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RESEARCH NOTE

Measuring Populism: Comparing Two Methods of Content Analysis

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The measurement of populism – particularly over time and space – has received only scarce attention. In this research note two different ways to measure populism are compared: a classical content analysis and a computer-based content analysis. An analysis of political parties in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy demonstrates that both methods can be used to measure populism across countries and over time. Recommendations are presented on how to combine these methods in future comparative research on populism.

The term populism has been applied to a wide range of movements, politicians and parties. This wide application reflects one of the most problematic characteristics of the concept: its contextual sensitivity. Because of this contextual sensitivity, populism is in turn plagued by a lack of conceptual clarity (Canovan 1981; Taggart 2000; Barr 2009; Laclau 2005). Consequently, scholars have not yet developed systematic methods to empirically measure populism across cases and over time. There have been some empirical investigations into populism, yet most of these are single case studies (e.g. Mény and Surel 2002; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). A more systematic and comparative perspective is still lacking. This is problematic, because the most relevant scientific questions are empirical and comparative in nature: are we increasingly living in a populist zeitgeist (Mudde 2004)? What other ideologies are combined with the thin-centred ideology of populism? Under what circumstances are mainstream parties becoming populist? In this research note, we do not aim to answer such empirical questions. Yet we do focus on a fundamental *prerequisite* for answering these questions: the methodological issue of how populism could be measured.

We compare two methods to measure populism: (1) a classical content analysis where coders systematically analyse texts by means of a codebook; and (2) a computerised content analysis in which an a priori designed

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dictionary serves as a gauge of the degree of populism. The study demonstrates that both approaches can be used to measure populism across cases and over time. We conclude the research note by showing how these two methods to measure populism can fruitfully be combined in one integrated man–machine approach.

We are not the first to measure populism by means of the method of content analysis. Jagers and Walgrave (2007) were among the first to do that. But although their analysis formed a breakthrough in measuring populism, their study included only one country and issues of reliability and validity were not dealt with. Another content analysis of populism has been executed by Hawkins (2009). He analysed speeches by means of 'holistic grading', in which the unit of measurement is the entire text. The main problems with Hawkins' study are the rough – and therefore possibly invalid – measurement due to the holistic grading method and the at times low reliability (Kappa = 0.44). More recently, Pauwels (2011) also measured populism by means of a computer-based content analysis. Yet he studied the Belgian case only. Building on these previous studies, we focus extensively on issues of validity (i.e. evaluating whether we measure what we think we are measuring) and reliability (i.e. the consistency of the measurement), while maintaining a comparative perspective.

Populism as a Thin Ideology Consisting of Two Components

In order to measure a concept systematically, we first have to agree on a clear definition. We build on the definition of populism provided by Mudde (2004: 543): '[populism is] an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ''the pure people'' versus ''the corrupt elite'', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people'. Although other scholars have defined populism as a style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007), a discourse (Hawkins 2009) or an organisational form (see Taggart 1995), we focus on ideology for its substantive approach and its denotative clarity (Canovan 2002; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Abts and Rummens 2007; Stanley 2008). Populism is not a 'full ideology', such as liberalism or socialism, but a 'thin ideology' (Freeden 1998), which only focuses on a confined range of concepts (e.g. nationalism, feminism, ecology).

According to Mudde's definition, the thin ideology of populism consists of two components: people-centrism and anti-elitism. The point of departure of every populist is the fundamental importance of the centrality of 'the people' (Ionescu and Gellner 1969: 4; Mény and Surel 2002). Yet 'the people' can mean many different things in many different circumstances (Canovan 1981; Mudde 2004). It can refer, for instance, to peasants, the working class, the electorate, the nation or no fixed group at all (see Canovan 1981; Taggart 2000). Populists are anti-elitist because elites stand

in the way of the centrality of the people. Elites are portrayed as corrupt and are contrasted with the general will of the people (Mudde 2004).

Research Strategy

The unit of analysis in our content analyses is the election manifesto.[1] This unit was chosen for two reasons. The first, substantive, reason is that an election manifesto can be seen as the document that gives the clearest overview of what a party stands for at a certain point in time. The second, more practical, reason is that election manifestos are appropriate documents for a cross-national study, because they are reasonably comparable across countries and over time.

