So do they empower the people?

Populism, electoral reform and direct democracy in Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands

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1. Introduction

A nagging question that has been puzzling scholars for some time now is whether populists are true democrats or not. Amongst others, Abts and Rummens (2007) and Pasquino (2008) say they are not, and view populism as a clear threat to liberal democracy. Yet, populists themselves argue that they are true democrats. After all, not only do they represent the people, they are also saving democracy from the corrupt elites and dangerous outsiders (such as immigrants or corrupt politicians) (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008). To achieve this goal, most populists have a clear ‘democracy agenda’. Populist parties have long called for more direct democracy and more personalized politics (see for instance: Canovan (1999), Barney and Laycock (1999) and, most notably, Mudde (2007: 150-155)). Based on the nature of this agenda, which is Jeffersonian rather than anti-democratic,\(^1\) Mudde concludes that populism “does not constitute a fundamental challenge to the democratic procedural system itself” (2007: 157).\(^2\)

However, this conclusion only holds if the ‘democracy agenda’ is more than a façade. After all, it may well be that it is merely a consequence of populist parties’ position in the political system rather than of their ideology (cf. Mudde, 2009: 331). The proof of the pudding may well be in the eating. Do populists really (try to) implement such democratic reforms when they have the chance to do so? Populists’ democracy agenda is hardly ever put to the test (but see: Barney and Laycock, 1999; Bowler & Donovan, 2006). This study is the first cross-national comparative case study that explicitly addresses this topic. Given that the state of the field is limited, it first provides a detailed theoretical model to improve the existing (rather simplistic) distinction between direct and indirect impact (cf. Bowler & Donovan, 2006). To do so, it blends findings from the field of electoral and direct democratic reform with insights from the field of populism. The detailed model in turn makes it possible to carry out process tracing –which requires such a detailed theoretical model- in four reform cases, the Austrian Vranitzky II and III and Schüssel I governments, the Dutch Balkenende I government and the Belgian Dehaene II government. These four cases are selected after a cross-case analyses of 18

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\(^1\) Jefferson noted that the answer to problems of democracy lies in more democracy (cf. Dalton, 2004)

\(^2\) To be precise, Mudde based this conclusion on an assessment of the populist radical right, though it can be extended to populism per se.
Austrian, Dutch and Belgian governments in the 1989-2007 time period. Given the limited state of the field these case studies aim at generating hypotheses for follow-up research. Though the cases inevitably suffer from some idiosyncrasies, such as the rather exceptional rise to power of the LPF, the findings are nevertheless consistent and revealing. Surely it is tempting to assume that ‘In politics, when principle collides with self-interest, principle tends to retreat with a bloody nose’ (Kellner, 1995: 23), but this is clearly not always the case. This study argues that this has to do with the type of populist party. Most importantly, there seems to be a difference between neo-liberal and populist radical right parties. Secondly and paradoxically, populists in opposition seem to be more successful than populists in office. Even if they genuinely want to reform, populists are often inexperienced and the barriers to reform are high. Established parties on the other hand clearly use the populist window of opportunity to strengthen their own positions.

### 2. The impact of populism on democratic reform

#### 2.1 A model of democratic reform

Though populism has a clear democracy agenda, it has hardly been included in democratic reform research (but see: Bowler & Donovan, 2006; Barney & Laycock, 1999). The impact of ideology - let alone populism – on democratic reform is under-examined. Traditionally, electoral reform is considered to be determined by seat-maximizing parties. Only if the outcome is thought to result in a bigger seat share of the ruling parties, will these parties implement electoral reform (cf. Benoit, 2004). If one broadens the scope to include electoral reforms that have no direct consequences on the seat shares of parties other motivations may play a role. After all, it may well be that a party only supports an electoral reform out of act-contingent motivations - because it looks good to support it (or conversely, that it looks bad not to support it) (Reed & Thies, 2001). However, both types of motivations are clearly vintage rational choice. Direct democratic reform, on the other hand, is a field dominated by sociological institutionalism. From a sociological institutionalist point of view, one would expect direct democratic reforms to happen when there is a widespread support for them. The focus then shifts from parties to the people. Indeed, in the most influential studies of
direct democratic reform, preferences of the public opinion are said to drive an increase in direct democratic provisions (LeDuc, 2003:20; Scarrow, 2001:653; Dalton, 2006:265-267). The causal mechanism these authors advance consists of two steps. First, values of the public opinion have shifted to more postmaterialist and participatory ones (cf. Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), which leads to an increase in participatory demands. This in turn makes it more appealing for politicians to support a rise in participatory devices, such as referendum provisions (Dalton, 2004: 204).

Recent studies have outlined a more detailed theory of democratic reform beyond the rather simplistic rational choice and institutionalist models. In the so-called historical-comparative model, reform is understood as a multi-stage process. In each stage, motivations of parties can change. Typically, at least three stages can be distinguished: the reform initiation stage, the reform processing stage, and the actual vote of the bill (cf. Rahat, 2008: 26). In the *initiation phase* reform-minded influential politicians are needed. However, by themselves, they hardly stand a chance. What triggers reform debates is some kind of catalyzing event. Only then can reform get on the agenda. Once it’s on the agenda, the *processing stage* starts. Depending on the procedure (e.g. is the First chamber involved or not? Is a constitutional change required? ), multiple sub-stages of the processing stage can be distinguished. Each arena where a bill has to be approved can mark a new sub-stage. The more cumbersome the procedures, the less likely a reform bill will make it to the last stage. However, procedures are not the only barrier a reform bill needs to pass. Actor’s vested interests need to be overcome and reformers must gather enough support by forging a coalition on the reform proposal (cf. Rahat, 2008:7). Non-reform is always the default option. If a reform bill fails to pass even one of these barriers, it is not adopted. Hence, passing each and every barrier is a necessary condition for reform to take place. The last stage is the *final vote*, where the aforementioned rational outcome- or act-contingent motivations play an important role. In this stage, the content of the bill is often decisive. The more complex the package deal, the more likely it is to pass. After all, complex package deals are also multi-interpretable and do not generate clear winners and losers.
2.2 The impact of populism on democratic reform

So where does populism fit into this picture? Populism can have a twofold impact on democratic reform: it can influence the content of the reform bills and/or it can change the stakes of the game.

