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## 8. Belgium. The Rise and Fall of Populism Research

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### Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of existing literature on populism in Belgium. The Belgian political system is to a large extent organized along linguistic lines, divided between Dutch speakers and French speakers (and a small group of German speakers). These linguistic divisions can be found in the structure of the state and in the party system as well as in the media. (The media system is made up of monolingual Dutch-speaking and French-speaking media, with little overlap in terms of audiences and therefore two largely distinct public spheres.) As a consequence, literature on populism in Belgium per se is sparse. Rather, the literature is either on populism in Flanders or on populism in Francophone Belgium. Much of the literature on populism in Belgium has been produced in, or deals with, the Dutch-speaking part of the country—largely due to the existence of a highly successful populist radical right party in Flanders and the absence of such a party in the French-speaking part of the country. Indeed, much of the literature on populism in Belgium focuses on the Flemish radical-right party, Vlaams Blok, renamed Vlaams Belang (VB) in 2004 (see Delwit, 2007, p. 141; Erk, 2005). In some cases, other parties have also been labeled populist.

### Research on Populism in Belgium

As is the case elsewhere, the term *populism* has often been used in Belgium during political debates as well as in academic literature but without much explicit reflection on what the term actually means. In Belgium, the notion of populism has been strongly associated with the radical right and especially with the Flemish radical-right party, VB. Both empirical research into populism and theoretical reflections on the concept of populism have mainly focused on, or been inspired by, the strength of the Flemish radical right.

The VB enjoyed a continuous electoral rise from the late 1980s until the mid-2000s, with a peak of 24% in the 2004 elections for the Flemish parliament, making it the largest individual party at that point and the second electoral force (the first being a cartel of the Christian Democratic and Flemish party [CD&V] and the Flemish nationalist New Flemish Alliance [N-VA]). The VB's prominence led to a substantial body of academic work on the party. Much of this literature has been focused on the party's origins (particularly the 1980s and 1990s), its ideology, and its voters. Its communication, however, received less systematic attention. Given the VB's strong electoral position for almost two decades, much attention has been paid to the party in international and comparative literature on the extreme or populist right (e.g., Art, 2008; Mudde, 2010; Oesch, 2008).

Literature on the VB published before the late 1990s usually did not deal with the concept of populism. Although not totally absent in earlier work, the notion of populism became more prominent after the year 2000 because of the concept's growing popularity in political science, political theory, and beyond. But another reason has to do with the VB's increasingly populist communication. The VB was founded at the end of the 1970s as a radical right-wing

Flemish nationalist party that could hardly be labelled “populist.” On the contrary, the party was elitist and saw itself as a Flemish nationalist vanguard rather than as the voice of “the people.” From the beginning, the party was highly critical of the so-called traditional parties (Socialists, Christian Democrats, and Liberals) and the more moderate Flemish nationalist party, the People’s Union. But this sustained criticism of the political establishment only slowly developed into a populist rhetoric. Increasingly, the party no longer only criticized its political opponents’ corruption and the like but also delegitimized them as “elite.” Simultaneously, the party increasingly presented itself as the representative of the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 336; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2002).

To a lesser extent, the communication of other political parties has also been approached from the populism perspective. Some authors have measured the degree of populism of different parties or categorized them using a typology of populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; also Jagers, 2006; Pauwels, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2014). The Jagers and Walgrave (2007) typology used in this edited volume was in fact developed for an analysis of the communication of Flemish political parties. In the Francophone Belgian context, the notion of populism has mainly been connected to the radical right, with the Belgian Front National (1985–2011) a major player. After the French Front National took legal measures to stop the party from using the name “Front National,” it changed its name to *Démocratie nationale*. In line with its smaller electoral appeal, the body of literature on the French-speaking radical right in Belgium is less developed than in Flanders, but it is still considerable (e.g., Blaise, 2004; Coffé, 2005; Delwit, 2011; Jamin, 2012a, 2012b; Rea, 1996). Research has focused mainly on the history of the radical right in Francophone Belgium and on explaining its electoral successes and failures, with weak party organization and the strength of the Francophone socialist party as among the main explanatory factors for the limited success of the Francophone radical right compared with its Flemish counterpart.

