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Dutch populism during the crisis

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Chapter 7: Dutch Populism during the Crisis

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Introduction

Although the Netherlands remains one of the more prosperous northern European countries, it did face the consequences of the Great Recession. Being a country with a very open economy, the Netherlands is sensitive to economic shocks at the global level. Since 2012 the Dutch economy has been in recession for an extended period of time, consumer demand has remained low, unemployment levels have risen, and it became increasingly difficult for the Dutch government to stick to the European 3 per cent deficit rule. Compared to harder hit Eurozone countries, such as Greece, Portugal and Ireland, the economic malaise in the Netherlands has evidently been modest, and the economy was projected to grow again with 0.75 per cent in 2014, and to grow further (with 1.25 per cent) in 2015 (CPB 2014). Yet in comparison with surrounding Western European countries, economic recovery has been sluggish, and the crisis has clearly left its mark on the political debate.

Despite declining levels of trust in political institutions and growing dissatisfaction, a trend visible in many European countries (see Chapter 1), it would go too far to claim that the economic crisis has also spurred a political crisis in the Netherlands. Recent Dutch governments may have been short-lived, but political trust and satisfaction levels have

remained relatively high in comparison with other (Western) European countries (see also Bovens and Wille 2011). At the same time, the high levels of electoral volatility between Dutch parliamentary elections date back to well before the crisis (Mair 2008). One should, furthermore, not be too quick to interpret these volatility levels as a sign of a footloose electorate, as most voters tend to switch between more or less like-minded parties (Van der Meer et al. 2012).

As this chapter will argue, the crisis did also not have apparent consequences for the electoral fortunes of populist parties. The first significant breakthrough of a (right-wing) populist party came before the Great Recession, when the List Pim Fortuyn (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*, LPF) experienced success in the parliamentary election of 2002, and entered a short-lived coalition government. The main populist party that emerged after the quick demise of the LPF was the radical right Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) of Geert Wilders, that entered parliament in 2006. In addition to the populist parties of the right, the Socialist Party (*Socialistische Partij*, SP) has frequently been identified as a case of left-wing populism. This party entered the Dutch parliament in 1994 already, but became a more notable electoral force after 2000, when it moderated its ideological appeal, as well as its populist rhetoric.

This chapter mainly focuses on the developments of the two latter parties during the years of the economic recession. It relies primarily on election manifestos and an analysis of the party leaders' Twitter messages in order to demonstrate the effects of the economic crisis on the discourse and positions of the PVV and SP. The chapter will argue that the crisis did have an impact on the discourse of the two parties. The PVV adapted its ideological profile after the dawn of the crisis and took a clearer welfare protectionist and anti-European stance. The SP, on the other hand, temporarily bolstered its populist rhetoric at the time of the 2010 parliamentary election. It is much less evident, however, that the crisis has influenced the electoral fortunes of populist parties in the Netherlands. Before turning to these arguments in

more detail, the following section will touch on the rise and characteristics of Dutch populist parties before the crisis.

Dutch populist parties in the 21st century

Several new political parties in 20th century Dutch politics have been associated with populism; examples include the Farmer's Party, which was founded in the 1950s, and the Centrum Party and Centre Democrats which were represented in Dutch Parliament in the 1980s and 90s (Lucardie and Voerman 2012). Yet only three alleged populist parties have managed to make a real electoral impact, and to threaten the position of the traditionally dominant party families (the Christian democrats, social democrats and liberals). These were the List Pim Fortuyn and the Freedom Party of Geert Wilders, positioned on the (radical) right, and the radical left-wing Socialist Party.

The three large established parties received a first blow after the rise of the flamboyant maverick Pim Fortuyn. Fortuyn, a columnist and former sociology professor, caused a stir with his harsh criticism of the ruling coalition and, most notably, his critical stance on immigration and cultural integration of ethnic minorities. His party, List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) won 17 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary election of 15 May 2002, despite the fact that Fortuyn had been murdered nine days before by an environmental activist (see Table 12.1). The List Pim Fortuyn joined a coalition government, which soon fell apart after a period of continuous LPF-infighting (see De Lange and Art 2011). The party had lost its electoral appeal and disappeared from parliament in 2006 altogether.

