



**Swaying the disgruntled floating voter.  
The rise of populist parties in  
contemporary Dutch politics.**

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper accounts for the rise of populist parties in the Dutch political landscape. Party politics in the Netherlands has long been dominated by three established party families, but since the rise of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, populist parties seem to have taken an important position in Dutch politics. This contribution will argue that the upsurge in populist electoral success can be explained by taking into account a combination of independent variables: the openness of the electoral system, the availability of the electorate, the responsiveness of established parties and the supply of credible populist parties. Accordingly, populist parties in the Netherlands have benefited from the highly proportional electoral system and the availability of a large reservoir of floating voters. At the same time, the established parties failed to sufficiently address the salient issues of immigration and integration of minorities at the time of the 2002 general elections. Finally, in the eyes of the electorate the List Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders' Freedom Party have proven to be credible alternatives to the established mainstream parties. Although the explanatory model is here only tested by means of the Dutch case, it can be expected that the populist electoral performance in other countries rests on the same logic as outlined in this paper.*

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### **Introduction**

Despite the fact that the electoral system in the Netherlands has always been very open to new political parties, three traditional party families have managed to dominate the post-war Dutch party political landscape. Things seem to have changed drastically, however, since Pim Fortuyn appeared on the political scene in 2002. Although Fortuyn was murdered just before the general elections that year and while his party gradually collapsed afterwards, new, and most notably ‘populist’ parties seem to have taken a permanent position in Dutch politics since; Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party being a case in point. This paper examines the reasons behind this sudden populist upsurge in the Netherlands.

While the ideas of populist parties in the Netherlands are in some ways unique, the explanatory model outlined in this paper is likely to apply in other countries as well. Accordingly, the performance of populist parties is here assumed to be dependent on a combination of structural variables – the electoral system and the availability of the electorate – and variables related to the agency of political parties: the responsiveness of established parties and the supply of credible populist parties.

This paper will argue that the electoral success of the Dutch populist parties has been facilitated by the increased availability of the Dutch electorate. Thriving on the open

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Aleks Szczerbiak, Paul Taggart and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

electoral system and loosened ties between the electorate and the traditional party families, populist parties in the Netherlands have become successful by politicising issues, most notably immigration and the integration of minorities, which were insufficiently considered by the political mainstream parties. Successful populist parties in the Netherlands have subscribed to a cultural-nationalist agenda, aiming to protect the Dutch liberal culture from outside threats, most notably embodied by the influence of Islam in Dutch society.

The following section touches on the concept of populism and the way populist parties can be defined. Next, the theoretical framework is presented; how can the electoral performance of populist parties be explained? The subsequent section describes the Dutch political background and electoral developments since the rise of Fortuyn. The remainder of the paper focuses on explaining the electoral performance of populist parties in the Netherlands.

### **Populism and populist parties**

Most contributions that focus on the concept of populism commence by emphasising the problematic and ambiguous nature of the term. The concept nevertheless takes a central position in this paper. In the Netherlands, as in other countries, political parties have emerged which cannot easily be categorised using traditional ideological labels, while they share a set of essential features that can best be described using the term populism.

Be that as it may, there are indeed several fundamental problems hampering a fruitful conceptualisation, or even a meaningful debate on how to define and apply populism (Taggart and van Kessel 2009). Scholars have questioned whether the alleged populist movements and parties throughout time and across the world actually have something in common (Ionescu and Gellner 1969, Canovan 1981). Although there seems to be a growing consensus about populism involving something like an appeal to the ‘common people’ and an anti-elitist critique, there is no consensus about which parties can be classified as populist parties. The fact that some authors use populism as a certain personal style of behaviour or as an opportunistic strategy to boost electoral appeal makes classification even more difficult. Populism in this sense is a ‘sweater’

rather than a 'skin' (Marsh and Furlong 2002), a tool which can be applied by any political party.

Another problem is that populism is almost indiscriminately used to refer to political actors which do not seem to have much in common (van Kessel, Bale and Taggart 2008). Moreover, more often than not, populism is used as a general term of dismissal or associated with xenophobic political actors. In other words, either explicitly or implicitly, the term tends to be used pejoratively. Instead of perceiving populism as an inherently negative phenomenon, others stress that the rise of populism is a sign of the political elite losing track of the popular will, or the 'constitutional' as opposed to the 'democratic' pillar of democracy becoming too dominant (Canovan 1999; Mény and Surel 2002; Abts and Rummens 2007). The approach in this paper is more in line with these latter accounts.

Instead of loosely defining populism as an opportunistic political strategy or style, this paper treats populism as an ideology, be it a thin, or thin-centred, ideology (Freeden 1998; Mudde 2004; Stanley 2007). Accordingly, populism in itself does not provide an all encompassing framework of how society should function, so that parts of existing, more rooted ideologies can and *should* be added to the populist core. It furthermore depends on the political context in which the populist party operates as to which ideological colour it adapts (Canovan 1999; Taggart 2000; Barr 2009). Political parties are classified as populist parties if they (1) appeal to a heartland consisting of 'ordinary' people, whose interests and opinions should be central in making political decisions, and (2) are fundamentally hostile towards the current (political) establishment, which allegedly does not act in the interest of the ordinary people. Populist parties thus position the 'ordinary people' and 'the establishment' in an antagonistic relationship.

A few vital points with regard to this definition have to be made. Obviously, both 'the establishment' and the 'ordinary people' are vague terms. However, populist parties tend to refrain from clearly defining their main opponents and, especially, their core following themselves. In the words of Paul Taggart (2000), populists portray a certain territory of the imagination, the 'heartland', often based on a romanticised image of the past. The appeal of the populists is targeted at the occupants of this particular

heartland. Power should be returned to these ordinary people who possess the common sense to identify the most important societal problems. However, populist parties do not necessarily intend to get their following directly involved in politics. Instead, the populist party or, more specifically, the populist leader claims to speak in the name of the people; the populist knows what the people want and truly represents their interests.

Populists do tend to be more precise about who does *not* belong to the heartland they represent. This is in any case the established political elite and often, although not necessarily, other 'outsiders' such as immigrants or particular minority groups who do not share the portrayed values of the heartland. But first and foremost populists react against the current political establishment, which allegedly does not act in the interest of the electorate. Residing in their ivory towers, the members of the establishment have lost track of the everyday problems of the people. The critique of populist parties goes further than condemning a particular political party or government - all (opposition) parties do that from time to time. Populists criticise the whole established political system and those parties that are seen to be part of it. Often, populists even maintain a broader view of the establishment, including academics and the media who are perceived to share the same interests as the political establishment, and who are equally blind to the demands of the ordinary people. Finally, populists are also impatient with the sluggish procedures of the decision-making process and hostile towards the bureaucracy, which is seen as an inefficient and money wasting machine. A new way of decision-making is required, one that is straightforward, transparent and effectively copes with the peoples' problems.

As will be described below, in Dutch politics several parties have emerged that comply to these characteristics of a populist party, the most prominent instances being the List Pim Fortuyn, Geert Wilders' Freedom Party and Rita Verdonk's movement 'Proud of the Netherlands'. Before focussing on these parties in detail, the following section provides the theoretical framework that will be central to this paper and which identifies the crucial causal conditions related to the electoral performance of populist parties.

## **Explaining the electoral performance of populist parties**

The central question in this paper is how the electoral performance of populist parties can be explained. A robust theory with regard to this question has as yet not truly developed. The theoretical basis for this essay is largely inspired by the somewhat explorative work of Charles Hauss and David Rayside (1978) focusing on the development of new parties. Hauss and Rayside (1978: 36) start from the assumption that new parties emerge after social or political transformations and the subsequent emergence of new social divisions, or ‘cleavages’ (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), but can also develop as a reaction to more ‘fleeting’ issues or strains. However, these cleavages and strains can be seen as necessary, but not sufficient preconditions for new party development; the cleavages and strains need to be politicised in order for a new party to develop and become successful.

The authors discuss several institutional and political ‘facilitators’ which they perceive to be the driving factors behind the development of new parties. Although Hauss and Rayside find that institutional facilitators only have a limited effect on the development of new parties, most other accounts have shown the importance of, most notably, the electoral system concerning the performance of new parties (Harmel and Robertson 1985; Willey 1998; Tavits 2006; Bolin 2007, cf. Carter 2002)<sup>2</sup>. With regard to the effects of the electoral system the theory of Duverger (1954) plays a central role. According to ‘Duverger’s law’ single-member district (SMD) electoral systems promote the emergence of two-party systems, while proportional representation systems are likely to result in multi-party systems, in which small parties stand a greater chance of becoming represented. Similarly, others have shown the importance of the district magnitude - the number of legislators to be elected per district – with regard to the electoral success of new parties, or their chances of entering the parliament (Willey 1998; Tavits 2006; Golder 2003). Theoretically, a higher district magnitude (more legislators per district) should lead to more proportionality between votes and allocated parliamentary seats, which in turn is beneficial for smaller, or new, political parties.

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2 Harmel and Robertson (1985: 517) actually find that the electoral system affects the electoral *success*, but not so much the *formation* of new political parties.



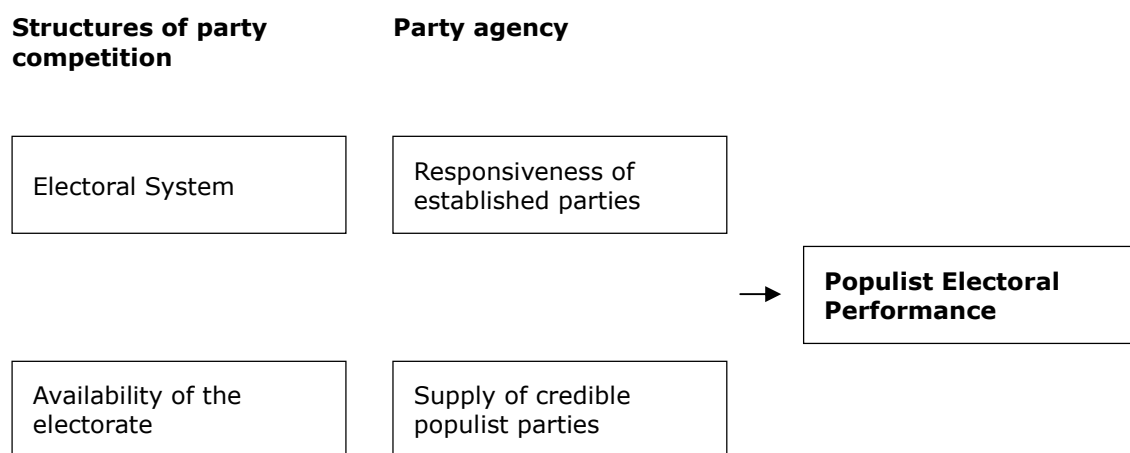
Haus and Rayside subsequently identify a set of 'political facilitators' with regard to the development of new parties, the first one being the behaviour of existing political parties. Accordingly, new parties can only prosper if existing parties fail to address issues that have led to public discontent. In other words, a political 'opportunity structure', for instance stimulated by the programmatic convergence of mainstream parties (Kitschelt 1988; Kitschelt and McGann 1995), has to emerge before new political parties can become successful. Existing parties, however, can hamper further development of new parties by responding to these issues after the new parties have emerged, even if only symbolically (Bale 2003; Meguid 2005; 2008).

Secondly, the existing commitments of the electorate play an important role. A crucial factor is whether or not voters have strong ties with established parties; is the electorate marked by strong partisan commitments or is the electorate to a large extent 'available' to be swayed by newly established parties (Bartolini and Mair 1990; Bartolini 1999)? The final two political facilitators Haus and Rayside identify deal with the agency of the new parties themselves. New parties are likely to do better when they have a highly visible or 'charismatic' leader, while also the party's organisational base is deemed to be important. With regard to this latter point however, the authors pose that strong organisational support is more important for a new party's *continued* success, as opposed to its *initial* success (see also Mudde 2007).