Next to this empirical research on the populism of particular political parties, Belgian authors have produced a modest but significant body of more conceptual work on the notion of populism. These conceptual approaches have also tended to use the (Flemish) radical right as a case study or a starting point and therefore partly overlap with the empirical research already mentioned. At the same time, most of the conceptual literature has distinguished the concept of populism from the notion of the radical right. In line with the international literature, different conceptual approaches to populism can be found in Belgium. Because the conceptual literature has been written predominantly by Dutch-speaking authors who tend to be oriented toward Anglophone journals and publishers, it has mainly drawn on Anglophone literature (but see Durand & Lits, 2005). Populism has been called a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; also Blommaert, 2004). Following Mudde’s definition, it has also been called a “thin” ideology (Abts, 2004; Jagers, 2006; Pauwels, 2010a, 2010b). Still others have developed a discourse-theoretical perspective on populism and have applied it to the VB (De Cleen, 2009, 2012, 2013; De Cleen & Carpentier, 2010; De Vos, 2002, 2005). Behind these different labels, a general consensus exists on the central characteristics of populism: an appeal to the people and a criticism of the political elite. But important discussions continue about other dimensions, including (a) how broad the definition of populism should be, (b) similarly, the nature of populism, and (c) how populism should be evaluated normatively. As to the latter, one strand of conceptual work has focused explicitly on the relation between populism and democracy, warning about the dangers of populism for democracy. Starting from Claude Lefort’s definition of democracy as a regime in which the locus of power needs to remain empty, researchers argue that populism’s claim to represent the people constitutes

a closure of this empty locus of power and is incompatible with democracy (Abts, 2004; Abts & Rummens, 2007; Rummens & Abts, 2010).

### **Populist Actors as Communicators**

Whether a group of “populist actors” can be identified and which parties belong to that group and why depends, of course, on the definition of populism that one uses. Those who use a restrictive definition of populism that revolves around a strong people/elite distinction mainly consider the radical right and a number of small neoliberal right-wing parties to be populist. When one uses a broader definition of populism that also includes *empty* populist references to the people (Jagers & Walgrave 2007), populism applies to nearly all parties in contemporary democracy. The same applies when populism refers critically to certain “popular” ways of speaking. For instance, Blommaert referred in his work on populist language and discourse to Stevaert, the popular leader of the Belgian Social Democrats (Sp.a), who presented himself as an ordinary person close to the people and distinct from the intellectual and cultural elite (Blommaert 2001, 2004, 2007).

Based on their comparison of Flemish parties, Jagers and Walgrave conclude that the VB— with its references and appeals to the people, anti-elitism, and exclusion of out-groups (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; also Jagers, 2006)— is a full-blown populist political party, an example of *complete populism*. Other parties also refer and appeal to the people, but their anti-elitism tends to be less profound and strongly connected to their periods in opposition. In addition, their exclusionary character is less pronounced. They therefore qualify as empty populist parties (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Occasionally, some parties may show characteristics of *excluding populism* and *anti-elitist populism*. The Green Party, for example, qualifies as an anti-elitist populist party in the period before its time in government (1999–2003). And it is argued that the strong anti-immigration stance of the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (VLD/Open VLD) equates with “excluding populism” (Jagers & Walgrave 2007, p. 335). In some cases, the Labor Party (PVDA/ PTB) is also considered populist., Delwit (2012), for example, calls the party “social-populist.”

A more robust quantitative content analytical approach to measuring populism can be found in the work of Pauwels (2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2013, 2014; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). He limits his list of Flemish populist parties to just two: the VB and the neoliberal, populist Lijst Dedecker (LDD, named after the famous judo coach and former liberal party member Jean-Marie Dedecker, who started the party). Lijst Dedecker was founded in 2007 (after Jagers and Walgrave published their article), was very successful for a while, but has all but disappeared. On the Francophone side, Pauwels considers the Front National/Démocratie Nouvelle and the small, neoliberal Popular Party to be populist.

The communication of the Francophone radical right has received less attention. An exception is Jamin (2006, 2012a, 2012b), who has compared the rhetoric of the different radical right actors in Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia. He shows strong similarities among the parties and identifies two main differences: their attitudes toward Belgium (the Flemish-nationalist VB is anti-Belgian, the Front National is unitarian) and a somewhat different anti-Islamic argumentation (the VB’s rhetoric is more ethnic-nationalist, whereas the Front National’s is more republican).

### **The Media and Populism**

Research on the media and populism consists of two partly overlapping strands of analyses: populist parties *and* the media, and the populism *of* the media. Part of the literature deals with