We focus on election manifestos of parties in Western Europe because 'the main area of sustained populist growth and success over the last fifteen years in established democracies has been Western Europe' (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008: 1). More specifically, we selected the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy because these countries accommodate a wide range of different kinds of allegedly populist parties: the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) (Vossen 2010), the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF) (Mudde 2007) and the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) (March 2007) in the Netherlands; the *British National Party* (BNP) and the *United Kingdom Independence Party* (UKIP) (Fella 2008) in the UK; the *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* (PDS, later Die Linke) (March 2007) in Germany; and *Forza Italia* (FI) and the *Lega Nord* (LN) in Italy (Tarchi 2008). They range from the left (e.g. PDS/Die Linke) to the right (e.g. the PVV), and from the electorally very successful (e.g. Forza Italia) to relatively unsuccessful (e.g. the BNP). Our focus is not only on the 'usual suspects', but also on the mainstream parties in each country – i.e. liberal, conservative and social democratic parties.[2] The reason for doing so is to explore whether our measurement enables us to distinguish populist parties from mainstream parties. Moreover, some mainstream parties such as the Labour party under Tony Blair have also been labelled as populist.

We have not only compared parties across space, but also over time. Three election years were selected in the United Kingdom, Italy and the Netherlands, and – for practical reasons – two election years in Germany.[3] For an overview see Appendix A.

The Classical Content Analysis

In our classical content analysis of populism, the manifestos were analysed by extensively trained coders by means of a codebook. In this codebook, people-centrism was operationalised by the following question: 'Do the authors of the manifesto refer to the people?' Coders were instructed to look at every possible reference to the people. It did not matter whether this reference concerned, for instance, 'citizens', 'our country', 'society' or 'we'

(as in 'we the people'). Coders were also instructed to interpret the broader context in deciding whether to code people-centrism or not. To help the coders, we provided an extensive list of words and combinations of words that *could* refer to the people.[4]

Anti-elitism was measured by means of the question: 'Do the authors of the manifesto criticise elites?' Critique had to concern political elites *in general*. Critique on a specific party or a particular politician is not general enough, and was therefore not coded. Because anti-elitism can be expressed in many different ways, coders were again instructed to interpret the context while coding.[5]

The unit of measurement is the paragraph because paragraphs are objectively traceable distinctions between arguments. We have selected those paragraphs as populist in which both people-centrism and anti-elitism were present. Eventually the percentage of populist paragraphs in every election manifesto was computed.

The Computer-Based Content Analysis

Since a classical content analysis is a very time-consuming and therefore expensive enterprise, we have also developed a much easier applicable measurement of populism, drawing on a computer-based content analysis. This measurement relies on the dictionary approach in which a computer counts the proportion of words that we consider to be indicators of populism.[6] This means that words instead of paragraphs are the unit of measurement. Although sceptics might argue that the same word can have different meanings depending on the context, it is mostly possible to code words unambiguously (Laver and Garry 2000).[7]

After a first explorative analysis, it turned out that a measurement of people-centrism by means of individual words only is nearly impossible. In many instances, 'the people' is referred to by the words 'we' and 'our' (e.g. '*we* [the people] need to raise *our* voice'). Yet not every mention of the words 'our' or 'we' is a reference to the people. Often, these words refer to the political party instead of the people (e.g. '*we* [the party] propose *our* plans in the next chapter'). We therefore decided to focus only on words that refer to anti-elitism. Although the computer-based measurement is therefore likely to be less valid, we believe that anti-elitism is a pretty good indicator of populism because the classical content analysis taught us that criticism towards elites is mostly motivated by the argument that elites betray the ordinary people. The argument cannot be reversed, however, because many political parties will centralise the people without being negative towards elites.[8] Whether anti-elitism alone is indeed a good indicator of populism can only be concluded from the comparison of our measurements.