Although this model deals with new parties in general, it can very well be applied to populist parties in particular, due to its stress on the importance of the behaviour of established parties. If established parties fail to recognise the importance of particular social issues which are salient in the eye of the electorate, they are, at least potentially, vulnerable to populist anti-establishment critique. On the other hand, there would be no populist success without the supply of a credible populist political party. Even if parties participate in elections, they have to present themselves as viable alternatives to the established parties with a credible message and a sound organisation. If they fail to do this, the chances of an electoral breakthrough are slim, and the chances of sustaining themselves in the longer run are even slimmer. Thus, both the lack of responsiveness of mainstream parties and the credibility of the populist party itself are crucial conditions with regard to the electoral performance of populist parties.

At the same time, the (institutional) environment in which the political parties operate has a large influence on the opportunity structure for populist parties. With regard to this the electoral system plays a vital role, as well as the loyalty of the electorate towards existing parties. Populist parties stand less of a chance of breaking through and sustaining electoral success in unaccommodating environments, marked by a disproportional electoral system and an ‘unavailable’ electorate, whereas a more favourable electoral system and a less partisan electorate may stir populist success.

**Figure 1:** Explanatory model with regard to populist electoral performance



To sum up, the model employed in this paper (see figure 1) combines structural as well as agency-centred variables; populist entrepreneurs themselves can grab electoral opportunities, but are not in complete control over their own fate if the structures of party competition are unfavourable (Haus and Rayside 1978; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Lucardie 2000). At the same time, a combination of a proportional electoral system and an available electorate is no guarantee for populist success. Whereas many scholars focus on individual variables in explaining the electoral success of (populist) political parties, this paper departs from the notion that it is the *combination* of explanatory conditions that is crucial in understanding populist electoral fortune. Populist parties are more likely to perform well if most, if not all of the causal conditions are favourable.

## **The rise of populist parties in contemporary Dutch politics<sup>3</sup>**

### *Political background*

For decades since the Second World War the Dutch political party system has been marked by relative tranquillity. Three large party families dominated the formation of governments; the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats and the Liberals. At the same time, newly formed parties generally remained marginal in terms of size and influence, that is, if they managed to enter the Dutch parliament at all (Krouwel and Lucardie 2008; van Kessel and Krouwel 2010). The most dominant parties were the three Christian Democratic parties; no coalition government prior to 1994 ever excluded a party from this family as the Catholic party (KVP) formed part of every post-war coalition. This party, together with the two protestant parties, ARP and CDU, eventually merged into the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) in 1980.

After the general elections of 1994 the Christian Democrats, becoming only the third largest party in the Dutch parliament, were kept out of government for the first time. The first 'Purple' cabinet was formed, mixing the red of the Social Democrats (PvdA) and the blue of the Liberals (VVD), the traditional arch nemeses, and incorporating the progressive liberal Democrats '66 (D66) as the junior coalition partner. The government benefited from economic prosperity and could easily sustain its combined share of the vote in the general elections of 1998 to govern for another term. In 2001, approaching the end of this term, the government still enjoyed high levels of public trust, while the main political rival, the Christian Democrats, suffered from internal conflicts and a leadership crisis (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2003; Van Praag 2003). Thus, the CDA did not seem to become a notable electoral opponent. Also the newly formed party 'Liveable Netherlands' (LN) which declared 'old politics' bankrupt and which strived for a democratisation of the political order could, according to the polls, only count on limited support with the general elections of 2002 on May 15 drawing near.

### *The rise of Pim Fortuyn*

The tables gradually began to turn, however, when former sociology professor and publicist Pim Fortuyn was chosen as the party leader of Liveable Netherlands. The

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from interviews, party documents and other literature in this section and beyond are translated from Dutch to English by the author.

party began to rise in the polls. Fortuyn was an extraordinary figure with a flamboyant lifestyle, wearing sharp suits and being very open about his homosexuality<sup>4</sup>. Fortuyn truly reached the centre of attention after a notorious interview on February 9 in the *Volkscrant*, a major daily newspaper. In this interview, Fortuyn questioned the merits of Article One of the constitution on the prohibition of discrimination – Fortuyn considered the freedom of speech more important – and he qualified Islam as a backward culture. The interview caused Fortuyn to be expelled from LN, but within a few days he founded his own party, List Pim Fortuyn (LPF). Quite unexpectedly, a week after the interview was published, opinion polls showed that the LPF already exceeded LN in terms of electoral support.

Pim Fortuyn's party can be perceived as a populist party. First of all, Fortuyn appealed to the 'ordinary people', although he did not always explicitly frame his projected following as such. Still, his appeal can be noted in his book annex political programme 'The shambles of eight years Purple': "The Netherlands should become a real lively democracy of and for the ordinary people, and depart from the elite party democracy which we are currently acquainted with, which decides over us without consulting us" (Fortuyn 2002: 186). What is more, according to Fortuyn, power should be returned to the 'people in the country' (Lucardie 2007); the number of managers and bureaucrats ought to be reduced and responsibility should be returned to the 'real' experts: the nurses, teachers and police officers (LPF 2002). Secondly, as is clear from the examples above, Fortuyn expressed harsh critique of the political establishment, the incumbent 'Purple' government in particular. In the official eight page election manifesto of the LPF in 2002, named 'businesslike with a heart' (*Zakelijk met een hart*), it is argued that 'Purple' has left the Netherlands with a rigid and self-satisfied political culture of appointed executives lacking creative or learning capacities (LPF 2002: 1).

Apart from being populist, Fortuyn's more substantial political programme was rather eclectic (Lucardie 2007: 158-9); he generally promoted a free-market economy, tough measures with regard to law and order issues, wanted to stop more immigrants from

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4 As Van Holsteyn and Irwin (2003: 44) sum up Fortuyn's lifestyle: "Ferrari, Bentley with chauffeur, butler, two lap dogs, portraits of John F. Kennedy in his lavishly decorated Rotterdam home which he referred to as Palazzo di Pietro".

entering the country and stressed the need to cut red tape in the healthcare and education sectors. At the same time, however, his position on moral or cultural issues like drugs and traditional marriage was very liberal. Fortuyn had a moderately sceptical position concerning European integration. Accordingly, European cooperation was beneficial for the Netherlands, but Dutch identity and sovereignty was to be retained and Brussels bureaucracy needed to be curtailed (LPF 2002: 7).

However, it was in his stance on immigration and integration that Fortuyn attracted most controversy. According to the LPF manifesto, crowdedness in The Netherlands was causing growing tensions and it was therefore necessary to resist immigration of more, often unemployed low skilled, foreigners into the country (LPF 2002: 5). The programme also speaks of problems caused by the social-cultural backwardness of large groups in society and the related crime problems. Acts that are incompatible with desired integration and emancipation, such as honour killings and female circumcision were thought to be impermissible, as was the discrimination of women in, especially, fundamentalist Islamic circles. “In the Netherlands there is a separation between church and state, thus also between mosque and state”, the manifesto further reads (LPF 2002: 5).

Overall, Fortuyn’s ideological appeal can perhaps best be labelled as populist and ‘cultural-nationalist’. Fortuyn sought to protect the Dutch liberal way of life against foreign cultural influences that clashed with the Dutch or, more broadly, Western liberal Enlightenment values (Akkerman 2005). Fortuyn’s ideology was at odds with the idea of a diverse multicultural society in which liberal principles came under pressure. Fortuyn was, so to say, intolerant towards the intolerant.

#### *The short-lived success story of the LPF*

The popularity of Fortuyn became apparent at the time of the municipal elections on March 6, 2002. With his local party Liveable Rotterdam, Fortuyn gathered about 30% of the vote in Rotterdam, which made his party the largest party in the city, while across the country the results of the Purple coalition partners were disastrous. In the remaining period until the general elections the Purple coalition parties were not able to formulate a good answer to the challenge of the LPF. Fortuyn would not witness

the results of the general elections, however; on May 6 he was murdered by an environmental activist. The campaign was officially cancelled, but the elections were not, and despite the dramatic incident the List Pim Fortuyn participated.

**Table 1:** Dutch general election results 1998-2006.

Party	'98 % (Seats)	'02 % (Seats)	'03 % (Seats)	'06 % (Seats)
Social Democrats (PvdA)	29.0% (45)	15.1% (23)	27.3% (42)	21.2% (33)
Liberals (VVD)	24.7% (38)	15.4% (24)	17.9% (28)	14.6% (22)
Christian Democrats (CDA)	18.4% (29)	27.9% (43)	28.6% (44)	26.5% (41)
Democrats '66 (D66)	9.0% (14)	5.1% (7)	4.1% (6)	2.0% (3)
GreenLeft (GL)	7.3% (11)	7.0% (10)	5.1% (8)	4.6% (7)
Socialist Party (SP)	3.5% (5)	5.9% (9)	6.3% (9)	16.6% (25)
Christian Union (CU)	3.2% (5)	2.5% (4)	2.1% (3)	4.0% (6)
List Pim Fortuyn (LPF)		17.0% (26)	5.7% (8)	0.2% (0)
Liveable Netherlands (LN)		1.6% (2)		
Freedom Party (PVV)				5.9% (9)
Others	4.9% (3)	2.5% (2)	2.9% (2)	4.4% (4)
<i>Total</i>	<i>100% (150)</i>	<i>100% (150)</i>	<i>100% (150)</i>	<i>100% (150)</i>

*Note: The percentage for the Christian Union (CU) in 1998 is the combined percentage of the GPV and RPF, the parties that later merged into the CU.*

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May the LPF gathered 17.0% of the vote and 26 seats in the Dutch parliament (see table 1). This was an unprecedented result for a new party; the former 'record' for a newcomer being 8 seats for DS'70 in 1971. The Purple coalition partners suffered an enormous defeat and lost their stable parliamentary majority of 97 out of 150 seats; their combined vote in 2002 only providing them with 54 seats. Especially the Social Democrats were hit hard; the PvdA reached an all time low with 15.1% of the vote, and with a mere 23 seats their representation in parliament was almost halved. At the same time, the Christian Democrats profited from not being at the receiving end of Fortuyn's critique (Van Praag 2003; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2003) and became the largest party with 27.9% of the vote and 43 seats. Subsequently, a coalition government including the Christian Democrats, the Liberals and the LPF was formed. The relatively new and unknown CDA leader Jan-Peter Balkenende became the Prime-Minister of his first cabinet. However, 'Balkenende I' proved to be the shortest incumbent government in Dutch history; after 87 days the coalition

partners CDA and VVD brought it down after a period of severe LPF infighting.

New elections were scheduled for January 22, 2003. Under the leadership of former Fortuyn spokesman Mat Herben, the LPF lost most its previous support, gathering 5.7% of the vote and 8 seats. The big winners were the Social Democrats who recovered remarkably well, collecting 27.3% of the vote and 42 seats. Eventually, however, the Christian Democrats, remaining the largest party, formed a coalition with the Liberals and D66. On first sight the results of the 2003 general elections seemed to indicate a return to 'old' politics; the established parties were well represented in parliament again and were in control of the formation of government. Also, no new (populist) parties managed to enter parliament.

### *The rise of Geert Wilders*

The second Balkenende cabinet eventually broke down in June 2006 and new general elections were planned on November 22 that year. Several right-wing populist parties competed again, the most visible being Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV). Wilders was a former MP for the Liberal Party (VVD) who broke with the VVD in September 2004 after a conflict with the parliamentary leader over the issue of Turkish EU membership. Wilders refused to give up his seat in Parliament and formed his own one-man fraction Group Wilders, or, as he later labelled it, Freedom Party (PVV).

Wilders' political programme turned out to be similar to that of Pim Fortuyn, most definitely in terms of its populist character. Wilders appeals to the 'ordinary people' even more explicitly and criticises the established political elite more harshly than Fortuyn used to do. Wilders (2005: 1) speaks of a "range of interlinked crises which flow from the incompetence of the political elite in Brussels and The Hague". In his 'declaration of independence' Wilders (2005: 2) further states: "I do not want this country to be hijacked by an elite of cowardly and frightened people (from whichever party) any longer. (...) Therefore, I intend to challenge this elite on all fronts. I want to return this country to its citizens". Further, Wilders claimed that the Dutch Parliament is filled with 'grey mice' pursuing their own interests. Wilders despises this self-sustaining political system which stands isolated from society; "politicians should no longer be deaf to the problems troubling ordinary people in every-day life" (Wilders 2005: 16).