*Impact on the content of the reform.* A first important impact of populism is that it brings in a specific democracy agenda. In recent work, Mudde outlines the archetypical populist democracy (2007: 150-155). He stresses the importance of plebiscitary politics and the personalization of power in the ideal-type populist democracy.³ (1) One of the crucial claims of populists is that they want to return the power to the people (and away from the corrupt elites). This can be done by increasing the use of plebiscitary means such as the recall, the public initiative and the referendum (cf. Barney & Laycock, 1999: 318). (2) Populists have an aversion to all intermediary bodies, since according to them these only dilute the relationship between the people and the leadership. This is particularly visible in populists' call for a more personalized political system (Mudde, 2007:153). One can thus expect that they want a direct link between the leader and the people. Such a desire can translate itself in many specific electoral reforms, such as increasing the power of the preference vote (which decreases the role of parties), or the direct election of executives such as mayors, provincial governors or even the head of state (which all instate a direct link between politicians and the people).

However, this democracy agenda only holds when populism is an ‘ideology’. This is not necessarily true. Some authors state populism is merely a communication style, a master frame that appeals to and identifies with the people, and pretends to speak in their name. In this view, populism is just a strategy to mobilize support (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007: 322). It is a function of a party’s position in the political system. Whenever a party finds itself in opposition, it will use a populist communication style (cf. Wendt, 2009). If populism is merely a communication style, we would see ‘populist’ parties abandoning

³ He also stressed the primacy of the political, which should be understood as the primacy of politics over the rule of law, since these weaken the rule by the people (Mudde, 2007: 154). However, since the relationship between the judiciary and politicians is not part of the topic of this study, this third element of the ideal-type populist democracy is left out in the rest of this discussion.
their democracy-agenda once they are in government. Alternatively, they can implement minor reforms that hardly have an impact. That way the shift from ‘opposition words’ to (the lack of) ‘government deeds’ is not too eye-catching or embarrassing.

**Impact on the reform process.** Secondly, populism can have a direct and an indirect influence on the reform process itself (Bowler & Donovan, 2006: 652; see also: Smith & Fridkin, 2008). Obviously, when populist parties enter the government and break the ‘government cartel’ (cf. Katz & Mair, 1995), they can implement democratic reforms themselves. Populists can also have an indirect impact on democratic reform. They can gather support for their democratic agenda and try to put it on the public agenda. If they gather enough support they may well pose a threat to the existing government cartel. As Boix shows, the indirect impact of outsider parties is mediated by the degree of threat they pose to the government cartel, a combination of ideological extremity and electoral strength (1999:610-613).

If we relate these insights to the historical-comparative model of democratic reform, it becomes possible to specify the impact of populism in a more detailed way (see figure 1).

(1) In the initiation phase, populists can play an important role by putting the topic on the agenda. When they are in the government, they can anchor the topic in the coalition agreement and/or introduce government-sponsored bills. When in opposition, populists can lend credibility to reform-driven politicians (who themselves need not necessarily be populists). The claim that something needs to be done to counter the rise of a given populist party can be a very powerful impetus for reform. This claim can be even more resounding if the populist party/parties gains a substantial electoral victory. Hence, elections where populists breakthrough or gain momentum can be powerful catalyzing events for reform.

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4 This need not prevent politicians to refer to the people or claim they know what the people want, since these can be perfectly congruent with government status.
5 Although I speak of populists, in practice the strategies in this paragraph hold for reformers in general.
6 All parties that have a reasonable expectation of being in office in the nearby future are said to act in a cartel-like way (cf. Katz & Mair, 1995). Note that this notion is broader than just the parties in charge at a given moment in time. For the government cartel implementing reforms that weaken their ability to maintain control over the public agenda (such as citizen initiated referendums) is counter-productive in the medium and long-term (cf. Boix, 1999: 11).
(2) In the processing phase the populists can keep the pressure on the kettle and prevent the issue from falling of the agenda. The can also change the act-contingent motivations of hesitant politicians. Indeed, populist allegations that opposing a given reform would mean serving the vested interests of political parties can be the “kiss of death” to the parties opposing a reform proposal (paraphrasing Pilet and Renwick, 2009: 15). Lastly, populists can try to influence the arena-setting (by for instance calling an advisory referendum on the topic before discussing it in the parliament) (cf. Blau, 2008).

(3) In the final stage the impact of populists is similar. Obviously when they are in government, populists have an influence on the package deal like any other party that is involved or even try to exchange other policy outcomes for reform (Katz: 2005: 62). When populists are in opposition all they can do is try to influence the act-contingent motivations by drawing as much attention on the vote as possible.

7 However, it remains to be seen how successful populists are in arena-setting. We suspect that the impact of populism lies elsewhere since it is unlikely that politicians with vested interests allow populists to determine such an important factor of the reform process.
Figure 1. Conceptualizing the impact of populism on democratic reform

- **Initiation**
  - Catalyzing events
  - Reform-minded politicians

- **Processing stage**
  - Multiple arenas
  - Multiple barriers
  - Rational motivations

- **Final vote**
  - Complexity final bill
  - Rational motivations

- **Populists**
  - **Democracy agenda:**
    - Increased personalization
    - Introduction or extension citizen-initiated referendum

**Note:** (G) strategy only for populist parties in government
3. Research design

3.1 Case selection, methods and techniques

The research approach used in this study is a nested case study design. Government periods in Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands will be analysed. The time frame is 1987 to 2008 and includes 18 government periods. The choice for these three countries and the time frame is motivated by the state of the field. The subject is relatively new—especially when one considers minor electoral and direct democratic reforms have only been examined by a handful of isolated authors. Hence, the country selection strategy must thus meet the criterion of being suited for hypothesis generating (cf. Gerring, 2007). A combination of countries and a time frame that include (1) typical and diverse cases (to allow for causal diversity but at the same time limit the impact of idiosyncratic factors) and (2) show similarity on key background variables (again to limit the impact of idiosyncratic factors) is therefore best suited (the so-called most similar system design). I’ll start with the last criterion. To limit causal heterogeneity, I selected countries that are established democracies, and more specifically consensus democracies, with similar party systems. A study of majoritarian democracies or new democracies would make sense as well, but given that it is precisely in established consensus democracies that populist parties made such a splash, it makes most sense to study these. Of this subset of consensus democracies, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands are probably the most typical (versus for example Switzerland), so I chose these three countries. To allow for as much diversity as possible while keeping the study manageable, I opted for a time frame that includes one government period prior to the 1990s. After all, the middle of the 1990s proved to be the general starting point of a wave of electoral and direct democratic reform (Cain, Dalton & Scarrow, 2003).

In the first part of the empirical section, I will carry out a cross-case analysis. The research technique used is a simple typological theory approach as outlined by George and Bennett (2005). This part of the study merely serves an exploratory purpose and will be used to carry out a well-informed selection of cases (in casu government periods) which will then be analyzed more intensively in the second part of the study, the within-case analysis (cf. George & Bennett, 2005: 251). To explore the causal mechanism, the
selection criterion will again be diversity on the dependent variable. I will examine both expected and unexpected outcomes. In the first group, the causal mechanism is most likely at work, while in the latter either it did not work as expected, or was absent altogether. Additionally, to examine both the direct and the indirect impact of populists, I include cases where populists were in office along with cases where populists were in opposition.

