

Construction of Populism

Meanings Given to Populism in the Nordic Press

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Abstract

The terminology of populism is often taken for granted, even though the very meaning of populism is quite unclear. The article approaches populism by exploring the meanings given to the term in the Nordic press during the first parliamentary elections of the 2010s in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. A combination of the quantitative content analysis and the qualitative frame analysis of the leading quality and popular papers is favoured. In the study of the use of populism in the British press the conclusion was that the term was used more or less explicitly in a pejorative way, although uses of the term varied and had no consistent logic. In the Nordic press recurring frames were found, but the meanings given to populism were only fully understood in their political and cultural contexts. The different life phases of the domestic populist parties as well as differences in Nordic political cultures especially explain the variation in the usage of the term.

Keywords: populism, Nordic countries, newspapers, frame analysis, constructivism

Introduction

There is an agreement that populist movements have grown during the last few decades – in Europe and elsewhere. However, scholars have stated that the meaning of populism is unclear due to the vagueness or slipperiness of the concept (e.g. Canovan 1999: 3; Taggart 2000: 1; Mazzoleni 2003: 4). In many political cultures and languages the term “populism” carries negative rather than positive connotations (cf. Canovan 2005: 75; Andersson 2009: 8-9), even though the etymological background of the word, deriving from the Latin noun “populus” meaning “the people”, gives it an emancipative or empowering signification (cf. Williams 1988: 66).

This article approaches populism by exploring the meanings given to the term’s use in the Nordic press. This involves adopting a constructivist design to ask, How is populism signified? rather than an essentialist approach exploring, What is populism? Populism as an ideology or political style has been studied extensively, although analyses of the actual uses of the term in political discourse are rare. In fact, only Bale et al. (2011) have studied the use of the term by the press and compared it with scholarly usage, and their focus was solely on a quantitative content analysis of the UK print media. Therefore, this study brings comparative and qualitative approaches to research on the subject.

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The context of the study is four Nordic countries: Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, which provide an interesting framework for this approach for three reasons. Firstly, a political party that has often been defined as “populist” has gained remarkable success in all those countries during the twenty-first century. Secondly, the Nordic countries have remarkably similar media and political systems, and they are prominent representatives of the so-called Democratic-Corporatist Model in Hallin and Mancini’s categorization (Hallin & Mancini 2004; Strömbäck et al. 2008). Thirdly, despite their similarities, the geopolitical, cultural and language contexts of the Nordic countries vary, especially in their political cultures and in the formation of their populist movements (e.g. Fryklund 2016).

The article examines the meanings given to populism through a combination of quantitative content analysis and qualitative frame analysis of the leading quality and popular papers of Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The main objective of the study is to find new insights into the discussion on populism as a universal but simultaneously local phenomenon by analysing the construction of populism as a term in specific contexts. The study is also important because the public meanings of populism have real effects on politics and the success of populist movements.

The research questions are:

RQ1. How is populism framed in its public portrayal within the Nordic press?

RQ2. How do frames differ between newspaper types and journalistic genres?

RQ3. How do different media and country contexts explain the framings?

The article starts with a short introduction to theories of populism and to the relationship between populism and the media. After introducing the contemporary Nordic populist parties, the method and materials of the study are discussed and the frame analysis of the usage of populism as a term in the Nordic press is reported (RQ1 and RQ2). The article ends with a discussion of the results (RQ3).

Defining populism

One way to define populism has been to consider it an ideology. As a political ideology, however, populism has been thought to be “a-political” (MacRae 1969: 157) or “thin” (Stanley 2008), since no solid ideological spine has been found from comparing different forms of populism (cf. Canovan 1981; Taggart 2000; Andersson 2009). Wiles (1969) described populism as “a syndrome” rather than “a doctrine” – a reaction to other political movements and their ideologies rather than an ideological starting point as such.

According to Canovan (1999: 3), an appeal to “the people” and opposing the establishment and its societal values have been the most common features of populism in modern democracies. Hence, populism differs from coherent ideological traditions or “full ideologies”, such as liberalism and socialism. Therefore, Stanley calls populism a “thin ideology”. For him, “the thinness of populism” – the fact that its core element is that of “anti-elite appeal” actually “ensures that in practice it is a complementary ideology; it does not so much overlap with as diffuse itself throughout full ideologies” (Stanley 2008: 106-107).

