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Introduction: Studying Populism in European Party Systems

I am deeply concerned about the divisions that we see emerging: political extremes and populism tearing apart the political support and the social fabric that we need to deal with the crisis; disunion emerging between the centre and the periphery of Europe; a renewed demarcation line being drawn between the North and the South of Europe; prejudices re-emerging and again dividing our citizens.

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It may be clear that populism, a term used in the gloomy prognosis of former European Commission President Barroso, is often associated with developments which are deemed adverse, or even dangerous. Particularly since the dawn of the financial and economic crisis in 2008, various European political actors have expressed their concern about the rise of populism, more often than not associating the concept with political extremism and xenophobia. Yet what precisely constitutes this ‘populism’, and which political actors embody it, is often left unsaid. This book aims to clarify the manifestation of populism in European politics between 2000 and 2013. The focus is on political parties, which are still the key actors in contemporary European politics in terms of democratic representation. I first aim to apply the concept of populism to party systems across the continent and to identify parties that stand out from the others in terms of their consistent expression of a populist discourse. Second, I seek to explain the electoral performance of those ‘populist parties’ in national elections. Does the success of these parties in Europe denote a reactionary and destructive mood, as certain commentators and representatives of the political elites would like us to believe, or is this interpretation incomplete, or even flawed?
It is something of a cliché to start a text on populism with the observation that agreement on a definition is lacking and that the term is used for many different types of actors through time and space. Although this may still be true, there has been a surge in academic contributions on populism in recent years, and many scholars – at least those who apply the concept with care – tend to talk about the same phenomenon when they use the term. Populism is generally associated with a Manichean vision of society (pitting the good ‘people’ against the corrupted ‘elites’), a conception of ‘the people’ as a homogeneous entity, and a defence of popular sovereignty (see e.g. Taggart 2000; Mudde 2004; Abts and Rummens 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008a). While many scholars broadly agree on what populism *is*, it is still debated in what *form* populism manifests itself. Disagreement exists about whether populism can best be seen as a strategy, a style or a political ideology. This, in turn, makes it unclear whether the term ‘populism’ denotes an ideological attribute of a bounded set of political actors, or whether it constitutes an (opportunistic) rhetorical tool which can be applied by any politician. By relating the concept of populism to party systems in Europe and aiming to identify ‘full’ cases of populism, I seek to shed more light on this question.

Although the academic debate on populism may be well developed, in the vernacular sphere the term is applied in a less precise way (Bale et al. 2011). In the European context, populism is habitually associated with xenophobic politics and parties of the extreme or radical right (and therefore considered to be dangerous). This is not surprising, since populism in Western Europe has often been expressed by parties characterised by a nationalist and culturally conservative ideology, and hostility towards immigration and multiculturalism. The European academic literature has therefore also mainly considered populism as an element of ‘the right’ (see e.g. Betz 1994; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Betz and Immerfall 1998; Mudde 2007). Populism, however, is not necessarily related to xenophobic politics or to any of the other properties of the radical right. Outside the European context, populism is actually often associated with politicians, parties and movements of a very different kind (see Ionescu and Gellner 1969; Canovan 1981; Taggart 2000; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Although the focus of this study is on Europe only, this book also considers cases of populism beyond the radical right, as I am interested in the phenomenon of populism (expressed by political parties) in itself.

Another feature of the literature on populism in Europe is that, at least until fairly recently, it predominantly dealt with long-established