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Abstract

Radical right-wing populist parties have recently emerged throughout Europe, but the electoral success among these parties is incredibly inconsistent. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) has become established in the country's political system, while the British National Party (BNP) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) struggle to gain even a single seat in British parliament. Models outlining a formula for the rise and success of populist parties can help explain why some parties achieve an electoral breakthrough and others do not. Researcher of radical right populism Pippa Norris' model of electoral success is divided into a political demand side that focuses on the public grievances driving these parties, and a political supply side that focuses on internal party activity as well as external factors shaping opportunity structure. This essay compares Britain's two radical right populist parties, the BNP and the UKIP, with the PVV in the Netherlands, and applies Norris' framework to explain the greater electoral success of the PVV. It concludes that while Britain and Netherlands are similar in terms of political demand, populist parties have seen more success in the Netherlands because supply-side factors are more favorable.

RADICAL RIGHT POPULIST PARTIES IN BRITAIN AND THE NETHERLANDS: EXPLAINING ELECTORAL SUCCESS

Casey Plach

Radical right-wing populist parties have recently emerged throughout Europe, but the electoral success among these parties is incredibly inconsistent. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) has become established in the country's political system, while the British National Party (BNP) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) struggle to gain even a single seat in British parliament. Models outlining a formula for the rise and success of populist parties can help explain why some parties achieve an electoral breakthrough and others do not. Researcher of radical right populism Pippa Norris' model of electoral success is divided into a political demand side that focuses on the public grievances driving these parties, and a political supply side that focuses on internal party activity as well as external factors shaping opportunity structure. This essay compares Britain's two radical right populist parties, the BNP and the UKIP, with the PVV in the Netherlands, and applies Norris' framework to explain the greater electoral success of the PVV. It concludes that while Britain and Netherlands are similar in terms of political demand, populist parties have seen more success in the Netherlands because supply-side factors are more favorable.

Populist Parties in the U.K. and the Netherlands

The British National Party was formed in 1982 by John Tyndall when he split from the National Front, a far-right party for whites only. With its ideological roots in fascism, the BNP has struggled to gain political legitimacy and respect. Current leader Nick Griffin has called for a modernization of the party to change this. He denies the fascist label and instead identifies the party as having "ideological foundations of a twenty-first-century 'popular nationalism.'"¹ Following Griffin's transformation, the BNP's platform defends "democracy, freedom, culture, and identity"² Despite this reconstruction, key grievances remained the same, with immigration and European Union membership at the forefront. However, the party's rhetoric has changed in an attempt to appear less radical. For example, the BNP is extremely anti-immigrant, seeing immigrants as a threat to British culture, and it uses nativist rhetoric in an attempt to legitimize these concerns. BNP members defend their stance on the grounds that multiculturalism "wipes out indigenous cultures and identities through homogenization" and so, by opposing it, they "[are] not racists but legitimate defenders of ethnic and cultural diversity."³ The BNP is also very anti-European Union because it sees the EU as a threat to democracy and national sovereignty. The party's target out-groups include

¹ Copsey 2007, 75

² "Democracy" 2010

³ Copsey 2007, 74

political actors in the EU as well as immigrants within the state, especially Muslims. A vertical structure of antagonisms is observed, as the party attacks both the “corrupt elites” at the top of society and the “dangerous others” at the bottom. With these key issues driving the party, the BNP garners support from “deprived and less well educated members of the working class [who] feel under ‘threat’ from immigration.”⁴

Eleven years after the BNP’s emergence, Alan Sked founded the Anti-Federalist League, which would later evolve into The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) now led by Nigel Farage. The Anti-Federalist league was a campaign against the Maastricht Treaty, so at its inception the UKIP’s platform solely promoted anti-EU sentiments. Realizing it could not last as a single-issue party, the UKIP broadened its appeals. It currently identifies itself as a “democratic, libertarian party” and focuses on leaving the EU and restoring democracy by empowering the people. Its manifesto explains its anti-EU stance and continues, “But the EU is only the biggest symptom of the real problem – the theft of our democracy by a powerful, remote political ‘elite’ which has forgotten that it’s here to serve the people.”⁵ The UKIP’s enemies are the mainstream politicians in both Britain and the EU. Immigration is also a concern, but the UKIP takes an economic perspective focusing on limited jobs and welfare, unlike the BNP’s cultural protectionist stance. The absence of overtly racist rhetoric has helped the UKIP be more successful and appear as a more respectable party than the BNP. The party’s basis of mobilization consists of Eurosceptic voters and ordinary, working-class people, but it also attracts some dissatisfied Conservatives.

