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## **A Matter of Supply and Demand: The Electoral Performance of Populist Parties in Three European Countries**

This article assesses the electoral performance of populist parties in three European countries: the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom. In explaining the electoral performance of the populist parties in the three countries, the article considers the agency of political parties in particular. More specifically, it examines the responsiveness of established parties and the credibility of the populist parties. Whereas the agency of populist parties, or other radical outsiders, has often been overlooked in previous comparative studies, this article argues that the credibility of the populist parties themselves plays a crucial role in understanding their electoral success and failure.

THIS ARTICLE CONSIDERS THE ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE OF POPULIST PARTIES IN three countries: the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom (UK). Populist parties are marked by an anti-establishment critique and an appeal to a community of ‘ordinary people’, and are a topic that has received widespread academic attention in recent years. Whereas many comparative studies aiming to explain the electoral performance of populist or other radical ‘challenger’ parties have focused on institutional variables and factors related to political opportunity structures, the role of the challenger parties themselves has often been overlooked. This study explicitly concentrates on the populist parties’ own agency by considering their electoral credibility. In addition to the presence of a conducive environment, this is believed to be a vital factor in explaining the electoral performance of populist parties. In other words, conditions related to both the demand for, as well as the supply of, populist parties are deemed to play a crucial role (see Mudde 2010).

The Netherlands and Poland are selected as they provide ideal ‘laboratory environments’ in which the success, but also the failure, of

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populist parties can be studied. The two countries have witnessed the rise and fall of populist parties in recent years, and in both countries populist parties have entered government. This article compares successful and unsuccessful manifestations of populism in both countries. The (institutional) environment in which Dutch and Polish political parties have operated has remained relatively stable in recent years. Various structural variables are therefore controlled for, so that the impact of party agency can be assessed. By selecting a former communist country in addition to two established Western European democracies the article also aims to show that the logic behind the electoral performance of populist parties is similar across very different contexts. The article also intends to encourage further research with a pan-European focus (for an example of such research, see Mudde 2007).

The third case that is selected is the United Kingdom, a country in which populist parties have played a marginal role at the national level. The UK serves as a 'negative' case, yet is also selected because the article aims to show that in countries with an institutional environment that is ostensibly hostile to the breakthrough of new (populist) parties, the agency of political parties also matters. The UK applies a single member plurality system in general elections, which tends to disadvantage smaller parties without a strong regional appeal. As will be argued in this article, however, it does not suffice to consider merely this institutional factor when explaining the failure of British populist parties.

The following section outlines how populist parties are defined in this article and presents the theoretical points of departure. The remainder of the article discusses the electoral performance of the populist parties in the three selected countries. As will be argued, unresponsive established parties can create a fertile breeding ground for populist parties, yet the latter parties only become successful if they present themselves as credible alternatives to the established parties.

## POPULIST PARTIES AND THEIR ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE

### *Defining Populist Parties*

Although populism can in some cases be conceived of as a fleeting rhetorical strategy – arguably used by many political actors from

time to time – the aim here is to identify populist parties that distinguish themselves by having populism at the very core of their appeal. Populist parties embody resistance to the established system of representative politics and it would be impossible to characterize such parties without taking their populist anti-establishment appeal into account. The way populism is used here is in line with the accounts that consider populism to be an ideology, albeit a ‘thin-centred’ one (see, for example, Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008). This means that populism in itself does not provide an all-encompassing agenda of how society should function. As a result, parts of existing ideologies can and should be added to the populist core.

In order to provide a definition of populist parties, this study seeks inspiration from contributions that provided clear and influential definitions of populism (see Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000). Several features recur in those definitions, including the separation of society into two antagonistic groups (‘the people’ and ‘the elite’), populism’s hostility towards the (political) elites and the glorification of the ‘ordinary’ people, who are supposedly betrayed or at least not being taken seriously by the elites. Following this line of reasoning, political parties are here classified as populist parties if they:

1. delineate an exclusive community of ‘ordinary people’;
2. appeal to these ordinary people, whose interests and opinions should be central in making political decisions;
3. are fundamentally hostile towards the (political) establishment, which allegedly does not act in the interest of the ordinary people.

Populist parties appeal to a community of ‘ordinary people’. It is not self-evident who belongs to these ‘ordinary people’, and populist parties are often not very specific about their target audience. Nevertheless, all populist parties do explicitly claim to represent the interests of these ‘ordinary people’. Populist parties are usually clearer about who does not belong to their portrayed community, which means that the community is typically constructed in a negative manner (see, for example, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). Immigrants and ethnic or cultural minority groups are the usual suspects to be branded as outsiders. Not all populists are necessarily xenophobic: the group of ‘others’ could, for instance, also consist of corporate elites, the media or intelligentsia whose

ideas, values and interests are at odds with those of the 'silent majority' (Canovan 1999: 3).