Our selection of words for the dictionary was based on both empirical and theoretical reasoning. For inspiration we used empirical examples (election manifestos of allegedly populist parties we did not actually analyse) to make

a list of words that such parties have used to express their negativity towards elites. Yet theoretical reasons were decisive for our final decision whether to include these words in our dictionary or not: only those words have been selected that were explicitly used to position the bad elites against the good people. The development of a dictionary is not an easy task, however. Not every word that could refer to anti-elitism does always refer to it, while at the same time many instances of anti-elitism can easily be missed because it is impossible to formulate every word that could refer to anti-elitism beforehand. Theoretically deduced words that never seemed to appear in the manifestos of any party were excluded. We attempted to translate the dictionary for the four languages as accurately as possible. However, besides the translated 'core words' we also added some 'context-specific words'. The context-specific words are words which are too context-specific to be translated from one language to another.[9]

Although we are aware of the possible pitfalls when translating the dictionary, we argue that the theoretical argument of anti-elitism is generally similar across cases and over time. Whatever the specific context, populists in every country and every time period do essentially the same thing: they position the good people against the bad elites. Because they make this same argument, we assume that they also use similar words. We used the open software programme Yoshikoder to measure the percentage of our dictionary words. For a complete overview of our dictionary, see Appendix B.

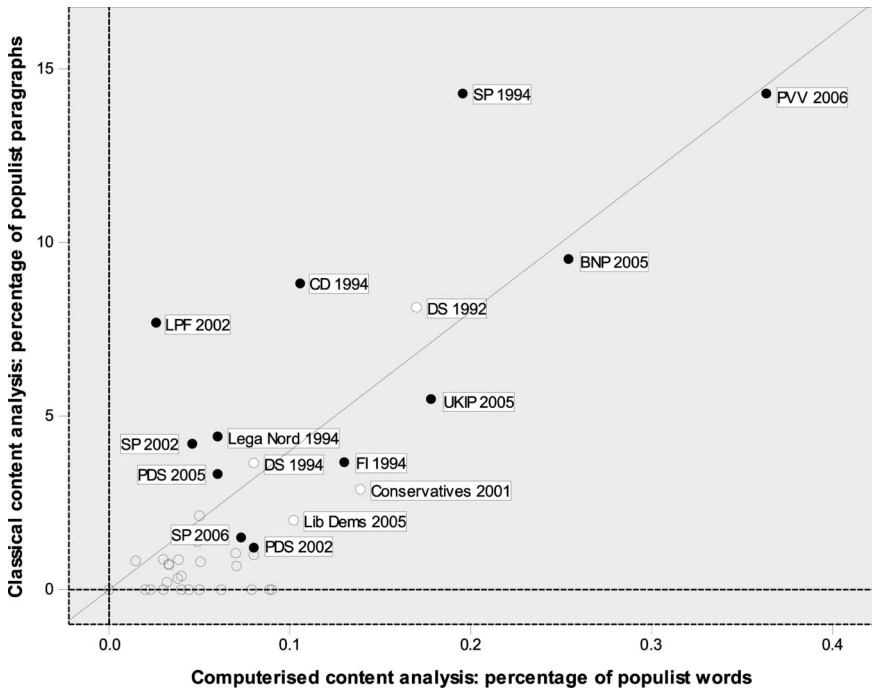
Results

Validity

We focus on three types of validation: content validation, face validation and concurrent validation. A measurement is *content valid* if the systematised concept is adequately captured by its indicator or indicators (Adcock and Collier 2001). We have argued that populism consists of the combination of people-centrism and anti-elitism. In the classical analysis we have measured it accordingly, since we verified for every measurement unit whether there was a reference to 'the people' combined with a critique on elites in general. Yet the computer-based analysis is less content valid. After all, here the systematised concept of populism is not adequately captured by its indicators. Instead of measuring both people-centrism and anti-elitism, the computerised content analysis only focused on anti-elitism.

A measurement has *face validity* when it appears to be measuring the concept that it intends to measure (Weber 1990). In our case, the measurement of populism has face validity if the allegedly populist parties turn out to be populist indeed. The results of both content analyses are presented in Figure 1. Allegedly populist parties are represented by black circles. Many mainstream parties are not represented by white, but by transparent circles.