****TABLE 12.1 ABOUT HERE****

At the 2006 parliamentary election a new populist party entered the Dutch legislature with 5.9 per cent of the vote: the Freedom Party (PVV). The party was founded and ever since controlled by Geert Wilders, who was a former MP for the mainstream Liberal Party (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, VVD).¹ Wilders shared Fortuyn's criticism of the political establishment, his hostility towards immigration and multiculturalism, and warned against the threats of 'Islamisation' of society in particular. By 2010 the Freedom Party had almost tripled its support and it won 15.5 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary election of that year. The PVV subsequently provided parliamentary support for the governing minority coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Liberals in exchange for the implementation of some of its key policies (including stricter policies on immigration). The government would not last longer than April 2012, when Wilders, refusing to sign up to newly drafted austerity measures, withdrew his support. In the early election that followed in September 2012, the Freedom Party suffered a substantial loss. The party received 10.1 per cent of the vote, but still remained the third largest party in parliament (together with the radical left-wing Socialist Party).

Besides the surge of populist right newcomers, also the radical left-wing Socialist Party achieved remarkable success. The party was founded in the 1970s, when it associated itself with Maoism, but only entered parliament in 1994 with 1.3 per cent of the vote. By this time, the party had gradually moved away from its communist roots and could better be described as a left-wing populist party (see Lucardie and Voerman 2012). The party's greatest electoral result was recorded in 2006, when it received 16.6 per cent of the vote. By this time, as the paper will discuss in more detail below, the party had toned down its populist rhetoric to a large extent. Four years later – after the departure of its telegenic leader Jan Marrijnissen – the party won 9.9 per cent. Although opinion polls prior to the election of

¹ Another ex-Liberal politician voicing a populist discourse, Rita Verdonk, failed to cross the electoral threshold with her party 'Proud of the Netherlands' (*Trots op Nederland*, TON).

2012 indicated that the SP's popularity had soared – the party even appeared to be in the race to become the largest party in parliament – the SP was not able to increase its vote share in the actual election. The party stagnated at 9.7 per cent of the vote.

The characteristics of Dutch populism before the crisis

Populists on the 'right'

The ideological features of the populist parties on the right (the LPF and PVV) are to a certain extent very comparable to populist radical right parties in other countries (see Mudde 2007).² Both Fortuyn and Wilders have expressed populist anti-establishment rhetoric. Fortuyn particularly targeted the incumbent governing coalition – which was dubbed 'Purple', since it included both 'red' Labour and the 'blue' Liberals, in addition to the smaller social liberal Democrats 66. Fortuyn had previously become leader of the party 'Liveable Netherlands' (*Leefbaar Nederland*, LN) in November 2001. Although this party lacked a very detailed policy programme, it declared 'old politics' bankrupt and called for the democratisation of the political order (LN 2002). After LN had ousted Fortuyn in February 2012, due to his controversial statements about Islam in a newspaper interview, he founded his own party and continued to express fierce anti-establishment rhetoric. In his book annex political programme 'The shambles of eight years Purple', Fortuyn stated that '[t]he Netherlands should become a real lively democracy of and for the ordinary people, and depart from the elite party democracy with which we are currently acquainted' (Fortuyn 2002: 186). According to Fortuyn, power had to be returned to the 'people in the country' (Lucardie 2008: 159). The number of managers and bureaucrats was to be reduced and responsibility

² Cas Mudde (2007: 47) actually categorises the List Pim Fortuyn as a 'neo-liberal' populist party, not a populist radical right party.

would have to be returned to the ‘real’ experts: the nurses, teachers and police officers (LPF 2002).

Quite similar to Pim Fortuyn’s critique of the ‘left-wing church’, Geert Wilders’s Freedom Party later railed against the ‘left-wing’ elites, their culture relativism and support for multiculturalism, and their ‘left-wing hobbies’ such as development aid and high-brow art. The Freedom Party arguably had a more outspoken populist character; Wilders appealed to the ‘ordinary people’ more explicitly than Fortuyn. In Wilders’s ‘declaration of Independence’, written in March 2005 after his departure from the Liberals, the politician spoke of a ‘range of interlinked crises which flow from the incompetence of the political elite in Brussels and [Dutch political capital] The Hague’ (Wilders 2005: 1). Wilders (2005: 2) further declared: ‘I do not want this country to be hijacked by an elite of cowardly and frightened people (from whichever party) any longer. (...) I therefore intend to challenge this elite on all fronts. I want to return this country to its citizens’. Wilders claimed to despise the self-sustaining political system which stood isolated from society; ‘politicians should no longer be deaf to the problems troubling ordinary people in every-day life’ (Wilders 2005: 16). Populist proclamations like these would remain a lasting and recurring feature in Wilders’ rhetoric and his party’s documents.