Another common definition of populism has considered it a political movement that arises during times of political crisis (see Laclau 2005; Andersson 2009). Thus, it can be defined as an anti-elite protest movement with no genuine ideological substance or political programme, carried out by a group calling themselves “the people” (see Rydgren 2005: 12-13). The problem of this definition is that the understanding of the people, the elite and the protest vary from context to context, thus the meaning of populism remains unclear.

One way to try to solve the vagueness of populism is to reduce it to a political rhetoric or style. Jagers and Walgrave (2006: 322), for example, define populism as “a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people”. This is a thin understanding of populism, in which “populism is totally stripped from all pejorative and authoritarian connotations” (ibid.: 323). However, Jagers and Walgrave also analyse the “thick” definition of populism with its anti-establishment ideas and its simultaneous exclusion of certain population groups (ibid.: 322). Thus, understanding populism primarily as a style or rhetoric seems simplistic (Mazzoleni 2014: 46), leading Jagers and Walgrave (2006: 336-337) to conclude their analysis by emphasising populism as a combination of style and ideology.

Regarding historical forms of populism, many scholars have talked about neo-populism as a specific phenomenon in contemporary Western democracies (e.g. Taggart 2000; Mazzoleni 2003; Mudde 2007; Andersson 2009). Neo-populism is characterised as a protest movement that criticises bureaucratised states and the alleged corruption of established parties (Taggart 2000: 75; Andersson 2009: 48-54). It is also connected to anti-immigration policies, xenophobia and even racism promoted by extreme or radical right-wing movements (see Taggart 2000: 76-83; Rydgren 2004; Andersson 2009: 64-76). However, not all researchers agree that neo-populism should be defined by right-wing extremism or nativist ideology (e.g. Laclau 2005; Andersson 2009). This is true also of Nordic populist parties, which do not necessarily fit directly such definitions of neo-populism (Andersson 2009: 73-76; Herkman 2015).

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012: 8) have tried to formulate a “minimal definition of populism”, and defined it as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”. Their definition eloquently combines most meanings given to the term in the research literature and it certainly helps to operationalise the empirical analyses of the phenomenon. However, even this definition does not encompass all cases under the title of populism and, as a scholarly endeavour, it does not fix the meanings given to the term in public discussions.

Nordic populist parties and the media

In the Nordic countries included in this study, political parties with backgrounds as anti-elite populist movements combined with nation-centric perspectives and criticism of immigration have enjoyed remarkable success in the twenty-first century. The Norwegian Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, NFP) was the largest party in Norway in the early 2010s, and joined the conservative government after the 2013 elections. The Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, PS) was the second largest party in the 2015 parliamentary elections

of Finland. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF) supported the conservative government between 2001 and 2011 and once again after the 2015 general elections. The Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD) won seats in the Swedish parliament in 2010 and in the 2014 parliamentary elections gained an astonishing 12.9 per cent of votes, upsetting Sweden's political *status quo*.

Those parties cannot be directly compared to the neo-populist movements of Western and Eastern Europe since, according to the European Social Survey (ESS), their supporters are quite different and rely on a democratic society (Mesežnikov et al. 2008; Paloheimo 2012: 337). Populism in the Nordic countries has not been as radical or offensive as in countries where politics in general has been more confrontational (see Widfeldt 2010: 179). NFP and DF have become established political players, appearing to be more mainstream than traditional populist movements in domestic contexts (cf. Herkman 2015). However, all these parties have intensely questioned immigration policies since the 1990s, thus linking them to the European populist radical right-wing party family (Jungar & Jupkåps 2014).

The importance of the media for the rise and development of the neo-populist movements has been alleged and reported in several studies (e.g. Mazzoleni 2003; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart 2006; Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Koopmans & Muis 2009; Roodjuin 2014). However, Bos and Brants (2014) indicate that the populist styles, ideas and policies represented in the media might be far less prevalent than often claimed. Some studies stress that media coverage is essential for the public images of all political leaders (Bos et al. 2011) and Pauwels (2010) reminds us that the media effect on the development of populist movements should not be overstated.

