

EXTREMISM AND DEMOCRACY

Populism in Western Europe

Comparing Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands

Teun Pauwels

Populism in Western Europe

Despite the increasing academic interest in populism, we still lack understanding of individual factors contributing to populist voting. One of the main reasons for this is that populism is almost always attached to other ideologies which makes it difficult to isolate factors.

This book draws on an innovative research design by comparing the reasons to vote for six populist parties which differ remarkably in terms of their host ideology in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. The results show that populist voters are motivated by their dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and a desire for more direct democracy. Furthermore, it appears that populist parties do not mobilize among one specific social group although deprived groups are generally more susceptible to populist voting. Finally, this study explored why some populist parties persist while others decline. Origins of party formation and how leaders organize their party internally seem the most important factors determining party persistence.

This book will be of great interest to students and scholars of populism, European politics and contemporary political theory.

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1 Introduction

In their seminal work, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argued that the party systems of contemporary European democracies were frozen. According to the authors, all political systems were structured around deep and enduring cleavages such as the opposition between the centre and periphery, church versus state and labour versus capital. And since most party families were positioned along these stable cleavages, not much change had to be expected in the party systems of Western Europe. Yet only a few years after their path breaking work, the first signs of a defreezing political system became visible. In the 1960s and 1970s environmental parties emerged in many democracies and as a reaction, numerous parties of the radical right gained momentum since the 1970s (Ignazi, 1992). Other parties, which are more difficult to classify, also started challenging the established parties. Examples of these ‘hybrids’ are the Fremskridtspartiet (Progress Party, FPD) in Denmark, the Italian Forza Italia (Go Italy, FI) or the Socialistische Partij (Socialist Party, SP) in the Netherlands.

What is remarkable about these new parties is their diversity, in terms of both ideology and their ability to obtain and maintain electoral success. A substantial number of these challengers has been grouped together, however, under the banner of populism (Mény and Surel, 2002). It is argued that some of them share a populist core as they all claim to defend the ‘pure people’ against the ‘corrupt elite’ while arguing that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004). In countries around the globe ranging from Venezuela (Hugo Chávez) to Italy (Lega Nord) – populist challengers have had a profound impact on the political system. Even in countries with a reputation for tolerance like the Netherlands, Sweden and Finland, populist politicians have achieved electoral success by denouncing immigration, the European Union and the ruling political elites in the last few years. Since populism is often conceived of as being the new spectre of democracy, in Western Europe as well as elsewhere, the research on the topic has proliferated lately (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007).

Existing research

One stream of literature has focused on the conceptualization of populism (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). For more than half a century, scholars have been debating on what populism exactly is and how it should be

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defined. Is populism a mobilization strategy, a political style or an ideology? Even though this appears to be a frustrating endeavour, it is nonetheless essential for the accumulation of knowledge to start from a common conceptual ground. In recent years it seems that some kind of consensus has been found among researchers, in that the political exploitation of an alleged division between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ is what populists thrive on and enables identifying populist actors (Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn, 2013). By contrast, the measurement of populism has not received much attention. The term is often attached to certain parties without systematically exploring their ideologies. Nor are the criteria to label a party as populist always specified. Here, too, research has been expanding recently, drawing on increasingly sophisticated methods such as content analysis to measure populism (e.g. Hawkins, 2009).

Another topic that received considerable attention is the relationship between populism and democracy (Abts and Rummens, 2007; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2011). Both theoretically and empirically, scholars have tried to answer the intriguing question whether populism is a pathological phenomenon leading to a degeneration of democracy or whether, on the contrary, populism might be a more authentic form of representation. Even though this debate is far from settled it seems that recent research increasingly acknowledges that, in some circumstances, populism might be a corrective to democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012).

Turning to the more empirical work on populism, scholars have been focusing on how populist parties deal with government participation (Albertazzi, 2009; Delwit, 2007; Heinisch, 2003). These studies have yielded interesting results and the idea that populist parties are only successful in opposition but have difficulties once in government has gradually been abandoned (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2010). More generally, it seems that populist parties are often more resilient than expected and have become increasingly anchored in contemporary party systems. Another promising lead of investigation in populism studies deals with the measurement of populist attitudes and to what extent these are supported by citizens (Hawkins, Riding and Mudde, 2012; Stanley, 2011).