Populist parties are in any case opposed to the political powers-that-be. As Cas Mudde (2004: 544) argues, the normative distinction between 'the people' and 'the elite' is essential to the populist discourse. Residing in their ivory towers, the members of the political establishment have allegedly lost track of the everyday problems of the people. Populists are also wary of, if not hostile to, representative politics where this leads to complex decision-making procedures (see Taggart 2000). Populist parties demand a direct implementation of the people's wishes. A new way of decision making is required; one that is straightforward, transparent and effectively copes with the people's problems.

That is not to say that populist parties necessarily intend to get their following directly involved in politics, and it is also not the case that 'populist voters' always demand this (Mudde 2004: 557–8). Instead, populist parties maintain that they know what the ordinary people want and that they are the ones who truly represent their interests. Following Robert Barr (2009), populism can be associated with a plebiscitarian form of linkage between citizens and the political elite. Populism emphasizes the need for accountability of leaders, but rather less the need for political participation by citizens.

### *The Electoral Performance of Populist Parties*

This article aims to explain the electoral performance of populist parties in three countries. Populism, at least in the Western European context, has more often than not been associated with the radical right and xenophobic politics. Even though this study intends to make an argument that applies to populist parties of all kinds, it does seek inspiration from the numerous works on the electoral performance of the radical right and other new or 'niche' parties. It is expected that populist parties are in some ways similar to other 'outsider' parties as far as the factors related to their electoral success or failure are concerned. This section will specify how such factors are supposed to apply to populist parties in particular. The emphasis will be on agential rather than structural factors. Although issues such as the state of the economy and levels of immigration have often been considered as drivers of the success

of new (radical right) parties, they are unlikely to be relevant to all populist parties considered here. This is because different issues are politically salient in the three selected cases. It is also not expected that populist parties merely rely on protest votes; that is, that they are electorally successful simply because a substantial part of the electorate is dissatisfied with the political establishment. Studies have, in fact, indicated that ideological convictions and policy preferences do play a crucial role with regard to the right-wing populist vote (see, for example, van der Brug et al. 2000).

Bearing in mind the importance of substantive policy positions, this study does consider the responsiveness of established parties concerning those issues that are perceived to be salient by their electorates. It can be expected that populist parties are likely to thrive when established political parties are perceived to be unresponsive to the demands of the 'ordinary citizens'. If many people feel that established parties do not recognize the salience of certain issues within society, or fail to represent their point of view, those parties are potentially vulnerable to the rise of new populist challengers (see Hauss and Rayside 1978). Established parties are also likely to be susceptible to populist critique if they are associated with corruption scandals or patronage (see Kitschelt and McGann 1995). It can be expected that this puts in doubt the integrity of the established parties and their image as trustworthy representatives of the people.

Established parties may hamper the development of populist parties. Tim Bale (2003) speaks of the 'black widow effect' when the mainstream parties in office are able to seize the electoral support of their radical junior coalition partner by copying its policy positions. Bonnie Meguid (2008) similarly argues that an 'accommodative' strategy by a mainstream party can reduce niche party support, although whether this strategy succeeds also depends on the strategies of the other mainstream parties.

Instead of only assessing the strategies of established parties, this article also considers the agency of populist parties themselves in explaining their electoral performance. Even if the opportunity structure for populism is favourable, there would be no populist party success without the supply of a credible populist political party. This might sound obvious, and indeed the importance of party organization and leadership in explaining new (populist) party success has been acknowledged by various authors (see, for example, Betz 2002; Mudde 2007); yet, in comparative studies these factors have

often been overlooked. Following Cas Mudde's argument (2010) concerning populist radical right parties, this is hardly justifiable, since these parties' leadership, organization and propaganda appear to be vital in explaining their success or failure to break through and survive. In her comparative study of Western European extreme right parties, Elisabeth Carter (2005) also finds that party organization and leadership are important; strongly organized and well-led extreme right parties have achieved more electoral success. Carter (2005) further shows that the ideology of the extreme right relates to electoral support; parties that are blatantly anti-democratic and adhere to classical racism are generally less successful.