As far as concrete policy proposals of the right-wing populists are concerned, Fortuyn promoted a free-market economy, took a tough line on law and order issues and stressed the need to cut red tape in the health care and education sectors (see Lucardie 2008). The initial ideology of Geert Wilders was also characterised by economic liberalism; he criticised the overly generous welfare state, and favoured less economic state intervention and a more flexible labour market (Vossen 2011). But the populist parties on the right were, above all, associated with their critical stance towards immigration and Islam, as well as their strict line on cultural integration of ethnic minorities. Fortuyn’s breakthrough can also largely be

ascribed to his position on these latter issues. None of the mainstream parties placed much emphasis on immigration and multiculturalism in 2002, while a substantial share of the electorate had become concerned about these issues since the 1990s (see e.g. Van Holsteyn et al. 2003; Pellikaan et al. 2007; Aarts and Thomassen 2008; Van Heerden et al. 2013).

After Fortuyn's posthumous breakthrough and the entrance of his party into the governing coalition, it was undoubtedly the continuous infighting that brought down the List Pim Fortuyn and the coalition (see De Lange and Art 2011; Van Kessel 2011). When the LPF disappeared from parliament in 2006, the Freedom Party filled the space that was left vacant. In his 'declaration of independence' of 2005, Wilders primarily criticised the political elites for the size of the public sector, overly generous subsidies and welfare entitlements, and smothering bureaucracy. Yet in the following years, Wilders would reach attention primarily with his outspoken views on Islam, which were for instance conveyed in his controversial 17-minute film *Fitna* from early 2008 (see Vossen 2011; Lucardie and Voerman 2012). The manifesto of 2010 nevertheless argued that the PVV was not a single-issue party, and Islamisation was linked to a range of other social issues: '[e]conomically it is a disaster, it damages the quality of our education, it increases insecurity on the streets, causes an exodus out of our cities, drives out Jews and gay people, and flushes the century-long emancipation of women down the toilet' (PVV 2010: 6).

While anti-immigration and Islamophobia are part and parcel of many Western European populist radical right parties, the former quote reveals what is quite special about the Dutch populist right: its relatively liberal attitude towards certain cultural issues such as traditional marriage, and emancipation of women and gay people. Pim Fortuyn – himself openly gay – saw the Netherlands as a country of liberal Enlightenment values, and was concerned about those being undermined (see Akkerman 2005). Wilders, too, emphasised the alleged threats of Islamisation to liberal values. At the same time, the protectiveness of the

liberal elements of Dutch culture could also be interpreted as a form of cultural conservatism. What is more, in particular Wilders blamed the progressive (left-wing) elites for undermining traditional norms and values, and even though the PVV leader presented himself as a defender of women and gay rights, these themes were mostly discussed as part of Wilders's warnings against the threats of Islam. In its manifestos, the Freedom Party actually remained silent about moral-cultural issues such as euthanasia and abortion.

Populists on the 'left'

The Socialist Party, which has become an important electoral force on the radical left, is regularly considered to be a populist party as well (e.g. March 2011; Rooduijn et al. 2012). Following Gerrit Voerman (2009: 26-7), up until the 1980s the SP had combined populism with Maoism, effectively treating 'the people' and the 'working class' as one, and basing its actions and positions on the perceived opinion of the 'common man'. The party combined this discourse with a criticism of the existing political order, showed distaste for intermediary political institutions and established parties, and favoured democratisation of the decision-making process.

By the time the party entered parliament in 1994, when it won two out of the 150 seats, the SP had departed from its more radical socialist policies and dropped references to its communist heritage (Voerman and Lucardie 2007; Voerman and Lucardie 2012). It now presented itself explicitly as a protest party, exemplified by its slogan 'vote against, vote SP', and in its 1994 election manifesto the party declared that 'the SP brings back the opposition in the Chamber [i.e. Parliament]' (SP 1994: 16). The SP clearly remained a party on the radical left, and argued that 'neo-liberal thinking has engulfed Western-Europe and severely infected parliamentary parties from left to right, also in our country' (SP 1994: 3). According

to the SP, furthermore, economic power was concentrated in the hands of a small, unelected and unaccountable, capitalist elite. Once represented in parliament, party leader Jan Marijnissen actively tried to preserve the party's outsider image, for instance by contrasting the supposed privileged background of most other politicians with his own humble career path that started out in a scruffy factory (Voerman 2009: 29-30).