With regard to his more substantial programme, many of the every-day problems perceived by Wilders boil down to the alleged incompatibility between Islam and democracy, although Wilders claims it is wrong to perceive his party as an anti-Islam party. Although Wilders does mention that the majority of Muslims living in the Netherlands have nothing to do with extremism and terrorism, he also argues that there is a group of Muslims stirring hatred and wishing to overthrow Dutch society (Wilders 2005: 12). The Netherlands is plagued with 'street terrorism', often committed by persons from Moroccan descent. According to Wilders (2005: 9), criminals with a double nationality should be denaturalised and removed from the Netherlands. With regard to crime and security in general Wilders promotes higher sentences, more policemen on the street and multiple criminals in one prison cell.

Where Fortuyn stressed the need to safeguard general Western values, Wilders' appeal seems to be focussed on preserving the Dutch culture in a narrower sense. Wilders (2005: 11), for instance, wants children at school to be more vigorously tested on their knowledge of culture, national identity and history. For the rest, Wilder's rhetoric is simply more radical, most notably with regard to the topic of immigration and integration. An example is Wilders' shocking and bloody film *Fitna*, released on the internet in March 2008, which portrays the alleged dangers of 'Islamisation' in the Netherlands.

*The general elections of 2006 and after: populist parties more popular than ever?*

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2006 Geert Wilders managed to secure 5.9% of the vote and 9 seats, a better result than expected, while the other radical right-wing parties failed to obtain any seats. The general elections again proved to be disappointing for the Social Democrats, while the Christian Democrats came out as the largest party once more. Strikingly, the Liberals became only the fourth largest party in the Dutch Parliament, as the Socialist Party (SP) secured an enormous victory, gaining 16.6% of the vote, increasing its number of seats from 9 to 25.

The Socialist Party started out as a Maoist movement in the 1970s and eventually turned into a 'social-populist' party (March and Mudde 2005: 35). In the 1990s the party's slogan was 'vote against, vote SP' and one of its campaign posters showed the Social Democrat party leader Kok gradually turning into the Liberal leader Bolkestein



throughout the years, indicating the convergence between the two traditional rival parties. However, in more recent years the SP seems to have shrugged off this anti-establishment image to a large extent - in 2002 its slogan had remarkably changed to 'Vote *for*, vote SP' - so that the SP can now better be classified as an 'ordinary' social-democratic party (Lucardie 2007: 154; 2009)<sup>5</sup>. In fact, by means of content analysis, De Lange and Rooduijn (2010: 7) show that the anti-elitist rhetoric in SP manifestos gradually evaporated; in 1994 anti-elite references were found in 17% of the paragraphs, while this percentage dropped to a mere 1.5% in 2006.

The SP remains an ambiguous case, however, as the party is still often labelled as populist by academics and journalists. Indeed, in its general election manifesto from 2006 the SP stresses the dissatisfaction of many citizens with the functioning of Dutch democracy (SP 2006). Also, the 'haughty' attitude of the second Balkenende cabinet is criticised and the manifesto argues in favour of more democratisation and citizen involvement. Apart from the Balkenende II government, however, the programme does not so much agitate against a broader 'political establishment' or representative democracy as such. The manifesto actually stresses the high levels of trust citizens have in the democratic system. Democracy requires thorough maintenance and parties ought to be responsive to citizens, but the SP does not seem to demand a rigorous change in the representative democratic system. Therefore, looking at the more recent years, in this paper the SP will not be considered to be a populist party.

After the 2006 general elections both the SP and Wilders, the election's largest victors, would remain outside of the government. The coalition would be formed by the CDA, PvdA and the smaller Protestant Christian Union, Balkenende becoming Prime Minister of his fourth cabinet. As it turned out, Wilders' PVV would not remain the sole populist party within the Dutch Parliament. After the general elections of 2006 it became clear that number two on the list of the Liberal Party, Rita Verdonk, the former immigration and integration minister, gathered more votes than party leader Rutte. After this unprecedented result the relationship between the two deteriorated swiftly and after several conflicts Verdonk was expelled from the VVD fraction.

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5 Although not entirely surprising in view of the often pejorative connotation of the term, Jan de Wit, MP for the SP, is also not very keen on applying the label 'populism' to the SP: "we have certain points of views, we have a certain analysis, and we will not put those aside because of what 'the people' may think" (Interview with Jan de Wit, The Hague, 23 June 2008).

Verdonk chose to keep her parliamentary seat and founded her own 'movement' 'Proud of the Netherlands' (TON) with the intention of participating in the following general elections.

Similar to Fortuyn and Wilders, Verdonk stresses that politicians are deaf to the citizens' problems (Verdonk 2007). Notably, Verdonk seems at ease with the label 'populist', which she perceives to be an honorary nickname: "I am there for the people, and there is nothing wrong with that. That's what I'm there for being a politician" (Verdonk, interview, The Hague, 18-12-2008). Apart from her populism, the concept programme 'the Vision of Proud of the Netherlands' is, just like the programmes of Fortuyn and Wilders, dominated by issues related to crime and security, and claims for lower taxes and a smaller, more efficient bureaucracy (TON 2008). Also Verdonk emphasises the need to preserve the Dutch culture, but is clearly less radical than Wilders in her portrayal of Muslims; Islam is not even mentioned once in 'the Vision of TON' (Lucardie 2009). Also her stance on immigration is less harsh; although Verdonk wants to prevent the entry of economic 'fortune seekers', she notes that the Netherlands does need skilled immigrants (TON 2008:4). However, Verdonk does stress that the Dutch norms and values are under pressure due to the newcomers: "if you come and live here, you ought to adapt to the prevailing Dutch culture" (Verdonk, interview, The Hague, 18-12-2008).

The elections for the European Parliament on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2009 confirmed that populist parties have become an important force in the Dutch party political landscape (van Kessel and Crum 2009). Verdonk did not participate, but the Freedom Party of Geert Wilders gathered 17% of the vote, making it the second largest party in these elections. The CDA remained the largest party with 20.1% of the vote, but Wilders' party became larger than both the Social Democrats, which after 2002 suffered another enormous defeat, only gathering 12.0% of the vote, and the Liberals, whose vote share was merely 11.4%. True, it could well be argued that the 2009 European elections in the Netherlands were 'second-order' elections, but it remains to be seen whether the PVV would have done much worse if general elections would have been held. Before and after the European elections Geert Wilders' party has come out as

one of the largest, if not the largest party in several opinion polls<sup>6</sup>. How can it be that since 2002 populist parties have managed to play such a significant role in Dutch politics? The remainder of this paper will deal with this question.

### **Explaining the rise of populist parties in contemporary Dutch politics**

#### *Electoral system and the availability of the electorate*

The first two conditions crucial to the rise of populist parties in the Netherlands relate to the structures of party competition: the electoral system and the availability of the electorate. These two variables are discussed together as they are very much interwoven.

The Dutch electoral system has always been very open to new political parties; the whole of the Netherlands is one electoral district, providing for the maximum degree of district magnitude, and the effective electoral threshold is remarkably low. Parties are only required to gather 0.67% of the vote in order to be represented in the Dutch parliament, which is evidently the lowest percentage in Western Europe (Carter 2002). Following ‘Duverger’s law’ this is the perfect institutional condition for new parties to emerge; new parties need relatively few votes in order to access parliament. Accordingly, voters are less afraid that their vote will be wasted and political entrepreneurs might be more willing to participate in elections. Since this electoral system has practically been in effect since 1918, it is remarkable that populist parties have never been very successful before and that populist parties from the past like the Farmers Party and the Centre Democrats could not sustain their (modest) electoral success.

The explanation for this can partly be found in the other structural variable: the availability of the electorate. Namely, the electorate was relatively unavailable in the

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6 According to polling bureau Synovate the Freedom Party would have gathered 24 seats in Dutch parliament if general elections would have been held in May 2009 (Synovate 2009a). CDA and PvdA would have gathered 34 and 28 respectively. In November 2009 Wilders’ party ranked second, with 26 seats, after the CDA with 37 seats (Synovate 2009b). According to the polls of Maurice de Hond, however, Wilders consistently gathers more seats at hypothetical general elections; in March 2009 the Freedom Party was estimated to become the largest party with 27 seats, compared to 26 seats of CDA and 21 seats of PvdA (*NRC Handelsblad*, 1 March 2009).

decades after the Second World War due to the ‘pillarised’ structure of Dutch society. This meant that the major Dutch parties and the most significant religious and social groups, or ‘pillars’, were closely aligned (Lijphart 1975). Thus, the electorate largely voted along the cleavage lines of religion and social class, being represented by either the Christian Democratic Parties, the Social Democrats, representing the working class, or the Liberal Party, representing the secular middle class (e.g. Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003, Andeweg and Irwin 2002).

The dividing lines between pillars gradually evaporated, largely due to the secularisation of society since the 1960s. However, the structural model of voting behaviour, based on these traditional social cleavages, still explained voting behaviour quite well for the following decades, especially with regard to the religious pillars (see table 2) (Andeweg and Irwin 2002; Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003; Irwin and Van Holsteyn 2008). However, the explanatory power of this model turned out to be very low by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As table 2 shows, the structural model explained 72% of the total vote in 1956, but this gradually declined and in 2002 only 28% of the vote could still be explained by this model. What is more, by this time voters also did not necessarily vote for the party that was closest to their ideological position, so that traditional ‘heartlands’ of political parties had become much less secure (Andeweg and Irwin 2002; Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003; Irwin and Van Holsteyn 2008).

**Table 2:** Electoral choice according to the structural model of voting behaviour 1956-2002 in percentages.

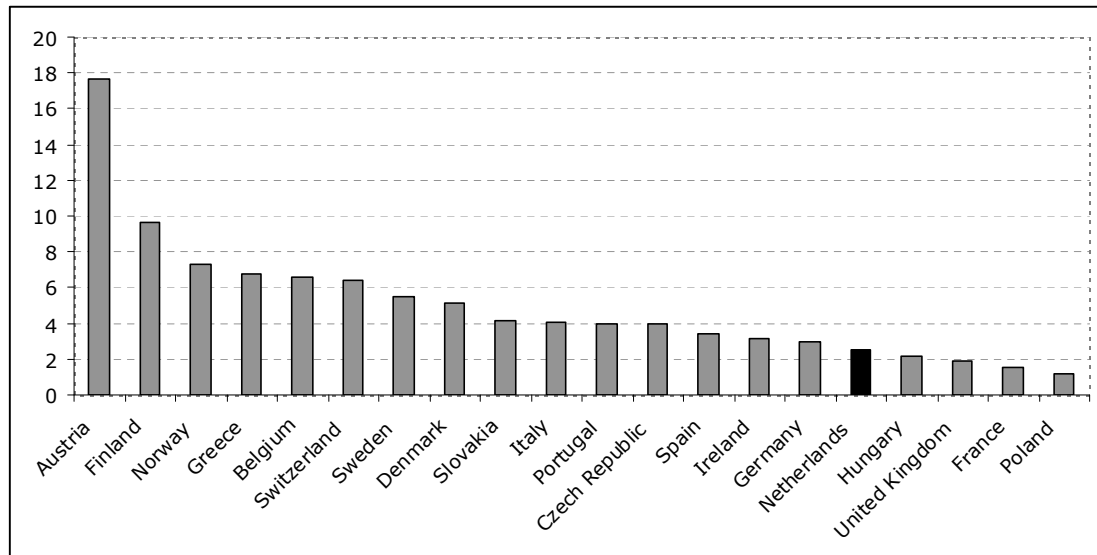
	<b>‘56</b>	<b>‘68</b>	<b>‘77</b>	<b>‘86</b>	<b>‘98</b>	<b>‘02</b>
Practising Catholic voting KVP/CDA	95	72	66	66	53	66
Practising Dutch Reformed voting ARP, CHU/CDA	63	55	52	58	44	53
Practising Calvinist voting ARP, CHU/CDA	93	78	75	58	44	43
Secular working class voting Labour Party (PvdA)	68	65	67	60	51	34
Secular middle class voting Liberal Party (VVD)	32	25	30	28	31	19
<b><i>Total percentage of voters explained with the structured model of electoral behaviour</i></b>	<b>72</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>28</b>

*Source: Van Holsteyn and Irwin (2003: 50).*

Thus, due to the declining partisan alignments the availability of the voters in the Netherlands has gradually increased and, at present, voters’ sociological background hardly predicts voting behaviour anymore. Furthermore, the availability of the Dutch

electorate seems relatively high compared to other European countries. This can, first of all, be shown by the levels of party membership in each country. It can be argued that higher levels of party membership in a particular country indicate that the electorate is available to a lesser extent, since more voters bonded with a particular party. Figure 2 shows party membership as a percentage of the electorate at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and reveals that party membership clearly is relatively low in the Netherlands, with only 2.5% of the electorate being a member of a particular party (Mair and Van Biezen 2001). Only Hungary, the UK, France and Poland have lower levels of party membership.

