

A populist *Zeitgeist*? Programmatic contagion by populist parties in Western Europe

Party Politics
2014, Vol. 20(4) 563–575
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1354068811436065
ppq.sagepub.com


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Abstract

In this article, we examine the programmatic reactions to the rise of populist parties. It has been argued that populism is not necessarily the prerogative of populist parties; it has been adopted by mainstream parties as well. The article investigates whether populism is 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 the programmes of mainstream parties have not become more populist in recent years. We find no evidence that mainstream parties change their programmes when confronted with electoral losses or successful populist challengers. Yet, we do find that populist parties change their own programmes when they have been successful: Their initial success makes them tone down their populism.

Keywords

content analysis, mainstream parties, populism

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 20 percent 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 focused primarily on the extent to which mainstream parties have reacted by copying these parties' anti-immigrant or nativist stances. Far less attention has been paid to populism, which is also a component of the ideology of radical

right-wing populist parties. Moreover, these studies have exclusively focused on contagion by radical *right-wing* populist parties, ignoring the radical *left-wing* populist parties that have emerged in recent years as well.

According to Mudde (2004), we are witnessing a populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe. He claims that radical left and right-wing populist parties are gaining support, and that in response to this development mainstream parties are increasingly using populist *rhetoric*. Thus, populism can be considered contagious (see also Bale et al., 2010; Mény and Surel, 2002). In this article, we analyse mainstream parties' *programmatic* reactions to the rise of both radical left and right-wing populist parties in Western Europe. The reason for this choice is that most scholars define populism as a 'thin-centred ideology', that is, a particular set of ideas about the relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite' (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Canovan, 2004;

Paper submitted 02 August 2011; accepted for publication 22 December 2011

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Hawkins, 2010, 2009; Mudde, 2007, 2004; Stanley, 2008). In line with this definition, we examine whether the programmes of mainstream parties have become more populist over the years.

The article 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 defined in this study. Second, we investigate the conditions under which the programmes of 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 that we employ to establish the extent to which the programmes of parties can be qualified as populist. Fourth, we analyse whether mainstream parties have become (more) populist since the late 1980s. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for our understanding of the rise of populism in Western Europe.

Defining populism

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars seems to agree that populism can best be defined as a ‘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, 2010, 2009; Mudde, 2007, 2004; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Stanley, 2008).¹ In this article, we build on this agreement and employ Mudde’s (2004: 543) definition of populism as ‘an 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’.

We conceptualize populism as being essentially a property of a message rather than a property of the actor sending the message. This difference may appear pedantic, yet we believe it is important. By conceptualizing populism as a characteristic of a message, politicians, parties, newspaper articles, party programmes or speeches cannot be qualified as being either populist or not populist. Instead, populism then becomes a matter of degree. A politician who sends out many populist messages can thus be classified as more populist than a politician who sends out few such messages. The same can be applied to texts, such as newspaper articles or party programmes, which also may contain few or many populist statements.

Our definition of populism has two core elements, ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. Populism is about the antagonistic *relationship* between these two groups (Laclau, 2005; Panizza, 2005). Populists define the people in opposition to the elite and the elite in opposition to the people. They 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).²

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 focus only 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 itself (Mény and Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004).

Some scholars argue that populists not only criticize elites, but also target ‘outsiders’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Taguieff, 1995). They are believed to exclude ‘dangerous others’ – individuals or groups who are not part of what populists consider to be ‘the people’, such as immigrants or religious or ethnic minorities. However, several scholars claim that while exclusionism is a central feature of *radical right-wing* populism, it is not part of populism *per se* (Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2007; Taggart, 2000). Whether or not populists are exclusionary depends on the ideology they adhere to, which can be either left or right-wing (March, 2007). Thus, populism is inherently chameleonic (Taggart, 2000). Following these authors, we do not consider exclusionism to be a constitutive component of populism. Including it in our definition would produce a bias towards radical right-wing populism, whereas we are explicitly interested in both left and right-wing populism.

Is populism contagious?