The technique used in the second part of the empirical section is process tracing. The reconstruction of the explanatory narratives is based on analyses of parliamentary minutes, coalition agreements and, where needed, interviews. I will focus on “key non-substitutable links” that connect populism to democratic reform (cf. Bennett & Elman, 2006:460). In the field of democratic reform, these are the three aforementioned stages of the reform process, namely the reform initiation, the processing stage and the actual vote of the bill (cf. Rahat, 2008:26). To increase the causal leverage as much as possible, I will also focus on evidence that is inconsistent with alternative explanations (in casu self-interest in the form of vote-seeking or seat-maximizing motivations).

3.2 Conceptualization and operationalization

*Populism.* Regarding populism, we use Mudde’s 2004 definition (2004:543). The Austrian, Belgian and Dutch parties will be assessed on whether they are populist or not based on their opposition to political elites and intermediary structures; and on whether they consider the people as one homogenous group. To do these assessments, two options are available: the expert option and the party manifesto option (cf. De Lange, 2008:53-58). Each option has its own merits and drawbacks and therefore none is always the superior one. Since the analyses of this paper are explicitly dynamic and allow for variation in time, the expert option with its highly auto-correlated outcomes is less suited (cf. De Lange, 2008:57). We thus opt for analyses of party manifestos. To accommodate for the general criticism that manifestos mostly serve a marketing purpose and are externally oriented, we also take important conferences and party publications into account (cf. Mudde, 2007: 39-40). The actual coding is done by using the causal chain approach since this approach allows for temporal flexibility (Mudde, 2007:39). Lastly, it is important to note that I follow the traditional dichotomous operationalization of
populism (either a party is populist or not). The parties and their coding are listed in Appendix 1. Mostly these codings have a high face value. When they are controversial, additional information is provided.

Electoral reform. In this study electoral reform is narrowed down to proportionality (personalization through a more majoritarian electoral system), ballot structure (specifically the type of vote; e.g. what’s the impact of the preference vote?) and scope (specifically the direct election of executives). Only significant reforms will be taken into account.\(^8\) Lastly, I will limit myself to national legislation concerning the national lower chamber and local elections.

Direct democratic reform. In this study I will limit myself to referendums (both the government-sponsored and the citizen-initiated referendum).\(^9\) Contrary to most studies of referendums, I will not study usage but merely legislation (cf. Scarrow, 2003: 48). Since the topic of this study is the link between populism and democratic reform, what matters most is the abstract provision not the specific usage.\(^10\) For instance, even elitist conservative parties may support a referendum on Turkey joining the EU; while a neo-liberal populist party may well oppose a referendum on banker’s bonuses. These positions would tell us something about the ideology that is attached to the populist component, but not about the populist component itself or the referendum as an anti-party tool.\(^11\) Regarding the specific operationalization of direct democratic reform, I use one that mirrors the electoral reform operationalization. I include the introduction (or repeal) of government-sponsored or citizen-initiated referendums, how politicians have to respond to the results (is it optional or binding and what’s the threshold for the result being valid) (cf. Leduc, 2003; Scarrow, 2001). Again, both national and local provisions will be looked at.

\(^8\) For an elaborate discussion of what constitutes a ‘significant’ reform see Jacobs and Leyenaar, 2011.
\(^9\) Direct democracy as a concept often includes referendum provisions, legislation on public initiatives (or citizen-initiated referendums), the direct election of executives and recall provisions. However, the latter are in essence electoral procedures within representative democracy.
\(^10\) As Taggart points out: the use of referendums “does not necessarily have any relationship to populism” (2001:104)
\(^11\) In practice, two national referenda occurred in the three countries: the 1994 referendum on joining the EU in Austria, and the 2006 referendum on the EU constitution in the Netherlands.
4. Empirical analysis

4.1 Cross-case comparison

Based on the cross-case analysis of the 18 government periods included in this study at least four observations can be made. First, the examined democratic reforms happen quite often: in 6 of the 18 government periods democratic reform was implemented. Second, populism is not the only road to democratic reform (equifinality). Populism (either in office or as a cartel threat) is not a necessary condition for democratic reform. Third, populism is no sufficient condition either. Though populist parties have been in government in all three countries, only in Belgium did they introduce reforms. Fourth and somewhat paradoxically, the presence of a ‘threatening’ populist party in the opposition did lead to democratic reforms in three of the four cases.12 Interestingly, it seems that populist parties have a large indirect impact but a limited direct impact.

Based on table 1 we can now pinpoint the most insightful cases to examine the causal mechanism more in detail. Obviously Verhofstadt I is the most-likely case, a case where we would expect the causal mechanism to be at work. If it is not at work here, then this is strong evidence against our theoretical claims. However, using Baysian logic, the causal leverage of this case is limited if the causal mechanism is indeed at work. Since Verhofstadt I has been studied extensively by other scholars, we know that his influence was quintessential in pushing through the reforms (Hondeghem, Meesschalck & Pelgrims, 2002; Pilet, 2007; Deweerdt, 2002; 2003). Verhofstadt did take a principled stance and used his position as Prime Minister to implement the reforms.13 He had to pay a price,14 but he and his party pushed through the reforms. Given this low causal leverage, the case is not included. Both Schüssel I and Balkenende I, on the

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12 The exception being Vranitzky IV, which was formed after the electoral earthquake of 1994. Whatever plans it originally had, the government was not able to carry them out since it fell early after what constituted the “shortest legislative period since 1945” (Müller, 1996:410). Given its short lifetime it is not analyzed here.

13 One media observer later on even summarized Verhofstadt’s attitude as: “je signe et je persiste” (Pauli, 2009).

14 The reforms were minor and the package deal included several non-populist elements (cf. Appendix 2).
## Table 1. Populism and democratic reform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In Government?</th>
<th>Populist cartel threat?</th>
<th>Reform?</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Included in part II?</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes (1/3)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Belgium: Verhofstadt I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>The Netherlands: Balkenende I</td>
<td>√ (deviant outcome)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Austria: Schüssel I</td>
<td>√ (deviant outcome)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No (0/1)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Austria: Schüssel II</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes (3/4)</td>
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<td>√ (expected outcomes)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Note: Success rate is added between brackets; Populist cartel threat is operationalized as (1) a more than 50% rise in the votes of the populist party/parties or (2) a more than 20% rise combined with the crossing of an important psychological threshold. Obviously the latter is a more arbitrary criterion, but given the particular political system of each country such a more flexible approach is needed. Cases that qualify are: Austria 1990 (FPÖ +71%); Austria (FPÖ +35%, but government cartel loses its two-third majority needed to change the constitution); Austria 1999 (FPÖ +23% and larger than the ÖVP); Belgium 1991 (Vlaams Belang +246%), Belgium 1999 (Vlaams Blok +26% and bigger than the junior cartel partner; VLD Biggest party); The Netherlands 2002 (LPF 17% out of the blue and second-biggest party of the country).