**Figure 2:** Party membership as a percentage of the electorate in 20 European countries



Source: Mair and Van Biezen (2001). The party membership data stems from the end of the 1990s or the year 2000.

One could well argue, however, that party membership in itself does not reveal whether the electorate is truly available; people may feel closely affiliated with a party and repeatedly vote for this party without being a member. In fact, party membership in the Netherlands has never been very high. Even during the ‘zenith’ of pillarisation in the 1950s, party membership was estimated to be about 15% of the electorate (Andeweg and Irwin 2002: 54). So even though many people felt closely related to the party representing their particular pillar, this did not automatically result in them being a party member. Still, the drop from 15% of the electorate being members of a party in the 1950s to 2.51% at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is striking.

A more precise indicator of the availability of the electorate is perhaps the extent to which voters feel closely affiliated with a particular party. In the European Electoral Survey of 2004, a relatively high percentage of Dutch respondents answered that they felt close to a particular party: 86.9% (see table 3). However, if one takes into account the *degree* of party affiliation of the group of respondents who feel close to a particular party it turns out that the bond between the Dutch respondents and their preferred party is rather weak. 70.3% of the Dutch respondents are merely sympathisers; only in Portugal and Estonia do party sympathisers have a lower degree of affiliation with their preferred party. At the same time, only 6% of the Dutch respondents favouring a particular party felt that they were ‘very close’ to this party.

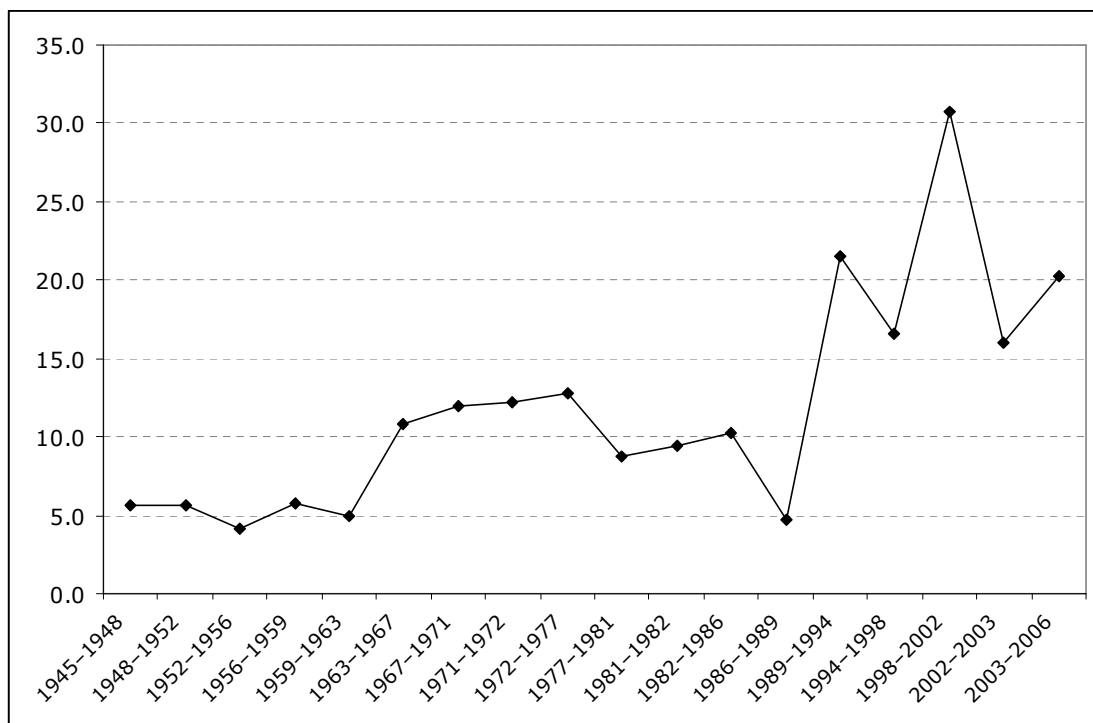
**Table 3: Party affiliation in 15 European countries.**

Country	Close to a Party?		Degree of party affiliation (if close to a party)		
	Yes	No	Very Close	Fairly Close	Merely a Sympathiser
Estonia	98.2%	1.8%	4.2%	16.9%	78.9%
Italy	94.9%	5.1%	17.7%	39.5%	42.8%
<b>The Netherlands</b>	<b>86.9%</b>	<b>13.1%</b>	<b>6.0%</b>	<b>23.6%</b>	<b>70.3%</b>
Sweden	83.7%	16.3%	17.8%	27.6%	54.5%
Portugal	73.7%	26.3%	8.4%	15.3%	76.2%
Spain	68.4%	31.6%	7.7%	35.2%	57.1%
Greece	67.6%	32.4%	36.5%	39.0%	24.5%
Czech Republic	66.9%	33.1%	17.3%	34.4%	48.3%
Austria	57.2%	42.8%	36.0%	17.2%	46.8%
Denmark	54.5%	45.5%	11.8%	28.5%	59.7%
Poland	53.9%	46.1%	7.2%	40.3%	52.5%
France	51.2%	48.8%	13.0%	53.1%	34.0%
Germany	49.3%	50.7%	11.6%	21.7%	66.8%
Hungary	38.3%	61.7%	20.3%	43.6%	36.1%
Great Britain	38.3%	61.7%	16.8%	50.7%	32.4%

*Data: European Election Study 2004 (Schmitt and Loveless 2004). Only the respondents giving a (valid) answer are taken into account, i.e. the table excludes the respondents who replied ‘don’t know’ or who gave no or an invalid answer.*

Finally, the availability of the electorate can be assessed by taking into account the degree of electoral volatility. If a substantial part of the electorate changes its vote repeatedly after subsequent elections this is a sign that voters have a weak bond with political parties and are more likely to vote for rival parties<sup>7</sup>. In the Netherlands one would expect this volatility to have risen in the last decades due to the depillarisation process and the associated decline in voting along traditional cleavage lines. Indeed, as figure 3 shows, the aggregate electoral volatility in the Netherlands has taken a vast flight from the elections in 1989 onwards. To put these figures into comparative perspective, volatility levels in the Netherlands “are now the highest in western Europe, with the most unstable elections, those of 1994, 2002 and 2006, breaking all sorts of historical records” (Mair 2008: 249). This is all the more remarkable, as Peter Mair notes, as these elections took place in relatively ‘ordinary’ times marked by a stable socio-economic and political environment (Mair 2008: 251).

**Figure 3: Electoral volatility in the Netherlands**



Source: Mair (2008). Volatility calculated according to the Pedersen (1979) Index.

<sup>7</sup> Note, however, that volatility figures are likely to underestimate the actual levels of electoral availability; the fact that particular voters stick to their party choice does not necessarily indicate that they could not in potential defect to another party (Bartolini 1999: 467).

Obviously, the peak in volatility at the time of the 2002 general elections is largely due to the electoral success of the LPF, which makes it hard to assess whether a large part of the electorate was already available to political entrepreneurs like Fortuyn or whether Fortuyn's persuasiveness was so immense that he swayed voters that were unavailable before. However, even if we discount the elections of 2002 the volatility figures remain remarkably high. Furthermore, volatility levels were already high after the general elections of 1994 and 1998 when no populist party managed to do well. It seems safe to assume, then, that a large part of the Dutch electorate was available to alternative political parties already before Pim Fortuyn entered the political scene.

To sum up, whereas the electoral system in the Netherlands has always been very open to new political parties, the levels of electoral availability have only greatly increased in the past few decades. Previously, the social cleavage structure of the Netherlands, marked by the different pillars, kept most of the electorate in place (Mair 2008). Voters were loyal and repeatedly voted for the party that represented their specific social group. Gradually, however, "the closed political and electoral system opened up, the 'pillars' of Dutch society began to crumble, and voters finally began to choose" (Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003: 48). Or in the words of Peter Mair: "the real effect of the absence of the constraining effect from the structure of party competition kicked in, since there was then no alternative anchoring device that might take up the slack left by depillarization" (Mair 2008: 242).

Moreover, the outcome produced by the electoral system in the Netherlands seems conducive to populist critique in particular. As Mair (2008) notes, no longer are elections about mobilising the parties' own adherents, because the ties between the traditional parties and their followings have more or less vanished. Elections in the Netherlands also do not directly determine who is going to govern, as the outcome of the coalition formation process does not always mirror the election results. In fact, the most notable winners in the general elections of 2006, the Socialist Party and Wilders' Freedom Party, are still in opposition, whereas the coalition parties together lost more than 6% of the vote compared to the elections in 2003 (Mair 2008: 237). It is likely to be frustrating for some voters, who are probably more interested in influencing the process of government formation than merely electing parliamentarians (Irwin and Van Holsteyn 2009), to see that election results sometimes hardly matter with regard



to the question of who is going to govern. It is this frustration on which populist parties are likely to thrive. As a matter of fact, in his ‘declaration of independence’ Wilders even refers to the shady process of coalition formation in which the voter actually has no say whatsoever (Wilders 2005: 16).

The combination of the open electoral system and the Dutch electorate being available to be swayed by different political parties provided fertile ground for new (populist) political parties in recent years. However, this does not directly explain why the successful populist parties in the Netherlands share a cultural-nationalist signature, and why no strong new populist force emerged after the general elections of 2003. To explain this, attention needs to be shifted to the agency of political parties; in particular the responsiveness of the established parties and the supply of credible populist entrepreneurs.

#### *Responsiveness of the established parties*

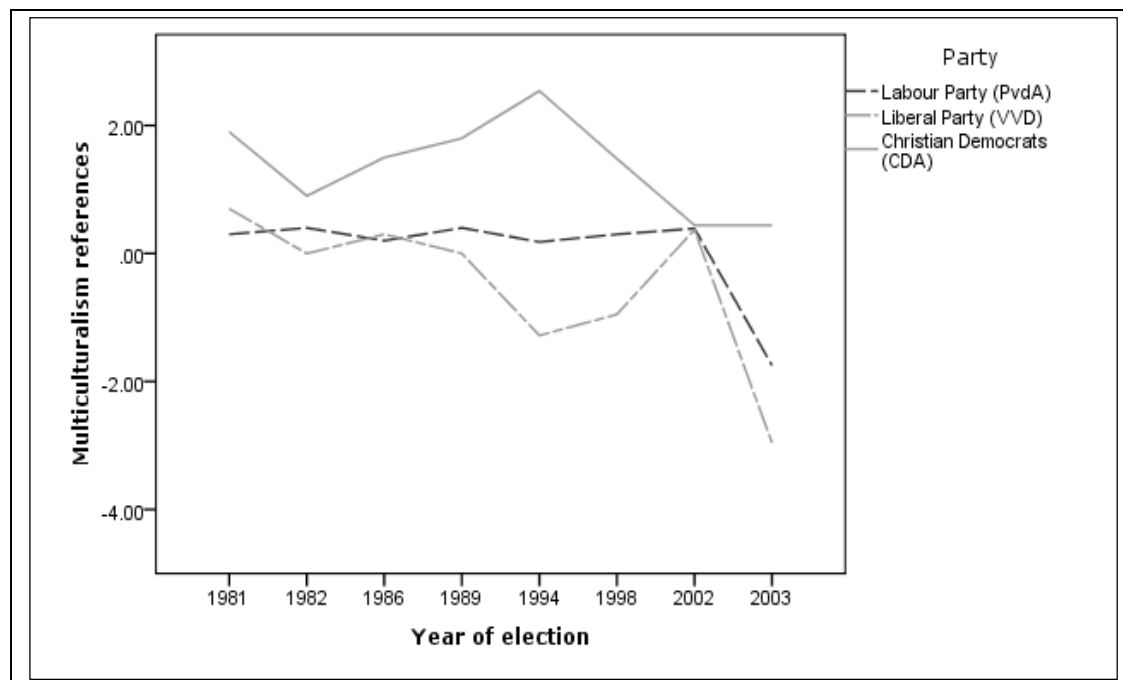
In explaining the electoral success of populist parties it is important to consider whether mainstream parties sufficiently address issues that are salient in the eyes of the electorate. If they do not it can be argued that the political opportunity structure for populist parties becomes more favourable; not only will populist parties be able to address the issues that are insufficiently politicised, they are also able to criticise the political establishment for being unresponsive with some justification. Various researchers have dealt with this question, even before the rise of Pim Fortuyn.