Mudde (2004: 550) 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’. To substantiate his point, Mudde (2004: 550) discusses a statement 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: 92) 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.’ Other Western European political leaders of mainstream parties, such as Nicolas Sarkozy in France, Steve Stevaert in Flanders and Wouter Bos in The Netherlands (De Beus, 2009; Mudde, 2004), have also been qualified as populists. Mudde (2004: 563) argues that:

When explicitly populist outsider groups gain prominence, parts of the establishment will react by a combined strategy of exclusion and inclusion; while trying to exclude the populist actor(s) from political power, they will include populist themes and rhetoric to try and fight off the challenge. This dynamic will bring about a populist *Zeitgeist*, like the one we are facing today, which will dissipate as soon as the populist challenger seems to be over its top.

Although Mudde primarily observes changes in the *rhetoric* of mainstream parties, it is plausible that the responses of mainstream parties to the rise of populist parties have been more substantive. Given that populism is often defined as a thin-centred ideology, it can be expected that mainstream parties have not only changed the way they *speak* about, for example, the people in their speeches, but have also changed the way they *think* about the people. We believe it is important to examine how pervasive the populist *Zeitgeist* is and investigate whether mainstream parties’ ideas, as laid down in their manifestos, have become more populist over time. We therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The programmes of mainstream parties in Western Europe have become more populist since the late 1980s.

Why would mainstream parties have become more populist in recent years? Harmel and Janda (1994) argue that parties are conservative organizations that only change 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 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 losses 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 (see also Panebianco, 1988). We therefore expect that mainstream parties that lose seats will revise their political programmes. 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 elites might be a remedy to electoral decline. In other words, mainstream parties that experience electoral setbacks might resort to populism. Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2: The greater the electoral losses of a mainstream party, the more populist the programmes of this party become.

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 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 programmes. Instead, they might opt for a dismissive strategy and hope that by ignoring populist contenders they will disappear (cf. Downs, 2001; Meguid, 2005). However, when populist parties become successful, mainstream parties may respond by incorporating populism in their own programmes (Mény and Surel, 2002). If they think that populism is one of the drivers of populist parties’ success, they may think that including anti-establishment rhetoric and references to the man in the street in their programmes will help them win back these votes. So, when populist parties are on the rise, mainstream parties are likely to adopt an accommodative strategy (cf. Bale et al., 2010; Downs, 2001; Harmel and Svåsand, 1997; Meguid, 2005) and become more populist. Moreover, 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 programmes of mainstream parties become.

It might be expected that mainstream parties will only change their programmes when they face competition from an ideologically proximate populist party. Right-wing parties may be most inclined to adapt their policy positions on immigration when confronted with a successful radical right-wing populist party (e.g. Harmel and Svåsand, 1997: 317). However, in a recent article, Van Spanje (2010: 578) demonstrates that ‘rightist parties are not more likely to co-opt the policies of the anti-migration parties than leftist parties are’. Because populism itself is neither left nor right, we do not expect left-wing mainstream parties to differ from right-wing mainstream parties in their responses to the successes of left and right-wing populists.³

Design and method

To test our hypotheses we need to select cases with sufficient variation on two variables: (1) the electoral losses

Table 1. Case details.

Country	Populist party	Electoral success populist party*	Electoral loss mainstream parties**
France	Front National (FN)	17.8%	-2%
Germany	Die Linke	8.7%	-13%
Italy	Alleanza Nazionale (AN)	15.7%	+2%
	Forza Italia (FI)	29.4%	
Netherlands	Lega Nord (LN)	10.1%	
	Centrum Democraten (CD)	2.5%	-25%
	Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF)	17.0%	
	Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	5.7%	
	Socialistische Partij (SP)	16.6%	
United Kingdom	British National Party (BNP)	0.7%	-1%
	United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)	2.2%	

*Highest percentage of votes gained by populist party in parliamentary or presidential elections 1990s–2000s.

**Total percentage of votes lost by mainstream parties 1990s–2000s.

of mainstream parties and (2) the electoral successes of populist parties. Moreover, since we explicitly aim to examine whether left and right-wing populism is contagious, we have also sought to select countries in which we find both types of populism. We have therefore selected five Western European countries: Italy (populists have been very successful), The Netherlands (populists have been successful), France (populists have been moderately successful), Germany (populists have been rather unsuccessful) and the United Kingdom (populists have been very unsuccessful).⁴

