A matter of supply and demand: the electoral performance of populist parties in three European countries

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A matter of supply and demand: the electoral performance of populist parties in three European countries.

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ABSTRACT

This paper 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 paper considers the agency of political parties in particular. More specifically, it will assess 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 paper argues that the credibility of the populist parties themselves plays a crucial role in understanding their electoral success and failure.

INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the electoral performance of populist parties in three countries: the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom. Populist parties are marked by an anti-establishment critique and an appeal to a community of ‘ordinary people’. This topic 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.¹

The Netherlands and Poland are selected as they provide ideal ‘laboratory environments’ in which the success, but also the failure, of populist parties can be
studied. The two countries have witnessed both the rise as well as the fall of populist parties in recent years and in both countries populist parties have entered government. The paper compares successful and unsuccessful manifestations of populism within both cases. 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 particularly well. By selecting a former communist country the paper also aims to encourage further research with a pan-European focus.\(^2\)

The third case that is selected is the United Kingdom, a country in which populist parties have played a marginal role on the national level. The UK serves as a ‘negative’ case, yet the UK is also selected because the paper aims to show that also in countries with an institutional environment which is ostensibly hostile to the breakthrough of new (populist) parties, the agency of political parties matters. The UK applies a Single Member Plurality system in general elections, which tends to disadvantage smaller parties. As will be argued in this paper, however, it does not suffice to merely consider this institutional factor in explaining the failure of British populist parties.

The following section outlines how populist parties are defined in this paper and presents the theoretical points of departure. The remainder of the paper 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 which distinguish themselves by having populism at the very core of
their appeal. Populist parties embody resistance against the established system of representative politics and it would be impossible to characterise 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.³ This means that populism in itself does not provide an all-encompassing agenda of how society should function. As a result, parts of existing, more rooted 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.⁴ Several features recur in those definitions, which include 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 belong to these ‘ordinary people’ and populist parties are often not very specific about their target audience. All populist parties do, nevertheless, 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.⁵ Immigrants and ethnic or cultural minority groups are 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’.  

Populist parties are in any case opposed to the political powers that be. As Cas Mudde 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 as far as this leads to complex decision-making procedures. 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. Instead, they maintain that they know what the ordinary people want and that they are the ones who truly represent their interests. Following Robert Barr, populism can be associated with a plebiscitarianist form of linkage between citizens and the political elite. Populism emphasises the need for accountability of leaders, but not so much the need for political participation of citizens.

**The Electoral Performance of Populist Parties**

This study 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 studies 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 factors 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, these are unlikely to be relevant to all populist parties considered here. This is because different issues are politically salient across the three selected cases. It is also not expected that populist parties merely rely on protest votes, i.e. 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.\textsuperscript{11}

Bearing in mind the importance of substantive policy positions, this study does consider the responsiveness of established parties with regard 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 recognise the salience of certain issues within society, or fail to represent a dominant position with regard to those, these parties are potentially vulnerable to the rise of new populist challengers.\textsuperscript{12} Established parties are also likely to be susceptible to populist critique if they are associated with corruption scandals or patronage.\textsuperscript{13} 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 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.\textsuperscript{14} Bonnie Meguid similarly argues that an ‘accommodative’ strategy of a mainstream party can reduce niche party support, although whether this strategy succeeds also depends on the strategies of the other mainstream parties.\textsuperscript{15}

Instead of only assessing the strategies of established parties, this paper 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 the importance of party organisation and leadership in
explaining new (populist) party success has indeed been acknowledged by various authors. Yet in comparative studies these factors have often been overlooked. Following Cas Mudde’s argument concerning populist radical right parties, this is hardly justifiable, since these parties’ leadership, organisation, 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 also finds that party organisation and leadership are important. Strongly organised and well-led extreme right parties have achieved more electoral success. Carter further shows that the ideology of 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 paper will therefore take into account factors related to the appeal and the organisation 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 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. 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. Secondly, the credibility of a populist party is likely to wane in the eye of many voters when its rhetoric is too radical or when party members are associated with political extremism. This applies to populist parties of the radical right in particular. Thirdly, it can be difficult for populist parties to credibly stick 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. Finally, party organisation 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. Since
populist parties are generally leader-centred organisations, they are especially likely to fall apart when the leader departs or loses grip over the party.