For instance, Rudy Andeweg (2001: 123) argued that the Dutch consensus democracy would provide fertile grounds for critique from the populist right, as consensus democracies are “strong on inclusiveness and weak on accountability” (see also Keman and Krouwel 2007; Hakhverdian and Koop 2007). Indeed, there is some reason to doubt the accountability of the Dutch political system. The Netherlands, according to Lijphart (1975), can be classified as a consociational democracy. On the mass level society is, or used to be, segmented. On the other hand, the elites who traditionally represent the different pillars cooperate. In this sense, politics in the Netherlands is essentially quite elitist, which provides room for populist critique. Furthermore, with the decline of the pillarised structure of Dutch society one can wonder whether the consociational character of Dutch democracy still makes sense.

As has been noted above, the ‘masses’ are no longer tied to a particular political party, so who does the elite actually represent?

It can be argued, nevertheless, that populist critique probably does not resonate very well with the electorate if the mainstream parties provide a diverse ideological pallet of policy options, satisfying each segment of society. However, whether this has been the case in the Netherlands during the past few decades is a moot point. In 2000 Jacques Thomassen already predicted that there was potential for the populist radical right in view of the convergence of the mainstream parties towards the political centre (Thomassen 2000). Indeed, the findings of Pennings and Keman (2002; 2003), based on data from the Comparative Manifestos Project, confirm that the mainstream parties in the Netherlands have converged. The authors also see this as one of the main factors behind Fortuyn’s success; if the public is not able to distinguish between mainstream parties anymore, outside challengers are able to occupy the political space that has become vacant.

**Figure 4:** Balance between positive and negative references regarding multiculturalism.



Data: Budge et al (2001), Klingemann et al (2006). The multiculturalism references scale is computed as: multiculturalism (positive references) minus multiculturalism (negative references).

Where Pennings and Keman construct two scales incorporating multiple policy issues (a socio-economic left-right scale and a progressive-conservative scale), figure 4 depicts the traditional mainstream parties' position on the single issue of multiculturalism since 1981. This was, after all, a prominent issue in the political programme of Fortuyn, and the issue he attracted most attention with. The figure indicates whether the parties, on balance, made more positive or negative comments about multiculturalism, including matters such as cultural integration and preservation of cultural and religious heritage (see Budge et al 2001; Klingemann et al 2006). The graph shows that in the 1980s the three parties did not perceive multiculturalism as a negative phenomenon. In the 1990s only the Liberals were critical of multiculturalism.

Indeed, the leader of the Liberals at the time, Frits Bolkestein, received a substantial amount of attention (and criticism) for his stance on issues related to minority integration and asylum seekers. Just as Fortuyn, Bolkestein was concerned that a lack of integration of minority groups would threaten (secular) Western liberalist achievements such as freedom of speech (Prins 2002). However, once in government since 1994, the VVD had to bear responsibility for integration and immigration policy and Bolkestein left national politics in 1999 to become EU Commissioner. By 2002 the VVD had stopped pressing the issue of multiculturalism and little was separating the three mainstream parties on this issue anymore (see figure 4). What is more, a closer look at the data reveals that their 'neutral' position was simply the result of the issue being almost non-existent in the parties' manifestos. This gave Fortuyn the room to position himself as the main critic of multicultural society (Kleinnijenhuis et al 2003).

By the time of the next general elections of 2003, however, the data indicates that the Labour Party and the Liberals had shifted their positions towards multiculturalism dramatically, and the data indicates that also other party manifestos were marked by this shift. Undoubtedly, this had to do with the success of Fortuyn in the previous elections. Whereas data for Fortuyn's stance on multiculturalism is missing for 2002<sup>8</sup>, the score of the LPF in 2003 on this issue is -4.02, which is still a larger negative

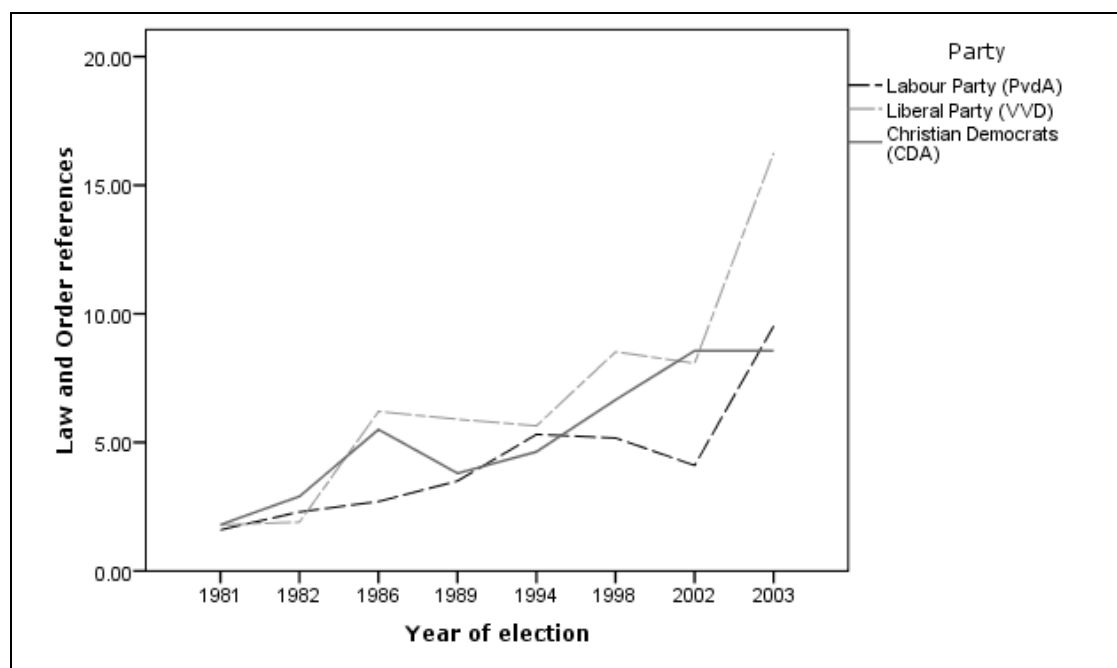
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<sup>8</sup> For 2002 the LPF score is 0.00, which seems odd; the short manifesto for the general elections in this year, 'Businesslike with a Heart', certainly discusses the issue of multiculturalism.

score than that of all the other parties.

However, in 2003 the LPF scores on the issues of government efficiency (8.4) and law and order (10.29) are even higher, indicating that, perhaps contrary to the party's image, multiculturalism was not the most prominent issue in the 2003 LPF manifesto. In fact, if the positive references of the three parties with regard to law and order issues (e.g. enforcement of laws, actions against crime) are measured, we also see a radical change in the positions of the Social Democrats and the Liberals between 2002 and 2003 (see figure 5).

**Figure 5:** Positive references as regards law and order issues.



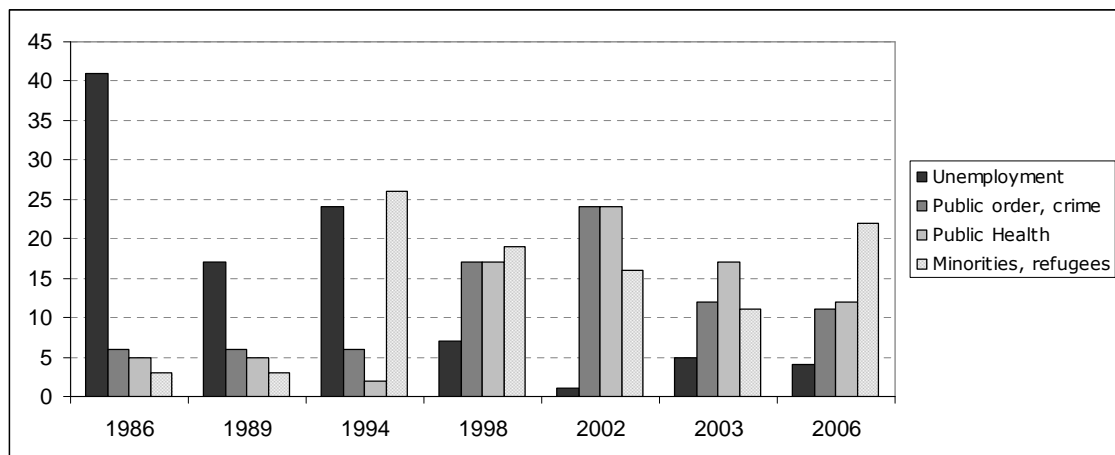
Data: Budge et al (2001), Klingemann et al (2006).

Although these shifts in party positions are remarkable, the fact that the mainstream parties did not press certain issues or the fact that party programmes have converged throughout time does not automatically mean that parties have also been unresponsive. That is, the electorate might also have been located in the centre of the political spectrum and perhaps the issues of multiculturalism and crime were not perceived as important issues in the eye of the voter. This, however, was certainly not the case. As Pellikaan, De Lange and Van der Meer (2003; 2007) argue, the

established parties failed to recognise that citizens actually *were* concerned about the perceived problems of immigration and the 'multicultural' character of society. Fortuyn managed to introduce a new 'cultural' line of political conflict which “had been ignored by the political elite, but was highly salient to the electorate” (Pellikaan et al. 2007: 294).

On the basis of Dutch Parliamentary Election studies Kees Aarts and Jacques Thomassen (2008: 217) indeed find that since the early 1990s the electorate saw problems related to minorities and refugees as the most important societal issues, together with crime and public order and health care issues. As figure 6 indicates, these issues suddenly became more important for many voters at the turn of the 1990s, while, most notably, unemployment became much less of a salient issue.

**Figure 6:** Most important issues as perceived by the Dutch electorate in %



Source: Aarts and Thomassen (2008: 216).

However, as Aarts and Thomassen argue, none of the political parties prioritised these newly emerged issues in their political programme in 2002. Furthermore, the perceived positions of the Christian Democrats and especially the Social Democrats towards ethnic minorities and asylum seekers were quite different from the attitudes of the electorate (see table 4). Similarly, Van Holsteyn, Irwin and Den Ridder (2003) find that it was not so much the electorate that shifted to the 'right' at the 2002 general elections; the public merely reacted to the entrance of a credible newcomer which tapped into their pre-existing attitudes.

**Table 4:** Perceived positions of political parties and the mean position of the electorate on the issues of ethnic minorities and asylum seekers.