In 1999, a year after the SP increased its number of parliamentary seats to five, the party adopted a less radical constitution. After the turn of the century the SP also increasingly made clear its ambition to enter government, and the party lost its disdain for representative parliamentary democracy and party politics (Voerman and Lucardie 2012: 61-4). The SP simultaneously downplayed its anti-establishment image, and in 2002 its slogan had remarkably changed to 'Vote *for*, vote SP'. De Lange and Rooduijn (2010: 324) further showed that the anti-elitist rhetoric in SP manifestos evaporated gradually. In 1994 anti-elite references were found in 17 per cent of the paragraphs, while this percentage dropped to a mere 1.5 per cent in 2006 – the year in which the party secured its largest national election victory to date.

There is thus a case for classifying the current SP as an 'ordinary' social-democratic party, even though the party and its politicians have continued to voice populist rhetoric (Lucardie and Voerman 2012). The parliamentary election manifesto of 2006, for instance, still criticised the incumbent government for its arrogance and observed the lack of faith citizens had in political institutions. The SP claimed to take people genuinely serious and was confident that many voters would dismiss the parties who were responsible for the 'thoughtless sell-out and futile bureaucratisation of the Netherlands' (SP 2006: 4). Yet the document did not refer explicitly to 'elites' anymore, and whether the SP programme truly conveyed a 'Manichean outlook', opposing the positive valorisation of 'the people' to the denigration of 'the elite', is questionable. It is thus problematic to view the SP as a 'full' case

of populism in the years in the run up to the economic crisis, certainly in comparison with the LPF and PVV (see Van Kessel 2014).

The SP also differed from these latter two parties in the sense that issues of immigration and integration have played a much smaller role in the present-day discourse of the Socialist Party. The SP supported anti-immigration politics in the early 1980s, when it published a brochure urging immigrants (*gastarbeiders*, ‘guest workers’) to choose between adopting the Dutch nationality and returning to their country of origin (Van der Steen 1995). Yet the party moderated its position afterwards and has shown little concern about the alleged threat of Islam to Dutch society in more recent years. That said, the SP has remained critical of labour migration from Central and Eastern Europe, fearing the depression of wages and other negative consequences of a more competitive labour market.

The SP’s signature policies have always related to socio-economic issues. After the party shed its more radical communist policies, the SP continued to advocate higher minimum wages and to oppose welfare state reforms, such as raising the pension age, restricting the eligibility for unemployment benefits, and privatisation of health care provision. It clearly did not adopt the pro-business position of the populist right parties. The SP did share the Freedom Party’s critical stance on European integration, which was, in turn, more pronounced than Fortuyn’s. This became evident in the campaign for the referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, when both the SP and PVV urged citizens to vote against – which a majority of those turning out (61.5 per cent) eventually did. While the SP mainly criticised the neo-liberal character of European integration, and Wilders focused specifically on labour migration, both parties campaigned against the ‘race to the bottom’ in terms of working conditions and social policies.

Post-crisis populism

The first great electoral success for a populist party occurred when economic circumstances were hardly dire. The List Pim Fortuyn broke through at a time of economic prosperity, and the incumbent government was not primarily blamed for economic mismanagement (Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003). The first success of the right-wing populist parties in the Netherlands should primarily be related to their stance on cultural issues and immigration, rather than their positions on socio-economic issues.

Due to the crisis, however, socio-economic issues have gained prominence in Dutch election campaigns. Like most European countries, the Netherlands has suffered the consequences of the crisis since 2008; economic growth slowed – or was even negative – and unemployment figures have risen steadily. In the run up to the 2010 parliamentary election, the state of the economy and the proposals to deal with it dominated the campaign. Important issues at stake were the tax relief on mortgage interest payments – one key factor behind the high levels of household debt in the Netherlands – the pension age, the eligibility to unemployment benefits, and the rising costs of health care provision (Van Kessel 2010). This section will discuss the developments in the discourse of the PVV and the SP in the context of these changed economic and political circumstances.