the relationship between populist parties and the media, with a focus on how media have covered populist parties and what role the media have played in the success of populist parties (and much less on how the radical right deals with the media). Again, the main focus has been on the Flemish populist radical right VB. It has often been assumed that the media played a role in the rise of the VB, but the evidence is mixed. In general, it seems that the media have not paid extra attention to the VB and their leaders but might have supported the party by paying attention to the party's issues. When looking at studies that measure the amount and tone of media attention to the VB, it mostly received less attention (relevant to its electoral strength) and more negative coverage than other parties. In particular, individual VB politicians receive less attention than do other opposition politicians (De Swert, 2001, 2002; Van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe, & Fiers, 2008). De Swert argues that its status as an "eternal" opposition party explains to a large extent why it receives relatively little attention. Since all other parties decided early on not to form a coalition with the VB (the so-called *cordon sanitaire*), it was structurally excluded from political power. Although there has never been a *cordon sanitaire médiatique*, most media outlets (in varying degrees) have not treated the VB as an ordinary party. Quality newspapers, De Swert argues, have sometimes used "exposure" strategies (showing the "true face" of the VB), especially during election periods. In a special note on its democratic role, the public broadcaster VRT explained why it treated the party differently. Also, newspapers more frequently distanced themselves from the party's extreme ideas. For instance, on the day before the 2003 election, the newspaper *De Standaard* gave five potential reasons to vote for each political party but explicitly mentioned that there were no reasons to vote for the VB (Van Aelst, 2007). However, studying the evolution of the media coverage of the VB between 1987 and 2004, Schafraad, d'Haenens, Scheepers, & Wester (2012; also Schafraad, 2009) argue that coverage of the VB became more nuanced over the years as the party became more established and ever more successful. The framing shifted from a "controversial outsider" to that of an "established outsider."

In sum, the media did not open their gates entirely and uncritically to the populist radical right party, but the news media did focus extensively on nationalism, immigrant topics, and crime-related themes as issues "owned" by the VB. With this attention on these issues, Walgrave and De Swert (2002, 2004) have argued that the media have contributed to the VB's success.

Besides these analyses of media coverage of the VB, various other approaches to the media/VB relationship are worth mentioning. Voorhoof has written about its legal context, reflecting on media coverage of the VB and on the VB's stance toward the media (including legal complaints against the public broadcaster, in particular). He has focused on issues such as the neutrality of the public broadcaster and the limits of freedom of speech related to racism (Voorhoof, 1996, 2008). Cammaerts has also reflected on the principle of freedom of speech and its limits in relation to racist rhetoric. In particular, he has focused on the distribution of radical right rhetoric via online public spaces such as blogs and online forums, thus countering celebratory accounts of the Internet as a driver of democratization (Cammaerts, 2007, 2008, 2009).

Reflections on VB rhetoric *about* the media are few and have not been systematic so far. Jagers (2006), for example, has pointed out that the media are among the actors delegitimized as an elite by the VB. And De Cleen has studied VB rhetoric about expressive culture in the media and elsewhere. He has shown how the VB uses populism to delegitimize artists and media professionals who speak out against the party as a politically correct elite. He also analyses how cultural and media genres as well as positions in the culture and media sphere (such as folk culture, popular culture, and elite culture) acquire political meaning both in the

politics of and in the politics against the radical right (De Cleen, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2015; De Cleen & Carpentier, 2010).

A second much smaller strand of literature goes beyond the relation between the VB and the media, and is concerned with the media's populism. In Belgium, the notion of populism has been most explicitly developed in the political context, but a broader definition of the term has been common in nonacademic circles (Blommaert, 2001, 2007; Blommaert, Coriin, Holthof, & Lesage, 2004; Elchardus, 2002). Usually, this broader notion of populism is used in a derogatory fashion to denounce the media's role in the anti-intellectualization (Blommaert) or dramatization (Elchardus) of politics and society at large. This second strand of research is relevant to the first in that it considers the media's populism to have paved the way for the success of populist political parties. In a limited number of cases, and as a reaction to its derogatory use, populism has also been accorded a positive connotation. In these cases, it is used (predominantly by the political right) to refer favorably to a politically incorrect *parler-vrai*, to common sense, to anti-elitism, and to the culture of the common man. This usage is rather uncommon in academic circles, but De Meyer has used populism in this fashion in his more essayistic work, which is inspired by the positive reevaluation of popular culture in cultural studies (De Meyer, 2003; De Meyer & Schamp, 2002; cf. McGuigan, 1992, 1997 on the "populism" of cultural studies). Finally, the well-known writer Van Reybrouck (2011) wrote a remarkable essay in which he argued for more populism as way to involve less-educated people in contemporary politics.

### **Citizens and Populism**

A substantial body of electoral and broader sociological research in Belgium covers the voters of the radical right VB and Front National and of the newer and more volatile neoliberal, populist, right-wing parties mentioned earlier. Large-scale electoral studies analyze voter motivations and voter movements across all parties and examine populist parties alongside other parties (e.g., Deschouwer, Delwit, Hooghe, & Walgrave, 2010; Deschouwer, Delwit, Hooghe, Rihoux, & Walgrave, 2014; Swyngedouw, Billiet, & Goeminne 2007). Survey research deals more specifically with the voting preferences for populist parties. The bulk of this literature is on the VB. Its electoral breakthrough and continued growth sparked a lively interest in the party's voters. Political scientists as well as sociologists have attempted to characterize VB voters and explain voting for the VB (Billiet, Coffé, & Maddens, 2007; Billiet & De Witte, 1995, 2008; Coffé, 2002; De Witte, 1992; De Witte, Billiet, & Scheepers, 1994; Elchardus & Smits, 2002; Pelleriaux, 2001; Rink, Phaet, & Swyngedouw, 2009; Swyngedouw, 1994; Swyngedouw & Depickere, 2007). Among other things, these studies show the overrepresentation of less-educated and male voters (although the overrepresentation of both decreased over time) and a higher degree of political distrust among the VB electorate. Similar questions have been asked about the Francophone Front National (Delwit, 1998), and some comparisons between the voters of the VB and the Front National have been made (Coffé, 2005).