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15 For instance in Belgium having a two thirds majority is not that important as in Austria. In fact, hardly any recent Belgian government had a two thirds majority (the exception being the relatively short-lived Martens VIII-government).
other hand, are particularly interesting since we would expect democratic reforms to happen precisely in these government periods. Second, to assess the impact of populist parties in the opposition, we will examine the reform package of Vranitzky II & III. We also included the Dehaene II reforms. If we can see traces of populism influencing democratic reform in this ‘least-likely case’, than this is strong evidence in favour of our theoretical expectations.

4.2 The impact of populists in office

4.2.1 The curse of the junior party: the LPF in Balkenende I

The road to power. After two relatively stable Purple governments (which included the social-democrats, the liberals and the progressive liberals) the Dutch party system was shocked by the dramatic events of late 2001 and early 2002. Pim Fortuyn announced his participation in the national elections on the 20th of August 2001 and his statements on Islam soon dominate the media (Van Praag, 2003:101). On the 25th of November Fortuyn is elected figurehead of the new party Leefbaar Nederland. Immediately afterwards the party skyrockets in the polls. However, on the 9th of February 2002 Fortuyn is expelled from the party because he wants to abolish the constitutional anti-discrimination provision. As a response, Fortuyn founds his own party the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF). In the local elections of the 3rd of March Fortuyn wins 17 seats (or 38% of the 45 seats) in his Rotterdam home base (Van Praag, 2003:101). The campaign for the elections on the 15th of May is polarized and the LPF seems to profit from this polarization. However, on the sixth of May Fortuyn is assassinated. His party wins the elections and instantly becomes the second-largest party in the parliament. After fairly smooth coalition talks, the LPF, the liberals and the Christian democrats form a government. The government was installed on the 22nd of July and fell shortly thereafter on the 16th of October.

The populist democracy agenda. The LPF advocated “to return the country to the people” (“het land terug te geven aan de mensen in het land”, LPF, 2002: art2, nr. 1). In practice it advocated the direct election of mayors and the Prime Minister and the

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16 The FPÖ lost heavily in the 2002 election which decreased the leverage of the party significantly. Hence it is less likely to expect democratic reform in here.
17 The reform talks were initiated in 1989, but some (‘easy’) reforms were implemented earlier than others. In total, two reform packages came out of the negotiations, namely the introduction of the Volksabstimmung in 1989 (Under Vranitzky II) and the major electoral reform of 1992 (under Vranitzky III).
referendum. It especially favoured the citizen-initiated or at least the consultative (versus the abrogative) government-sponsored referendum (Herben, 2010).

*Reform initiation?* Given the short duration of the cabinet, it should come as no surprise that no democratic reforms were implemented. However, if the LPF really had a democracy agenda, this should be visible in the coalition formation process and the coalition agreement. LPF-negotiator Mat Herben described the process as follows: first, Joost Eerdmans, an LPF-MP, was charged with reading the books of Fortuyn in order to find information on his positions regarding democratic reform. He made a list with the aforementioned reforms. This list then served as the basis for the coalition talks (Herben, 2010). The coalition talks started on the 23rd of May. On the 31st of May the negotiators discussed democratic reform. The LPF succeed in winning the direct election of the mayor, one of the issues on Eerdmans’ list. However, the Christian democrats and liberals refused the direct election of the prime minister and the referendum (Hippe, Lucardie & Voerman, 2003:32). The Christian democrats were the most anxious of the two, and demanded that the introduction of the direct election of the mayor be limited to the four largest cities (Herben, 2010). Additionally, the coalition agreement even included the scaling back of previous direct democracy provisions, which was clearly contrary to what Pim Fortuyn would have wanted. As a result, the parliamentary debate on the coalition agreement substantially zoomed in on this inconsistency (De Graaf, TK 2002: 91-5403; TK 2002: 91-5418; Rosenmöller, TK 2002: 91-5403). In a recent interview the author had with Herben, he states that stating that they only abolished the abrogative referendum, while the possibility to hold a consultative government-sponsored referendum was still possible. He adds that he prioritized the direct election of the mayor, and said that increasing referendum provisions would have been impossible given

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18. The liberals were never really fond of the referendum, and it was always difficult to convince them into supporting bills on the issue. The previous government (under the influence of the progressive liberal D66) had tried to change the constitution to allow for referendum provisions. The necessary second reading of the change failed because of the liberals in the Senate (during the so-called “night of Wiegel”) (EK, 1999: 30-1407). The save the government a temporary referendum law was passed. The liberals according to their spokesman Van Heukelum only supported the referendum law “not because it is consultative, nor because it is abrogative, but because it is merely temporary” (EK, 2001: 39-1691).

19. The withdrawal of the temporary referendum law in order to “strengthen representative democracy” (CDA, LPF, VVD, 2002:25)

20. De Graaf for instance literally said: “should we see this as the price you paid to the Christian democrats and the liberals?” LPF leader Herben skipped the question and answered that the referendum indeed fit with Pim Fortuyn’s principles, but that there were more important matters to deal with (TK, 2002: 91-5403).
the veto of the two other parties. As an additional part of the compromise, the VVD and the CDA promised not to block any bills on consultative referendums (Herben, 2010). Later on, the LPF supported all referendum bills afterwards also pointing in the direction that it had to compromise on the issue during the coalition talks of 2002 (TK 2004: 89-5704; EK 2005: 13-626).

*Principle or self-interest?* Despite the mixed track record of the coalition agreement, there are several traces that point in the direction of the LPF taking a principled stand during the coalition negotiations. The first trace pointing in this direction is the fact that Pim Fortuyn even after his dead dictated the LPF’s democratic reform agenda. The LPF did not calculate its potential electoral gains or losses, or its chances of winning mayor positions, but ‘read Pim’s books’. The second is that the repeal of the abrogative government-sponsored referendum is not a core feature of the theoretical democracy agenda of populists. Populists do not favour just any kind of referendum. They favour citizen-initiated referendums over government-sponsored referendums. The direct election of executives, on the other hand, is a core element of the populist democracy agenda, and therefore it makes sense to prioritize it. Moreover, the guarantee that consultative referendum bills would not be blocked is a significant concession from a populists’ point of view. Third, given the strong opposition of the two other parties, finding consensus on a reform proposal proved a very hard barrier to cross. The LPF was the least experienced and the junior party in the government. Fourth, if we look at the self-interested motivations, than the LPF had little reason to support the direct election of the mayor. It was a newly founded party, with hardly any significant regional branches. Though the party did have a 50/50 chance to win in Rotterdam, it would most likely stand little chance to win in the three other major cities. Prioritizing the direct election of the mayor is thus more likely to be a principled stand than a self-interested one.