FIGURE 1
THE CLASSICAL AND COMPUTERISED CONTENT ANALYSES COMPARED



Most allegedly populist parties turn out to be rather populist indeed. It could therefore be argued that the measurements are sufficiently face valid. In the Netherlands only the SP in 2002 and 2006 is less populist than would be expected from the literature. Because the party was strongly populist in 1994, however, it seems as if the party has moderated its populist profile over the years. According to both measurement methods, PDS/Die Linke in Germany is only slightly populist. In Italy the Lega Nord and Forza Italia score moderately high.

If we look at the mainstream parties, most parties turn out to be only slightly populist or not populist at all. Yet there are also some mainstream parties that turn out to be rather populist. In the United Kingdom the Conservatives in 2001 and the Liberal Democrats in 2005 score moderately high on our populism scales. An Italian mainstream party that turned out to be rather populist is the social democratic DS, which turns out to be very populist in the beginning of the 1990s. This might be due to some specific features of the Italian political situation. Further research is needed to determine the reasons for the high degree of populism of the DS.

Concurrent validity entails that a measure is valid if the results of a measurement of the systematised concept in one study are empirically

related to the results of a different measurement of the same systematised concept in another study (Adcock and Collier 2001). We can test whether our measurements of populism are valid by comparing their results. We can conclude that the results are pretty concurrent. There is a strong correlation between the results of the two measurements: Pearson's $r = 0.80$ (significant at $p < 0.01$). There are also some important differences between the two measurements. For the Dutch LPF and SP (in 1994) the results differ strongly from each other: according to the classical content analysis they are much more populist than according to the computerised method.[10] Because many experts describe the LPF and the SP (in the 1990s) as populist parties (see Mudde 2007; Lucardie 2010; Van der Brug 2003 for the LPF; and March 2007; Voerman 2009; Vossen 2010 for the SP), it is likely that the classical content analysis generated a better estimation of their true degree of populism than the computerised analysis.

The validity of the computerised method thus turns out to be lower than that of the classical approach. The computerised measurement is still sufficiently valid, however. The biggest problem with this method is that the indicator of anti-elitism alone does not cover the whole concept, which consists of *both* people-centrism and anti-elitism. Yet empirically the effect of this theoretical shortcoming is limited. Face validation and concurrent validation show that anti-elitism alone is a pretty good indicator of populism. This is very good news for comparative scholars. Despite its contextual sensitivity, populism turns out to be measurable across countries and over time. Not only by means of a fine-grained classical content analysis, but even with a more easily applicable computerised method.

Reliability

In a classical content analysis inter-coder reliability is the extent to which different coders code the same text in the same way (Krippendorff 2004). In order to prevent low inter-coder reliability, we have extensively trained our 11 coders (four from the Netherlands, three from the United Kingdom, two from Germany and two from Italy). Every coder attended three training sessions in which the codebook was explained and in which coding examples were discussed. In between the training sessions the coders had to complete take-home exercises. After the training sessions, we assessed the inter-coder reliability. Coders had to complete two reliability tests. First, all coders had to analyse a sample of paragraphs from British election manifestos (all coders speak English), so we could calculate whether the *cross-national* inter-coder reliability was sufficient. We calculated the inter-coder reliability using Krippendorff's alpha. The results for cross-national reliability are $\alpha = 0.73$ for people-centrism and $\alpha = 0.70$ for anti-elitism. Second, all coders had to analyse another sample of paragraphs from election manifestos of parties from their own countries, so we were able to assess the *national* inter-coder reliability

coefficients. The Krippendorff's alphas range from 0.66 to 0.92. The statistics in general are satisfactory.[11]