Despite the many different avenues in populism research, most studies to date still focus on explaining the rise of populist parties (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007; Ivarsflaten, 2008). The problem with populism is, however, that it rarely exists in isolation. Populism is almost always attached to another ideology which makes the understanding of its nature and causes particularly complex. Consequently, we have learned a lot about the rise of populist radical right parties (Arzheimer, 2009; Carter, 2005; Golder, 2003; Jesuit, Paradowski and Mahler, 2009) and to a lesser extent about left-wing populist parties (March and Rommerskirchen, 2012; Weyland, 2003) yet we know remarkably little about general causes of populist party success (for exceptions, see Hawkins, 2010; Hino, 2012). Whereas numerous studies found that anti-immigrant attitudes at the individual level increase the likelihood of populist radical right voting (e.g. Ivarsflaten, 2008), it is unclear whether this is related to the host ideology (i.e. ethnic nationalism) or the populist appeal of these parties. The few studies that have focused on a wide variety of populist parties have pointed to broad factors such as the convergence of mainstream parties, the media and globalization (Albertazzi and

McDonnell, 2007), yet a systematic and more detailed empirical verification of these theories is still lacking.

Challenges in explaining the success of populist parties

At least three problems hamper our understanding of populist party success. The first has been touched upon in the previous paragraph. The abundance of studies on the populist radical right do not allow us to determine which factors are related to the populist character of these parties and which to other features. Possibly there exist some explanatory variables that are similar for the rise of all populist parties. An investigation into which factors (if any) are common for populist parties might be illuminating in this respect. Second, Mudde (2007: 29) suggests that we should distinguish between the populist radical right, social populist and neoliberal populist parties.¹ The first group contains ‘prophets’ – addressing the new issue of immigration – while the latter two are ‘purifiers’ claiming to defend the ‘real’ socialist or (neo)liberal values which have allegedly been betrayed by the established parties (Lucardie, 2000). Again, while there is much research on the populist radical right, it is largely an open question what explains the rise of neoliberal and social populist parties. Although the latter are less numerous and successful (in Europe), some of them have become serious competitors for established parties. A third shortcoming in existing research is the focus on the breakthrough of these parties while less is known about why parties persist or not. As most research is cross-national in nature or focused on the individual voter, it does not provide answers to the question why there is often a considerable variation in populist party success over time. This is particularly disturbing since many populist parties have been very unstable in their electoral performances. The ‘flash’ performances of parties such as Lijst Pim Fortuyn (List Pim Fortuyn, LPF) in the Netherlands or the Swedish Ny Demokrati (New Democracy, ND) demonstrate this.

This study pushes forward our understanding of populist parties in three ways. First, I will propose a typology of populist parties and classify parties in three West European countries according to this typology. This typology has the advantage of not having to resort to the too generic term ‘populist parties’. Second, it will be investigated which socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes contribute to populist voting in general at the individual level. It is explored who votes for populist parties and for what reasons by drawing on a comparative research design. The general aim of this study is to explore and compare the voters of a wide variety of populist parties in search for a common denominator. Third, this study will shed light on why some populist parties are persistently successful while others have disintegrated fast. This will be done by focusing on factors such as organizational characteristics and leadership.

Research question

The basic research question guiding this book is the following: *What causes people to vote for a populist party?* It is expected that, depending on which ideology populism is combined with, these parties will attract different kinds of voters. By studying the electorates of a range of different populist parties, I attempt to

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disentangle what is exactly the populist element, rather than elements related to the host ideology, that drives voters towards these parties. The underlying logic is that explanatory factors such as political distrust or opposition to immigration have the same impact on different subtypes of populist parties but not necessarily on all populist parties. Those variables that *do* have the same impact on all cases can be related to the populist character of the party and not to its adjacent ideological characteristics.