4.2.2 Austria I: The FPÖ’s preoccupations during Schüssel I

Contrary to the Dutch LPF, the Austrian FPÖ spent a longer time in the government. Nevertheless, no democratic reforms were carried out. This raises the question: why was this the case? Did the party abandon its agenda, or did reform attempts fail?
Entering the government. When the FPÖ achieved a resounding electoral victory in October 1999 and outpolled the People’s Party (though by a mere 415 votes), this was a psychological landmark (Müller, 2000:191). After dead-ended coalition talks with the social democrats the ÖVP and FPÖ formed a government. Though the Freedom Party was larger than the People’s Party vote-wise, it was the latter that captured the Chancellor’s position. The government included six ÖVP ministers and FPÖ-ministers. Formally, this seems to indicate that the parties were equal, but de facto the Freedom party was the junior party. Not only did the Conservatives acquired the Chancellor’s position, they also bargained more successfully, and were able to have more impact on the coalition agreement (De Lange, 2008:180).

The FPÖ-democratic reform agenda. Austria has a relatively advanced form of direct democracy (cf. Scarrow, 2003:48). Given these (nominally) far-reaching direct democratic provisions, only the genuine citizen-initiated referendum would be a major increase of the provisions. The citizen-initiated referendum is advocated by the FPÖ (FPÖ, 1997:16). Additionally, the party also wanted to increase the impact of personalities in elections by introducing a genuine preference vote, the direct election of executives and the recall (FPÖ, 1997:16-17). The Freedom Party thus had a typical populist democracy agenda. However, from the cross-case analysis we know that no democratic reforms were implemented during the Schüssel I government period. Did the FPÖ abandon its democracy agenda?

The initiation phase. A look at the coalition agreement seemingly signals the opposite. The coalition agreement did include some elements of the FPÖ democracy agenda. Most importantly, it included a chapter on “strong democracy” (ÖVP-FPÖ, 2000: 12-18). One of the measures included in this chapter is the introduction of the citizen-initiated referendum. This was to be done by amending the law on the public initiative (the Volksbegehrengesetz). Other elements of the chapter also reflect the interests of the ÖVP (most notably the postal voting provision, already favoured by the party since the introduction of suffrage for Austrians residing abroad in 1989, Wenda, 2009). However,

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21 The current referendum legislation consists of the 1972 law on the so-called “Volksabstimmung” (BGBl 79/1973) and Volksbefragung, which was introduced in 1989. Both are basically provisions on government-sponsored referendums. Additionally, citizens have the opportunity to initiate petitions which, if they pass the 100.000 signatures threshold, have to be discussed in the parliament (the “Volksbegehren”; BGBl 344/1973).
the topic immediately dropped of the agenda. In contrast, the government focussed on socio-economic and administrative reforms (Minkenberg, 2001:15). By the time the government collapsed in September 2002, the planned direct democratic reform had not materialised (Heinisch (2003: 104). An important addition is that in its first two years in office the government made haste with a so-called ‘depolitization’ or ‘democratization’, which in practice meant ‘more politicization’. Several corporatist bodies were cleansed and ‘red’ people were replaced by ‘blue’ people (Fallend, 2002b:906-908). Thereby the government alienated the opposition from the beginning. The only populist traces were seen when the FPÖ “re-activated its populist roots” and threatened to initiate a Volksbegehren on an issue where it disagreed with the Conservatives (Fallend, 2002b:912).22

The low priority of direct democracy. Obviously, non-reform is always difficult to explain, since it mostly leaves fewer traces. This is certainly the case here. Nevertheless some explanations can be thought of. (1) To begin with, it was more difficult for the FPÖ to keep control of the agenda-setting. Since it was de facto the junior party, the FPÖ did not have the same power as for instance Verhofstadt’s OpenVLD (which was by far the largest party in the coalition). Moreover, it was the ÖVP who was in charge of the Ministry of the Interior (Fallend, 2000:240). The arena-setting was thus more or less out of the hands of the FPÖ. (2) Furthermore, this issue was clearly an FPÖ-issue where the two government parties had opposing interests. The ÖVP only half-heartedly supported the citizen-initiated referendum (cf. ÖVP, 1995:9-11); where the party describes its preference for a representative democracy). Additionally, the compensation (postal voting) has few benefits while the citizen-initiated referendum has high costs. In order to persuade the ÖVP, tough negotiations would have been necessary. Yet, the Freedom party itself was weak since it soon suffered from in-fighting. Moreover, there was no clear reform entrepreneur who could push the issue. Haider both lacked agenda power and support from his party. To make things worse, he was often in conflict with his own party, which prevented him from being able to take a firm stance (cf. Fallend, 2000). Hence, he could not take the initiative and hammer out a package deal, even if he wanted

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22 In Carinthia, Haider did implement direct democracy and electoral reforms increasing personalization (Minkenberg, 2001:17). However, his power base was so strong in Carinthia that it was unlikely that these would be used against him.
(3) Lastly, the procedural barrier to the reform was high. The government needed a two thirds majority (which it did not have by itself) to implement the reforms. If the government really wanted to implement the proposed direct democratic reforms, then prioritizing its socio-economic reforms, which alienated the opposition, was extremely counterproductive.

What does this mean regarding the FPÖ’s populism? Though the FPÖ put direct democracy on the agenda and given the high barriers to implement the reform, it is nevertheless striking that the issue was so easily abandoned afterwards. The ÖVP-FPÖ coalition seemed keener on slashing corporatist bulwarks of the social-democrats under the guise of democratization than on implementing ‘genuine’ democratization (cf. Fallend, 2002b:907). The only signs of populism were strategic usage of the Volksbegehren. All of this points into the direction of populism as a strategic tool, rather than an ideology.

4.3. The impact of populists in the opposition

Austria II. The 1989 and 1992 democratic reforms

Some ten years earlier on when the FPÖ was still in opposition democratic reforms were successfully implemented in Austria. Contrary to the Schüssel I period democratic reforms were not only on the agenda but were actually pushed through as well.