Having outlined the theoretical and conceptual points of departure, the paper will now turn to the populist parties and their electoral performance in the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom. With regard to 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 were closely aligned with the most significant religious and social groups. 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.

Before 2002 new parties nevertheless played a relatively modest role. This changed when the maverick populist politician Pim Fortuyn entered the political scene. 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 criticised the political establishment fiercely and stressed that power had to be returned to the ‘people in the country’. Fortuyn’s anti-establishment rhetoric particularly targeted the incumbent ‘Purple’ coalition. This coalition included the Social
Democrats and the Liberals – traditional antagonists – who 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’ 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. 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 social-cultural backwardness of the Muslim minority population in particular.

On May 6, nine days prior to the 2002 parliamentary election, Fortuyn was murdered by an environmental activist. This did not stop the leaderless party to win 17% 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% of the vote. In terms of populism, Wilders appealed to the ‘ordinary people’ even more explicitly and criticised the political elite more harshly than Fortuyn used to do. Wilders was more primarily occupied with immigration and integration issues. Dutch culture was to be protected against the process of ‘Islamisation’ in particular. Wilders also adopted a more explicit Eurosceptic position than Fortuyn, yet up until the parliamentary election of 2010 European integration 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 change this.

In the parliamentary election of 2010, the Freedom Party’s vote share increased substantially. The party received 15.5% 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.
Explaining populist party performance

It has been argued that the ideological convergence of Dutch mainstream parties – perhaps epitomised by the formation of the Purple coalition – has opened up the space for new parties challenging the political establishment. The agency of established mainstream parties has thus been addressed in order to explain the breakthrough of Dutch populist parties. Yet in order to provide a more precise explanation for the performance of Fortuyn and Wilders it is required 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 with regard to multiculturalism. By 2002, however, none of the three established parties emphasised immigration and integration issues in their campaigns. This gave Fortuyn the room to position himself as the main critic of multicultural society. By doing so, Fortuyn voiced the opinion of a substantial share of the electorate which had become increasingly wary of this issue since the 1990s.

In order to explain why it was Fortuyn in particular who built up such significant levels of support, the agency of Fortuyn must also be taken into account. With his flamboyant media performances Fortuyn dominated the campaign of 2002, placing the established parties in a difficult position. 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.

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 organisational 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: ‘Not one organisation 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.\textsuperscript{34} The party lost heavily in 2003 and disappeared from parliament altogether in 2006, as it was never able to raise its profile anymore, lacking an equally appealing and visible leader as Fortuyn.

In 2006 Geert Wilders’ 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 \textit{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 related to the emancipation of women and homosexuals.\textsuperscript{35} In organisational terms, having drawn lessons from the mistakes of the List Pim Fortuyn, Wilders managed to keep the ranks of his party closed by enforcing strict party discipline.\textsuperscript{36} In order to avoid dissent within his party, Wilders has even refused to let sympathisers become members of the Freedom Party. The only split from the parliamentary group occurred in March 2012 and did not lead to a great deal of turmoil. Hero Brinkman, an MP who favoured more intra-party democracy, left the party when it became clear that his pleas were fruitless. It is questionable whether the powerful position of the Freedom Party after the successful election of 2010 has harmed the party’s populist anti-establishment image. Through the support agreement, the Freedom Party has been able to influence government policy, but it can still blame the government – in which it is not officially taking part – for taking less popular measures. Even if established parties have reacted by putting the issues of the populist parties higher up their own political agenda, the fact that Wilders has been able to withstand competition from the mainstream thus far shows that a considerable amount of Dutch voters is reluctant to return to the ‘old’ parties.

A very proportional electoral system and a dealigned electorate have contributed to a conducive environment for populist parties in the Netherlands. Yet an explanation for the performance of these parties would be flawed without taking party agency into account. A populist party only truly broke through when established parties were
unresponsive with regard 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 whilst steering clear from 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 organisational problems. The party of Geert Wilders, on the other hand, has learned from the LPF’s mistakes in terms of party organisation, has managed to keep ‘one foot in and one foot out’ of government, and has continued to dominate the political debate.