In 2002, almost a decade after the UKIP was founded, the Netherlands saw the rise of the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF), a radical right party populist that set the stage for the emergence of Geert Wilder’s Party for Freedom in 2006. Pim Fortuyn founded the LPF in response to the “Purple Coalition” coalition formed by three of the mainstream parties who, he felt, ignored the people. He was killed just before the 2002 election, but the party gained 17 percent of the vote and twenty-six seats in Dutch Parliament.⁶ However, the LPF’s success was short-lived. With the death of Fortuyn, the party lost its organizational leadership and experienced internal conflict, ultimately leading to its collapse. Just a few years later, Geert Wilders took over as the country’s new populist leader. He broke from the mainstream right People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) after disagreeing with the parliament leader about Turkey obtaining EU membership and founded Geert Wilders’ Dutch Party for Freedom. His party focuses on the same issues as the BNP and UKIP, with the major concerns being EU membership, immigration, and restoring democracy. Target out-groups are also similar, as the PVV is very hostile to political elites working for the EU and the mainstream

⁴ Goodwin 2012, 20

⁵ “The Only”

⁶ Van Kessel 2011, 74

Dutch parties, as well as to Muslim immigrants. For Wilders, “Islam is perceived as a violent ‘ideology’ and Dutch culture should be protected against the process of Islamisation.”⁷ Like the BNP, he employs nativist rhetoric in an attempt to restore national sovereignty by means of bringing ownership back to the “true and good people,” also referred to as the heartland. The PVV mainly draws support from Eurosceptic voters and so-called “losers of modernization,” who have lost their jobs to outsourcing, technological development, and other effects of globalization. They are considered the “ordinary hardworking men and women”—a phrase that Wilders is never hesitant to employ.⁸

Demand

The demand side of Norris’ model focuses on public grievances and how these grievances drive the emergence of new political parties. Touching on the most prominent concerns among countries in Western Europe, Norris explains, “the rising salience of cultural protectionism, in a backlash against globalization and population migration, has altered the public agenda in each country, providing sporadic openings for new parties.”⁹ Public grievances increase electoral demand, and the higher the electoral demand for PRR parties, the more likely they are to succeed. Furthermore, if there is dissatisfaction among the public, voters are more likely to be receptive to parties who address issues that mainstream parties have ignored or failed to solve. Dissatisfaction in Britain and the Netherlands has stemmed from structural changes both countries have experienced in recent years. Both countries became member states of the European Union, were affected by the economic crisis of 2008, are subject to negative effects of globalization, and have experienced an increase in immigration. These changes produced electoral demand and led to the emergence of populist parties.

To determine what grievances are present in Britain and the Netherlands, data from the Eurobarometer Public Opinion Survey of 2012 can be examined. One question on the survey asks, “What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?” The three highest ranked issues in the United Kingdom were unemployment (40 percent), the economic situation (30 percent), and immigration (24 percent). In the Netherlands, they were the economic situation (55 percent), health and social security (46 percent), and unemployment (32 percent). Unemployment and the economic situation were concerns in both countries, which demonstrates that on the macro level the public has similar grievances.

Populist radical right parties in Western Europe have found success capitalizing on issues of democracy, globalization, and immigration, all of which are public concerns in the Netherlands and

⁷ Van Kessel 2011, 75

⁸ Ibid., 84

⁹ Norris 2005, 4

the United Kingdom. According to a May 2004 Eurobarometer survey, 27 percent of Dutch respondents and 23 percent of British respondents indicated that they were not very satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. Satisfaction rates were similar on all measures, which indicates that both countries were experiencing similar grievances. Populist parties were gaining ground when this survey was taken, and with about a quarter of the public in each country expressing dissatisfaction with their democratic process, the demand was present for a populist party to respond.

In terms of globalization, results from the May 2012 Eurobarometer survey indicated that 24 percent of Dutch respondents and 37 percent of British respondents believed globalization represents a threat to employment and companies. This is another public concern, common in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. One outcome of globalization is an increase in immigration rates, which is an issue that has not escaped notice in Western Europe. Currently, the foreign born population in Netherlands makes up 11.2 percent of the total population, and in Britain 12.9 percent.¹⁰ The public is wary of the immigrant population and high immigration rates, and populist parties are acting on these concerns.