The initiation phase. The Austrian electoral reform debate had been going on from the late 1970s (Müller, 2005:399). Reformers in both large parties, the ÖVP and the SPÖ, were afraid that the electoral system at that time would increase the public dissatisfaction. After all the large electoral districts, they feared, blurred the contact between the parliamentarians and the electorate (Busek, 2009). The fact that the greens entered the parliament and the FPÖ made spectacular gains 1986 elections, gave credibility to this claim (Müller, 2005:399). This was particularly the case with the FPÖ. After Haider took over the FPÖ in 1986, the party took a populist turn. The Freedom party did especially well in the 1986 and 1990 elections. In 1986, it virtually doubled its vote share (from 5%...

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23 This is not the only example of changing positions regarding democratic reform. For instance, the FPÖ also shifted its position on the strong executive when it had bad experiences with President Klestil (Fallend, 2002:909).

24 Even before the 1970s multiple electoral reforms were implemented (cf. Müller, 1996).
to 9.7%; +94%) though its gains in terms of seats were more modest (from 12 to 18; +50%). In 1990 the party again almost doubled its vote (9.7% to 16.6%; +71%) and seat share (18 to 33; +83%) (Sully, 1991:78). What made these developments all the more pressing was the fact that the two established parties were forced into a grand coalition in 1987. Many observers (media and intellectuals) were concerned that this would be too great a concentration of power (which reminded them of the unpopular grand coalitions of the 1950s). Hence, to get the issue of the public agenda, the two parties prominently included democratic reform into the coalition agreement (Müller, 2005:400). The first chapter of the agreement was simply called “Demokratie” and outlined the government’s democracy agenda. The goal of the democratic reforms was to increase the contact between the electorate and the MP and to increase the impact of the voter on who will represent him (SPÖ-ÖVP, 1987: 3). The democracy agenda consisted of electoral reform (the shift to a mixed electoral system with 100 single member districts; the introduction of a 3% electoral threshold; and direct democratic reform (making the introduction of a Volksbegehren easier; including proponents of the Volksbegehren in the parliamentary debate when it gets more than 100,000 signatures; and the introduction of a Volksbefragung, a binding government-sponsored referendum).

The process phase. The introduction of the Volksbefragung was also done quickly on the 27th of July 1989. However, the electoral reform proved far more difficult. Though the parties did hold the necessary two third majority, they feared they would lose seats to one another. Moreover, the MP’s of both parties firmly opposed the single member districts, since they feared they would lose their mandate. Even the regional and national party leadership opposed the proposal since it did not want its MP’s to be independent from the party (Busek, 2009). Lastly, a too majoritarian electoral system would have eroded the constitutionally entrenched notion of proportionality. Though the government did hold the necessary two third majority, it thought it might be deemed undemocratic to change that part of the constitution (Stein, 2009). Given the risk of

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25 As the head of the Department of Electoral Affairs explained in an interview on the 24th of February 2009: “The experts of the parties are sitting at the table, let us say six experts, and two officers, two from each party. And in the coalition agreement you could read change of the election law for more democracy. In praxis it works different. They had ten drafts, may be virtual drafts, thirty ideas and three drafts and then they say ‘we will ask what our party says about that draft’. But what the parties do is not to look whether the draft would cause more democracy, but whether the draft would cause more seats compared to the other party or fewer seats (laughs). And if the draft would gain them seats, it was a good draft” (Stein, 2009).
loosing seats, the parties were not able to force a compromise. However, given the possibility to win seats and the pressure on the coalition from outside, the issue stayed on the agenda. The government fell early and the 1990 elections were a disaster for the ÖVP, which lost 9.23% of the votes (a fourth of its votes) (Sully, 1991:78). Moreover, the voter turnout dropped from 88% to 83% and in Vienna even from 82% to 69% (Sully, 1991:77). Democratic reform again featured prominently in the coalition agreement (SPÖ-ÖVP, 1990). This time the parties wanted a three-tier proportional electoral system with approximately 45 electoral districts, an increased impact of the preference vote and a 4% electoral threshold to “counter splinter parties” (SPÖ-ÖVP, 1990:2). In practice the issue was tricky. As long as it was on the agenda, each party risked to lose votes if it did not pay attention to the other party. As one protagonist of the negotiations noted: “there is sometimes the idea that if the discussion keeps going on, nobody knows the end and so far I think let's do something because some things are moving out of order or in the wrong direction” (Busek, 2009). Hence, in 1992 a decision was made.

The final vote. The bill was approved on the 4th of August of 1992. The actual electoral reform resembled the proposal in the coalition agreement, the only difference being the increase to 43 instead of 45 electoral districts. The government parties approved the bill, while the opposition parties voted against it.

A populist democratic reform? Clearly the rise of the populist FPÖ and the side-effect of making a grand coalition unavoidable were catalyzing events putting the issue on the government agenda. It also limited the manoeuvring room for the government parties: there were clear act-contingent motivations to refrain from all too obvious seat-maximizing reforms. However, the actual electoral reforms hardly improve the position of the citizen. The introduction of the binding government-sponsored referendum was merely symbolical since it is the government who decides on using it. In practice, no such referendum has taken place. A second element that on the blink of it seems populist, is the increase of the impact of the preference vote. Yet, one should not overestimate the impact of this measure. As Robert Stein puts it: “theoretically these persons could campaign themselves, but in reality the campaigns were forbidden by the parties, because such campaigns would be against the party interest” (Stein, 2009). The only reason why the reform was included was that “it is in line with more democracy” (Wenda, 2009).
The increase of the number of electoral districts indeed tried to create closer ties with the voter, and was expected to benefit the government parties since they had more locally known figureheads than the opposition parties (Müller, 2005: 400) Lastly, the introduction of the electoral threshold of four percent again benefits the government parties, since the treat of splinter parties decreases.26

In sum, the FPÖ did trigger the reform (and even indirectly kept it on the agenda by winning the 1990 election). It also delineated the borders by indirectly imposing legitimacy constraints. Contrary to the 1960s and 1970s, the two established parties were not free to introduce a tailor-made electoral system since they feared electoral retaliation. It should thus not come as a surprise that the package deals includes important symbolic ‘pro-democracy’ measures. However, the more substantial measures clearly benefited the government parties and the final outcome could not be affected by the opposition parties.


Contrary to the Austrian Vranitzky reforms, the Belgian reforms were implemented after the Belgian populist parties had just experienced a disappointing electoral result. The Belgian reforms therefore seem to suggest that populist reforms can pass without the backing of threatening populist parties. On the other hand, it could also be the case that populists can have an influence without having won the elections in a resounding way.