One of the advantages of the computer-based content analysis is its accuracy. Since a computer produces the exact same results no matter how many times one runs the analysis, Laver and Garry (2000: 625) claim that '[c]omputer coding is 100 percent reliable'. This is, however, a rather one-sided way to look at reliability. It must be kept in mind that different researchers of populism would probably end up with different dictionaries to measure the concept, which in turn would impact upon the results. We have performed a split-half test to shed some light on this issue. First, the words of the dictionaries for each country were randomly divided into two groups. For each country this resulted in two 'half' dictionaries. In a second step we explored the Pearson correlation coefficients between the results computed by the two 'half' dictionaries in each country. The results are: 0.54 for the United Kingdom, 0.42 for the Netherlands, 0.23 for Germany and 0.53 for Italy. To control for analysing 'half' dictionaries only, we adjusted the split-half correlations by means of the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula which resulted in reliability scores of 0.70 for the United Kingdom, 0.59 for the Netherlands, 0.37 for Germany and 0.69 for Italy.[12] Except for Germany, which might be explained by the lack of populist parties and hence variation in the scores, these statistics seem sufficient. So even when the split-half test provides a different picture than that suggested by Laver and Garry (2000) we would nonetheless argue that the computerised approach is reliable enough to be employed in empirical research. Whether it is more or less reliable than the classical content analysis is difficult to assess because of the different approaches in reliability testing.

Conclusion

The measurement of populism, particularly over time and space, has not received much attention yet. In this research note we have paid extensive attention to the measurement of populism over time and across countries. By means of both a classical content analysis as well as a computerised method, we investigated the degree of populism among political parties in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy. The usual suspects were the most populist according to our measurements, although we also demonstrated that even mainstream parties might sometimes adhere to populist appeals. Most importantly, the two methods generated similar results. Although the classical approach turns out to be more valid, and possibly also more reliable, both approaches can be used to measure populism across cases and over time.

It is also possible to combine both methods. In particular for medium-*n* comparative studies on populism we propose a combination of the classical and computer-based method: an integrated man–machine approach that filters out the disadvantages and emphasises the strong points of both

methods. This method can be applied to every kind of text (spoken or written): from speeches to election manifestos and from newspaper articles to parliamentary debates. The following procedure would probably yield valid and reasonably reliable results. First, every word that *could* refer to the people or to negativity towards elites is included in a dictionary. Second, a computer scans the relevant texts for all the selected words. Third, human coders interpret the results of this computer analysis by means of a codebook. Focusing on the selected words, they decide for every paragraph whether there is a reference to the people and whether the author of the text is negative towards elites. On the one hand, this approach will be much faster and therefore less expensive than a classical content analysis. On the other hand, it will produce more valid results than a computerised analysis because the first selection of the computer will be double-checked by human coders who are able to interpret the contextual meanings of the selected words.

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Notes

1. The unit of analysis should not be confused with the unit of measurement. The classical and the computerised content analysis approach have the same unit of analysis (election manifestos), but different units of measurements (paragraphs and words respectively). This is due to the different points of departure of the two methods. More on this in the next sections.
2. For Italy we simply included the most important leftist and rightist parties considering the absence of liberal parties (see Appendix A). We also included the 1992 manifesto of the social democrats (DS) because the number of available Italian election manifestos was rather low.
3. We only included the 2002 and 2005 party manifestos for Germany because manifestos prior to these dates were often not available in a legible digital format, which is needed for the computerised analysis.
4. These words are: people, citizen(s), community, society, public, population, nation(al), all of us, each of us, everyone, our, we, voter(s), electorate, referenda, direct democracy, public opinion, country. And words such as: United Kingdom, Britons, Netherlands, Dutch, Italians, Gemany, etc. (depending of course on the country under analysis.)
5. For the codebook the first author can be contacted.
6. While there are different approaches available in computerised textual analyses – such as *Wordscores* or *Wordfish* – we draw on a dictionary approach (Laver and Garry 2000). A drawback of *Wordscores* is that it requires scores to be computed by other methods such as expert surveys (Laver *et al*. 2003). *Wordfish* works well for extracting single left–right dimensions (Slapin and Proksch 2008), while it is less suited to explore a specific ideological aspect such as populism.