Developments in the Freedom Party's discourse

The Freedom Party evidently adapted to the new political reality. Even though Wilders's anti-Islam rhetoric did not wane, he was forced to place more emphasis on socio-economic issues when these started to play a more prominent role. The PVV also altered its position on several socio-economic issues, and adopted a more 'welfare protectionist' stance. Wilders had always been against raising the pension age, but previously favoured a small state and a

flexible labour market (Wilders 2005; PVV 2006). In 2010, however, the PVV called for the preservation of certain welfare entitlements and opposed easing the rules for laying off employees, amending unemployment benefits, and a ‘marketisation’ of the health care sector. Wilders had thus shifted significantly to the socio-economic left with regard to certain policy domains. At the same time, the PVV still favoured typical *laissez faire* policies such as tax cuts and deregulation, and continued to support the mortgage interest relief. The PVV’s socio-economic programme had thus become a rather eclectic mix of right-wing and left-wing policies.

After the successful election of June 2010, the PVV supported a minority coalition between the Liberals (VVD) and Christian Democrats (CDA) (formed in October) that imposed several austerity measures in response to the economic crisis. Many of those measures were in line with the Freedom Party manifesto, and included reducing the size of the public sector, lowering subsidies for the arts, and cutting in development aid. Meanwhile, Wilders continued to criticise the government’s willingness to contribute to the bailout packages for Greece, an area not covered by the support agreement. Since the budget deficit continued to grow in the period after the formation of the minority coalition, the VVD, CDA and PVV started negotiations on 5 March 2012 about new austerity measures. After seven weeks Wilders left the table. The PVV leader declared his unwillingness to support measures hurting the financial position of pensioners and to abide by the Brussels 3 per cent deficit rule at all cost. After the breakdown of the negotiations, Wilders vowed that ‘Europe’ was going to be the central theme of the campaign for the new election that would follow.

In the run up to this new parliamentary election of September 2012, the PVV would indeed pay attention to the EU issue as never before, both in its manifesto and in election debates (Van Kessel and Hollander 2012). The manifesto, tellingly titled ‘*Their Brussels, our Netherlands*’, spoke derogatively of ‘the blind inhabitants of the ivory towers in Brussels’,

‘unelected multi-culti Eurocrats’, and the ‘holy Great-European project’ (PVV 2012: 11-12). National-level politicians, in turn, were blamed for their submissive compliance with the ‘dictates from Brussels’, for surrendering national sovereignty to ‘Europe’, and for wasting tax-payers money on supporting corrupt countries such as Greece and Romania at a time of economic hardship at home.

****TABLE 12.2 ABOUT HERE****

Although the Freedom Party had always been Eurosceptic, Wilders’s anti-EU rhetoric intensified, and he now went as far as to support a Dutch withdrawal from the EU. ‘Europe’ had become a much more prominent theme in both the PVV’s manifesto, as well as in the personal Twitter messages (‘tweets’) of Wilders. Table 12.2 shows data from a content analysis of the PVV leader’s critical tweets; that is, those tweets in which he criticised political or non-political actors in relationship to policy proposals and social developments in general (Van Kessel and Castelein 2014). What is clear is that European integration became a much more prominent theme in Wilders’s tweets in the run-up to the 2012 national election (see ‘Election 2012’ column). In this period, almost two-thirds of Wilders’s critical tweets related to this issue. After the election, Wilders’s tweets were less EU-dominated, yet the PVV stuck to its Euroreject position, as again became evident in the campaign for the European Parliament election in May 2014.

It would be wrong to assume that Wilders had altered his views on immigration and Islam, or ignored the themes altogether. It must also be noted that Wilders spent more attention in his tweets to immigration and culture than the percentages in Table 2 suggest – examples of specific issues being crime levels among Moroccans and the ‘Islamisation’ of

neighbourhoods. The PVV leader did not always relate these issues explicitly to the failure of political actors, which is a reason why the themes of immigration and culture – and law and order for that matter – were not more prominent in Wilders’s critical tweets. Yet it is clear that the Freedom Party shifted its focus more explicitly towards ‘Europe’ in the run up to the 2012 parliamentary election, not in the last place focusing on the social and financial costs of European integration and the loss of national sovereignty.

