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POPULIST SUCCESS AND FAILURE

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*How did you get interested in populism? Is there any particular work or author that sparked your interest, and that you keep going back to?*

After graduating from high school, I moved to North Dakota on a basketball scholarship. I became fascinated by how the environment in which we grow up can influence our political preferences. This is how I became interested in studying politics. As an undergraduate, I first came across the work of Peter Mair, which got me thinking about broader, structural explanations for making sense of contemporary politics. My interest in populism was sparked by personal circumstances. I was born and raised in Luxembourg, but my parents are both originally Dutch. In the early 2000s, I witnessed the rise of right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) in the Netherlands, with the List Pim Fortuyn, and later Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party. I wondered why RWPPs were succeeding in the Netherlands, a country that was widely known for its social tolerance and progressivism, while similar movements never managed to break through in Luxembourg. The puzzle gets more complicated when you look at what lies in-between these two countries: the curious case of Belgium (de Jonge, 2021a). While Flanders (the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) was home to one of the strongest far-right movements in Europe, Wallonia (the southern, francophone part) has remained ‘immune’ to such tendencies. This begs the question why RWPPs succeed in some countries and regions, but not in others. This research puzzle forms the backbone of my research interest in populism (see de Jonge, 2021b).
The existence of a potential electorate, or demand, for right-wing populists does not necessarily translate into electoral success. The demand, it is argued, must meet the supply. Is it possible to understand the success and failure of right-wing populist parties as the interaction between demand and supply? What are the main limitations of this approach?

The electoral performance of RWPPs is often conceptualised as a marketplace, where success and failure are contingent on ‘public demand’ and ‘party supply’. Demand-side explanations highlight factors that create a breeding ground for RWPPs, notably socioeconomic conditions that make voters more prone to support these parties. Supply-side theories look at mechanisms that enable RWPPs to translate lingering demand into actual votes. These include party organisation and leadership, as well as institutional features such as the electoral system. Although demand- and supply-side explanations provide a useful starting point to understand different electoral trajectories of RWPPs, they do not offer a full explanation. Let’s look at the Benelux region (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) to illustrate this point. Demand for the populist radical right is relatively constant across the Benelux region. If anything, existing theories would lead us to expect popular appetite for RWPPs to be strongest in Wallonia, a region still recovering from industrial decline. However, it turns out that voters in this region hold similar views on socio-political issues. Demand-side explanations are therefore not particularly helpful in explaining the asymmetrical success of RWPPs in the region. Supply-side explanations are more useful. Indeed, the supply of RWPPs has been stronger in the Netherlands and Flanders. Some institutional features (notably the proportionality of the electoral system in the Netherlands and the availability of an extensive support network in Flanders) have made it easier for RWPPs to enter the political arena. But still, supply-side explanations provide little insight into how RWPPs succeeded in making their voices heard in the first place. In my book, I therefore argue that in order to fully understand the asymmetrical success of RWPPs in the Benelux region, we must examine the wider context in which party competition takes place. In particular, we need to take into account the role of mainstream parties and the media. Taken together, they act as ‘gatekeepers’ in the sense that they can facilitate or hinder access to the electoral market. As such, they determine the ‘openness’ of the electoral market.

While certain conditions form a favourable ground for right-wing populism, others shape a hostile environment for it. In particular, you claim that the context formed by the strategic choices of mainstream parties and the role of the media is crucial. How can the behaviour of mainstream parties and the media influence the electoral breakthrough of right-wing populist parties?

The main conclusion of my book is that the spread of right-wing populism is not simply a matter of chance or accident, but ultimately a matter of choice. The choices that mainstream parties and the media make play a crucial role in the rise of RWPPs. The Benelux region is an interesting case to illustrate this point. First,
the behaviour of centre-right and centre-left parties helped pave the way for the rise of the populist radical right in the Netherlands and Flanders, while such parties narrowed the opportunities for right-wing populist challengers in Wallonia and Luxembourg. Indeed, in the Netherlands and Flanders, mainstream parties failed to keep traditional lines of conflict ‘frozen’. Instead, they contributed to the politicisation of new issues, notably immigration, which created favourable opportunity structures for RWPPs to thrive. By contrast, in Wallonia and Luxembourg, traditional cleavage structures (i.e. the main social or cultural dividing lines within a society that structure political conflict) have stayed comparatively intact. Support for mainstream parties has therefore remained relatively stable. As a result, demand for the populist radical right in Wallonia and Luxembourg is less pronounced than in Flanders and the Netherlands.

