score in Italy during the 1990s is that this reflects the corruption scandal that erupted in the country in 1992. After the scandal came to light, the established parties were accused of being corrupt, which gave outsiders like the *Democratici di Sinistra* (DS) / *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS) an opportunity to capitalize on a populist discourse.

If we compare the 1990s with the 2000s, mainstream parties do not seem to have become more populist. The average level of populism in the manifestos of mainstream parties was 0.59 in the 1990s and 0.52 in the 2000s. Instead of an increase of populism, we thus witness a small decrease. If we look at the countries individually, we see a strong decline in France (from 0.47 to 0.18) and Italy (from 0.90 to 0.17), and a more moderate decline in Germany (from 0.08 to 0.00). In the Netherlands we see a rather negligible increase from 0.50 to 0.51. Only the United

Kingdom has experienced a substantial increase of the extent to which mainstream parties use a populist discourse in their manifestos (from 1.28 to 1.46). On the basis of these descriptive accounts, one is inclined to conclude there is no populist *Zeitgeist*.

[Table 2 about here]

A more formal test of the *Zeitgeist* hypothesis is presented in Table 3.⁹ Model 1 estimates which parties are more populist than others. The results demonstrate that mainstream parties are significantly less populist than populist parties ($b = -7.02, p < 0.01$). Yet there is no evidence that non-populist non-mainstream parties are less populist than populist parties. Although the regression coefficient is negative (-2.87), it is not significant. It can thus be concluded that mainstream parties differ from populist parties and non-populist non-mainstream parties when it comes to the extent to which their manifestos can be qualified as populist.¹⁰ In model 2 we estimate the effect of time in order to examine whether the three types of parties mentioned above have become more populist over time. The time variable has no significant effect on the extent to which parties use a populist discourse. In fact, the sign of the regression coefficient is not positive (as expected), but negative. Adding time to the model does not change the effects

⁹ Because of the low N we decided not to include control variables, such as the left-right position of a party, its size, and whether it is in government or not. Yet we have estimated the effects of these variables in a separate analysis (see Appendix 2). None of these variables exert a significant effect on populism. We have therefore not included these variables in the analyses presented in the main text.

¹⁰ On the basis of the results presented in Table 3 it cannot be concluded that mainstream parties differ from non-populist non-mainstream parties. We have, however, also estimated the regression coefficients using non-populist non-mainstream parties as our reference category. The results of this analysis demonstrate that mainstream parties also differ from non-populist non-mainstream parties.

found in the first model. Moreover, the interactions between ‘mainstream’ and ‘time’ and ‘non-populist non mainstream’ and ‘time’ are not significant (see model 3). We can therefore reject our first hypothesis. The discourse of mainstream parties in Western Europe has not become more populist since the late 1980s, nor has that of non-populist non-mainstream and populist parties. So, these formal tests verify our initial observation that there is no evidence for a populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe.

[Table 3 about here]

So far, our analyses focused on *general* patterns in the extent to which parties use populist discourse. We now turn to more *specific* patterns, in particular how parties react to electoral success or defeat. We hypothesized that mainstream parties will be more likely to resort to a populist discourse when they are confronted with either electoral defeat or with successful populist parties. These hypotheses are tested in models 4, 5, 6 and 7 (Table 3). We can conclude that electoral losses during previous elections do not influence the extent to which parties include populist paragraphs in their manifestos. Moreover, the effect of electoral loss does not vary between mainstream parties, non-populist non-mainstream parties, and populist parties, since none of the interactions is significant. We therefore have to reject our second hypothesis. Mainstream parties that lose seats do not become more populist.