The initiation phase. Democratic reform was not on the agenda of Dehaene II. On the contrary, while it did aim at increasing the participation of the citizen at the local level, it explicitly stated to do this by using existing legislation (CVP-PSC-PS-SP, 1995: Ch. 4). However, the discovery of two kidnapped young girls and arrest of Marc Dutroux caused a storm in Belgian politics. At the same time, corruption scandals involving the socialist parties and allegations discrediting the Walloon socialist leader Elio Di Rupo (re)surfaced (Deweerdt, 1998:500-503). The pressure on the established parties increased even more when on the 20th of October 1996 between 250.000 and 300.000 citizens protested in Brussels (Deweerdt, 1998: 499). As a result, democratic reform (amongst other topics)

26 In practice, the measure somewhat backfired by disadvantaging a splinter party of the FPÖ (the Liberal forum in 1999).
got onto the political agenda. As a response to the unrest, the government installed a broad commission under the chairmanship of the Christian democrat Raymond Langendries (Deweerdt, 1998: 353). Originally, the liberals, the Flemish separatists and the socialists and the Christian democrats participated. However, despite the tensions between the socialists and the Christian democrats, it soon became clear that the government would not fall. The Christian democrats covered the socialists and closed the ranks, which caused the Flemish liberals and the separatists to leave the talks. In contrast, the Walloon liberals decided to stay in.

*The processing phase.* In late 1996 and early 1997, Verhofstadt seized the opportunity and tried to influence the arena-setting by organizing special informal meetings in the so-called Room-F of the Senate (Deweerdt, 1998:354). Supported by the revolutionary atmosphere surrounding the White Marsh, he was fairly successful. The talks included the greens, the liberals, the separatists and even some politicians of the Flemish Christian democrats. The meetings paralleled the more formal Group Langendries but resulted in the introduction of far more revolutionary bills in May 1997 on the repeal of compulsory voting and a binding regional referendum (cf. 49:1009; 49-1030; 49-1036; 49-1043; 49-1124). However, because Verhofstadt was reinstalled as party chairman, the Christian democrats withdrew and the bills failed (Deweerdt, 1998:354).

The Group Langendries was more successful. Though the proposals originally discussed were heavily influenced by Verhostadts citizen manifestos, it soon became clear that only minor issues could be addressed (Deweerdt, 1998:354). The one exception was the citizen-initiated referendum. On the 17th of June 1997 an agreement was reached to upgrade the existing legislation on local government-sponsored referendums to local, provincial and regional citizens-initiated referendums. However, the actual bill only included local and provincial referendums (cf. bills 49-1174; 49-1175). The bills aimed to introduce a non-binding citizen-initiated referendum that could be triggered when 10% (or 20% for smaller municipalities) of the population signed a petition.\(^27\) The voting age

\(^{27}\) The procedures for provincial citizen-initiated referendums were more severe: at least 10% of each electoral district should sign (cf. bill 49-1175).
was set at 16 years and foreigners were also allowed to vote. Lastly the threshold for a referendum to be valid was lowered from 40% to 10%.

The parliamentary debate on the citizen-initiated referendum was fairly heated: the greens and the Flemish liberals demanded a binding referendum and pointed out that the current government-sponsored referendum had a lower threshold. Though the Flemish liberals and greens tried to push for lower thresholds and kept the issue on the agenda, the government parties and the Walloon liberals ignored them - even when the opposition pointed at judicial flaws in the law that later on had to be adjusted (Tavernier, 1999: 49K11853). The Vlaams Belang was largely absent from the discussion and did nothing to further the issue: in the commission debate it only briefly sketched its position, while in the plenary sessions it did not intervene at all (Second Chamber, 1998).

The final vote. The bill eventually was supported by the government and the Walloon liberals. The Greens and the Vlaams Belang voted against it. The Flemish liberals lead by Verhofstadt abstained since they thought the bill should have been more far-reaching. However, the position of the Vlaams Belang is the most interesting: it opposed the bill because… it allowed foreigners to participate (Van Den Broeck, 1998: 49K9989).

A populist reform? It is hard to tell what the influence of populism on the actual outcome was. However, what is clear is that the issue was put on the agenda by Verhofstadt. The White Marsh provided the window of opportunity to push the populist agenda. Without the public outrage, the topic would probably not have stood a chance to begin with. What makes this case unique is that the two Belgian populist parties used such different strategies. The OpenVLD actively tried to influence the agenda took a leading role. It used the White Marsh. The Vlaams Belang on the other hand remained silent. Surely given the cordon sanitaire its impact would have been limited, but nevertheless it is striking that it did not even intervene in the plenary discussion. In the commission debates its only speech made clear that it sacrificed its populist agenda for its radical right one.

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28 Indeed, the current legislation included that when 10% of the electorate signs a petition, the executive can decide to hold a referendum on an issue. The replacement of electorate by population de facto means a 25% increase in the threshold (Tavernier, 1998: 49K9709).
5. Conclusion

Governing means making tough choices. Populists in office are thus an excellent spot to see how important ‘populism’ is for populist parties. One can expect this to be a hard nut to crack. After all, at those instances the ‘anti-government’-party is in the government itself (cf. Taggart, 2000:117). Our cross-case analyses of Belgian, Austrian and Dutch democratic reforms in the 1989-2007 period showed that populists have more impact when they are in opposition but pose a threat to the established parties than when they are in government themselves. However, the within-case analyses of one such reform period, during the Vranitzky II and III governments, shows that the populist threat actually creates a window of opportunity for the established parties to tweak the electoral system in a subtle way. Though their room for manoeuvre is limited by the populist parties, the actual reform packages include subtle measures that are self-serving. These are then covered up by symbolic ‘pro-democracy’ measures that serve as a lightening rot. Hence, somewhat cynically, the presence of anti-establishment parties allows the established parties to make the electoral system more to their benefit. On the other hand, populists in office often face several barriers to implement reforms. They are mostly inexperienced newcomers that are seem easily sidetracked by established parties. Even if they are experienced (as for instance Verhofstadt was), they still have to overcome the self-interest of the other parties and make significant concessions.

The within case analyses also shed light on the role and status of populism. When populism coincides with self-interest, it is impossible to assess its importance. But when in government, populism and self-interest sometimes clash. We found a divide between the two neo-liberal populist parties, the LPF and the OpenVLD, and the two populist radical right parties, the Vlaams Belang and the FPOE. The former acted far more principled and prioritized the issue, while the latter acted more opportunistic and downplayed the issue. However, since populism is never a standalone ideology but at best a thin-centred ideology, one can also look at it from a different angle and examine what happens when the populist component conflicts with the other components (e.g. the radical right or neo-liberal components). There is reason to expect that especially populist radical right parties face difficult dilemmas when they are in charge. The authoritarian (which is in essence elitist), the nativist (which is exclusionary) and the
populist (which is reformist and fairly egalitarian since all votes are equal) component may well be at odds. For neo-liberal populists, this tension is far less problematic: its individualism is congruent with its democracy agenda (which reduces democracy to the sum of individual opinions). Indeed, this seems to be the case. The most visible contradiction occurred when the Belgian local citizen-initiated referendum was discussed. Given that the bill allowed for foreigners to vote, this presented a tension between the populist and the nativist component. We found that the Vlaams Belang did not even mention that it supported the idea of a citizen-initiated referendum and bluntly prioritized the latter. Something less visible, but nevertheless similar happened in Austria. In order to implement their direct democratic agenda, the government needed the support from the opposition. However, by prioritizing the socio-economic and immigration agenda it diminished the chances of its direct democracy agenda. Cas Mudde is therefore probably right deliberately to label this party family populist radical right instead of radical right populism (2007:26). After all, populism is clearly the least important part of the label.