Second, related structural changes in the media landscape have made the media more compatible with the ‘populist logic’. These changes include audience fragmentation, along with the twin processes of privatisation and commercialisation. The Dutch and Flemish media landscapes are more accessible to right-wing populist challengers than those in Wallonia and Luxembourg. Media in Luxembourg and Wallonia categorically ostracise RWPPs. By contrast, Dutch and Flemish media have become more accommodating over time, frequently offering RWPPs a platform.

The media can decide to reject, confront or accommodate the messages of populist radical-right parties. Should the media be tolerant towards intolerant ideas because in a democratic debate every viewpoint is legitimate? Or should the media reject and ignore the message of populist radical-right parties to avoid lending them visibility and legitimacy?

This is, of course, a normative question. It ultimately depends on what societal role you ascribe to the media. Are journalists gatekeepers or ‘neutral’ transmitters of information? There is no blueprint on how the media should deal with the far right in general and right-wing populist parties in particular. In theory, journalists can choose between three strategies (de Jonge, 2019). First, media practitioners can ‘isolate’ far-right politicians by treating them as pariahs. The aim of this strategy is not to ignore them but to make clear their ideas and policies lie outside the bounds of democratic discourse. Second, journalists can assume a confrontational stance by delegitimising their policies through overtly critical news coverage. The third strategy is to accommodate the far right by offering a platform to politicians or incorporating some of their rhetoric in the news coverage. There are clear differences throughout Europe regarding how the media chooses to deal with the far right. My research shows that in the Netherlands and Flanders, members of the media have gradually become more accommodating toward the far right, whereas Walloon and Luxembourgish journalists generally adhere to strict demarcation. To be sure, the role of the media should not be overstated; media coverage does not automatically lead to electoral success, and as I have explained earlier, there are other factors at play that help explain the rise of the RWPPs. At the same time, there is ample
evidence that media behaviour does not simply reflect but also shapes the electoral advances of RWPPs. The media can play an instrumental role in disseminating xenophobic, ethno-nationalist and racist messages, and contribute to legitimising their cause by removing the ‘stigma of extremism’ (Ellinas, 2018). Particularly in the earlier phases of a party’s life cycle, media coverage can be an important asset to gain national visibility and legitimacy. The way in which the media deal with the far right is one of the thorniest debates in democratic politics; specifically, it raises questions about the degree of tolerance the media should display toward the often intolerant views proclaimed by populists, radicals and extremists.

**Politicising issues like immigration and national identity seems to be more difficult in certain countries than in others. Why do you think this is the case? Could it be that the specific political culture of each country shapes the public discourse in different ways? Or might short-term, contingent factors be more important?**

Yes, culture certainly plays an important role in shaping the opportunity structures of right-wing populist parties. Your own research, for instance, highlights the ways in which different collective memories of World War II can open up or close down space for RWPPs (Caramani and Manucci, 2019). But short-term factors can also play a crucial role. Germany is a case in point. Given the country’s history with authoritarianism and National Socialism, the country’s public sphere was particularly averse to the emergence of a new far-right party. Accordingly, David Art (2006) argued that the combined efforts of political elites, mainstream parties, the media and civil society to combat the far right made it extremely difficult for right-wing populist parties to recruit qualified personnel and break through electorally. The social stigma associated with the far right narrowed the opportunity structures of RWPPs. Yet the 2017 German federal elections saw the spectacular breakthrough of the ‘Alternative for Germany’ (*Alternative für Deutschland* or AfD). To understand the breakthrough of the AfD, we need to look at the changing political context, which affected the positioning of mainstream parties. At the height of what became known as ‘the migration crisis’, Chancellor Angela Merkel welcomed tens of thousands of refugees to Germany. The shift of her ruling conservative Christian Democrats created political space on the right of Germany’s political spectrum, and the AfD eventually managed to occupy that space. Crucially, however, the AfD did not emerge as a right-wing populist party. It was conceived as a moderate Eurosceptic party, which subsequently transformed into a RWPP over time, after entering the electoral arena. By doing so, the party circumvented the ‘gatekeeping’ of mainstream party and media control. In that sense, the party can be likened to a Trojan horse. The broader take-away point here is that there are different routes by which right-wing populist parties can enter into the political arena. Specifically, RWPPs do not just enter as newcomers, but they can also emerge also as ‘Trojan horses’ or as splinters or reincarnations of established parties.
Bibliography