Before the variety of populism can be explored, several related questions have to be dealt with. The first is concerned with the definition of populism. Since populism is a contested concept, this issue deserves considerable attention. *What do we mean with the term 'populism'?* The most recurrent meanings of the concept will be reviewed in an attempt to arrive at a systemized concept. But even in a more substantive form – populism as a thin centred ideology – it is commonly acknowledged that populism needs another ideology to attach itself to (Deegan-Krause and Houghton, 2009). This means that a considerable part of the identity of populist parties is derived from other ideological components. Consequently, it seems necessary to build a typology of populist parties. The typology of Mudde (2007), who distinguishes between neoliberal populism, social populism and the populist radical right, provides a useful starting point but will be refined and elaborated.

Another important question is that of classification: *Which parties can be labelled as populist?* Or more precisely: Which parties are populist radical right, neoliberal populist and social populist? Since the measurement of populism has received scant attention, it remains a challenge to arrive at a systematic and valid classification. In this study, I will examine which parties can be labelled as populist in the party systems of Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. These countries have been selected because existing research suggests that they host a variety of populist parties. Another advantage of taking these countries into consideration is that they share a similar institutional setting. This allows for a most similar system design, making the impact of other causal factors such as the electoral system rather limited (Przeworsky and Teune, 1970).

Probably the rarest subtype of populist parties in Europe is the left-wing variant. Within Western Europe, March and Mudde (2005) only identified the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), the Dutch SP and some small radical left movements in France (e.g. Lutte Ouvrière) as *social populist*. 'In Eastern Europe, the East German PDS would be the ideal type' (March and Mudde, 2005: 36). Since the latter transformed and renamed itself to Die Linke (The Left, DL) and is currently competing for votes among the whole of Germany, this seems also a case worth considering. *Neoliberal populist* parties are not very common either. Among the most known are probably the Dutch LPF, the Danish FP, FI in Italy and the Belgian Lijst Dedecker (LDD) (Mudde, 2007; Pauwels, 2010). *Populist radical right* parties are far more numerous and successful than the other two subtypes. The most known in Western Europe are the Belgian Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest, VB)², the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ), the Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party, DFP) in Denmark, Die Republikaner (REP) in Germany and the Front National (National Front, FN) in France.

Finally, after a careful classification and measurement of populism, I will turn to the main research question by exploring who votes for populist parties and why. Drawing mainly on the sociological model of voting it is hypothesized that certain social groups are more likely to vote for populist parties than others. While some hypotheses are expected to be relevant for all parties under study, others will be differentiated according to the type of populist party. In a next step, the socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes of the voters for different kinds of parties will be examined. For each case it will also be explored to what extent the party has been able to persist over time. This sheds light on why certain parties are here to stay while others have faded away quickly.

Data and methods

Two main data sources will be used to answer the research questions previously outlined. First, in an attempt to classify political parties in accordance with the proposed typology, I will use party programmes as main data sources. These documents are commonly used to explore the policy positions and ideologies of political parties (Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, and Tanenbaum, 2001). Since it is argued, moreover, that populism can be best conceptualized as a thin centred ideology it should be possible to identify populism in party manifestos.

Two methods will be combined to identify populist parties in different party systems. The first is a qualitative analysis on the basis of party ideology (i.e. party programmes and secondary literature) (see Mair and Mudde, 1998; Mudde, 2000). Investigating for each party whether it matches a minimal definition of populism allows for a Sartorian classification of parties. However, this qualitative approach leaves a lot of room for interpretation to the researcher. Given the debate on classification (exacerbated by the negative connotation of populism) and the existence of borderline cases, the obtained results will be complemented with more systematic content analyses. These do not replace the qualitative analysis but they allow for evaluating the validity of earlier findings.

To explore the electoral base of populist parties in several countries over multiple points in time, few other options exist but to engage in a quantitative analysis of survey data. More specifically, national election studies will be used. To study the voters of Dutch parties, I will make use of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (1998–2010). The Belgian electorate will be studied drawing on the Partirep 2009 election study carried out on the occasion of the regional and European elections. For the German case I will be using survey data gathered within the framework of the German Longitudinal Election Study (2009). Additionally, existing analyses derived from national election surveys (Billiet and De Witte, 2008; Bowyer and Vail, 2011) are being used to validate my own findings and to extend the period of investigation. More information on datasets will be provided in the case study chapters.