In these five countries we identified 11 populist parties:⁵ the *Front National* (FN) (Rydgren, 2008; Surel, 2002) in France; *Die Linke* (March, 2007; Decker, 2008) in Germany; *Forza Italia* (FI) (Tarchi, 2008; Zaslove, 2008), the *Lega Nord* (LN) (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2010; Tarchi, 2008) and the *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) in Italy (Ruzza & Fella, 2011; Tarchi, 2002); the *Centrum Democraten* (CD) (Mudde, 2007; Van der Brug & Mughan, 2007), the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF) (Lucardie, 2008; Van der Brug, 2003), the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) (Akkerman, 2011; Vossen, 2010) and the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) (March, 2007; Voerman, 2009) in The Netherlands; and the *British National Party* (BNP) (Fella, 2008; Mudde, 2007) and the *United Kingdom Independence Party* (UKIP) (Abedi & Lundberg, 2009; Fella, 2008) in the United Kingdom. The largest electoral successes of populist parties and the aggregated electoral losses of mainstream parties are listed in Table 1.

We focus on the period between 1988 and 2008, because populist parties in Western Europe surged mainly during this time span. In each country we selected two elections in the 1980s or 1990s and two in the 2000s and analysed the programmes of mainstream (i.e. Christian-democratic, conservative, liberal and social democratic parties) and non-mainstream parties.⁶

We have measured how populist the programmes of parties are by means of a content analysis of election

manifestos. Although an election manifesto is only one type of document in which a party's ideology can be observed, we decided to use 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 ideology consists of a set of claims about the relationship between the good people and the bad elite. 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', 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.

The manifestos have been analysed 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.

Table 2. Populism in the programmes of mainstream parties.

Country	Party	Election 1	Election 2	Election 3	Election 4	Average
France	PS	0.00	1.53	0.00	0.00	0.38
	RPR	0.50	0.00	0.62	–	0.37
	UDF	0.00	–	0.80	–	0.40
	UMP	–	–	0.00	0.00	0.00
Germany	CDU/CSU	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	SPD	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	FDP	0.00	0.50	0.00	0.00	0.13
Italy	DC/PP	0.13	1.67	–	–	0.90
	PD/Ulivo	–	–	0.34	0.00	0.17
Netherlands	CDA	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	D66	–	0.65	0.00	2.64	1.10
	PvdA	0.00	1.03	0.85	0.61	0.62
	VVD	1.75	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.44
UK	Cons	0.24	0.31	3.10	1.43	1.27
	Labour	0.00	0.53	0.58	0.90	0.50
	LibDems	1.13	5.45	1.00	1.76	2.34
Average		0.29	0.90	0.49	0.56	

The election years are: 1993, 1997, 2002 and 2007 in France; 1990, 1994, 2002 and 2005 in Germany; 1992, 1994, 2001 and 2008 in Italy; 1989, 1994, 2002 and 2006 in The Netherlands; and 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005 in the United Kingdom.

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’.⁷ Anti-elitism was measured by means of the question: ‘Do the authors of the manifesto criticize elites?’ The critique had to target elites *in general*. Criticism directed towards individual parties (e.g. Labour in Britain) or individual politicians (e.g. Sarkozy in France) has not been coded as anti-elitism.⁸

To assess the inter-coder reliability of the results of the content analysis, the coders analysed 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 analysed a sample of paragraphs from manifestos from their own country.⁹ The alphas range from 0.66 to 0.89, showing that the inter-coder reliability within the various country teams is also satisfactory.¹⁰

The dependent variable in this study is the extent to which party programmes 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 populist. After all, it is the *combination* of people-centrism and anti-elitism that defines populism. Only if a critique on the (bad) elite coincides with an emphasis on the (good) people, can we speak of populism.¹¹ So, populist rhetoric is defined as the *combination* of a focus on the people and anti-elitism. 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 text 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).¹² Moreover, because we expect that detailed manifestos contain less populism than concise texts, we have assigned paragraphs in long manifestos more weight than paragraphs in short manifestos.¹³

The face validity of this measurement of populism is quite good: the manifestos of the mainstream parties listed in Table 2 contain only few populist paragraphs (the party means range from 0.00 to 2.34). The *Liberal Democrats* (UK) have the highest mean populism score of the mainstream parties (2.34 percent), while a number of mainstream parties have no populist paragraphs in their manifestos at all. The populist manifestos contain much more populism (the party means range from 1.61 to 23.08) (see Table 3). Among the populist parties the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) has the highest mean score and the *Partido della Liberta* (PdL) the lowest.