In both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, public demand is present for a party that offers simple solutions to restore democracy, protect the country from the negative effects of globalization, and limit immigration. The opportunity exists in both countries for radical right populist parties to respond and find success. Overall, the demand actually appears to be slightly stronger in Britain. Immigration, a central focus for all three populist parties, ranks among the U.K.'s top three concerns and 13 percent more of the British public views globalization as a threat. However, demand is not a direct indicator of success. This is especially apparent in the 2010 general election results. In Britain, the UKIP gained 3.2 percent of the vote, and the BNP gained 1.9 percent, but neither won a seat in parliament.¹¹ In the Netherlands' 2010 general election, the PVV gained 15.5 percent of the vote, which earned it twenty-four seats out of 150 in parliament.¹² While both countries are similar in terms of political demand, the PVV has clearly seen greater electoral success, not only in seats gained but also in overall share of the vote. To explain this difference, political supply-side factors must be considered.

Supply (External)

Norris explains that demand alone is not enough to guarantee the success of populist parties. She introduces a supply side, which “focus[es] upon patterns of party competition, including where mainstream parties decide to place themselves...as well as the actions taken by the radical right

¹⁰ OECD 2013

¹¹ Denver 2010, 593

¹² Van Kessel 2011, 74

themselves.”¹³ External supply-side factors include electoral conditions, ideological space, availability of the electorate, and the media. These factors are outside of party control, but in certain instances they can contribute to the electoral success of populist parties.

A country’s electoral conditions are critical in deciding how many seats a party will gain. Although the BNP and the UKIP do not hold any seats in the British Parliament, they do have a combined fourteen seats in the European Parliament. This difference has only one possible explanation: the electoral system. In the United Kingdom, general elections use a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system where the candidate who earns the most votes wins the seat. As Duverger’s law states, plurality rule voting tends to produce two-party systems, which “makes it rather difficult for new political forces (populist or otherwise) to make an electoral breakthrough.”¹⁴ This type of system can also discourage the electorate from voting for a third party candidate because their vote will most likely not carry any significance. The BNP and UKIP received a combined 5.1 percent of the vote in the last election, but “the FPTP electoral system continues to restrict their ability to impact on national level politics.”¹⁵

Because the European Parliament uses a proportional representation system (PR), the BNP and UKIP have experienced some electoral success at this level. In this system, candidates gain seats in proportion to the number of votes they receive. The Netherlands also uses a PR system for its general election, which in part explains the electoral success of the PVV. The system has no established threshold, meaning that parties only need .67 percent of the popular vote to gain a seat.¹⁶ The electoral conditions naturally encourage new parties to enter the political arena. In fact, “[b]etween 1946 and 2003, 18 new parties have gained entry into parliament.”¹⁷ The PVV has benefitted from this open and accessible system, while the BNP and UKIP are working under conditions that impede electoral success.

Other actors in the political system also have an effect on a party’s success. Mainstream parties play a role because their position on the political spectrum and whether or not they respond to the concerns of the public determines how much ideological space exists for a populist party to emerge. In the United Kingdom, mainstream parties are much more in tune with public grievances. They will respond to constituent concerns and often “shift policies to mop up temporary forms of discontent.”¹⁸ In fact, the Conservative party has even used populist rhetoric itself, “portray[ing] the

¹³ Norris 2005, 14

¹⁴ Fella 2008, 182

¹⁵ Ibid., 197

¹⁶ Lucardie 2008, 152

¹⁷ Ibid., 152

¹⁸ John and Margetts 2009, 497

New Labour as an out-of-touch liberal metropolitan elite selling out the British people.”¹⁹ This does not bode well for populist parties who insist that all parts of the establishment are unresponsive to the people. Rather than gaining the political legitimacy that they aim for, these parties are restricted to the role of a pressure group on established parties. For example, the BNP and the UKIP both concentrate on immigration, but mainstream parties have responded to the issue as well, undermining their efforts. In fact, many might agree with Matthew Goodwin that the “Conservatives have offered a more credible brand to citizens anxious over immigration.”²⁰ Established parties in the U.K. present themselves as a more legitimate option and since they respond to public concerns, there is very little ideological space for a populist party to succeed.

