

How can we understand populism? What determines the success of populist actors and far right parties in contemporary democracies?

In this essay, I will argue that the success of populist actors is primarily the result of supply-side factors. Although it is necessary for there to be demand for populism, it is possible for this demand to exist without a populist party achieving electoral success. To illustrate this, I will use the Netherlands as a case study. I will use Mudde's definition of populism as a thin-centred ideology, which allows it to attach to other ideologies such as socialism or nationalism. Firstly, I argue that there has to be some demand for populism. Economic downturns and corruption allow populist actors to present themselves as spokespersons of 'the people' against the corrupt 'elite', rapid cultural change can especially create fertile ground for right-wing populism. And when mainstream parties fail to address citizens' concerns, also if this is not possible because of international organisations such as the European Union (EU), this further creates fertile ground for populist actors. However, I will then argue that, in the end, supply-side factors are of greater significance in determining whether populist actors are successful in converting this demand into electoral performance. The charisma of populist leaders determines whether the populist is able to mobilise voters. And the reaction of the political elite – whether they accommodate or confront populists – contributes to the success of populist actors. Accommodation only strengthens far-right parties. I will show that these factors, the charisma of populist actors and the accommodation of the political elite, are the most important determinants of populist success by using Dutch populism as a case study.

Of course, there are multiple ways to define 'success', but in this essay I will mainly focus on whether a populist actor is successful at *getting into power* and has electoral success rather than whether a populist actor is successful at sustaining that power and implementing changes.

Defining populism

Populism is a very contested subject. However, most political scientists today use the ideational approach to define populism. Mudde defines the ideational approach as follows: populism is '*a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.*' (2017a, 2017b)

The fact that populism is a thin-centred ideology allows populist actors to attach themselves to other ideologies. In Latin-America, for instance, populists have attached themselves to socialist ideas. Conversely, European populism has taken a more

Met opmerkingen [MOU1]: Very good, maybe a little bit to case-focussed, be more theoretical and try to generalise more.

Met opmerkingen [MOU2]: Power is ambiguous, government/vote share?

nationalist, authoritarian form. The ideational approach mainly focuses on the fact that populists try to split the world into 'the people' who are good and pure, and 'the elite' who are bad and corrupt. The populist actor then tries to position themselves as the embodiment of the good people. The populist then believes that ultimate power lies in the hands of the people, of the general will, and that institutions such as the EU or the judiciary should not be able to decide what happens.

Met opmerkingen [MOU3]: Use this more later, make it more coherent. Talk about the relationship to the far-right

Demand-side factors

In order for a populist actor to be successful, there has to be demand for populism. Demand-side factors can broadly be categorised in two categories: the perception of voters that there are threats to society as a whole – economic downturns and corruption – and the perception of voters that the political system is unresponsive – which leads to cultural backlash and anger at international organisations such as the EU (Mudde 2017a, chap. 6). These factors make the electorate more prone to populism, as there is general dislike of 'the political class' because they are not doing a very good job at ruling the country.

There is a lot of evidence that shows that economic downturn leads to the proliferation of populism. In Europe, it has been shown that far-right parties – who are usually populist – benefit from financial crises (Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2016). For instance, after the 2008 crisis, populist parties such as Front National in France and UKIP in the United Kingdom surged. De la Torre (2017) argues that the first two waves of populism in Latin-America were largely a result of economic crises and that the third wave was the result of widespread dissatisfaction with economic inequality which resulted from the previous, neoliberal populist wave. In Venezuela, for example, Hugo Chávez got elected in the third wave of populism because he advocated to get rid of neoliberalism and implement more redistributive policies. There is also clear evidence which shows that corruption contributes to the rise of populism (Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels 2017). Corruption shows the weakness of mainstream parties, which allow populists to set themselves apart from the elite by arguing that they are elite. This is why Hugo Chávez used anti-corruption narratives to get into power.

However, many European countries did not have widespread economic problems or corruption. In the Netherlands, for instance, the PVV (Party for Freedom) was able to be very successful without there being corruption or economic difficulties. Rather, they were mainly able to capitalise on anti-immigration voters. This was because the electorate felt like the government was not doing anything to address the issues that the electorate cared about, such as immigration. When the elite is unresponsive to the wishes of the people, a populist actor can capitalise on this to try to get into power. International organisations make this even worse. In the Netherlands, because the

national government has no power to make certain decisions because it is in the hands of the EU, populists have taken on an Eurosceptic tone as they argue that the people should have the final say (van Kessel 2011; Taggart 2017). Norris and Inglehart (2019) specifically argue that politicians have become unresponsive to older voters who, as a result of the 'silent revolution' – the greater acceptance of gender equality, multiculturalism, LGBTQ+ values etc. – have become disillusioned with the traditional parties and have started voting for populists.