While the issues central to the discourse of the Freedom Party have thus changed over the years, the thin core of the PVV’s populism remained intact. All PVV manifestos have blamed the ‘elites’ for many of the societal ills, although the emphasis changed somewhat. Since 2010 the PVV referred more explicitly than before to the ‘left-wing elites’. Wilders targeted in particular the dominant progressive ‘left-wing’ ideas, which were alleged to pose a threat to Dutch identity and culture. In the 2012 parliamentary campaign, in turn, the Freedom Party intensified its criticism of unresponsive European Union elites. The degree to which Wilders applied populist anti-establishment rhetoric has also varied somewhat over the years. This is again visible in Wilders’s tweets (see Figure 1). When Wilders provided parliamentary support for the VVD-CDA minority coalition between October 2010 and April 2012, the percentage of critical tweets was relatively low, while we can observe a clear surge after the government’s break-up. Although the graph does not display a measure of Wilders’s populism – but rather the intensity of his criticism of (political) actors – it suggests that government support may indeed (temporarily) soften the anti-establishment character of populist parties.

****FIGURE 12.1 ABOUT HERE****

Figure 12.1 also shows the percentage of SP leader Emile Roemer's tweets that contained criticism of other actors. We can observe that Roemer's critical tweets actually slumped during the 2012 election campaign, which suggests that the SP leader did not use Twitter to wage an aggressive campaign as Wilders did. The following section discusses the discourse of the SP and its leader in more detail.

Developments in the Socialist Party's discourse

At the time of the 2010 parliamentary election, it was no surprise that the radical left SP held greedy bankers, speculators and managers responsible for the economic problems; 'there can be no doubt about it: the crisis came from the right', the SP stated in its manifesto (SP 2010: 7). Instead of imposing harsh austerity measures on innocent citizens, the SP proposed to pass the bill to those it held responsible for the crisis (i.e. bankers, large companies and shareholders). It is thus clear that the economic crisis also left its mark on the Socialist Party's discourse. Yet in comparison with the PVV, the SP's programme has been characterised by more continuity: socio-economic issues remained at the core of the party's appeal. This is also evident from the critical tweets of Emile Roemer, of which almost 80 per cent were related to socio-economic and financial issues (see Table 12.3).

****TABLE 12.3 ABOUT HERE****

With regard to European integration, the second-most important theme in Roemer's tweets, the Socialist Party took a less radical approach than in the past. In 1994 the SP manifesto was very clear about its position on Europe: 'The interests of the people in the Netherlands and abroad are not served by the devaluation of our country to a powerless

province of an undemocratic European super state. That is why the Netherlands must say ‘no’ to the European Union’ (SP 1994: 15). European integration was perceived to serve merely the interests of big companies. In more recent years, the SP has remained critical of the European Union and surrendering national sovereignty – its active role in the campaign against the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 being a case in point. In its 2006 manifesto, the SP claimed that ‘the megalomania of Brussels has estranged many citizens of the European Union’, and the party criticised the proliferation of European regulations (SP 2006: 10). By this time, however, the party did not oppose membership of the European Union anymore.

While the Freedom Party radicalised in its position on Europe prior to the 2012 election, and now called for a Dutch ‘exit’, the SP did not directly blame ‘Brussels’ for the economic malaise. The SP’s position on European integration was actually somewhat ambiguous during the campaign (Van Kessel and Hollander 2012: 4). The Socialists were critical of the supposed neo-liberal character of the EU, and in an interview party leader Roemer stated that he would not accept financial sanctions if the Netherlands would fail to meet the EU’s budgetary rules – ‘over my dead body’, Roemer declared. After criticism from political opponents, however, Roemer half-heartedly qualified this statement. At the same time, the Socialist Party supported stricter control over national budgets and the financial sector by the European Central Bank (ECB), and intended to give the ECB a role in stimulating the growth of jobs. Despite its many critical notes about the European Union, then, the SP saw European cooperation also as a means to solve the crisis. The Freedom Party, on the other hand, portrayed European integration merely as the cause of the (economic) problems.

Despite the overall moderation of the SP’s policy positions, the economic crisis did appear to serve as a temporary catalyst for the SP’s use of populist rhetoric. In its manifesto for 2010, the party argued that most political parties in the Netherlands had betrayed their

viewpoints and ideals in exchange for some kind of neo-liberal, pro-market philosophy (SP 2010: 5). ‘Politicians have failed, now the choice is yours’, the document opened, adding that ‘we have never seen such a painful exposure of the political and economic elite’ (SP 2010: 5). The powerful language in the manifesto was not matched by a smooth election campaign. After the resignation of Jan Marijnissen, new party leader Agnes Kant failed to leave a good impression in early election debates (Lucardie and Voerman 2012: 63). With just three months to go to the general election, Emile Roemer, a relatively unknown Socialist Party parliamentarian, replaced Kant as party leader. Roemer did surprisingly well in the TV debates, but he did not share Wilders’s confrontational style and abrasive populist anti-establishment rhetoric, and instead conveyed a friendly ‘ideal neighbour’ type of image. This ostensibly set Roemer apart from the typical, more rhetorically aggressive, populist leader.