In contrast, mainstream parties in the Netherlands have converged ideologically and are unresponsive to public concerns, opening political space where populist parties can thrive. With a highly consociational political system in the Netherlands, these parties have not established distinct platforms and have converged in such a way that voters cannot distinguish between them.²¹ The Labour Party, for example, attempted to address multiculturalism and the public’s concerns over cultural preservation, but they gave up and “by 2003... little was separating the three mainstream parties on this issue.”²² This allowed for populist parties, such as the PVV, to step in and be the answer voters were looking for. In addition, mainstream parties in the Netherlands are on the whole less likely to respond to public grievances. Unlike mainstream parties in the U.K. that at least attempt to deal with high immigration rates, “[e]stablished parties [in the Netherlands] failed to recognize that citizens actually were concerned about the perceived problems of immigration.”²³ This provides the perfect opportunity for the PVV to claim that the establishment is ignoring important issues and that the people are not being heard.

Even if political parties are responsive to public grievances, the availability of the electorate is an important factor in determining the support a populist party will obtain. With the UK’s highly structured party system, voters are not very receptive to new parties like the BNP or UKIP. Availability in large part depends on how tied voters are to their respective parties, and in the U.K. mainstream parties have been relatively stable and remain legitimate choices. A State of the Nation Poll measuring views on the BNP indicates that only 9 percent of self-identified Conservatives “might vote for” the BNP in the future.²⁴ There are some dissatisfied conservatives, but for the most part voters are loyal to their respective parties and would not readily abandon them for a new one.

¹⁹ Fella 2008, 197

²⁰ Goodwin 2012, 17

²¹ Van Kessel 2011, 78

²² Ibid., 79

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ John and Margetts 2009, 507

Meanwhile, the electorate in the Netherlands is highly receptive to new parties because of structural changes the country experienced in the twentieth century. Before World War II, Dutch society was organized according to different symbolic pillars, including a Protestant, Catholic, and Socialist pillar. Schools, media, and political parties were divided according to these pillars, but this system broke down and society experienced drastic changes, especially in the political system. Within this pillarized structure “the electorate largely voted along the cleavage lines of religion and social class... By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, the explanatory power of this factor had become very low.”²⁵ Voters are no longer tied to the pillars that in the past had defined all their choices, and today parties are still developing to respond to the new social structure. This upheaval means that voters are “less loyal to traditional parties and ready to give the benefit of the doubt to new parties.”²⁶ The PVV is one new party trying to establish itself in this new political structure and with such a highly receptive electorate, it has been able to experience success.

Another factor that can help or hurt a party in its attempts to find electoral success is the media. In Britain, the media is very critical of the UKIP and the BNP. In her study on populist parties and their relation to the popular media, Tjitske Akkerman notes:

One of the reasons that the BNP is less successful is that it faces a less favorable discursive opportunity structure. In contrast to the PVV, a party that is treated by Dutch political parties and the media as a normal party, the BNP has been generally stigmatized by leading politicians and the media as a racist or fascist party.²⁷

The BNP’s platform is controversial, and its attempts to legitimize itself are stunted by the media. While less radical than the BNP, the UKIP also faces trouble in establishing legitimacy. It directs its efforts in distancing itself from the BNP, but is still viewed by the media and by many voters as radical.

As Akkerman points out, the PVV is considered normal and established in the Netherlands, even though it employs much of the same rhetoric as the BNP and the UKIP. The party is highly institutionalized and has enough support to be considered a normal part of the political system, which is why the media is less critical. After pillarization, parties were no longer supported by mass media, and for the most part the media has attempted to remain neutral. Therefore, the party’s “core consists of a leader and a parliamentary group that is very effectively fenced off for outsiders in general and journalists in particular.”²⁸ Geert Wilders is the only formal member of the PVV, so it is not a very open organization. Without the media working against it, the PVV has an easier time developing a positive reputation.

²⁵ Van Kessel 2011, 77

²⁶ Lucardie 2008, 155

²⁷ Akkerman 2009, 935

²⁸ Akkerman 2009, 935

Supply (Internal)

Although many factors work outside of party control, there are supply-side factors that allow parties to direct their own success. Further criticizing the one-sided model that only focuses on demand, Norris explains, “demand-side analysis is too simple and instead we need to give far greater emphasis to what parties can do through their own actions as strategic agents.”²⁹ Here she is referring to the internal supply-side factors, which include leadership and party organization. Parties have control over these factors, so it is their responsibility to craft favorable conditions and create their own political success.