<b>Ethnic Minorities</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2006</b>
Christian Democrats (CDA)	3.91	4.08	4.83	4.86	4.69
Social Democrats (PvdA)	3.20	3.39	3.54	3.80	3.93
Liberals (VVD)	5.09	5.33	5.47	5.62	5.60
List Pim Fortuyn (LPF)	-	-	6.33	6.40	-
<i>Respondents (all)</i>	<i>4.91</i>	<i>4.69</i>	<i>5.15</i>	<i>4.95</i>	<i>5.21</i>
<i>Respondents voting LPF</i>			<i>6.15</i>	<i>6.01</i>	
<b>Asylum Seekers</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2006</b>
Christian Democrats (CDA)	-	3.80	4.23	4.59	4.45
Social Democrats (PvdA)	-	3.22	3.31	3.43	3.58
Liberals (VVD)	-	5.41	5.21	5.57	5.44
List Pim Fortuyn (LPF)	-	-	6.58	6.32	-
<i>Respondents (all)</i>	-	<i>4.36</i>	<i>4.59</i>	<i>4.48</i>	<i>4.71</i>
<i>Respondents voting LPF</i>			<i>6.00</i>	<i>5.89</i>	

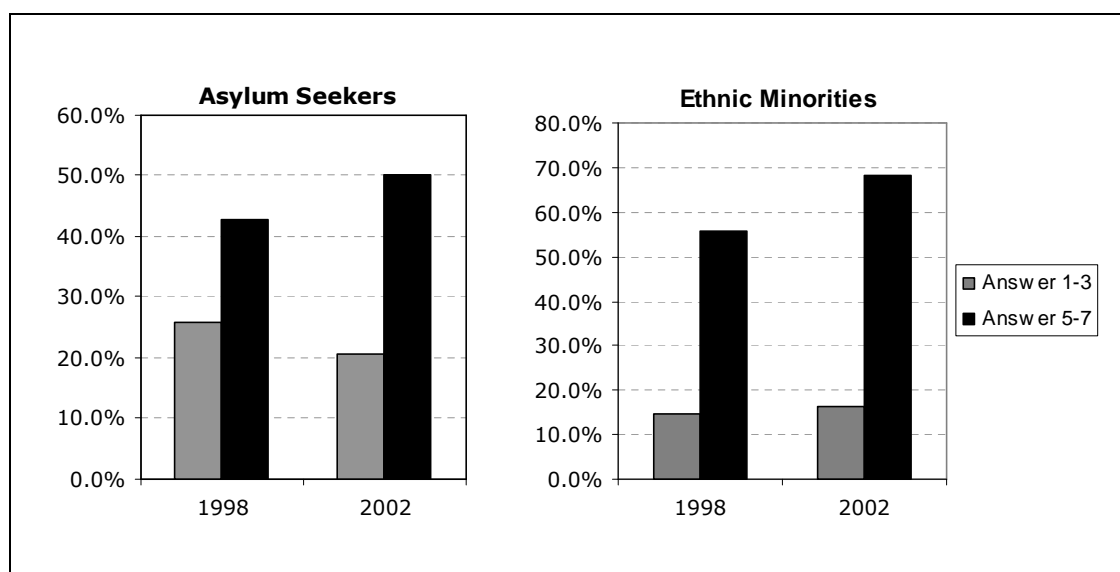
*Note: Ethnic Minorities 1= may preserve customs of own culture; 7= should completely adjust to Dutch culture. Asylum seekers: 1= admit more; 7= send back as many as possible.*

*Source: Aarts and Thomassen (2008: 214). LPF scores and positions of LPF voters based on own calculations on the basis of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2002-2003 (Irwin et al 2003).*

Table 4 shows the mean position of the electorate as well as the perceived stances of the mainstream parties on the issues of ethnic minorities and asylum seekers. In most election years the mean position of the electorate on these issues lies somewhere in between the perceived position of the Christian Democrats and the Liberals. At the same time, the Social Democrats are clearly seen to be more lenient towards asylum seekers and minorities than the average respondent. The LPF, on the other hand, is perceived to be considerably more ‘restrictive’ with regard to asylum seekers and minorities than the average respondent and, in fact, the Liberal Party. The LPF voters, however, turn out to have much stronger views than the average respondent. Considering the LPF voters made up a considerable part of the electorate, this might indicate that there indeed was a large group of voters available to be swayed by a political party with a ‘tougher’ position on issues related to asylum seekers and minorities.

What is more, if the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study of 1998 (Aarts et al 1999) is considered, it is evident that already in 1998 a substantial amount of respondents favoured strict policies towards asylum seekers and ethnic minorities. 11.6% preferred asylum seekers to be sent back (option 7 on a scale of 7), while 42.8% of the respondents gave an answer ranging from 5 to 7 (see figure 7). On the other hand, a mere 3.7% favoured admitting more asylum seekers (option 1) and 26% opted for an option ranging from 1 to 3. With regard to the integration of minorities a similar pattern can be observed; 16.1% of the respondents want minorities to adjust to Dutch culture completely, as opposed to 3.3% of the respondents who find that minorities may preserve their national customs. True, if we look at figure 7, the electorate seems to have become less lenient towards the inflow of asylum seekers and the integration of minorities between 1998 and 2002, but already in 1998 clearly more people were in favour rather than against stricter policies with regard to these issues.

**Figure 7:** Position of electorate on the issues of asylum seekers and ethnic minorities.



*Note:* See notes table 4. Asylum seekers: answer 1-3 (admit more), answer 5-7 (send back). Ethnic Minorities: answer 1-3 (preserve customs), answer 5-7 (adjust).

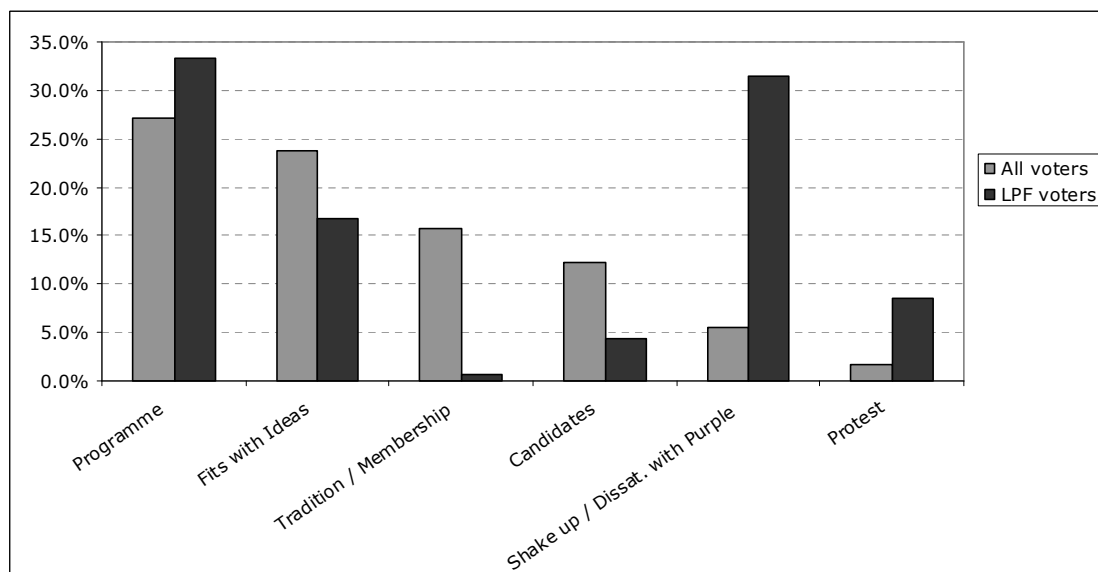
*Data:* Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 1998 (Aarts et al 1999) and 2002-2003 (Irwin et al 2003).

The rise of Pim Fortuyn can thus be seen as the result of the unresponsiveness of the established parties, or at least the perception that the mainstream political parties did not sufficiently take into account salient social issues. This indicates that a vote for Fortuyn was not merely a protest vote driven by political apathy or *ressentiment* (Betz 1994). In fact, Wouter van der Brug (2003) finds that the LPF electorate did not so

much vote for Fortuyn out of reduced political efficacy and cynicism, but because voters agreed with the LPF on its proposed policies. Van der Brug argues that it is more likely that Fortuyn himself ‘fuelled’ political discontent, rather than thriving on it. Bélanger and Aarts (2006) also find that a vote for the LPF was mainly based on policy preferences, although they suggest that attitudes of discontent also contributed to the support of Fortuyn.

Judging from figure 8, LPF voters indeed seemed driven by both the substance of Fortuyn’s programme and general dissatisfaction with the Purple government or a feeling that the Netherlands needed to be shaken up. Obviously, tradition or party membership was not the main motivation for people to vote LPF. People also did not seem to vote LPF due to the party leader or candidates, but this might well have been different if Fortuyn had not been murdered by the time the elections were actually held.

**Figure 8: Reasons behind party choice in general elections of 2002.**



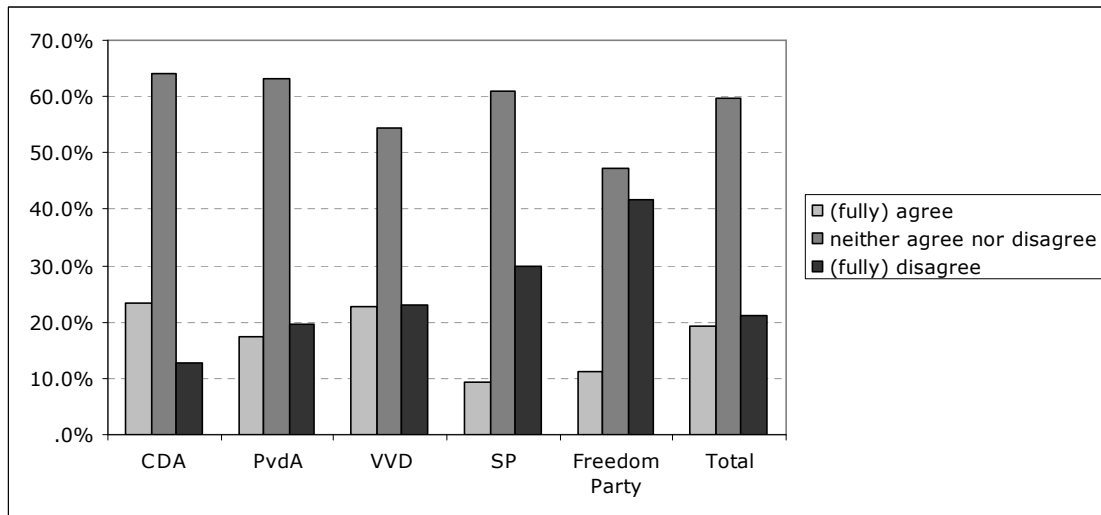
*Data: Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2002-2003 (Irwin et al 2003).*

Regardless of the question of whether or not pre-existing political discontent has stimulated the rise of Pim Fortuyn, the presence of this discontent in itself is likely to be grist to the mill of populist parties, as they picture established parties as unresponsive, incompetent and untrustworthy. Figure 9, showing data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2006, indicates that the trust in politicians does not



seem particularly high among the Dutch electorate; only under Christian Democrat voters more respondents agreed than disagreed with the statement that politicians are honest. Also, we can observe that especially the Freedom Party electorate seems to doubt the trustworthiness of politicians.

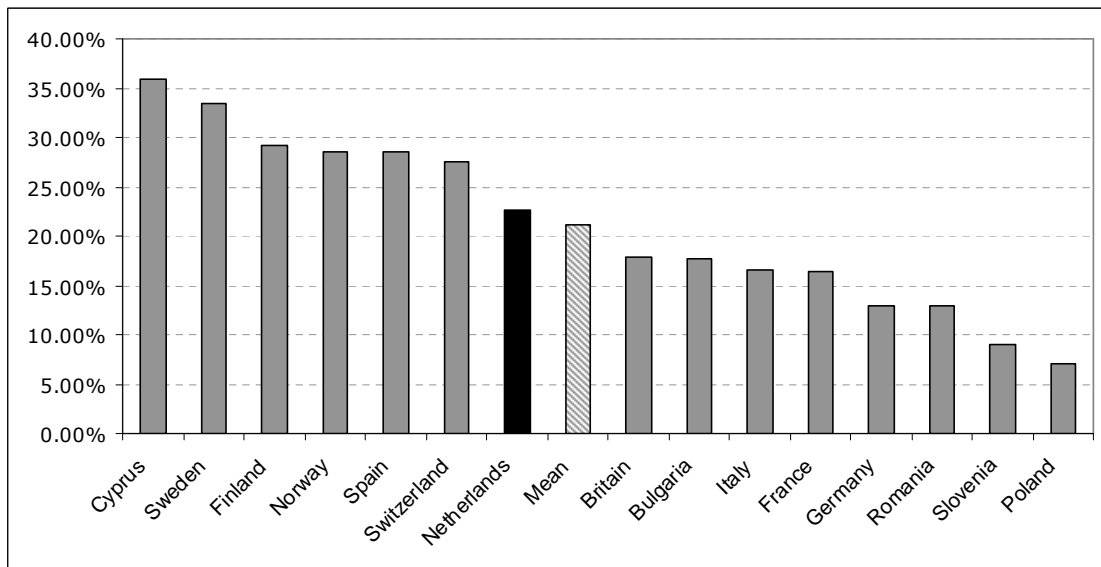
**Figure 9:** View of different party supporters on the statement ‘Politicians are honest’.