The meanings given to populism in studies on the Nordic countries have most commonly been tied to the ideological or social dimensions of the movements (e.g. Arter 2010; Jungar 2010; Rydgren & Ruth 2011; Jungar & Jupkåps 2014). The majority of the media-based research has considered Nordic populism in relation to right-wing extremism and anti-immigration rhetoric (e.g. Rydgren 2004; Hellström & Nilsson 2010; Horsti & Nikunen 2012). However, the style of populism has also been studied (e.g. Niemi 2013), and in Finland and in Sweden the media portrayal of the domestic populist parties has been analysed with regard to the overall coverage of the elections (Perna & Railo 2012; Ljunggren & Nordstrand 2011).

The multiple definitions of populism have been considered in academic theorisations for several decades (Wiles 1969; Canovan 1981; Taggart 2000; Laclau 2005), but actual uses of the term have rarely been studied. The alleged pejorative use of the term has been stated (e.g. Canovan 2005; Andersson 2009), but few empirical studies of the subject have been published. Elmgren (2015) has studied the term's use, but her focus was on the self-identification of the Finns Party. Only Bale et al. (2011) have explored the usage of the term in the media. They concluded that the term was used more or less explicitly in a pejorative way, although uses of the term varied and had no consistent logic. This study examines whether this is true in the Nordic context and considers the possible effects of the construction of the meaning of populism.

Methods and materials

The material analysed in this article comes from articles collected during the first parliamentary elections of the 2010s in Finland (April 2011), Sweden (September 2010), Denmark (September 2011) and Norway (September 2013). The articles in which the term populism, or its variants, was explicitly used during a 30-day period surrounding the parliamentary elections – polling day plus 16 days before and 13 after that date – were sieved out from the largest quality and popular newspapers of the countries by using different domestic press archives. The search word used was “populis*” because it allowed us to encompass all variations of “populism”, “populist” and “populistic” in the Nordic languages. The sampling of the material was carried out by native research assistants with good track records in media and political studies from a total gathering of 3337 journalistic articles discussing the elections (see Herkman 2015). In this study, news articles other than election stories, letters to the editor, readers’ comments and other non-journalistic articles were also included, thus increasing the total amount of articles in the search to almost 5000. In total, the material analysed here amounts to 170 articles sampled by using the search term “populis*”. After the assistants had collected and copied the articles from the archives, I proceeded with the coding and frame analysis.

Election campaigns create a particular moment for public discourse and may distort the material found by stressing political populism at the expense of, for example, “cultural populism” (cf. McGuigan 1992). The chosen elections were especially interesting, however, because a political party which was commonly termed “populist” gained remarkable success, consequently highlighting the term and the meaning given to it through the various public discussions in which it participated. PS attained 19.1 per cent of the votes in Finland, SD won seats in the Swedish parliament for the first time, and NFP joined the Norwegian cabinet for the first time in its history. Thus, the appearance of “populist parties” can be said to have increased the public debate on populism.

The differing approaches of the elite and the tabloid media have usually been discernible from each other in studies on populism (see Mazzoleni 2003: 8). However, the Nordic countries do not have tabloid papers similar to those found in the Anglo-American or Central European context. Sparks (2000: 15) defines Nordic tabloids as the “semi-serious press” in his pioneering analysis of “tabloidization” because they publish serious news content resembling that of the quality press. The term “tabloid” is also confusing, since many Nordic quality papers changed from broadsheet to tabloid format during the twenty-first century. However, according to their journalistic style and topics, the Nordic popular papers can be defined as a sort of tabloid media (cf. Jungar 2010: 215-216). Accordingly I use the terms “quality” and “popular” press.

The papers analysed are *Helsingin Sanomat* (quality) and *Ilta-Sanomat* (popular) from Finland, *Dagens Nyheter* (quality) and *Aftonbladet* (popular) from Sweden, *Politiken* (quality) and *Ekstra Bladet* (popular) from Denmark and *Aftenposten* (quality) and *Verdens Gang* (popular) from Norway. There are no clear political affiliations in these papers today, although the quality papers usually represent more “liberal” and the popular papers more “conservative” values. However, their historical backgrounds might reproduce some left-of-centre tendencies in *Politiken* and *Ekstra Bladet* and right-of-centre tendencies in *Dagens Nyheter* and *Aftenposten*. *Aftonbladet* is defined as “independent social democratic”.