6. References and original sources
6.1 References


### 6.2 Sources used in the text

**Austria**

1. Coalition agreements and political programs


2. Extracts from the EJPR yearbooks

3. Interviews:
*Erhard Busek* (04/08/2009) (ÖVP - He was elected Chairman of the Austrian People’s Party in 1991 and served as Vice-Chancellor of Austria from 1991 to 1995. He was also Minister for Science and Research from April 1989 onwards. From 1994 until May 1995 Busek was Minister for Education)
*Gregor Wenda* (24/02/2009 and 24/02/2010) (Member of Election Department of the Ministry of the Interior)

Belgium
1. Parliamentary minutes and bills

2. Coalition agreements and political programs

3. Extracts from the yearbooks of *Res Publica*

4. Media

The Netherlands
1. Parliamentary minutes

2. Coalition agreements and political programs

3. Extracts from the yearbooks of the Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen:

4. Interviews:
Mat Herben (26/02/2010) (Negotiator for the LPF during the Coalition talks of 2002)
7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1. Overview of populist parties

Table 2. Populist parties included in this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Type of populist party</th>
<th>Time period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>FPÖ Populist Radical Right</td>
<td>1986 onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BZÖ Populist Radical Right</td>
<td>2005 onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium*</td>
<td>Vlaams Belang Populist Radical Right</td>
<td>From 1990 onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OpenVLD Neo-liberal populists</td>
<td>From 1991 to 1995; 1997 to 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>SP Social populists</td>
<td>1987-1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LPF Neo-liberal populists</td>
<td>2002-2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PVV Populist Radical Right</td>
<td>From 2006 onwards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: only parties that occupy at least 5% of the seats in the Lower Chamber at one moment in time are included. Some parties changed their name. The names used are the official names of the parties in 2010.
* both parties are Flemish

The Vlaams Belang

Originally, the Vlaams Belang was elitist and believed the people were considered an unqualified, manipulable mass. Only in 1990, under the influence of Filip Dewinter, did it become populist (cf. Mudde, 2000:112).

OpenVLD

OpenVLD is clearly an ‘unusual suspect’ (to use Mudde’s typology, 2007:53). Under the party leadership of Guy Verhofstadt the Flemish liberal party shifted from classic Thatcherian liberalism to neo-liberal populism in 1991, when Verhofstadt wrote his first citizen manifesto. Verhofstadt was driven by his personal frustration with the influence of the pillarized structures. The citizen manifestos call for a radical change in politics which Verhofstadt called diseased (cf. Verhofstadt, 1994). After ‘loosing’ the 1995 elections, Verhofstadt stepped down as party chairman and the elitist Herman de Croo took over. However, already in June 1997 Verhofstadt returned as party chairman (Deweerdt, 1998: 354). In 2003, the conference preparing the party for the subsequent 2003 federal elections was marked by the downplaying of the populist component. While the November declaration still called for personal freedom for each citizen and wanted to give the people more influence in politics in order to reduce the role of the government (VLD, 2002:3), all
of this was downplayed at a congress on the 23rd of March 2003 (cf. VLD, 2003). The party in 2006 was effectively transformed into a progressive liberal party, which also translated itself in the fact that it was renamed into OpenVLD in 2007.

The Socialistische Partij (SP)
The SP has been considered populist by some authors (Mudde, 2004; Marsh & Mudde, 2005). I agree and disagree at the same time. In my opinion it was only populist for a relatively short period of time. The data that Marsh and Mudde use to show that the SP is a social populist party all refer to writings of the mid 1990s (2005:35). At that time the SP was indeed clearly a populist party, as is illustrated by the titles of the party manifestos at that time: “for clean politics” (“Voor een schone politiek”, 1989); “Vote Against” (“Stem tegen”, 1994) and “Resist” (“Tegengas”, 1998). However, at a congress in 1999 the party shifted focus from a ‘corrupt elite’ to ‘the corrupted people’ and distinguished between the advanced West of the country and the more underprivileged East (1999, 4). In the party manifesto of 2002, the SP is once again the “vanguard of the proletariat” and no longer the “vox populi” and stresses that the people need to be reeducated (SP, 2002:3).

7.3 Appendix 2: Dataset descriptives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country and government</th>
<th>Reform degree</th>
<th>Reform content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vranitzky II</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Introduction of the so-called “Volksbefragung”, a government-sponsored referendum alongside the already existing “Volksabstimmung”, which is also a type of government-sponsored referendum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vranitzky III</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Change of the electoral system, increase of the number of electoral districts, increase of the impact of preferential voting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vranitzky IV</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vranitzky V/ Klima</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schüssel I</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schüssel II</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gusenbauer</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(Introduction of postal voting, lowering of voting age to 16 and extending election cycle from four to five years is excluded from the analysis, since it does not affect personalization nor direct democracy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lubbers III</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Kok I           | Minor | Increase of impact of *preference vote* by lowering threshold to get elected from 50% of the electoral quota to 25%.
| Kok II          | Major | Introduction of temporary referendum law and optional direct election of mayors |
| Belkenende I    | -    | - |
| Balkenende II/III | -    | - |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belgium</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martens VIII/IX</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Dehaene I | Minor | * The introduction of the *multiple preferential vote* and the list of reserve candidates.  
* The introduction of government-sponsored local referendums  
(The introduction of the *directly elected regional parliaments* as part of the 1993 state reform and its ensuing consequences for the size of the national parliament; and the introduction of *gender quota* are excluded in the analysis) |
| Dehaene II | Minor | The introduction of *citizen-initiated local referendums*  
(the introduction of directly elected sub-local councils and the extension of voting rights for Europeans and citizens abroad are excluded from the analysis) |
| Verhofstadt I | Minor | Introduction of a *electoral threshold* of 5%; enlargement of the *electoral districts* (from 21 to 10); increase of the impact of the *preferential vote*; repeal and introduction of list of reserve candidates. |
| Verhofstadt II | - | -  
(introduction of local suffrage for foreigners residing in Belgium for 5 years is excluded from the analysis) |