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 has been 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 in the last place 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 against 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 socio-economic issues or foreign affairs. Both sides were, for instance, committed to accession to the European Union. EU membership would also never become a hot topic in electoral campaigns or in terms of general public interest. 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 materialised.\textsuperscript{39}

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. This led to the foundation of two parties, which 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, in 2001 two anti-establishment parties broke through which 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% and 8% 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 was somewhat of a borderline case. The latter party’s conservative position on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage was more inspired by an explicit adherence to Catholic values, instead of 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’.\textsuperscript{40} Despite the lack of a clearly developed programme, Self Defence could be considered as a left-wing populist party in terms of socio-economic 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 turn of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. Polish voters also had reasons to be
dissatisfied with the established politicians due to their involvement in corruption scandals and practices of clientelism throughout the 1990s. Surveys indicated that in 1991 one-third of the Poles believed that corruption in public life was a ‘very big’ problem, whereas ten years later this figure was two-thirds, with a sharp increase in the year before the 2001 parliamentary election.

As a consequence, the 2001 election campaign was marked by a general anti-establishment mood. Besides Self Defence and the League of Polish Families, also Law and Justice could profit from this mood. The latter party could capitalise 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’.

The League of Polish Families could particularly benefit from a pool of religious right-wing voters that became available after the demise of the post-Solidarity coalition.

The social democrats won the election of 2001, but the centre-left government that was formed after the election did not leave a better impression in terms of clean politics. It would soon become Poland’s most unpopular government since the transition to democracy. Unsurprisingly, the anti-establishment mood prevailed. In a survey from June 2003 a great majority of respondents thought that politicians were dishonest (77%), unreliable (78%) and that they simply cared for their own interests (87%). As a result, in the subsequent parliamentary election of 2005 the most important single reason for the Poles to vote for a party related to the honesty and reliability of their preferred party.

The climate thus seemed very conducive to parties with an outspoken populist anti-establishment message. In 2005 it was Law and Justice that could capitalise 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’. It would go 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 party of the Kaczyński brothers. 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% 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 would continue 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 subject of substantial negative news coverage. As regards policy effectiveness even former spokesperson for Self Defence Mateusz Piskorski admitted that ‘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 would eventually tumble in the summer of 2007. This happened shortly after Self Defence leader, and now Agriculture Minister, Lepper was accused of taking bribes, and 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. Due to its ceaseless emphasis on fighting corruption, Law and Justice still appealed to the voters who were concerned with probity in public life in particular. 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’. 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 profited from a favourable opportunity structure in which there was widespread distrust of established parties. Similar to the List Pim Fortuyn, however, Self Defence and the League of Polish Families lost their credibility after they took part in in government. The two parties hardly showed to be more reliable or competent than the established parties they criticised before and thus 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 materialised in Poland, whereby a mainstream party managed to present itself as a more credible agent of the dissatisfied voters.

THE UNITED KINGDOM

Background and context
Populist parties in the United Kingdom 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 party was founded in 1993 as the successor of the Anti-Federalist League, with the aim to end British European Union membership. In the words of former leader Alan Sked: ‘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.
As such, it began to stress an issue which had always been at the core of the programme of the British National Party. The BNP, founded in 1982, descended from the neo-fascist National Front. After the turn of the 21st century the party aimed to cultivate a legitimate image by moving away from overt biological racism and by emphasising more commonplace ‘local community’ issues.\(^{55}\) In the 2005 and 2010 general election manifestos the party also explicitly embraced democracy, whilst rejecting totalitarianism. The BNP further promised to ‘return power to the men and women of Britain, the taxpayers, pensioners, mums and dads and workers’.\(^{56}\) It can well be argued that the BNP’s change of direction is an opportune ‘change of clothing’ instead of a real break with the past.\(^{57}\) 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’.\(^{58}\)

