Conclusion: Populist Parties and Their Electoral Performance

In the previous chapters I investigated the manifestation of party-based populism across Europe by identifying populist parties in long-established and post-communist European democracies, and explaining these parties’ electoral performance. Populism still requires clarification, both as a theoretical concept and as an empirical phenomenon. Particularly in the vernacular, the term is frequently used yet ill defined (Bale et al. 2011). It is evident that ‘populism’ is often used pejoratively, and that the concept is habitually related to political extremism and the ideology of the radical right. Several commentators and politicians have therefore treated populism as a phenomenon that needs to be opposed. In the academic sphere, the threats of populism to liberal democracy have also been acknowledged, but many scholars have also underlined the value of populism as a corrective for representative democracy (e.g. Canovan 1999; Mény and Surel 2002; Taggart 2002; Panizza 2005; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Considering the confusion surrounding the concept, as well as the presumed significance of populism as a phenomenon, it is required to come to a closer and more accurate understanding of how and why populism occurs.

In order to shine light on the manifestation of populism in European politics – a sphere in which political parties have remained key actors – the first aim of this study was to clarify which cases could be considered as populist parties. This was done on the basis of a minimal definition inspired by the academic literature. Populist parties, according to this definition, 1) portray ‘the people’ as virtuous and essentially homogeneous; 2) advocate popular sovereignty, as opposed to elitist rule; and 3) define themselves against the political establishment, which is alleged to act against the interest of ‘the people’. Second, the book sought to explain the electoral performance of the identified populist parties, and
to reveal the conditions underlying their success or failure. This final chapter first focuses on the results of this study with regard to these two central aims, before drawing implications and discussing avenues for further research.

Identifying populist parties

If one seeks to identify populist parties, it is hard to disregard the more usual suspects in Western Europe that have received ample attention in the academic literature. Cases such as the French *Front National*, the Belgian Flemish Interest, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Italian *Lega Nord*, and the Danish and Swiss People’s Parties have often primarily been studied as parties of the radical right, but their populist character has also received attention (e.g. Mudde 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008a). It is widely accepted, though, that populism is not necessarily a feature of the radical right; cases of left-wing populism, such as the German *Linke*, have also been identified (e.g. March 2011).

While several parties can be identified that constitute relatively undisputed cases of populism, there are certain factors that complicate the construction of a definitive ‘universe’ of populist parties (see Van Kessel 2014). These factors became evident in the second chapter of this book, which discussed the populist parties and borderline cases across Europe. A first key issue is that populist rhetoric can be used to various degrees and that it is unclear when a political party should be classified as a ‘full’ instance of populism. The second, often related, difficulty is that populist rhetoric can be added and removed from the repertoire of political actors relatively easily, so that identification of a stable universe of populist parties is perhaps not even achievable.

As became clear from Chapter 2, both these issues have been particularly apparent in former communist countries with fluid party systems, where new political parties often voiced fierce (populist) anti-establishment rhetoric. The criticism of elites often evaporated if these parties took the opportunity to enter government themselves (see Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2009; Sikk 2009). In several post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and the Baltic States, it has thus been difficult to separate the populist from the non-populist parties. In these countries it was also hard to distinguish between genuine populist and more general anti-establishment rhetoric, especially in contexts where the issue of corruption was politically salient and the integrity of the political elite open to doubt (see