Similar agency-related factors are likely to apply to populist parties beyond the radical right as well. This article will therefore take into account factors related to the appeal and the organization of the populist parties in order to assess whether they have been electorally credible. First of all, it is expected that populist party leaders need to be sufficiently persuasive in order to seize the ownership of the issues central to the party's appeal. The potential electorate of the populist party must be convinced that the party is better able to 'handle' the problems it identifies than its opponents are (Petrocik 1996: 826). It is important that the populist party attracts sufficient media attention and that the party figurehead(s) make a strong impression during the election campaign. Second, the credibility of a populist party is likely to wane in the eyes of many voters when its rhetoric is too radical or when party members are associated with political extremism (Rydgren 2005); this applies to populist parties of the radical right in particular. Third, it can be difficult for populist parties to stick credibly to their anti-establishment appeal and to present themselves as 'outsiders' in a convincing way once they enter government. After all, they then have to become part of the system they previously vehemently opposed (see, for example, Betz 2002; Heinisch 2003; Taggart 2000; for a counter-argument, see Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010; Zaslove 2011). Finally, party organization is considered to be important in assessing the credibility of a populist party. Particularly after their breakthrough, populist parties are likely to lose their credibility as competent political actors if they fail to preserve internal discipline and cohesion (Mudde 2007; Norris 2005: 263). Since populist parties are generally leader-centred organizations, they are especially likely to fall apart when the leader departs or loses a grip on the party.

Having outlined the theoretical and conceptual points of departure, the article will now turn to the populist parties and their electoral performance in the Netherlands, Poland and the UK. In each of these cases the electoral performance of the populist parties will be assessed, with a particular focus on the agency of the established and populist parties. By doing so, this study aims to answer the question of how to explain the recent electoral performance of populist parties in the three selected countries. The broader aim is to show that studying party agency – including the electoral credibility of populist parties themselves – is necessary in order to explain the electoral performance of populist parties in general.

## THE NETHERLANDS

### *Background and Context*

The Netherlands has traditionally been dominated by three party families: the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats and the Liberals. The dominant parties – save, arguably, the Liberals – were closely aligned with the most significant religious and social groups (see Lijphart 1975). The pure proportional electoral system applied for parliamentary elections was geared at securing proportional representation for each of these groups. However, the traditional group identities gradually weakened in the decades after the Second World War, as did the ties between the electorate and the traditional parties (see, for example, Andeweg and Irwin 2009).

Before 2002, new parties nevertheless played a relatively modest role electorally. This changed when the maverick populist politician Pim Fortuyn entered the political scene.<sup>1</sup> Fortuyn, a columnist and former sociology professor, founded his party, List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), after he was expelled from the also newly formed party Liveable Netherlands. Fortuyn criticized the political establishment fiercely and stressed that power had to be returned to the ‘people in the country’ (Lucardie 2008: 159). Fortuyn’s anti-establishment rhetoric particularly targeted the incumbent ‘Purple’ coalition. This coalition included the Social Democrats and the Liberals – traditional antagonists – who had joined forces for the first time, together with the smaller social liberal party Democrats 66. The coalition had a good record in terms of economic achievements, yet

Fortuyn addressed the ‘messes’ that the coalition had allegedly made in areas such as health care, education, law and order, immigration and the social integration of ethnic and cultural minorities (van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003: 60). It was in his stance on these latter issues of immigration and integration that Fortuyn attracted most controversy. Fortuyn spoke of societal tensions due to immigration and problems caused by the sociocultural backwardness of the Muslim minority population in particular.

On 6 May 2002, nine days before the 2002 parliamentary election, Fortuyn was murdered by an environmental activist. This did not stop the leaderless party from winning 17 per cent of the vote – an unprecedented result for a new party – and the LPF joined a coalition government. After no more than 87 days the coalition broke down and the LPF lost heavily in the following election.

The parliamentary election of November 2006 marked the rise of a new right-wing populist party. The Freedom Party of Geert Wilders, a former Liberal MP, managed to win just under 6 per cent of the vote. In terms of populism, Wilders appealed to the ‘ordinary people’ even more explicitly and criticized the political elite more harshly than Fortuyn had done. Wilders was primarily occupied with immigration and integration issues; Dutch culture was to be protected against the process of ‘Islamization’ in particular. Wilders also adopted a more explicit Eurosceptic position than Fortuyn, yet until the parliamentary election of 2012 European integration had remained an issue of minor importance in parliamentary election campaigns. The referendum that was held in 2005 on the European Constitutional Treaty – resulting in an overwhelming vote against the Treaty – did not immediately change this (van Holsteyn 2007: 1142; van Kessel 2010).

In the parliamentary election of 2010, the Freedom Party’s vote share increased substantially. The party received 15.5 per cent of the vote and became the third largest party in the Dutch parliament. The Freedom Party, moreover, signed a support agreement with the Christian Democrats and Liberals, who formed a minority government. The government would not last longer than April 2012, when Wilders withdrew his support on the basis of his disagreement with newly drafted austerity measures. In the early election that followed in September 2012, the Freedom Party suffered a substantial loss after having campaigned primarily on the basis of an anti-EU platform (van Kessel and Hollander 2012). The party received just



over 10 per cent of the vote, but still remained the third largest party in parliament (together with the radical left-wing Socialist Party).