Even though both UKIP and the BNP saw their share of the vote increase in recent general elections, the parties never received more than 3.1\% and 1.9\% of the nationwide vote, respectively (in the 2010 general election). Under the Single Member Plurality electoral system, neither of the parties ever came close to winning a single seat, not 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 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.\(^{59}\) 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 amount of votes (over 20\% 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 provides support for this claim.\(^{60}\) The data does suggest that the electoral system has an impact on voting behaviour in
Britain. Of all respondents 8.1% stated they voted for another party because their preferred party stood no chance of winning in their constituency. Another 8.9% of the respondents indicated that they voted tactically. For about two-thirds of these two groups of voters, however, the party actually preferred was one of three major parties. Only 15% of these respondents stated the party they preferred was UKIP, whereas 6.4% indicated they had rather voted for the BNP. Judging from these figures, if all British voters would have cast their vote for the party closest to their heart, the impact in terms of the overall vote share of UKIP and BNP would have been quite 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%, whereas the BNP secured 6.2% 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. The high profile news about 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 can be considered a surprise that under these circumstances the populist parties did not manage to do any better in the 2009 EP election. At the very 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 with regard to 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. A series of opinion polls showed that in 2001 around 25% of the
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% in the following years, and to over 45% in 2006 and 2007. Another poll from March 2010 indicated that 78% of all respondents perceived the level of immigration to be too high.

Considering the established parties’ agency, the Conservative Party in particular has responded to these concerns, even though also individual Labour politicians have 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. Even though the Conservatives under David Cameron’s leadership (December 2005-present) are perceived to have moderated their tone, the party managed to retain ownership of the issue. According to a poll, carried out shortly before to general election of 2010, 38% of the respondents thought the Conservatives would handle these ‘problems’ best, compared to 24% who opted for Labour and 14% who answered that the Liberal Democrats would be most capable. Another 9% of the respondents gave ‘other party’ as a response.

As regards the issue of European integration, the British electorate has been very Eurosceptic from the outset. According to Eurobarometer data, in 2009 only 28% 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. Since the end of the 1990s, however, the Conservative Party adopted an increasingly Eurosceptic position, resulting in a clear dominance of Eurosceptic sentiments within the party’s parliamentary fraction.

With regard to both the issues of 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. 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 which is ‘beyond the pale’ for more mainstream voters. This is indicated by the results of an opinion poll stating that 66% of the respondents would ‘under no circumstances’ consider voting for the BNP. Different from 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 around its negative attitude towards European integration. In terms of visibility and leadership the party has also failed to impress. In the words of former MEP Graham Booth: ‘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, as the BNP for that matter, has been plagued by intra-party quarrels throughout its existence, even though the parties’ organisational troubles did not receive widespread public attention.

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, the paper 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, but 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 United Kingdom, 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, organisational chaos and a disappointing record in government can spell the quick end of a populist party. Geert Wilders has steered his Freedom Party clear from such problems. The continued success of this party 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’. The Polish case, in turn, 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 Law and Justice’s success in doing so. The case of the UK, in turn, shows that populist parties stand little chance if they take policy positions which are not quite at odds with those of the established parties. A lack of visibility (in case of UKIP) and an extremist image (in 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 paper 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. It matters whether the issues central to the appeal of populist parties resonate with the ideas of their potential electorates. As this paper has indicated, in line with Mudde’s assertion, leadership and organisation also play an
important role. 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 operationalising 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 are welcome which develop a more comprehensive measurement of electoral credibility of political parties. There is also room for further research assessing which elements of electoral credibility, for instance related to leadership or organisational stability, are relevant under different circumstances.

NOTES

8 See Taggart, 2000, op. cit.


The Dutch Socialist Party is a party is frequently considered to be an example of a left-wing populist party, but since the beginning of the 21st century the party has used much less populist rhetoric. See: S. de Lange and M. Rooduijn, 'Een populistische Zeitgeist in Nederland? Een inhoudsanalyse van de verkiezingsprogramma's van populistische en gevestigde politieke partijen', in: R. Andeweg and J. Thomassen (eds.) Democratie Doorgelicht, het functioneren van de Nederlandse democratie, Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2011, pp. 319-334.


Ibid.


51 Quote from an interview with the author, Warsaw, 22-09-2008.
53 Ibid, pp. 418. 
54 Quote from an interview with the author, London, 10-07-2010.
56 BNP, Rebuilding British Democracy, General election manifesto, 2005, pp. 3.
58 BNP, 2005, op. cid., pp. 53.
67 European Commission, Eurobarometer 71, Spring 2009, pp. 93.
70 See for instance Goodwin, 2011, op. cid.
Quote from an interview with the author, Brussels, 09-09-2008.
Meguid, 2008, op. cid., pp. 22.