Drawing on national election studies (as opposed to cross-national surveys) for a comparative research design has both strengths and weaknesses. One of its strengths is that they are carried out at election time and therefore are the most valid instruments to grasp actual voting behaviour. Large cross-national surveys

such as the European Social Survey certainly have their merits, but they gauge potential voting behaviour at a point in time that does not necessarily coincide with election time. In the case of exceptional ‘earthquake elections’ such as the Dutch elections in 2002 when LPF peaked with 17 per cent of the votes it is questionable that the support for this party can be investigated in another way than to rely on a national election study. This is because only months later, the support for this party was already decimated. A second advantage of using national election studies is that they are mostly carried out over a long period of time making it possible to analyse electorates at different time points. National election studies generally also use larger sample sizes compared to cross-national surveys, which is an advantage to study smaller parties. The main drawback of national election surveys is that although they generally have a similar design, they often measure different constructs or use different survey items, jeopardizing measurement equivalence. As a consequence, some hypotheses cannot be tested for all parties under study. At the same time, measurement equivalence in cross-national surveys is not evident either (Ariely and Davidov, 2012).

With regard to methods, I will make use of classical multivariate techniques to investigate the importance of sociological variables, ideology and attitudes on voting behaviour. In a first step, voting will be operationalized as a dichotomous outcome where 1 stands for a vote for the (populist) party under investigation and 0 for all other parties. Given the dichotomous outcome, logistic regression is applied. While this technique is appropriate in the case of dichotomous dependent variables, one could raise the point that the operationalization of populist versus nonpopulist voting does not correspond to the range of options that voters are confronted with in multiparty competitions (including nonvoting). This is why the logistic regressions will be complemented with analyses in which the impact of independent variables on the likelihood of voting for a (populist) party is estimated. Since all voters have been asked how likely it is to ever vote for a party on a generous scale, this allows for ordinary least squares regression analysis (Van der Eijk, Van der Brug, Kroh and Franklin, 2006). Finally, in the comparative chapter I will also run several multinomial logistic models in an attempt to evaluate the robustness of my earlier findings (Dow and Endersby, 2004). While this book does not contain a separate methodological chapter, several important methodological choices will be clarified more in detail throughout the study.

Main findings

The main finding of this study is that dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and a desire for more decision making through referendums are important and unique drivers for populist voting in general. On the demand side it is argued that a process of cartelization, i.e. increased reliance of parties on state subventions, more cooperation between government and opposition, and ideological moderation, combined with the growth of critical citizens has led to the questioning of political authority. On the supply side, an increasing group of well-organized populist parties have begun challenging mainstream parties by depicting them as a group of self-serving elites depriving the ordinary people of their sovereignty. Moreover, populist parties claim to restore the voice of the people

through the introduction of direct democracy. Accordingly, a growing group of voters who share these concerns are attracted to the populist appeal.

Dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy at an aggregate level is not a sufficient condition for populist parties to emerge. This is shown in Wallonia where trust in politics is actually lower compared to Flanders yet no meaningful populist parties exist in the south of Belgium while they have thrived for two decades in the north (Hooghe, Marien, and Pauwels, 2011). In line with other research, I therefore conclude that demand and supply should be taken into account to understand the success of populism in a country (Mudde, 2007; Van Kessel, 2013). A similar paradox exists with regard to the importance of direct democracy. While the findings of this study could lead readers to think that reforms towards a more participatory democracy hampers the success of populist parties, a closer look suggests that this is unlikely. In line with Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) I argue that populist voters do not want to get more involved into politics; in fact they often disdain it. Yet there is something which they dislike even more which is politicians making decisions for opportunistic reasons rather than the common good (Webb, 2013).