Model 6 shows that parties in general do not respond to the electoral success of populist parties by adopting a more populist discourse. Yet the interaction effect between ‘mainstream’ and ‘success’ in model 7 is significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, suggesting that the success of populist parties affects mainstream parties in a different way than it affects non-populist non-mainstream and populist parties. More specifically, the regression coefficient of ‘success’ in model 7 is -0.18 ($p < 0.05$), while the coefficient for the interaction between ‘mainstream’ and

‘success’ is 0.17 ($p < 0.05$). This means that the regression coefficient for mainstream parties is $-0.18 + 0.17 = -0.01$, indicating that mainstream parties do not change their discourse when challenged by successful populist parties. We can thus reject our second hypothesis. Mainstream parties do not become more populist when they are confronted with successful populist challengers.

An interesting finding is that the main effect of the success of populist parties is significant and negative. This main effect relates to populist parties (the reference category). Since this effect is negative, this means that populist parties become less populist when they have been successful in previous elections. Hence, the model shows that populist parties moderate their discourse after being electorally successful.¹¹ Given that the interaction effect between ‘non-populist non-mainstream’ and ‘success’ is not significant, it can be concluded that non-populist non-mainstream parties also become less populist in response to the success of populist parties. We should, however, be careful to read too much into this finding, because the number of non-populist non-mainstream parties in the analysis is rather low ($N = 9$).

The magnitude of the estimated effects for mainstream and populist parties are visualized in Figure 2. The dotted line in the figure highlights that the extent to which mainstream parties’ manifestos include populist paragraphs is not influenced by the electoral success of populist parties. Whether a populist party receives 0 or 20 per cent of the votes does not matter, mainstream parties manifestos always include less than 1 per cent populist paragraphs. The straight line in the figure shows that populist parties do become less populist when they have been successful in previous elections. A populist party that has had hardly any success in previous elections will adopt a highly populist discourse, while a

¹¹ In order to test the robustness of our findings, we estimated our models for 87 subsets of our sample (jackknifing). In none of the subsets direction and significance of results change and we can therefore conclude that our findings are robust.

populist party that has received more than 15 or 20 per cent of the vote in previous elections will tone down its populism.

[Figure 2 about here]

Conclusion

Several scholars have argued that Western European mainstream parties have become more populist over the years (De Beus, 2009, Mudde, 2007, 2004, Mair, 2002). In this paper we have put this populist *Zeitgeist* thesis to the test. Contrary to what has been assumed, the results indicate that there is no such thing as a populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe. Of course, populist parties have become more successful since the late 1980s, but mainstream parties have not responded to their rise by resorting to the use of populist discourse.

One could of course argue that party manifestos are not the best source to detect the use of a populist discourse. Perhaps mainstream parties have become more populist in their statements in the media? We acknowledge that this is a possibility. Yet, the fact that a large proportion of the party manifestos of populist parties contains a populist discourse, indicates that populism is not just a media phenomenon. Parties for whom the use of a populist discourse is part of their campaign strategy or for whom it is central to their core message, will explicitly use a populist discourse in their manifestos. Mainstream parties have largely shied away from doing this.

However, there is substantial variation in the degree to which mainstream parties can be considered populist. It turns out to be quite difficult to explain this variation. Mainstream parties do not become more populist when they are confronted by electoral losses, nor do they adopt a populist discourse when they are challenged by populist parties. In other words, mainstream parties are no copycats that – pressured by their own electoral failure or the success of populist parties – adopt an accommodative strategy and cut and paste from the manifestos

of their rivals. Although there is a lot of evidence that mainstream parties have adjusted their discourse on immigration and integration as a consequence of the emergence of *radical right wing* populist parties, our findings show that mainstream parties have not responded to the rise of populist parties in a similar fashion. They have not incorporated the populist discourse in their manifestos and it can therefore be concluded that populism is not contagious. Yet the question why some mainstream parties are more populist than others remains unanswered. Future research could focus more contextual factors, such as the party system and the political system, and on agency and leadership (Van Kessel, 2011).