*Data: Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2006 (CBS et al 2007)*

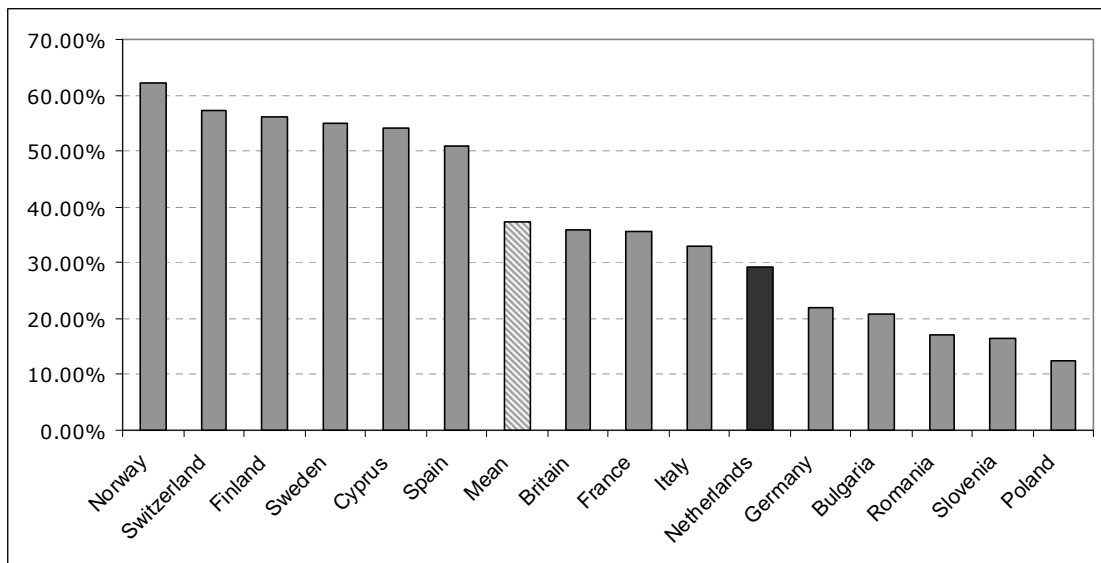
Can we say that the Dutch electorate is indeed a relatively dissatisfied electorate compared to other European electorates? Figures 10 and 11 display data from the 2005 World Values Survey concerning confidence in political parties and parliaments. Figure 10 indicates that the confidence of the Dutch in political parties is fairly low; 22.7% of the respondents had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in political parties, whereas 77.3% of the respondents had little or no confidence at all in parties. Compared to other European countries, however, the Netherlands does not stand out with these figures; it has a confidence value just above the mean. With regard to the confidence in the Dutch legislature the picture is different (see figure 11). With 29.1% of the respondents answering they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in parliament and 70.9% answering they had not much or no confidence, the Netherlands scores rather poorly. The only West European country in which confidence statistics are lower is Germany.

**Figure 10:** Confidence in political parties in 15 European countries.



*Data: World Values Survey (2005). The bars represent the percentage of respondents answering they had ‘a great deal or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in political parties, as opposed to ‘not much or ‘none at all’.*

**Figure 11:** Confidence in parliament in 15 European countries.



*Data: World Values Survey (2005). The bars represent the percentage of respondents answering they had ‘a great deal or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in their national parliament, as opposed to ‘not much or ‘none at all’.*

All things considered, on top of the permissive electoral system and the availability of the electorate, the explanation for the rise of populist parties in the Netherlands should be sought in the fact that established political parties did not sufficiently respond to the demands of a substantial part of the electorate. Baukje Prins (2002) argues that

these demands might well have emerged due to a growing influence of a ‘new realist’ discourse, marked by a positive portrayal of the ordinary people and ‘Dutch identity’ and a resistance towards elitist left-wing progressive ideals. Already in the 1990s Bolkestein introduced this discourse and Fortuyn benefited from its electoral appeal. It goes beyond the scope of this contribution to assess whether this discourse has in fact been constructed by political actors, or whether the anxieties of the electorate were simply ‘valid’ if one looks at the actual developments in Dutch society and the problems related to the multicultural society. What matters here is that issues related to immigration and integration were salient to a large part of the electorate and that in 2002 only Fortuyn truly put them on the political agenda.

Other explanations for the rise of fringe parties often focus on voters being disillusioned due to dire economic circumstances and high levels of unemployment (e.g. Jackman and Volpert 1996). However, these latter explanations do not seem to make sense taking into consideration the economic conditions at the time of Fortuyn’s rise. First of all, as already mentioned and depicted in figure 6 above, the saliency of unemployment as an issue declined sharply during the 1990s and only a very limited amount of voters considered this to be the most important political issue at the time of the 2002 general elections. More generally, the economy was flourishing at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and most voters thought that the Purple government’s performance had been favourable to this economic performance (van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003: 54-5). Clearly, the electoral success of the List Pim Fortuyn in 2002 cannot be explained by considering economic circumstances.

On the other hand, (fuelled) disillusionment among voters seemed to have stirred support for populist parties. Even if the mainstream parties have adapted their positions after the elections of 2002, they do not seem to have regained the confidence of a considerable share of the electorate. The breeding ground for populist parties has thus very much remained present after the rise of Pim Fortuyn. If this is so, how can the return of the electorate to the established parties during the general elections of 2003 be explained? To account for this, the agency of the populist parties themselves has to be considered.

### *Supply of credible populist parties*

As has been claimed so far, populist parties stand a good chance when the electoral system is advantageous to the rise of new parties, when the electorate is available and when the mainstream parties fail to respond to the needs of the electorate, or at least fail to convince the voters of doing so. However, if no party emerges to challenge the establishment and to provide a plausible alternative to mainstream politics, electoral success of populist parties will remain absent. Moreover, and less self-evident, even if populist candidates emerge, they have to appear credible enough in order to receive the support of a sufficient amount of disgruntled voters. This section discusses the credibility of the populist parties that have competed in the general elections since 2002. Also, and this relates more to the longevity of the parties under consideration, the party organisation and, in particular, the degree of unity within the populist parties will be assessed.

The assessment of credibility is not an easy task as a tautology trap is lurking. Namely, a party that has been successful in elections was obviously credible, whereas an unsuccessful competitor can be said to have been lacking credibility, but only so after the fact. This problem is relevant with regard to populist parties in particular, as their success is often ascribed to their leaders possessing some sort of ‘charisma’ which they use to sway their potential following. Again, this charisma is mostly attributed to successful leaders, while failing leaders are almost never called charismatic (see van der Brug 2003; van der Brug and Mughan 2007). Thus, in order to say something about the credibility of populist parties it is necessary to find relevant indicators of this before the elections actually took place.

Another, related, point to make is that credibility of a politician, as it is treated here, goes further than personal character traits of a party leader alone. Without an appealing substantial message and without politicising issues that are actually salient to the electorate a politician, as ‘charismatic’ as he or she may be, is not likely to gather a lot of electoral support. Fortuyn’s popularity, for instance, is often ascribed to his ‘charisma’; people believed that Fortuyn had extraordinary endowments and this, at least to a substantial degree, explained the large amount of support he received (Ellemers 2004). However, a sound operationalisation of the term ‘charisma’ is often lacking and the direct correlation between this perceived charismatic leadership and

party choice is generally not shown. As figure 8 above already showed, a lot of people voted LPF because of its political programme, just like people who voted for a 'normal' party without an alleged charismatic leader.

Similar accounts focussing on the personalisation or mediatisation of politics should also be treated with some caution. Dick Pels for instance sees Fortuyn's popularity as an example of the shift from political representation based on ideology, party programmes and party alignment towards representation based on "personal personalities and their *political style*" (Pels 2003: 45, italics in original). Again, such accounts underestimate the importance of the content of party programmes with regard to party choice. Moreover, more in particular, by stating that in secularised societies celebrity is the new "opium of the people" Pels (2003: 44) might also be underestimating the ability of the electorate to make sensible decisions.

In fact, on the basis of Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies, Van Holsteyn and Andeweg (2008) find that in 2003 and 2006 about three quarters of the electorate based its decision on what the preferred party had to offer, rather than on the appeal of party leaders as such. With regard to the List Pim Fortuyn in the elections of 2003 this applied to 76% of its electorate, although, admittedly, Fortuyn was not the party leader anymore by that time. With regard to the Freedom Party electorate in 2006, however, 43% of the respondents claimed to have voted for the party because of party leader Wilders.

If people were asked whether they would follow the leader of the party they preferred if he or she would switch to another party, only 8% of the respondents answered affirmatively. With regard to the Freedom Party supporters, the share was 25%. Overall, the electorate thus seems to focus on the party instead of the (personality of the) leader in making a decision in the ballot box, and this raises some doubts about the personalisation of politics thesis. Nevertheless, supporters of the Freedom party appear to be much more 'attached' to party leader Wilders. This is not a great surprise, considering the hierarchical structure of Wilders' party; similar to the LPF and Fortuyn, the Freedom Party *is* Geert Wilders.

Therefore, it is not to say that the credibility of individual politicians does not play an

important role with regard to the electoral fortunes of political parties, and parties with centralised leadership – such as the Dutch populist parties – in particular. The tumultuous election campaign of 2002 showed the importance of this factor; the support for ‘Liveable Netherlands’ in the polls only truly began to rise under Pim Fortuyn’s leadership. After the forced departure of Fortuyn in February 2002 it became clear that it was the appeal of Fortuyn that really mattered; most LN supporters followed him to his new party. Fortuyn would dominate the rest of the campaign, placing the established parties in a difficult position. The most notable occasion where this happened was the TV debate following the, for Fortuyn so successful, municipal elections in March. The broadcast showed the grumpy looking Social Democrat and Liberal party leaders being unable, and seemingly unwilling, to respond to the triumphant monologues of Pim Fortuyn (Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003: 46).

**Table 5:** News coverage of prominent individual politicians during the 2002 general election campaign.

<i>Actor</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Coverage</i>
Pim Fortuyn	List Pim Fortuyn (LPF)	Party Leader	24.0%
Benk Korthals	Liberals (VVD)	Minister	7.3%
Wim Kok	Social Democrats (PvdA)	Prime Minister	7.2%
Ad Melkert	Social Democrats (PvdA)	Party Leader	6.0%
Hans Dijkstal	Liberals (VVD)	Party Leader	4.4%
Tineke Netelenbos	Social Democrats (PvdA)	Minister	4.0%
Jan Pronk	Social Democrats (PvdA)	Minister	3.1%
Els Borst	Democrats 66 (D66)	Minister	2.9%
Jan-Peter Balkenende	Christian Democrats (CDA)	Party Leader	2.8%
Paul Rosenmöller	GreenLeft (GL)	Party Leader	1.8%
Thom de Graaf	Democrats 66 (D66)	Party Leader	1.5%
Fred Teeven	Leefbaar Nederland (LN)	Party Leader	1.1%

*Source: Kleinnijenhuis et al (2003: 86).*

The dominance of Fortuyn in the news is expressed in table 5, which shows the distribution of media attention covering prominent individual politicians during the 2002 general election campaign. No less than 24% of media attention was spent on Fortuyn, leaving a vast gap between him and the rest of the politicians (Kleinnijenhuis

et al 2003). Media attention, however, does not necessarily say something about the popularity or credibility of a politician; the relatively low attention for Christian Democrat leader and Prime Minister in-waiting Jan Peter Balkenende being a case in point.