Roemer remained the undisputed leader of the SP in the years after the election and, judging from the opinion polls, the party appeared to gain popularity. The SP published a new election manifesto prior to the early 2012 parliamentary election, in which the economic situation again played an important role. Once more, bankers, shareholders and managers were blamed for the crisis, whilst the incumbent government was criticised for its austerity measures. These measures were alleged to have led to further economic polarisation and to have hampered economic recovery (SP 2012: 5). In comparison with the previous manifesto, however, the populist rhetoric was toned down again. A content analysis of Matthijs Rooduijn (2014) confirmed that the degree of populist statements in SP programmes declined in 2012, after a surge in 2010. What is more, the SP had not lost its ambition to take part in government, and party leader Roemer ostensibly aimed to behave in a prime-ministerial, rather than confrontational, manner during the 2012 parliamentary election campaign.

All in all, where populism has consistently been a defining core attribute of Geert Wilders’s Freedom Party, this cannot truly be said for the Socialist Party, as it had developed

itself since the late 1990s. The contemporary SP is a party which likes to portray itself as an ‘ordinary people’s party’, but for which populism is more an auxiliary rhetorical device than an ideological core attribute.

Electoral implications

At first sight, the economic crisis cannot be said to have stimulated populist success in national elections. The Freedom Party experienced a striking victory in 2010, but lost badly in 2012. The Socialist Party lost in 2010, and its vote share stagnated in 2012. In the European Parliament elections of May 2014, the two parties also failed to make a great impact. The PVV finished third with 13.2 of the vote – a loss of 3.8 per cent compared with the previous 2010 EP election – while the SP secured a not more than reasonable 9.6 per cent.

It is thus apparent that poor economic circumstances do not guarantee the success of, on the one hand, radical left-wing parties such as the SP, even if these are seemingly provided with a good opportunity to blame the crisis on unbridled capitalism and widely-loathed bankers. The Dutch case, on the other hand, shows that populist right-wing parties do not necessarily fare better under poor economic conditions. This is not entirely surprising, as previous studies have indicated that radical right parties mobilise primarily on the basis of cultural, instead of economic, grievances (e.g. Oesch 2008; Ivarsflaten 2008; see also Mudde 2007). It is, furthermore, questionable whether Wilders’s explicit focus on leaving the EU has been an effective vote-winning strategy. Even though the Standard Eurobarometer from Spring 2013 showed that the EU was distrusted by most (58 per cent) of the Dutch, a clear majority (71 per cent) disagreed with the statement that the Netherlands could better face the future outside the EU (European Commission 2013: 70; 102).

****TABLE 12.4 ABOUT HERE****

Besides the fact that support for leaving the EU has remained limited, it is questionable whether European integration has become a genuinely salient issue for populist voters. Table 12.4, based on data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES) of 2006, 2010 and 2012, shows the motivation of PVV and SP supporters. Most of these respondents indicated they voted for the parties because of their ideology or programme.. Of the ideologically-driven voters who gave a more concrete answer, the plurality of PVV voters expressed their hostility towards immigration or felt that Dutch culture was threatened (by Islam). Social policies became more prominent in the PVV respondents' motivations in 2010, and answers specifically referring to the EU became more numerous in 2012. These developments are consistent with the developments in the ideological profile of the Freedom Party and suggest that Wilders has been able to attract support from voters who were driven by their negative views on European integration. Yet cultural issues, such as immigration and cultural integration, clearly remained the most prominent themes in the motivations of PVV voters, despite the fact that these issues played a modest role during the campaign of 2012.

For the SP, on the other hand, its position on social policies clearly remained the most important reason for voters to support the party.³ The party also attracted a limited number of voters who were driven by an urge to protest against the existing parties, or a desire for 'change', although the PVV clearly relied on a greater number of 'protest votes'. The party leader was important for a substantial number of PVV and SP voters as well.⁴

³ This category included voters who referred to the 'left-wing' identity of the SP as well.

⁴ Several other categories could also be created on the basis of an inductive assessment of the data, including voters who cast a strategic or negative ('the party was the least bad') vote, those who followed the outcome of an online Voting Advice Application (VAA), and voters with a vague or an idiosyncratic motivation.