Met opmerkingen [MOU4]: You are missing immigration, and you can relate it to the definition of far-right and to economic things etc.

Supply-side factors and the three waves of Dutch populism

Even if there is demand for populism, populist actors do not always emerge. According to the Dutch National Voter Study since the 1970s, voters have not started thinking more negatively about immigration, which was the main motivator to vote for far-right populists in the Netherlands in 2023 (Voogd, R., et al. 2024). In fact, if anything, there has been a decrease in anti-immigration sentiment (Frederik 2024). Therefore, Larry Bartels (2023) argues that the wave of right-wing populism in Europe is more of a reservoir than a sudden change in opinion. The recent surge in European populism, therefore, has to be explained with other factors than demand-side factors. I argue that this has mainly been the result of leadership charisma response of the political elite, which I will illustrate with the example of Hans Janmaat.



Figure 1: Who wins the anti-immigration vote? Vote-share per quartile of society based on anti-immigration sentiment: low (1), high (4). From left to right: "Did not vote", "Right-wing populist", "VVD", "CDA", "Left", "Other". Source: National Voter Study (1994-2021).

In the Netherlands, one can roughly discern three waves of populism. The first one was Hans Janmaat's Centrum party (CP, 1980-1986) and Centrum democrats (CD, 1984-1998). However, Hans Janmaat was not very successful, he only ever managed to get 3 seats. If anti-immigration sentiment has been roughly constant since the 1970s, it is odd that Hans Janmaat was not more successful at winning seats.

I argue that there are two reasons for this. Firstly, Hans Janmaat was not very charismatic. He was paranoid and had lots of affairs with women in his party. Weyland (2017) argues that the success of populism can largely be attributed to the populist leaders. He argues that populist movements centre around a charismatic leader rather than a party. This partly explains why Hans Janmaat was not more successful. This is

also illustrated in the second wave of Dutch populism. Pim Fortuyn was mainly successful because of his charisma. He only built a party because it was necessary to contest in elections. That party was even named after him, List Pim Fortuyn (LPF, 2002-2008) and did not have a strong ideological position. The same is true for the third wave of Dutch populism. Geert Wilders' party, the PVV, has only a single member, Geert Wilders himself, and is built almost entirely around him and his opinions (van Kessel 2011). Weyland also argues that this is also visible beyond Europe. In Latin America, even though there were many countries with economic troubles and the potential for populism during the third wave of Latin American populism, it only emerged when there was competent and charismatic leadership which was able to mobilise supporters.

Met opmerkingen [MOU5]: Talk about how this can be very tautological. If someone is popular then they are perceived as charismatic etc...

The other reason that explains the lacking performance of the CP and the CD was the response of the political elite (Vetten 2016, 226-28). Hans Janmaat was avoided by traditional media, being denied television time, and he was completely boycotted by other parties with a cordon sanitaire. Mayors prohibited gatherings and during a party conference, Hans Janmaat's wife lost a leg because of a smoke bomb from protestors. Afterwards, the only coverage this got in parliament was that left-wing parties insisted that the protestors were treated well. The political situation in the Netherlands was very much as Katz and Mair (1995) describe it: a cartel party system. Conversely, many political commentators attribute the recent success of the PVV in 2023 largely to the fact that the new party leader of the centre-right VVD (People's party for Freedom and Democracy) said that she no longer wanted to exclude the PVV (Yeşilgöz (VVD) sluit samenwerking met PVV niet op voorhand uit 2023), thereby making a vote for the PVV no longer a wasted vote. As a result, Geert Wilders was finally able to mobilise the anti-migration sentiment. More generally, Krause et al. (2023) empirically find that accommodation of far-right parties does not work to reduce their support. On the contrary, they find that it strengthens them.

Met opmerkingen [MOU6]: There could also be a demand side explanation, maybe the demand for a cordon sanitaire has been reduced because of anti-fascist ideas etc.

In conclusion, the success of populist actors and far-right parties in contemporary democracies is ultimately shaped more by supply-side factors than by demand alone. While economic downturns, corruption, cultural backlash, and unresponsiveness of the elite create fertile ground for populism, they do not automatically lead to the rise of successful populist parties. The Dutch case illustrates this well – despite consistent levels of anti-immigration sentiment, populist success has varied significantly over time. This suggests that the ability of populist actors to capitalise on demand depends on their personal charisma and the strategic responses of the political elite. Leaders such as Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders were able to build strong personalist movements, whereas Hans Janmaat's failure demonstrates the limitations of populist rhetoric without compelling leadership and the effect that a boycott from the political elite can have, even if there is demand for populism.

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