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 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

Table 3. Populism in the programmes of non-mainstream parties.

Country	Party	Election 1	Election 2	Election 3	Election 4	Average
France	FN*	–	15.79	2.59	4.08	7.49
	MPF	–	0.00	1.94	–	0.97
	PCF	2.89	3.33	6.45	–	4.22
	Verts	4.41	–	9.52	–	6.97
Germany	Die Linke/PDS*	2.67	0.69	1.14	2.82	1.83
Italy	AN/MSI*	17.44	7.29	–	–	12.37
	CdL/FI/PdL*	–	–	1.39	1.82	1.61
	LN*	2.10	2.47	–	–	2.29
Netherlands	PDS	10.07	3.76	–	–	6.92
	CD*	–	12.50	–	–	12.50
	LPF*	–	–	10.53	–	10.53
	PVV*	–	–	–	23.08	23.08
UK	SP*	–	16.41	5.04	1.43	7.63
	BNP*	19.51	–	–	10.64	15.08
	UKIP*	–	8.54	–	8.02	8.28
Average		8.44	7.08	4.83	7.41	

*Populist party.

The election years are: 1993, 1997, 2002 and 2007 in France; 1990, 1994, 2002 and 2005 in Germany; 1992, 1994, 2001 and 2008 in Italy; 1989, 1994, 2002 and 2006 in The Netherlands; and 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005 in the United Kingdom.

Table 4. Populism in the programmes of mainstream parties in the 1990s and 2000s.

	Average 1990s	Average 2000s	Average
France	0.41	0.24	0.31
Germany	0.08	0.00	0.04
Italy	0.90	0.17	0.54
Netherlands	0.49	0.51	0.50
United Kingdom	1.28	1.46	1.37
Average	0.59	0.52	

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.¹⁴

The unit of analysis in the analyses 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 multi-level 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.¹⁵

Results

Table 2 shows that mainstream parties in the United Kingdom score much higher on the populism scale than the mainstream parties in France, Germany, Italy and The Netherlands. 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. It might well be that the British exception is not the result of populist contagion, but of a divergent model of political competition.

If we compare the 1990s with the 2000s, mainstream parties do not seem to have become more populist (see Table 4). 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 in populism, we thus witness a small decrease. If we look at the countries individually, we see a strong decline in France (from 0.41 to 0.24) 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 0.49 to 0.51. Only the United Kingdom has experienced a substantial increase of the extent to which mainstream parties use populism in their manifestos (from 1.28 to 1.46). On the basis of

these descriptive accounts, one is inclined to conclude that there is no populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe.

A more formal test of the *Zeitgeist* hypothesis is presented in Table 5.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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 populism. Adding time to the model does not change the effects 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 programmes of mainstream parties in Western Europe have not become more populist since the late 1980s, nor have those of non-populist non-mainstream and populist parties. So, these formal tests confirm our initial observation that there is no evidence for a populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe.

So far, our analyses have focused on *general* patterns in the extent to which parties use populism. 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 populism when they are confronted with either electoral defeat or with successful populist parties. These hypotheses are tested in models 4, 5, 6 and 7 in Table 5. 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 programme. 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 manifestos when challenged by successful populist parties. We can thus reject our third hypothesis. Mainstream parties do not become more populist when they are confronted with successful populist challengers.¹⁸

The main effect of the previous success of populist parties is significant and negative, which means that populist parties become less populist when they have been successful in previous elections. Hence, the model shows that populist parties moderate their populism after populism has turned out to be electorally successful. 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 not to read too much into this finding, because the number of non-populist non-mainstream manifestos in the analysis is rather low ($N = 9$).¹⁹

The magnitude of the estimated effects for mainstream and populist parties is visualized in Figure 1. 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 percent of the votes does not matter, mainstream party manifestos always include less than 1 percent populist paragraphs. The straight line in the figure shows that populist parties do become less populist when they have been successful in previous elections. If populist parties have had hardly any success in previous elections, a populist party will campaign on a manifesto that is highly populist, while if populist parties have received more than 15 or 20 percent of the vote in previous elections, a populist party will tone down its populism.