Political distrust and criticism of traditional parties have been part of the explanatory models for voting for the radical right, but the notion of populism only started to be operationalized explicitly in this kind of survey research more recently. Some survey research now includes sets of questions specifically aimed at measuring populism and voters (see Pauwels, 2014, p. 190). Pauwels (2010a, 2010b, 2014) has studied the voters of what he considers the populist parties in Flanders—the VB and the now defunct Lijst Dedecker (as well as German and Dutch populist parties). The choice for these parties is based on their programs being populist

according to Mudde's definition of populism as a "thin" ideology. Pauwels argues for a more concerted effort to distinguish the role that populism plays in attracting voters from the role that other ideological components of parties play (e.g., a negative stance on immigration). In his analysis, he identifies dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and a preference for more decision making through referendums as important drivers for voting for populist parties. He also notes that populist voters would be more likely not to vote were voting no longer compulsory (as is the case in Belgium).

Elchardus and Spruyt (2012, 2014; Spruyt 2014) take a different approach to populism and voting, basing their identification of populist parties on the appeal of populist "thin" ideology among the electorate rather than on party positions. The authors stress the importance of education as a factor in explaining support for populist statements among the population. This approach leads them to argue that, based on the attitudes of their electorates, the VB and the far-left socialist Labor Party are populist, but the right-wing nationalist New Flemish Alliance and Lijst Dedecker are not. Therefore, a voter (or demand-side) perspective only partly overlaps with a party (or supply-side) perspective.

### **Summary and Recent Developments**

In sum, the literature on populism in the small and divided country of Belgium is elaborate. The main reason is the sustained electoral success of the populist radical-right party VB. Although not all studies focused on the party's populist character, the party increased the scholarly interest in, and public debate on, populism. Since Belgium has few own-language outlets, many studies are published in English (the most cited one being Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

A number of recent developments in the Flemish political landscape are important to our understanding of populist parties and the concept of populism. A first major development is the electoral downfall of the VB. Starting from the 2005 federal elections, the party has, slowly at first and then more rapidly, lost large shares of its voters. The party that at its peak got no fewer than one out of four Flemish votes failed to win over much more than five percent of voters in 2014. A number of factors have contributed to this decline. Partly at fault are internal struggles between the leaders of the VB. The *cordon sanitaire*—the agreement between the other political parties to avoid coalitions with the VB—eventually showed voters that a vote for the VB was a lost vote (Pauwels, 2011b). The *cordon sanitaire* became especially problematic for the VB once a serious contender on the nationalist right arrived in the form of the New Flemish Alliance.

The rise of the New Flemish Alliance, a conservative right-wing Flemish nationalist party, is a second relevant development. In part, thanks to the immense popularity of its leader, the New Flemish Alliance has become a major political force, dominating both the Flemish government and the federal government after the 2014 elections. The party's rhetoric has populist elements, but it is not a populist party *pur sang*, or a "complete populist party" like the VB (see Pauwels, 2013, p. 81). As a new contender in the opposition, even on entering the Flemish government, the New Flemish Alliance presented itself as an alternative to the "traditional" parties and used anti-establishment elements to do so. The party claims to be tapping into what it calls the "ground stream," thus presenting itself as the representative of the people, but this "people" is only partially defined in opposition to an elite. Furthermore, the party has a more moderate center-right view on the immigrant issue than the VB, which makes the party more acceptable to both voters and other parties.

A third development is the growing strength of the socialist Labor Party, situated to the left of the Social Democrats. This party participated in the 2014 elections on a Francophone/Dutch platform and obtained a few seats in different parliaments. The Labor Party has clear populist elements. The distinction between the people and the elite—defined by the party in economic terms—plays an important role in its communication. Slogans such as “It is *their* crisis—make *them* pay” and “First the people, not profit” exemplify this stance. Although the Labor Party’s electoral success remains modest, it might benefit from the recent success of radical-left parties with populist characteristics in Spain and Greece. A similar success could inspire Belgian social scientists (as the Greek and Spanish situation has already done internationally) to renew their interest in populism in Belgium—this time focusing on the left side of the political spectrum.

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