Interestingly, populist parties are not immune to their own electoral success. Contrary to mainstream parties, they *do* adjust their political discourse once they experience electoral growth. Populist parties that gain seats tone down their populism, probably in an attempt to become acceptable coalition partners to mainstream parties. One of the populist parties that most clearly illustrates this finding is the Dutch SP. The populism score of this party plummets from 16.4 in 1994 to 1.4 in 2006, making it difficult to still label the party populist. De Lange and Rooduijn (2011) argue that the moderation of the discourse of the SP is due to the desire of the party to assume office. Their argument supports Heinisch's (2003) claim that populist parties will face numerous challenges in office and are therefore likely to tone down their populism before making the transition from opposition to government.

The fact that populist parties moderate their populist discourse after their electoral success has important implications for our understanding of populism. It suggests that populism can, but need not be a deeply rooted worldview. It could also be a discursive strategy used to gain votes, which is employed by parties that believe that appealing to the man in the street and bashing elites might help them to achieve electoral breakthrough. It is therefore useful to make a distinction between populism as a discourse (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2008) and a 'thin-centred' ideology (Freedon, 1998).

Given that there is no populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe, it can be assumed that criticism directed at the checks and balances, minority rights and representative institutions that are constitutive to liberal democracy has not become mainstream (yet). Only populists seem to be quite sceptical about the principles underpinning liberal democracy. Moreover, these parties tend to become more moderate once they gain a large following. This means that although the functioning of liberal democracy is criticized by certain parties, it is not necessarily under threat.

Tables

Table 1: Populist parties

Country	Populist party	Most important electoral success: year and percentage of votes
France	Front National (FN)	1997: 5.9% (parliament) 2002: 17.79% (presidential)
Germany	Die Linke	2005: 8.7%
Italy	Alleanza Nazionale (AN)	1996: 15.66%
	Forza Italia (FI)	2001: 29.43%
	Lega Nord (LN)	1996: 10.07%
Netherlands	Centrum Democraten (CD)	1994: 2.5%
	Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF)	2002: 17.0%
	Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	2006: 5.9%
	Socialistische Partij (SP)	2006: 16.6%
United Kingdom	British National Party (BNP)	2005: 0.7%
	United Kingdom	2005: 2.2%
	Independence Party (UKIP)	

Table 2: Average degree of populism of mainstream parties

	1990s	2000s
France	0.47	0.18
Germany	0.08	0.00
Italy	0.90	0.17
Netherlands	0.50	0.51
United Kingdom	1.28	1.46
<i>Total</i>	0.59	0.52

Table 3: The effects on the degree of populism of election manifestos

	Time		Electoral loss				Success of populist parties							
	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>		<i>Model 4</i>		<i>Model 5</i>		<i>Model 6</i>		<i>Model 7</i>	
	b	CRSE	b	CRSE	b	CRSE	b	CRSE	b	CRSE	b	CRSE	b	CRSE
Mainstream	-7.02**	1.61	-7.04**	1.62	-7.10**	1.69	-7.02**	1.60	-7.08**	1.60	-7.26**	1.64	-7.28**	1.71
NPNM	-2.87	1.95	-2.96	1.98	-2.91	2.17	-2.87	1.97	-2.74	2.00	-2.63	1.87	-1.92	1.96
Time			-0.05	0.08	-0.19	0.27								
Success populists											-0.09	0.05	-0.18*	0.07
Electoral loss							0.00	0.00	0.01	0.02				
Mainstream * Time					0.19	0.27								
NPNM * Time					0.21	0.41								
Mainstream * Loss									-0.01	0.02				
NPNM * Loss									0.02	0.02				
Mainstream * Success													0.17*	0.08
NPNM * Success													-0.12	0.23
<i>N</i>	87		87		87		87		87		87		87	
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	0.41		0.40		0.40		0.40		0.39		0.43		0.45	

CRSE = clustered robust standard errors. *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$