7. The word 'taxes', for instance, might be associated with cutting taxes but it can equally be used to indicate that a party wants to increase taxes. In practice, however, this latter meaning will hardly be found in party manifestos, and the word taxes is hence a good indicator for the category 'reduce state involvement in the economy', identifying socio-economic rightist parties.
8. Indeed, the classical content analysis empirically confirmed this: there is only a weak correlation between people-centrism and anti-elitism ($r = 0.04$, not significant at $p < 0.05$), whereas – the other way around – almost every anti-elitist paragraph also contains a reference to the people.
9. For instance, populists in the Netherlands sometimes talk about 'regenten' to express anti-elitism. This word refers to the Dutch political rulers in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although the 'regenten' did not form a hereditary class, they did form a closed group that reserved government offices for themselves. This specific word is not used by populists in countries other than the Netherlands.
10. This becomes even more apparent when we regress the results of the two methods on each other and look at the standardised residuals: the LPF and the SP (in 1994) are more than three standard deviations removed from the mean residual of 0.
11. The sample of paragraphs in the reliability tests contained about 5 per cent of the total amount of paragraphs. The results for people-centrism are: $\alpha = 0.78$ (NL), $\alpha = 0.73$ (UK), $\alpha = 0.74$ (GE) and $\alpha = 0.81$ (IT). The results for anti-elitism are: $\alpha = 0.84$ (NL), $\alpha = 0.66$ (UK), $\alpha = 0.81$ (GE) and 0.81 (IT).
12. Reliability $= \frac{n*r}{1+(n-1)r}$.

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APPENDIX A
ANALYSED ELECTION MANIFESTOS

	1992	1994	2001	2002	2005	2006	2008
Mainstream Parties							
CDA (NL)		X		X		X	
PvdA (NL)		X		X		X	
VVD (NL)		X		X			
D66 (NL)		X		X		X	
Conservatives (UK)	X		X		X		
Labour (UK)	X		X		X		
Liberal Democrats (UK)			X		X		
CDU/CSU (GE)				X	X		
SPD (GE)				X	X		
FDP (GE)				X	X		
DS (IT)	X	X					
Ulivo (IT)			X				
PD (IT)							X

(*continued*)

APPENDIX A
(*Continued*)

	1992	1994	2001	2002	2005	2006	2008
Doubtful Cases*							
Casa delle Libertà			X				
Partito della Libertà							X
Allegedly Populist Parties							
SP (NL)		X		X		X	
CD (NL)		X					
LPF (NL)				X			
PVV (NL)						X	
BNP (UK)					X		
UKIP (UK)					X		
PDS/Die Linke (GE)				X	X		
Lega Nord (IT)		X					
Forza Italia (IT)		X					

*The Casa delle Libertà (CdL) was an alliance of right-wing parties, including the allegedly populist parties Lega Nord and Forza Italia. We did not include this alliance in our category of allegedly populist parties because the alliance also included many parties which have not been associated with populism. The Partito della Libertà (PdL) is more than a mere alliance of parties; it is an official political party. However, only Forza Italia merged into this party while the Lega Nord did not. Therefore we put CdL and PdL in the category 'doubtful cases'.

APPENDIX B
DICTIONARY OF THE COMPUTER-BASED CONTENT ANALYSIS

	NL	UK	GE	IT
Core	elit*	elit*	elit*	elit*
	consensus*	consensus*	konsens*	consens*
	ondemocratisch*	undemocratic*	undemokratisch*	antidemocratic*
	ondemokratisch*			
	referend*	referend*	referend*	referend*
	corrupt*	corrupt*	korrupt*	corrot*
	propagand*	propagand*	propagand*	propagand*
	politici*	politici*	politiker*	politici*
	bedrog	*deceit*	täusch*	ingann*
	bedrieg	*deceiv*	betrüg*	
			betrug*	
	verraa	*betray*	*verrat*	tradi*
	verrad			
	schaam*	shame*	scham*	vergogn*
			schäm*	
	schand*	scandal*	skandal*	scandal*
	waarheid*	truth*	wahrheit*	verità
	oneerlijk*	dishonest*	unfair*	disonest*
			unehrlich*	
Context	establishm*	establishm*	establishm*	partitocrazia
	heersend*	ruling*	*herrsch*	
	capitul*			
	kapitul*			
	kaste*			
	leugen*		lüge*	menzogn*
	lieg*			mentir*