### *Explaining Populist Party Performance*

It has been argued that the ideological convergence of Dutch mainstream parties – perhaps epitomized by the formation of the Purple coalition – has opened up the space for new parties to challenge the political establishment (Pennings and Keman 2003). The agency of established mainstream parties has thus been addressed in order to explain the breakthrough of Dutch populist parties. In order to provide a more precise explanation for the performance of Fortuyn and Wilders it is necessary to consider the established parties' position with regard to the specific issues of immigration and social integration of minorities. In the 1990s the Liberal Party, under the leadership of Frits Bolkestein, voiced clear concerns about multiculturalism. By 2002, however, none of the three established parties emphasized immigration and integration issues in its campaign (Aarts and Thomassen 2008). This gave Fortuyn the room to position himself as the main critic of multicultural society. By doing so, he voiced the opinion of a substantial share of the electorate who had become increasingly wary of this issue since the 1990s (Aarts and Thomassen 2008: 217).

In order to explain why it was Fortuyn in particular who built up such significant levels of support, the agency of the man himself must also be taken into account. With his flamboyant media performances Fortuyn dominated the 2002 campaign, placing the established parties in a difficult position (see Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2003). In a televised debate following the municipal elections in March 2002, for instance, the grumpy-looking Labour and Liberal party leaders seemed unable, and apparently unwilling, to respond to a triumphant Fortuyn. Although Fortuyn was controversial, he was seen as the right candidate by the substantial part of the electorate that was convinced by his appeal (van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003: 58–9).

Whereas Fortuyn's persuasiveness and visibility gave his party electoral credibility during the 2002 campaign, the later demise of Fortuyn's party was chiefly a matter of organizational failure. After Fortuyn's posthumous breakthrough and the entrance of his party into the governing coalition, it was undoubtedly the continuous infighting that brought the List Pim Fortuyn and the coalition down.

In the words of former party leader Mat Herben (2005: 25), ‘Not one organization is able to function without (accepted) leadership, loyalty and discipline. After Pim Fortuyn had gone there was a lack of all three within the LPF’. The party lost heavily in 2003 and disappeared from parliament altogether in 2006, never able to raise its profile again, lacking a leader as appealing and visible as Fortuyn.

In 2006 Geert Wilders’s share of the vote was still quite modest. In the years following the election the populist politician received increasing media attention with strong anti-establishment statements and with his controversial anti-Islam film *Fitna* from 2008. Even though Wilders was certainly more radical than Fortuyn in this respect, he was able to fend off widespread allegations of extremism. Similar to Fortuyn, Wilders framed his anti-Islam rhetoric in terms of defending libertarian values, for instance in relation to the emancipation of women and homosexuals (Vossen 2010: 20). In organizational terms, having drawn lessons from the mistakes of the List Pim Fortuyn, Wilders intended to keep the ranks of his party closed by enforcing strict party discipline (de Lange and Art 2011). In order to avoid dissent within his party, Wilders has even refused to let sympathizers become members of the Freedom Party.

Despite Wilders’s largely successful efforts to keep his party together, a handful of MPs split from the party from March 2012 onwards. The most prominent example was arguably Hero Brinkman, who left after his pleas for more intra-party democracy proved fruitless. Compared to the chaos of Pim Fortuyn’s party, however, the internal problems within the Freedom Party were ostensibly much more limited. The loss of Wilders’s party in the parliamentary election of 2012 was also not necessarily related to Wilders’s support for the governing minority coalition, which could be supposed to have undermined his anti-establishment credentials. Through the support agreement, however, the Freedom Party was able to influence government policy, but still blamed the government – in which it was not officially taking part – for taking less popular measures. Instead, it is likely that Wilders suffered a loss in the election because, in light of the Euro crisis, ‘his’ issues related to immigration and Islam had become much less salient (van Kessel and Hollander 2012). Wilders’s attitude of Euro-rejection during the campaign might not have been as electorally fruitful as his stance against Islam was in the past. Further research on the outcomes of the 2012 election will need to shine light on this.

It is safe to say, in any case, that a very proportional electoral system and a dealigned electorate have contributed to a conducive environment for populist parties in the Netherlands. An explanation for the performance of these parties would be flawed, however, if it did not take party agency into account (van Kessel 2011). A populist party only truly broke through when established parties were unresponsive to salient issues related to immigration and multiculturalism. The agency of the populist parties has been crucial too. Both the List Pim Fortuyn and the Freedom Party could attract substantial attention while steering clear of overt political extremism. The success of the List Pim Fortuyn soon waned as the party could not live up to expectations once in government, largely due to continuing organizational problems. The party of Geert Wilders, on the other hand, has learned from the LPF's mistakes in terms of party organization, irrespective of several splits from his party. Even if established parties have reacted by putting the issues of the populist parties higher up their own political agenda (see Oosterwaal and Torenvlied 2010), the fact that Wilders was able to remain a significant political force after the 2012 parliamentary election, despite a less favourable opportunity structure, shows that a considerable number of Dutch voters have been reluctant to return to the 'old' parties.