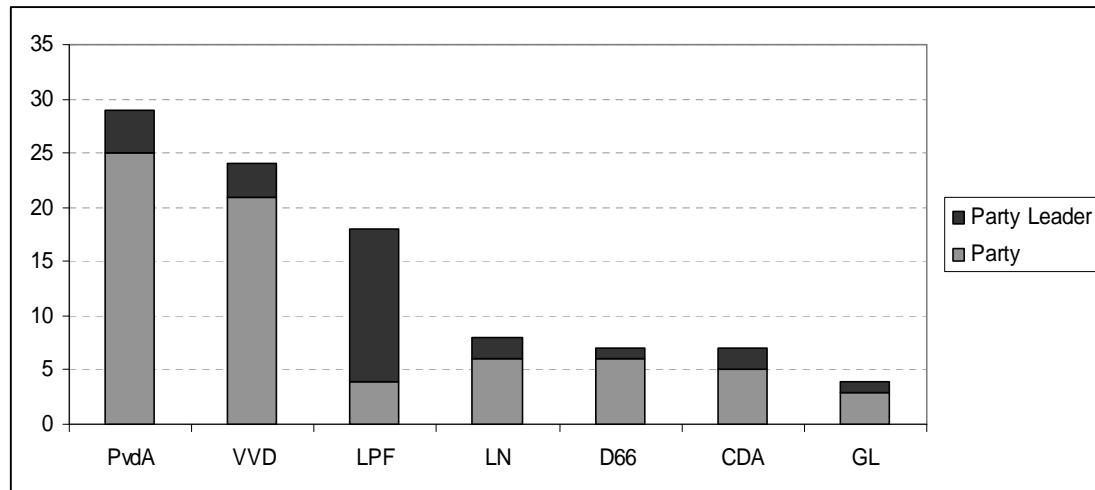
However, Koopmans and Muis (2009) do find that the public visibility of Fortuyn combined with the support from other actors in the public sphere proved to be beneficial for Fortuyn's support in the pre-electoral opinion polls. Van Holsteyn and Irwin (2003) further show that although Fortuyn was clearly perceived as the least sympathetic party leader on the whole, a large share of the voters that *did* evaluate Fortuyn favourably also cast a vote for him. Whereas Fortuyn and his ideas were thus highly controversial, he was nevertheless seen as the right candidate by a substantial part of the electorate, and even his assassination did not stop 17% of the electorate from casting a vote for his party.

Once represented in parliament and government, however, Fortuyn's party failed to leave a good impression. Arguably, for all newly founded parties - and especially parties that portray themselves as political outsiders - it is hard to remain popular once sharing governmental responsibility (Deschouwer 2008). With regard to populist parties this seems particularly problematic, because they are forced to participate in a political system which they previously fundamentally opposed. According to Paul Taggart (2000), populist parties are therefore even invariably self-limiting.

This logic could well have applied to the List Pim Fortuyn as well. However, for the heirs of Fortuyn it already seemed to go wrong before any difficult decisions in government had to be justified. Directly after Fortuyn had been murdered, the internal turmoil began and the struggles continued after the LPF became part of the governing coalition. It was without doubt the continuous infighting between LPF cabinet members – most notably the ministers Heinsbroek and Bomhoff - MPs and party officials that caused the breakdown of the first Balkenende cabinet. Without Pim Fortuyn, the party organisation of the LPF proved to be no more than loose sand. In the words of former LPF 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” (Herben 2005: 25). Indeed, as figure 12

indicates, Fortuyn *was* the LPF; when the LPF was in the news during the 2002 election campaign, by far most of the time Fortuyn, instead of the party as a whole or a fellow party member, was the subject referred to.

**Figure 12:** News coverage of political parties and their party leaders during the 2002 general election campaign in percentages.



Source: *Kleinnijenhuis et al (2003 : 37)*.

Despite the internal quarrels, the LPF would compete again in the following general elections of 2003. Yet, the electoral results of the party, 5.7% of the vote and 8 seats, were far from impressive compared to the results in 2002. For the rest, the results of the 2003 general elections seemed to indicate a return to ‘old’ politics, with most notably the Social Democrats recovering remarkably well from their electoral beating in 2002. However, did the elections of 2003 truly mark a return to political normalcy and the end of populist success, or could we instead speak of “a restoration that never was” (Mair 2008: 248)?

First of all, the LPF, despite the enormous organisational chaos, still managed to equal the former electoral record of new party DS’70 in 1971: 8 seats. If internal cohesion is seen as an indication of the credibility of political parties this appears remarkable. Secondly, the lack of populist party success can simply be ascribed to the fact that no other serious populist contender with similar ideas to Fortuyn participated in the 2003 general elections. Liveable Netherlands participated, but also LN was torn by leadership struggles; it was strikingly the inexperienced and unknown younger sister of former Fortuyn spin-doctor Kay van der Linde who eventually became the party



leader. The person who missed out on LN leadership, the well known ‘motivation trainer’ Emile Ratelband, competed with his own list, but seemed too much of a controversial and, different to Fortuyn, incapable candidate<sup>9</sup>. Neither LN, nor Ratelband gathered enough votes to become represented in parliament. With her new party Winny de Jong, former LPF MP, also stood for the elections, but she lacked media attention, while her reputation was stained for being part of one of the LPF break-ups. The news that an extreme right-wing organisation supported her party further decreased her chances.

Thus, the electorate’s return to the old parties of 2003 can be qualified as half-hearted; the crippled LPF still received a substantial amount of votes and Fortuyn-minded voters simply had not much of an alternative. In 2006 the situation was different; several right-wing populist candidates emerged with a certain political track record. Former LPF immigration minister Hilbrand Nawijn formed the Party for the Netherlands (PVN) and Marco Pastors, former alderman for Fortuyn’s local party Liveable Rotterdam, and Joost Eerdmans, who had been a prominent LPF MP, formed One NL (EénNL). Finally, List 5 Fortuyn more or less emerged out of the original LPF, although its leader Olaf Stuger was by far the most unknown party leader of the newly emerged populist parties and the party’s campaign appeared to be rather poor<sup>10</sup>.

It was Geert Wilders, the former Liberal MP, who attracted most attention, predominantly with his radical statements about Islam. Wilders also proved to be the most credible party leader of all these candidates (see table 6). In the Dutch Parliamentary Election Research of 2006, 8% of the respondents answered that, irrespective of their party preference, Wilders reflected their opinions reasonably well. Wilders’ score was much better than the other populist candidates who ended at the very bottom of the list. Surprisingly, Socialist Party leader Marijnissen ended on top of the list, whereas Liberal leader Mark Rutte only found 7.2% of the respondents answering that he reflected their opinions reasonably well, being indicative of the

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9 Ratelband, who had become a famous TV personality, did not have any political experience. His motivational training methods included loudly exclaiming the catchword ‘Tsjakka’ and convincing people to walk over hot coals barefoot.

10 In order to show how close List 5 Fortuyn allegedly was to the original ideas of Pim Fortuyn, the party’s campaign video showed a man - face concealed yet smartly dressed like Fortuyn - being parachuted from the skies, landing in the midst of the Dutch parliamentary buildings. The man turns out not to be Fortuyn, but Olaf Stuger.

stormy weather in which the Liberal Party had ended up.

**Table 6:** Percentage of respondents answering that the individual party leader reflects their opinions reasonably well, irrespective of party preference

<i>Party Leader</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Agreement</i>
Jan Marijnissen	Socialist Party (SP)	33.3%
Jan-Peter Balkenende	Christian Democrats (CDA)	31.2%
Wouter Bos	Social Democrats (PvdA)	16.9%
Andre Rouvoet	Christian Union (CU)	9.5%
Femke Halsema	GreenLeft (GL)	8.4%
Geert Wilders	Freedom Party (PVV)	8.0%
Mark Rutte	Liberal Party (VVD)	7.2%
Alexander Pechtold	Democrats 66 (D66)	2.1%
Bas van der Vlies	Orthodox Christian Party (SGP)	1.1%
Marco Pastors	One NL (EénNL)	0.6%
Hilbrand Nawijn	Party for the Netherlands (PVN)	0.2%
Olaf Stuger	List 5 Fortuyn (LVF)	0.1%

*Data: Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2006 (CBS et al 2007).*

Although the 5.9% of the vote for Wilders in 2006 was similar to the electoral result of the LPF in 2003 – and thus far removed from the enormous LPF victory in 2002 – the 2006 general elections seem to signify a new rise of populism in Dutch politics. Also the fact that in these elections more Liberal voters cast their votes for Rita Verdonk rather than on party leader Rutte indicated that there was potential for more populist success. Further, although not directly related to the performance of right-wing populists in this election, the shift of many former Social Democratic voters towards the Socialist Party showed that also the PvdA was still in trouble.

The European election results in June 2009, in which Wilders came out as the second largest party, indicated that Wilders managed to sustain his popularity. Having learned from the mistakes of the List Pim Fortuyn, Wilders acts as the indisputable leader of his party, keeps his ranks closed and is very selective in seeking media attention or giving interviews. Furthermore, in spite of the high rankings of the Freedom Party in the opinion polls, Wilders only decided to stand in two municipalities in the local elections of 2010, due to a lack of sufficient credible candidates. Wilders himself explained that he wants to avoid ‘LPF-like situations’ as this would harm the PVV’s chances of good results in the next general elections (*NRC Handelsblad*, 15-08-2009).

If internal party disputes are detrimental for future electoral success, the prospects for the other right-wing populist represented in the Dutch legislature, Rita Verdonk, look grim. While she already had to cope as a one-woman fraction for a substantial amount of time she also had to break with her two closest trustees in 2008. Therefore, it seems that, at least in potential, the most powerful populist force in the Netherlands will, for the foreseeable future, be the Freedom Party of Geert Wilders.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has introduced a causal model accounting for the electoral performance of populist parties. Accordingly, the electoral performance of populist parties is dependent on the combination of four variables: the electoral system, the availability of the electorate, the responsiveness of mainstream parties and the supply of credible populist parties. In the Dutch context this model seems to work very well. Whereas most researchers in the field focus on the explanatory power of individual variables alone, this paper has shown that it is rather the combination of various independent variables that accounts for the populists' electoral performance.

Firstly, the structures of party competition in the Netherlands have become highly favourable to the electoral success of populist parties. The electorate has become increasingly available after the demise of the pillarised cleavage structure, which meant that new parties were able to fully profit from the low electoral threshold and the high degree of proportionality that mark the Dutch electoral system. Moreover, and this seems specific to the Dutch context, populists can easily target the process of coalition formation after the elections, especially when the outcome proves to be a poor reflection of the election results. In these instances populists can, with some justification, claim that the verdict of the voter is being ignored by the political establishment.

Further, in accordance with the populist critique, the political mainstream parties have been unresponsive to the opinions held by a substantial part of the electorate, most notably with regard to the issues of immigration and integration at the time of the 2002 general elections. Where the party of Pim Fortuyn failed to sustain, his populist critique was not silenced, and the potential for new populist entrepreneurs remained

very much present. Thus, in 2006 another populist party entered the Dutch Parliament: the Freedom Party of Geert Wilders, who shares Fortuyn's cultural-nationalist political programme and who seems to have become the most credible populist entrepreneur in the post-Fortuyn era.

Other explanations of the rise of populism in contemporary Dutch politics fail to convince. The Dutch case clearly shows that support for populist parties is not always related to economic circumstances. Evidence for 'charismatic leadership' or a general trend towards the personalisation of politics as good explanations for the support of populist parties seems meagre. Supporters of populist parties do appear to be quite loyal towards the party leader, but this is not a big surprise given the highly centralised organisations of parties like the List Pim Fortuyn, the Freedom Party and Proud of the Netherlands. Generally, people vote for a party because they agree with it, not because party leaders put a spell on them.

Further research needs to point out whether this explanatory model also holds in other contexts. As has been touched on, populist parties come in many different shapes, as they react to the perceived problems in their specific political context (Canovan 1999; Taggart 2000). Nevertheless, it can be expected that their electoral performance rests on the same logic as outlined in this paper.

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