The main finding from Table 12.4 which is of interest here is that Geert Wilders's PVV has primarily mobilised support on the basis of cultural issues related to immigration and integration, and that this did not change in the most recent parliamentary election of 2012. Wilders's explicit focus on European integration in the electoral campaign may thus have been a rather poor strategy, as relatively few of his supporters appeared to cast their vote on the basis of this issue. The fact that the focus of the campaign was on solutions to deal with the economic crisis, and not on the PVV's cultural signature issues, is also likely to have disadvantaged Wilders's party in 2012. Finally, the recent losses of the PVV can also be related to organisational problems. The credibility of the party was damaged at least to a certain extent when Wilders was unable to prevent defections from the party in the run-up to both the 2012 national, as well as the 2014 European Parliament elections.

The prospects for the SP seemed more promising in the months before the 2012 parliamentary election; the party was expected to become one of the largest, if not the largest, party in Dutch parliament. Yet when the election campaign reached its crucial stage, a few alleged slip-ups of party leader Roemer in the TV debates prompted a downward trend in the SP's opinion poll standings, and the party's campaign turned into an uphill battle (Van Kessel and Hollander 2012). In the end, the Labour Party (PvdA) became the most important contestant on the political left, and the SP suffered from the 'horse race' that materialised between the PvdA and the centre-right VVD – which may also have affected negatively the PVV's performance. While the SP thus seemingly had a good chance to win the election in times of economic crisis, the Dutch election of 2012 illustrates that voters may still prefer established mainstream parties if these are able to present themselves as more credible actors during the campaign.

Conclusions

Comparing the two alleged populist parties in the Netherlands (PVV and SP) throughout the years of the economic downturn, we can observe some notable differences. The economic crisis did not truly affect the populist nature Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party. Hence, the case of the PVV does not substantiate the hypothesis that the economic crisis caused an intensification of populist discourse (H1 in this volume). There have been fluctuations in the intensity of Wilders's anti-establishment rhetoric during the years of the crisis, but these can better be explained by considering party political conditions. Notably, when the PVV supported the minority government (between October 2010 and April 2012), Wilders was more 'docile' compared to the years before and after the tenure of this coalition. This is consistent with the fourth hypothesis of this volume, which stated that populist parties in office, or supporting governments, tone down their populism.

We can also observe changes concerning the policies the Freedom Party placed at the centre of its programme. In 2010 the PVV emphasised its welfare chauvinist character to a greater extent, and the party became more protectionist of existing social welfare arrangements. With the national election of 2012 in sight, Wilders's party prioritised the issue of European integration, and for the first time supported a Dutch withdrawal from the EU. It is safe to assume that the Euro-crisis and the economic situation at home inspired Wilders to alter his ideological course and focus.

The Socialist Party, on the other hand, did not truly emphasise different issues than before the crisis. The party merely stepped up its criticism of bankers and large companies, holding them responsible for the crisis, and blaming politicians for letting them get away with it. In its 2010 manifesto the party also increased its populist rhetoric, and directly related its anti-establishment criticism to crisis-related themes. At first sight, therefore, the case of the Socialist Party does confirm the first hypothesis. In 2012, however, the party appeared to tone

down its populism again. Moreover, SP leader Roemer did not match the confrontational rhetoric and style of PVV leader Wilders in the 2010 and 2012 election campaigns. On the whole, the party was not the pure populist anti-establishment party it used to be during the 1990s, and the last national election campaigns demonstrated the party's overall ideological moderation.

Although both the Freedom Party and the Socialist Party have altered their discourse in one way or another in the face of the economic crisis, the Great Recession has not automatically improved their electoral fortunes. Although the SP appeared to head for a large victory in 2012, many left-wing voters opted for the mainstream PvdA after a disappointing SP campaign. At the same time, the decision of Geert Wilders to campaign mainly on the basis of a welfare chauvinist anti-EU platform did not appear incredibly successful, as PVV voters seemingly still cared most about cultural issues. Defections of dissatisfied PVV politicians further did little to improve the party's credibility. Both the PVV and the SP remain important challengers of the established parties, but the crisis did not seem to have altered the two radical parties' electoral scope, or the more general structures of party competition in the Netherlands. Even if the crisis provided electoral opportunities for the two radical challengers, the Dutch case shows that voters do not automatically turn their backs on established parties if the challengers fail to present themselves as more credible alternatives.

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