## POLAND

### *Background and Context*

The first decade of post-communist Polish politics was marked by a very fluid party system whereby the lifespan of many parties was short. The proportional representation (PR) electoral system was amended repeatedly since the transition to democracy, yet it has always been less conducive to the breakthrough of small parties than the Dutch system. Election results were very volatile, regardless of institutional factors, not least due to very low levels of party affiliation.

By the time of the parliamentary election of 2001, two camps had developed that could reasonably be perceived to make up the Polish political establishment after the transition to democracy: the communist successor camp, emerging out of the former Communist Party, and the post-Solidarity camp, emerging out of the main

opposition force to the communist regime. The two dominant political forces were mainly divided with regard to their stance towards the communist past and moral and cultural issues – the communist successors adopting a more secular position. On the other hand, the camps were not strongly divided concerning socioeconomic issues or foreign affairs. Both sides were, for instance, committed to accession to the European Union (although EU membership would never become a hot topic in electoral campaigns or in terms of general public interest (see Szczerbiak and Bil 2009)). Support levels for EU accession had always been relatively high and the Eurosceptic sentiments that did exist, for instance among farmers, largely faded after the benefits of EU membership materialized (see de Lange and Guerra 2009).

Where the former communists had founded a new social democratic party, the post-Solidarity camp was much less united. An alliance that was formed in 1996 broke down in 2000, which led to the foundation of two parties that would later come to play a dominant role: the liberal-conservative Civic Platform and Law and Justice, a party headed by twin brothers Jarosław and Lech Kaczyński. The programme of the latter party mainly focused on law and order issues and combating corruption in public office.

At the same time, 2001 saw the breakthrough of two anti-establishment parties that lacked ties with the post-communist establishment: Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families. In 2001 the parties entered the Polish parliament with roughly 10 per cent and 8 per cent of the vote, respectively. Four years later, the parties achieved a similar result. Whereas Self-Defence clearly complied with the characteristics of a populist party, the League of Polish Families was something of a borderline case. The League's conservative position on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage was more inspired by an explicit adherence to Catholic values rather than an urge to follow the ordinary people's will. The undisputed leader of Self-Defence, Andrzej Lepper, on the other hand, did not shy away from the label 'populism' if, as he stated, 'populism means an uncompromising struggle against a corrupt establishment in defence of ordinary people and national interests' (quoted in Jasiewicz 2008: 14). Despite the lack of a clearly developed programme, Self-Defence could be considered to be a left-wing populist party in terms of socioeconomic policies, and the party mainly attracted support in poorer rural areas.

*Explaining Populist Party Performance*

As in the Netherlands, the agency of mainstream parties played a large role in explaining the performance of populist parties in Poland. Both radical parties clearly benefited from a widespread dissatisfaction with the Polish political elite. This dissatisfaction was partly based on bad economic circumstances. Economic growth slowed down and unemployment rose by the start of the twenty-first century. Polish voters also had reasons to be dissatisfied with the established politicians because of their involvement in corruption scandals and practices of clientelism throughout the 1990s (see, for example, Millard 1999: 23; Szczerbiak 2004: 71). Surveys indicated that in 1991 one-third of Poles believed that corruption in public life was a 'very big' problem, whereas 10 years later this figure was two-thirds, with a sharp increase in the year before the 2001 parliamentary election (CBOS 2001: 5–6).

As a consequence, the 2001 election campaign was marked by a general anti-establishment mood (Szczerbiak 2002). Besides Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families, Law and Justice could also profit from this mood, especially by capitalizing on the strong crime-fighting image of former Justice Minister Lech Kaczyński. Self-Defence leader Lepper, in turn, was able to raise his electoral credibility by making 'an efficient transition from streetwise thug to persuasive spokesman for the poor and alienated' (Millard 2003: 78). The League of Polish Families could particularly benefit from a pool of religious right-wing voters that became available to it after the demise of the post-Solidarity coalition (Szczerbiak 2002: 62).

The Social Democrats won the election of 2001, but the centre-left government that was formed did not leave a better impression in terms of clean politics. It soon became Poland's most unpopular government since the transition to democracy (Szczerbiak 2007: 207). Unsurprisingly, an anti-establishment mood prevailed. In a survey of June 2003 a great majority of respondents thought that politicians were dishonest (77 per cent), unreliable (78 per cent) and that they only cared for their own interests (87 per cent) (CBOS 2003: 4). As a result, in the subsequent parliamentary election of 2005 the most important single reason for Poles to vote for a party concerned the honesty and reliability of their preferred party (CBOS 2005: 2–3).