Conclusion

Several scholars have argued that the rhetoric of Western European mainstream parties has become more populist over the years (De Beus, 2009; Mair, 2002; Mudde, 2007) and the idea that we live in a populist *Zeitgeist* has therefore become popular. Yet, the claim has not been tested systematically. This study has investigated whether evidence for the existence of a populist *Zeitgeist* can be found in party programmes. More specifically, we examined whether populism is contagious, that is, whether mainstream parties make more populist statements in their programmes in response to the success of populist parties. The results indicate that the manifestos of mainstream parties in Western Europe have not become more populist in the past two decades and hence that populism is not particularly contagious.

Table 5. Explaining populism in party programmes.

	Time						Electoral loss						Success of populist parties					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7					
	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)												
Electoral loss							0.00	(0.00)	0.01	(0.02)								
Success populists											-0.09	(0.05)	-0.18*	(0.07)				
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)				
N	87		87		87		87		87		87		87					
Adjusted R ²	0.41		0.40		0.40		0.40		0.39		0.43		0.45					

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

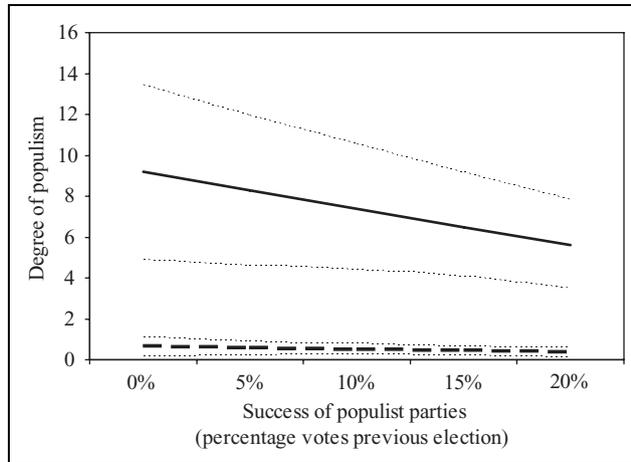


Figure 1. The effect of the success of populist parties on the degree of populism.

We realize that a study of party programmes has its limitations. One could argue that populist statements are not always included in party programmes, because the appeal of these programmes is not particularly great and voters are often not aware of their content. And even though no indications for a populist *Zeitgeist* were found in party programmes, there might still be an increase in populist statements in the media or in political speeches. While we admit that party programmes only tell part of the story, we want to stress that many party manifestos do contain populist statements. First of all, there is much more populism in the programmes of parties that are generally seen as ‘populist’, and, secondly, there is substantial variation in the *degree* to which mainstream parties use populist statements in their programmes. Another possible criticism of the use of manifestos is that mainstream parties change their manifestos less easily than populist parties do, because they have longer histories, and therefore more groups and factions to deal with when they write their programmes. While this may be true, mainstream parties have responded to the success of radical right-populist parties by adapting their position on immigration, also in their manifestos (e.g. Van der Brug et al., 2009). So, the fact that their party programmes have not become more populist is a significant finding.

It turned out to be quite difficult to explain the variation in populism contained in party programmes. Mainstream parties do not become more populist when they are confronted by electoral losses, nor do they include more populist statements in their programmes 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 positions on immigration and integration issues as a consequence of the

emergence of *radical right-wing* populist parties, our findings show that mainstream parties have not responded in a similar fashion regarding their populism. Yet the question why some mainstream parties are more populist than others remains unanswered. Future research could focus more on contextual factors, such as the party system and the political system, and on agency and leadership (Van Kessel, 2011).

Interestingly, populist parties themselves are not immune to their own electoral success. Contrary to mainstream parties, they *do* adjust their political programmes once they have experienced electoral growth. If populist parties have gained seats during previous elections, a populist party tones down its populism, probably in an attempt to become an acceptable coalition partner 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 manifestos 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.

That some allegedly populist parties become less populist and some mainstream parties more populist indicates that it might be a good idea to discard the dichotomous approach according to which we classify parties as *either* populist *or* not populist. As we have shown, parties can be classified as *more* or *less* populist.