Another finding of this study is that, while there is no such thing as a single socio-demographic group that supports populist parties, these parties do generally attract social groups that feel themselves deprived. In Eastern Germany of the 1990s these were the ‘losers of unification’, i.e. highly educated civil servants who had lost the social prestige that they enjoyed during the heydays of the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic, DDR). Yet in contemporary ‘diploma democracies’ it appears that populist parties, regardless of their host ideology, are increasingly attracting the ‘losers of globalization’, which are the lower educated and lower social classes (Bovens and Wille, 2010). While populism has mostly been considered a threat for democracy, the ability of populist parties to integrate excluded social groups into the political system certainly deserves notice.

Finally, to understand why some populist parties persist while others decline, it is argued that party origins and internal leadership should be taken into account. First, parties that have links to societal groups, such as nationalist movements, unions or other existing organizations, are more able to draw on long-term support and find it easier to recruit competent personnel. Entrepreneurial parties, in contrast, lack these resources and are therefore more fragile in times of crisis (Bolleyer and Bytzek, 2013). Perhaps even more important is how populist leaders organize their party internally. Parties with leaders who are committed to organization building and who focus on issues such as recruitment, training and socialization, are more likely to persist than parties which lack these.

Structure of the book

This book will be organized as followed. Chapter 2 focuses on the nature and meaning of populism. The concept will be put in a historical context and the different meanings of populism will be carefully examined. Moreover, a typology of populist parties will be developed. To what extent populism and its host ideology are compatible or not is also addressed.

In chapter 3, the measurement of populism in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany will deserve considerable attention. Three methods will be combined – classification through minimal definition, classical content analysis and a computerized content analysis – in an attempt to arrive at valid results. The analysis yields support for three parties to be labelled neoliberal populist: LDD and Parti Populaire (Popular Party, PP) in Belgium and the LPF in the Netherlands. Furthermore, three social populist parties were found: Partij van de Arbeid/Parti du Travail de Belgique (Labour party, PVDA/PTB) in Belgium, Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus/Die Linke (Party of Democratic Socialism/The Left, PDS/DL) in Germany and the SP in the Netherlands. Finally, the largest category is that of the national populist parties. The German Republikaner (Republican, REP) and the Deutsche Volkunion (German People's Union, DVU), the Belgian VB and FN, and the Dutch Centruumpartij 86 (Centre Party 86, CP'86), Centrumdemocraten (Centre Democrats, CD) and Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party of Freedom, PVV) fit in this category. Taking the electoral strength into account, this means that at least two cases of each subtype of populist party can be meaningfully studied: LPF, LDD (neoliberal), SP and DL (social) and VB and PVV (national). The voters of these parties will be analysed in the following chapters.

In chapter 4, I will present the theoretical framework that will be used to explain populist voting. Because the main research question essentially revolves around voting behaviour, I will first present in somewhat more general terms different voting models. It will be argued that the sociological approach is the main source of inspiration while also taking certain elements from other voting theories into account. Next, different hypotheses predicting the likelihood of a populist vote will be formulated. This will be done first for populist parties in general. In a next step, I will develop some additional arguments explaining the vote for different subtypes of populist parties as proposed in chapter 2.

Chapter 5 focuses on the case of the LPF. How was this party established? How should we exactly understand its ideology? And who votes for this party? In chapter 6, the same questions are answered for the Belgian LDD. Chapters 7 and 8 are devoted to the national populist parties, i.e. the Belgian VB and the Dutch PVV. Next, chapters 9 and 10 examine the origins, ideologies and voters of the social populist parties, i.e. the Dutch SP and the German DL.

After a detailed analysis at the level of the individual parties and their electorates, chapter 11 will focus on the comparative perspective. At the core of this study is the idea that although all parties share populism, they differ to a considerable extent in their adjacent ideologies. The similarities and disparities between the different electorates will be examined in this chapter. This might provide an answer as to which factors are relevant in explaining the success of populist parties in general. Finally, chapter 12 summarizes the main findings of this study while reflecting on their broader implications. Some avenues for further research will also be suggested.

Notes

- 1 In this study the term 'national populism' is preferred over the 'populist radical right'. Yet the two concepts are considered synonyms and since other authors often refer to the populist radical right, both of them will be used interchangeably.

- 2 The VB was originally named Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block) and changed its name to Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) in 2004.

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