The climate thus seemed very conducive to parties with an outspoken populist anti-establishment message. In 2005 it was

Law and Justice that could capitalize most successfully on the electorate's sentiments. Even though corruption had always been one of the core issues for the party, Law and Justice had begun to sail a more explicit populist course with a clear message: 'for well over a decade liberal reforms had wreaked havoc on the fortunes of ordinary folk' (Millard 2010: 146). It would be going too far to speak of a wholesale ideological transformation and it is questionable whether Law and Justice turned itself into a fully fledged populist party, yet it was clear that the party now appealed more explicitly to the electorate of Self-Defence. The League of Polish Families also had to fear competition from Law and Justice, especially after the conservative Catholic radio station Radio Maryja – which attracted a considerable amount of loyal listeners – shifted its support from the League to the Kaczyński brothers' party. Indeed, whereas the League and Self-Defence came no further than consolidating their support levels in the election of 2005, Law and Justice managed to attract no less than 27 per cent of the vote.

After the election, the two radical parties supported a Law and Justice minority government but formally signed up to joining a majority coalition government in May 2006. The government of Jarosław Kaczyński proved to be highly unstable, with the two junior coalition parties repeatedly quarrelling with Law and Justice. At the same time, scandals continued to occur and the junior coalition partners suffered from numerous defections and bad press in particular. The practices of patronage and corruption of Self-Defence and the League, as well as their more general incompetence, were the subject of substantial negative news coverage (Millard 2010: 146). As far as policy effectiveness was concerned, even former spokesperson for Self-Defence Mateusz Piskorski (2008) admitted, 'if we would find a kind of method to estimate the degree of programme realisation . . . it would be very small in the case of Self-Defence, after two years of coalition. Very small.' The coalition eventually tumbled in the summer of 2007, shortly after Self-Defence leader Lepper (now in the role of agriculture minister) was accused of taking bribes and was subsequently dismissed.

Law and Justice remained popular among a significant section of the electorate. The government refrained from radical austerity measures, unemployment was falling and the government received credit for its anti-corruption measures (Szczerbiak 2008: 418). Thanks to its ceaseless emphasis on fighting corruption, Law and

Justice still appealed especially to voters who were concerned with probity in public life. The party thus ‘retained a loyal core of supporters prepared to give it the benefit of the doubt as long as it appeared to be delivering on its programme of moral and political renewal’ (Szczerbiak 2008: 418). Meanwhile, the junior coalition partners failed to play a visible role in the 2007 parliamentary election campaign or to differentiate themselves from their coalition partner in a positive way. In the elections of 2007 and 2011 Law and Justice was beaten by the Civic Platform of Donald Tusk, but the party remained a dominant force in Polish politics. Self-Defence and the League lost their seats in 2007.

As was the case in the Netherlands, populist parties benefited from a favourable opportunity structure in which there was widespread distrust of established parties. Similar to the List Pim Fortuyn, Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families lost their credibility after they took part in government. The two parties hardly showed themselves to be more reliable or competent than the established parties they had criticized, and thus they failed to live up to expectations. Instead of a newly founded populist party, it was Law and Justice, a party with roots in the Polish post-communist establishment, that eventually captured the populist parties’ electorate. Different from the Dutch case, then, a ‘black widow’ effect materialized in Poland, whereby a mainstream party managed to present itself as a more credible agent of the dissatisfied voters (see Bale 2003).

## THE UNITED KINGDOM

### *Background and Context*

Populist parties in the UK have never become electorally successful in general elections. In a country traditionally dominated by two major parties, Labour and the Conservatives, the most notable populist parties acting on a nationwide basis have been the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the British National Party (BNP). The former was founded in 1993 as the successor of the Anti-Federalist League, with the aim of ending British European Union membership. In the words of former leader Alan Sked (2010), ‘Normal people should run their own affairs and we didn’t want to

be run by a committee of unelected bureaucrats'. In more recent years, after various leadership changes, the party has also taken a more restrictive position with regard to immigration.

In this it began to stress an issue that had always been at the core of the programme of the BNP. The BNP, founded in 1982, descended from the neo-fascist National Front. After the start of the twenty-first century the party aimed to cultivate a legitimate image by moving away from overt biological racism and by emphasizing more commonplace 'local community' issues (see, for example, Goodwin 2011). In its 2005 and 2010 general election manifestos the party also explicitly intended to show its commitment to democracy while rejecting totalitarianism. The BNP (2005: 3) further promised to 'return power to the men and women of Britain, the taxpayers, pensioners, mums and dads and workers'. It can be argued that the BNP's change of direction was an opportune 'change of clothing' rather than a real break with the past (Copsey 2008: 164–5). When the electoral appeal of the party is taken at face value, however, it is appropriate to consider the 'new' BNP as a populist party. The party has combined a strong anti-establishment rhetoric with an explicit appeal to the 'ordinary British folk' (BNP 2005: 53).