The fact that populist parties moderate their populism after their electoral success suggests that populism need not be a deeply rooted worldview. As a *thin-centred* ideology (instead of a *full* ideology), it can also be used more strategically to gain votes. This is done by parties that believe that appealing to the ‘man in the street’ and bashing elites might help them to achieve electoral breakthrough. This does not mean that populism should be conceived of as (merely) a style. After all, it is not just their *rhetoric* that populists adjust; they change their *programmes* just as well.

Acknowledgement

We thank Kees Aarts, Emilie van Haute, Tom van der Meer, Catherine de Vries, participants at the Comparative Politics PhD Club at the University of Amsterdam, and three anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Funding

This work is part of the research programmes ‘Newly Governing Parties: Success or Failure?’ (dossiernummer 016-115-060) and ‘Political Legitimacy and Transformations of Party Democracy’ (dossiernummer 311-99-110), which are financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

Notes

1. Alternatively, populism can be conceptualized as a discourse. The differences between a discourse and a thin-centred ideology are minimal, since both concepts highlight that populism refers to a set of ideas (Hawkins, 2010). The ‘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, 1995).
2. Taggart (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 article, however, we are not interested in specific conceptions of the people, but in the *degree* to which parties can be qualified as populist. Therefore we do not employ the term ‘heartland’.
3. We nevertheless empirically test whether mainstream left and mainstream right parties respond differently to left and right-wing populist parties.
4. We are aware of the fact that these cases differ from each other in terms of historical background, as well as party and political system. We have therefore done extensive robustness checks, during which we have controlled for country effects, among other by jack-knifing.
5. We have classified parties as being populist if at least two scholars of populism have identified them as such.
6. Parties have been classified using the coding scheme of the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006).
7. Coders were provided with a comprehensive list of words that could be indicative of people-centrism, which included words such as: all of us, citizen(s), community, country, direct democracy, each of us, electorate, everyone, nation(al), our, people, population, public, public opinion, referenda, society, voter(s) and we. Coders were instructed to take the context in which these words were used into consideration to determine whether parties were indeed referring to the people in a populist way.
8. Anti-elitism is present if parties criticize for instance: our politicians, the old parties, the political establishment, European technocrats, Brussels (as being the symbol for European politics), the rich, the business elite, multinationals, intellectuals, the media, judges.
9. The sample consisted of roughly 5 percent of the total number of paragraphs that had to be coded by the country teams.
10. 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).
11. The decision to count paragraphs as populist only when both people-centrism and anti-elitism are present does not affect the results of our analyses. The vast majority of references to anti-elitism are made in paragraphs in which people-centrism is present as well and there is a correlation of $r = 0.86$ between anti-elitism and populism. Moreover, if we run the same analyses with anti-elitism as the dependent variable, the results do not change substantively.
12. We have also performed our analyses with weights of 1 and 3, which did not change the results.
13. First, we computed the mean length of the manifestos (number of paragraphs) per country. Second, we computed the Z-scores for every manifesto per country. If the Z-score of a manifesto was between 1 and 2 we gave the paragraphs from this manifesto a weight of 1.5. If the Z-score was 2 or larger, we gave the paragraphs a weight of 2. If the Z-score ranged between -1 and -2 , we weighted the paragraphs with a factor 0.67, and if the Z-score was -2 or lower we gave them a weight of 0.5. When we run our analyses without weighting the paragraphs, the results do not change substantively. Finally, we have multiplied the weight for the introduction by the weight for the length of the manifesto.
14. Election results have been obtained from Döring and Manow (2010), elezionistorico.interno.it, and www.parliament.uk.
15. In order to prevent multicollinearity problems, all continuous independent variables were centred around their means before constructing interaction terms.
16. 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. None of these variables exert a significant effect on populism. We have not therefore included these variables in the analyses presented in this article. The analyses are available upon request.
17. 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.
18. We also tested whether left-wing mainstream parties react primarily to the success of left-wing populists and right-wing mainstream parties respond to the success of right-wing populists. The analyses demonstrate that this is not the case, left and right-wing mainstream parties do not react differently to left and right-wing populist parties. The analyses are available upon request.
19. We have executed different robustness checks, which substantiate these findings. First, we estimated our models for 87 subsets of our sample (jack-knifing). Second, we controlled for country effects in two ways: (1) by clustering the standard errors on the country level instead of the party level; (2) by including country dummies. The direction and significance of the results remain the same and we therefore conclude that our findings are robust. The analyses are available upon request.

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