Populist parties regard the public as a homogenous body, so a charismatic leader who embodies the people plays a central role in a party’s development and success. In Britain, the BNP has struggled with leadership and building party reputation. John Tyndall, the original leader of the BNP, embraced the fascist label and took extreme stances on many issues, believing that “all that was required [in the quest for political power] was undiluted racism combined with strong and disciplined central leadership.”³⁰ Not only did Tyndall fail to deliver electoral success, he tainted the image of the BNP, which made restoring political respectability a central concern for Griffin when he took over. Griffin directed his energy into modernizing the party and continually rejecting the extreme label the BNP gained under Tyndall. However, the public remains skeptical because of the image Tyndall promoted in the past. His leadership harmed the BNP, which is so “delegitimized by association with fascism and violence” that it “has no hope of becoming a serious national force.”³¹

In contrast, strong leadership has been consistent among radical right populist parties in the Netherlands. Before Geert Wilders, the current leader of the PVV, Pim Fortuyn was the country’s central populist leader. He was charismatic and took a less extreme stance on many issues, causing “the stigma of ‘extreme right’... [to be] broken for good.”³² When Wilders took center stage, the public was responsive because Fortuyn previously established a respectable image. However, in comparison to Fortuyn, Wilders is “more radical in regards to immigration and integration” and “he criticizes the establishment more harshly.”³³ Because Fortuyn did not taint the party’s image like Tyndall did with the BNP, Wilders does not meet resistance for his more extreme positions. Success is, in part, dependent upon the leader and past leaders who worked to shape the party. The PVV has this advantage, which contributes to its electoral success.

Party organization also impacts electoral success, and is critical for a party that wishes to institutionalize and compete with mainstream parties. In the United Kingdom, “[b]oth the BNP and

²⁹ Norris 2005, 14

³⁰ Copsey 2007, 66

³¹ Eatwell 1998, 153

³² Mudde 2007, 211

³³ Van Kessel 2011, 75

UKIP have experienced infighting and continual organizational problems which jeopardize their electoral chances.”³⁴ Over time, they have made improvements in basic party operations, such as Internet development and recruitment efforts. However, the biggest challenge that remains is for the radical right to become a united force. After various leadership disputes, both the BNP and UKIP have become more stable and internally united, but they still compete against each other for votes, which takes away from the success the radical right can achieve as a whole.

The PVV, on the other hand, is united and well-organized, which has allowed it to more easily become an established party in the Dutch political system. Party operations are directed by Wilders, who “managed to build up a united party organization under his own firm leadership while sending out an appealing message to a large share of Dutch voters.”³⁵ The PVV may be running smoothly now, but since Wilders is its only formal member the party’s future may be at risk. The LPF completely fell apart after Fortuyn’s death because, like Wilders, he was the core of his party and made all the decisions. To maintain efficient party operations, Wilders may allocate some of his control or, in his absence, the PVV would likely face the same fate as the LPF.

Conclusion

As Norris explains, “the key to radical right success depends upon the complex interaction of public demand and party supply under conditions of imperfect competition in a regulated electoral marketplace.”³⁶ Success cannot be explained by supply or demand alone, but in the cases of Britain and the Netherlands where demand is quite similar, differences in supply-side factors can be examined to determine why populist parties are more likely to succeed in the Netherlands. In terms of demand, the PVV, BNP, and UKIP all focus on the same ideals in an attempt to respond to public grievances stemming from immigration, the EU, globalization, and a perceived loss of democracy. These grievances drive the emergence of populist parties, and “will continue to cultivate opportunity for the extreme right.”³⁷ However, to explain the success of these parties, both internal and external supply side factors need to be examined.

In the Netherlands, supply factors created a favorable opportunity structure for Geert Wilders’ Dutch Party for Freedom to emerge and experience electoral success. With an open electoral system, consensus-oriented politics, and depillarization of Dutch society, the Netherlands was ready and available for a party like the PVV.³⁸ Internal factors also play a role: the PVV is a well-organized party with strong leadership. Supply-side factors in Britain are quite the opposite, and have greatly harmed populist parties’ chances at success. In Britain, the FPTP system is the root of many

³⁴ John and Margetts 2009, 501

³⁵ Van Kessel 2011, 85

³⁶ Norris 2005, 4

³⁷ Goodwin 2012, 28

³⁸ Lucardie 2008, 165

electoral struggles the BNP and the UKIP face. It not only makes winning seats difficult, but also leads to an extremely structured party system, in which outside parties cannot compete. These parties may have answers to electorate concerns, but that does not mean the electorate is available and willing to vote for them. Lack of organization and leadership also hindered the success of the BNP and UKIP. Parties have control over these internal supply-side factors, but even if they can work them in their favor, factors outside of party control will still be present, preventing populist parties in Britain from experiencing electoral success on par with their Dutch counterparts.

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