Even though both UKIP and the BNP saw their share of the vote increase in recent general elections, the parties did not receive more than 3.1 per cent and 1.9 per cent of the nationwide vote, respectively (in the 2010 general election). Under the single member plurality electoral system, neither party ever came close to winning a single seat – even in their main target constituencies.

### *Explaining Populist Party Performance*

The electoral system provides a potential explanation for the failure of populist parties in Britain. Smaller parties without a strong regional support base are likely to be disadvantaged under a plurality system in terms of the distribution of seats. Voters may also anticipate the mechanical effects of the electoral system and refrain from voting for these parties in the first place (Duverger 1959). The results of the Liberal Democrats in British general elections, however, show that it is not impossible for a third party to win a significant number of votes (over 20 per cent in 2005 and 2010). Considering the electoral system alone is thus unlikely to be sufficient when explaining the failure of the British populist parties.



Data from the 2010 British Election Survey (Clarke et al. 2010) provide support for this claim. The data suggest that the electoral system has an impact on voting behaviour in Britain. Of all respondents 8.1 per cent stated they voted for another party because their preferred party stood no chance of winning in their constituency; another 8.9 per cent of respondents indicated that they voted tactically. For about two-thirds of these two groups of voters, however, the party they actually preferred was one of three major parties. Only 15 per cent of these respondents stated that the party they preferred was UKIP, whereas 6.4 per cent indicated they would have preferred to vote for the BNP. Judging from these figures, if all British voters had cast their vote for the party closest to their hearts, the impact in terms of the overall vote share of UKIP and BNP would have been fairly marginal.

Elections for the European Parliament show that the two British populist parties can do better under a different electoral system. In Great Britain seats for the European Parliament are allocated on the basis of a PR system. In 2009 UKIP even became the second largest party behind the Conservatives, with a vote share of 16.5 per cent, whereas the BNP secured 6.2 per cent of the vote. It should be borne in mind, however, that European Parliament elections can be considered as 'second order elections', conducive to the success of radical protest parties (Reif and Schmitt 1980). The high-profile news coverage of the 'expenses scandal' also played a large role in the campaign of 2009. This scandal involved the misuse of allowances and claimed expenses by MPs from all three major parties, which contributed to a general anti-establishment mood. To put it provocatively, it might be considered surprising that under these circumstances the populist parties did not manage to do any better in the 2009 European Parliament election. At the least, it seems very unlikely that UKIP and the BNP would have built up similar levels of support at a hypothetical 'first order' election, held under a PR system.

In order to provide a more complete picture we have to move away from a purely institutional argument and take into account the agency of both the established and the populist parties. A first question to be asked is whether the established parties in Britain have been responsive to the demands of the electorate concerning the issues of immigration and European integration – the issues at the core of the populist parties' appeal. Immigration has become a salient issue for the British electorate since the end of the 1990s

(see John and Margetts 2009); a series of opinion polls showed that in 2001 around 25 per cent of respondents considered the issues of asylum or immigration to be very important in deciding which party to vote for. This percentage rose to above 35 per cent in the following years, and to over 45 per cent in 2006 and 2007 (Ipsos MORI 2010). Another poll, from March 2010, indicated that 78 per cent of all respondents perceived the level of immigration to be too high (YouGov/*Sun* 2010a).

The Conservative Party in particular has responded to these concerns, even though individual Labour politicians have also been critical about immigration and cultural integration. When the salience of these issues rose after the turn of the century, the Conservatives toughened their stance in their election campaigns (Copsey 2008: 117–19). Even though the Conservatives under David Cameron's leadership (from December 2005) are perceived to have moderated their tone, the party managed to retain ownership of the issue. According to a poll carried out shortly before the general election of 2010 (YouGov/*Sun* 2010b), 38 per cent of the respondents thought the Conservatives would handle these 'problems' best, compared to 24 per cent who opted for Labour and 14 per cent who answered that the Liberal Democrats would be most capable. Another 9 per cent of the respondents gave 'other party' as a response.

In the issue of European integration, the British electorate has been very Eurosceptic from the outset. According to Eurobarometer data (European Commission 2009: 93), in 2009 only 28 per cent of the respondents thought that EU membership was a good thing. 'Europe' has at the same time been an issue of low salience to voters and was above all an issue accentuating divisions within mainstream parties (see, for example, Baker et al. 2008). Since the end of the 1990s, however, the Conservative Party had adopted an increasingly Eurosceptic position, resulting in a clear dominance of Eurosceptic sentiments within the party's parliamentary fraction (Webb 2008).