Figures

Figure 1: The degree of populism of mainstream parties and populist parties

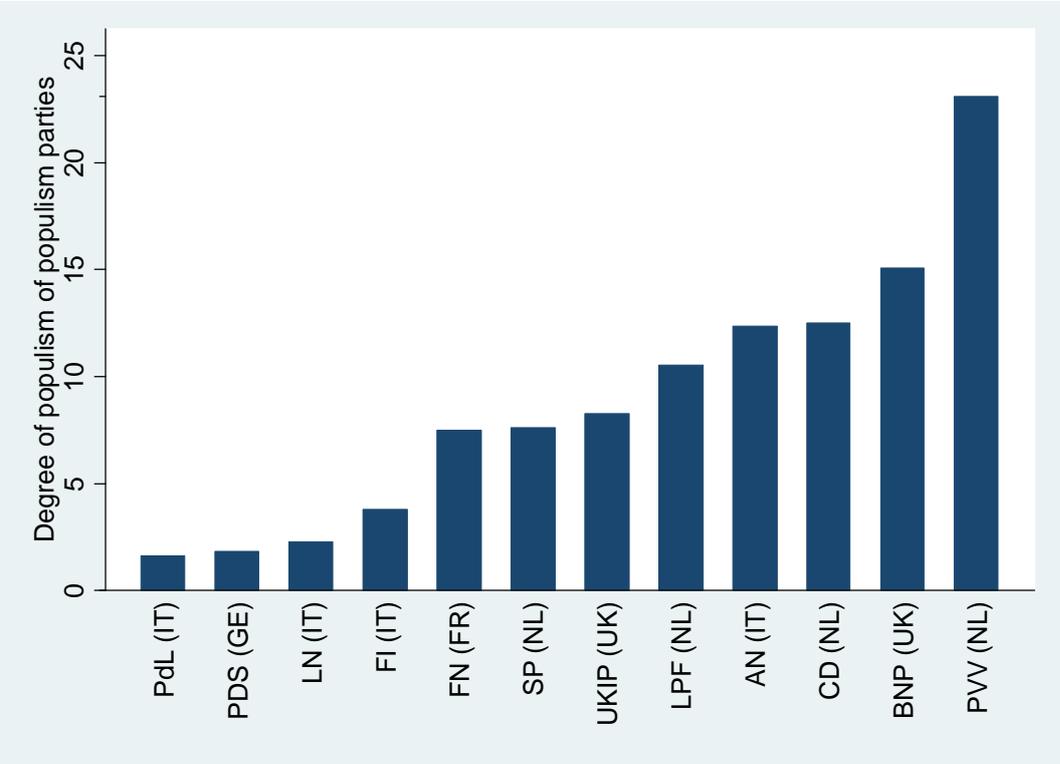
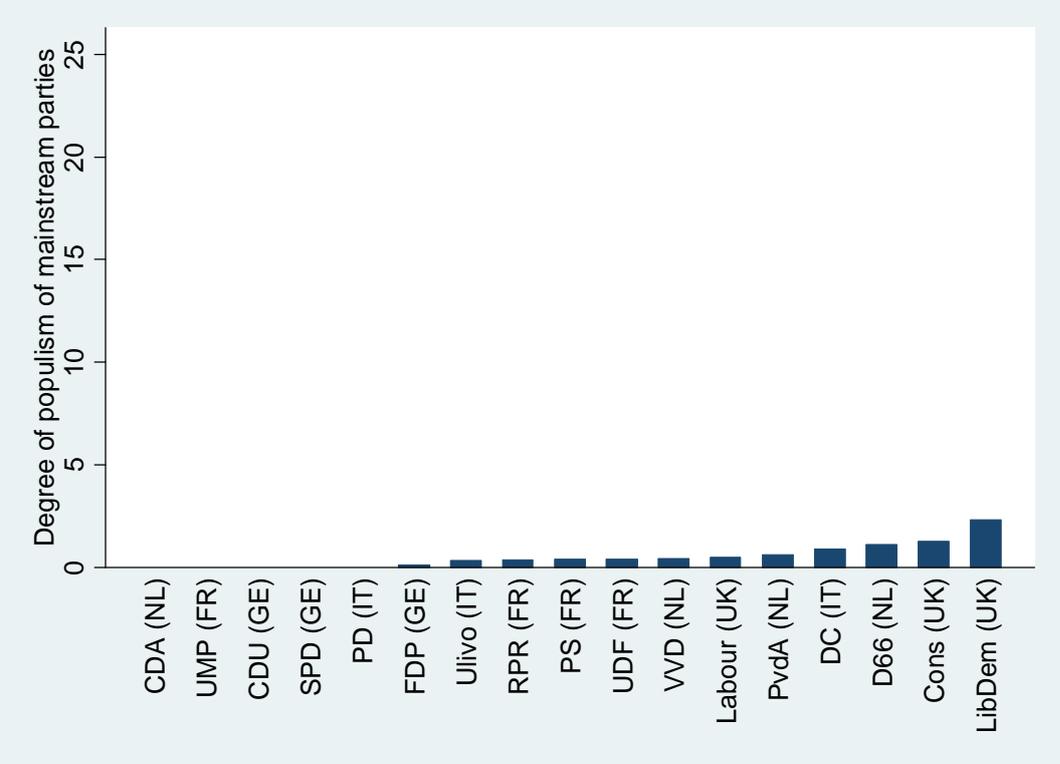
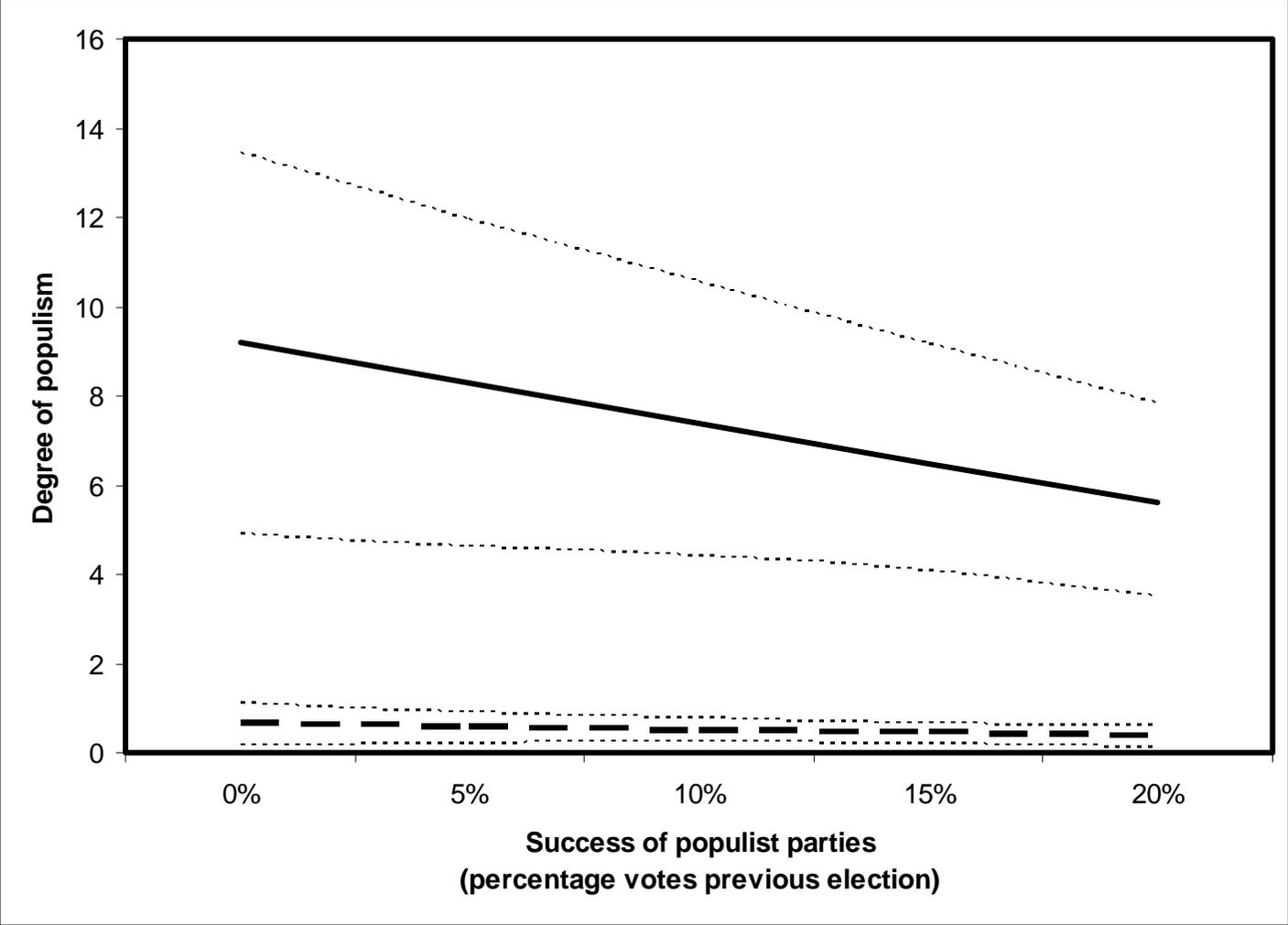


Figure 2: The effect of the success of populist parties on the degree of populism of populist parties and mainstream parties



Straight line: populist parties (with 95% confidence interval)
Dotted line: mainstream parties (with 95% confidence interval)

Appendix 1: Manifestos included in the analysis

FR	1993	1997	2002	2007
<i>Mainstream</i>	PS	PS	PS	PS
	RPR	RPR	RPR	-
	UDF	-	UDF	-
	-	-	UMP	UMP
<i>Non-mainstream</i>	PCF	PCF	PCF	-
	Verts	-	Verts	-
	-	MPF	MPF	-
	-	FN*	FN*	FN*
GE	1990	1994	2002	2005
<i>Mainstream</i>	CDU	CDU/CSU	CDU/CSU	CDU/CSU
	SPD	SPD	SPD	SPD
	FDP	FDP	FDP	FDP
<i>Non-mainstream</i>	PDS/Linke*	PDS/Linke*	PDS/Linke*	PDS/Linke*
IT	1992	1994	2001	2008
<i>Mainstream</i>	DC/PP	DC/PP	-	-
	-	-	Ulivo	PD
<i>Non-mainstream</i>	PDS	PDS	-	-
	-	FI*	CdL*	PdL*
	MSI/AN*	MSI/AN*	-	-
	LN*	LN*	-	-
NL	1989	1994	2002	2006
<i>Mainstream</i>	CDA	CDA	CDA	CDA
	PvdA	PvdA	PvdA	PvdA
	VVD	VVD	VVD	VVD
	-	D66	D66	D66
<i>Non-mainstream</i>	-	SP*	SP*	SP*
	-	CD*	-	-
	-	-	LPF*	-
	-	-	-	PVV*
UK	1992	1997	2001	2005
<i>Mainstream</i>	Labour	Labour	Labour	Labour
	Cons	Cons	Cons	Cons
	Libdems	Libdems	Libdems	Libdems
<i>Non-mainstream</i>	-	UKIP*	-	UKIP*
	BNP*	-	-	BNP*

*: Populist party

Appendix 2: Party characteristics and the degree of populism in election manifestos

	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>		<i>Model 4</i>	
	b	CRSE	b	CRSE	b	CRSE	b	CRSE
Mainstream	-7.02**	1.61	-6.65**	1.44	-6.56**	1.48	-5.73**	1.60
NPNM	-2.87	1.95	-1.95	2.34	-1.94	2.36	-1.90	2.46
Left/right position			0.35	0.29	0.35	0.30	0.36	0.30
Opposition					0.17	0.43	-0.48	0.50
Size							-0.05	0.03
<i>N</i>	87		87		87		87	
<i>Adjusted R</i> ²	0.41		0.43		0.42		0.43	

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

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