With regard to the issues of both immigration and European integration, then, at least one of the established parties has been responsive to the opinions of many voters. Yet the fact that neither UKIP nor the BNP was able to seize the ownership of both issues was also largely due to the agency of the populist parties themselves. Even though the BNP has attempted to forge a 'clean' image, the party found it hard to get rid of its extremist stigma (see, for example,

Goodwin 2011). It has been difficult for BNP leader Nick Griffin, for instance, to refute having repeatedly voiced his doubts about the occurrence of the Holocaust. Even though the BNP might attract a small niche of xenophobic voters, it has remained a party that is 'beyond the pale' for more mainstream voters. This is indicated by the results of an opinion poll stating that 66 per cent of the respondents would 'under no circumstances' consider voting for the BNP (YouGov/*Daily Telegraph* 2009). Unlike the populist parties in the Netherlands, then, an extremist image curbed the electoral credibility of the BNP.

UKIP's lack of popularity, in turn, is more related to the relative indistinctiveness of the party's appeal, which is mainly centred on its negative attitude towards European integration (Usherwood 2008). In terms of visibility and leadership the party has also failed to impress. In the words of former MEP Graham Booth (2008), 'Our problem is: we are all unknowns, nobody knows who the hell we are'. The only truly high-profile leader was former chat show host Robert Kilroy-Silk, but he proved to be a highly divisive figure. UKIP – and the BNP, for that matter – has been plagued by intraparty quarrels throughout its existence. However, whether this has truly hampered the populist parties' success is questionable, since organizational troubles did not receive widespread public attention in the first place.

Even if the electoral system can be assumed to have played a part in the failure of British populist parties, the agency of established and populist parties also needs to be considered. The British populist parties lacked a true window of opportunity, as their issues were largely 'covered' by the Conservative Party in particular. At the same time, both the BNP and UKIP lacked the electoral credibility to gain ownership of the issues central to their appeal.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explain the electoral performance of populist parties in the Netherlands, Poland and the UK. By means of the three case studies, this article has provided empirical substantiation for the claim that, across different political contexts, the electoral performance of populist parties is largely dependent on the perceived responsiveness and integrity of established parties, and also on the agency of the populist parties themselves. Structural

conditions, such as the state of the economy in Poland and the electoral system in the UK, may have made life harder or easier for populist parties, yet it seems that a substantial part of the electorate must feel dissatisfied with the political elite in order to generate a truly conducive environment for populist parties. Even if the conditions are favourable, however, populist parties have to present themselves as credible alternatives to the established parties in order to become successful.

The case of the List Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands has shown that the loss of an appealing leader, organizational chaos and a disappointing record in government can spell a quick end to a populist party. Despite several defections, Geert Wilders has in the main steered his Freedom Party clear of a similar scenario. The fact that the Freedom Party has remained the third largest party in the Dutch parliament indicates that voters do not automatically return to established parties, even if these become more responsive to their demands. The Dutch case thus shows that it might be inaccurate to conceive of populist parties as mere 'by-products of competition between mainstream parties' (Meguid 2008: 22). The Polish case shows that it can be possible for a large mainstream party (Law and Justice) to steal the electoral thunder of populist parties by successfully incorporating their policies and rhetoric. The inability of the two radical parties (Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families) to present themselves as responsible political actors in government certainly contributed to Law and Justice's success. The case of the UK shows that populist parties stand little chance if they take policy positions that are radical but not quite at odds with those of the established parties. A lack of visibility (in the case of UKIP) and an extremist image (in the case of the BNP) have further hampered the electoral credibility and the success of the British populist parties.

By pointing out the importance of the agency of populist parties as regards their electoral performance, this article steps away from the idea that populist parties only rely on uninformed protest votes. Even if these parties thrive on dissatisfaction with the political elite, there is more to populist parties' electoral success than the presence of anti-political sentiments alone (see, for example, van der Brug et al. 2000). It matters whether the issues central to the appeal of populist parties resonate with the ideas of their potential electorates. As this article has indicated, in line with Mudde's assertion, leadership and organization also play important roles

(Mudde 2007, 2010; see also Carter 2005). Populist parties need to convey a resonant message in a convincing way in order to become successful. To explain their electoral performance we thus have to consider the demand for, as well as the supply of, populist parties.

Even though this message may sound rather obvious, comparative studies have often neglected the agency of populist parties or other radical outsiders. This is not entirely surprising as operationalizing a concept such as ‘electoral credibility’ is rather difficult, especially when the aim is to measure credibility quantitatively. This is no excuse, however, for excluding such a crucial factor from the analysis. This study has suggested a way to assess the electoral credibility of populist parties in cross-national research. Further contributions that develop a more comprehensive measurement of electoral credibility of political parties would be welcome. There is also room for further research assessing which elements of electoral credibility – for instance, related to leadership or organizational stability – are relevant under different circumstances.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The Dutch Socialist Party is a party frequently considered to be an example of a left-wing populist party, but since the beginning of the twenty-first century the party has used much less populist rhetoric; see Lange and Rooduijn (2011).

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