The articles using the term “populism” are first analysed quantitatively, but the main research method here is a qualitative frame analysis. In media studies, framing usually means the various strategies, practices and techniques by which the media or journalism bring meanings to the fore and the way certain aspects of reality are stressed and others are deemphasised (Gitlin, 1980: 7; Entman, 1993: 53). Media frames can be separated from audience frames, meaning the ways journalism represents and frames reality (de Vreese et al. 2001: 107). Audience frames, in turn, refer to the ways audiences receive and interpret the media. In this study, the focus is on the media frames the Nordic press uses to underline the meanings of populism.

First, the sentences and statements where the term populism, or its variants, were used was identified. Next, those sentences were classified according to the main meaning they (and the context of the story) constructed of populism. These significations constitute the media frames of populism as a “floating signifier” (cf. Laclau 2005; Herkman 2016).

Five main frames were found to indicate the ways the Nordic newspapers constructed meanings of populism: (1) the nationalism frame, (2) the nativism frame, (3) the empty rhetoric frame, (4) the political movement frame, and (5) the voice of the people frame. However, the frames overlapped somewhat, and the coding of the main frame was not always unambiguous. The nationalism and nativism frames, for example, were sometimes difficult to separate. In such cases, primary and secondary (or supplementary) frames were coded.

In *the nationalism frame* populism is understood as a project emphasising national traditions, history, language and culture. Within this frame, hostility towards “outsiders” is not important, instead populism is identified mainly as a nostalgic yearning for the “good old days”. Thus, the nationalism frame resonates intimately with Taggart’s (2000: 95-97) idea of “heartland” as the core dimension of populism.

The nativism frame is close to the nationalism frame, but instead of positively identifying with the nation, the nativism frame is focused on the negative and even hostile exclusion of others. Consequently, it is closely linked to definitions of contemporary neo-populism associated with the extreme or radical right, which attributes to populism xenophobic, racist and anti-immigration connotations (see Mazzoleni 2003: 4-5; Mudde 2007; Andersson 2009: 48nn).

The empty rhetoric frame constructs populism as a political style that appeals to people through a down-to-earth rhetoric (cf. Jagers & Walgrave 2006; Niemi 2013). However, it also carries with it strong negative connotations connected to irresponsible policymaking and is commonly used pejoratively (see Bale et al. 2011). In this frame, populism refers to statements that do not result in actual political acts, trust or responsibility.

The political movement frame approaches populism in a more neutral manner. In this frame populism is used as a descriptive label to separate different political movements or parties from each other (cf. Andersson 2009: 5).

The voice of the people frame is the only clearly positive framing of populism. It accords with Laclau’s (2005) idea of populism as a manifestation of a political logic whereby a group of people identifies itself as “the people” in the meaning of political agency. This frame is also used by some (populist) politicians, when they announce themselves to be the voice of “the real people” (see Elmgren 2015).

Framing populism

In general, the words “populism” or “populist” and their variants were seldom used; only about three per cent of the articles explicitly used the terms during the sample period. The result is similar to that found by Bale et al. (2011: 117) in the UK context, who state that “populism is almost never the central concept in news coverage”. It is also justifiable to argue that both journalists and politicians avoid using the term in the Nordic consensus-seeking context because it is a pejorative term rather than a neutral notion (Andersson 2009: 8-9).

More than one third of the articles mentioning populism were news articles (36.5 per cent). Editorials, opinion pieces, commentaries or columns amounted similarly to 37 per cent. If we take into account letters to editors and comment articles (13 per cent), then half of the story types mentioning populism were genres in which subjective evaluations and critique are typical. Similarly, the British press used the term more pejoratively in opinion pieces and commentaries than they did in news articles, which were usually neutral in style (Bale et al. 2011: 124).

Table 1. *Number of articles mentioning populism in the different countries and genres*

	News articles	Editorials / columns	Letters to editors	Other	All
Sweden	26	22	2	10	60
Finland	26	18	8	8	60
Norway	4	10	8	3	25
Denmark	6	13	4	2	25
Total	62	63	22	23	170

Note: N=170.

The Swedish and Finnish press used the term more often than Danish and Norwegian press – 120 mentions in the Finnish and Swedish papers, but only 50 articles in the Danish and Norwegian papers (see Table 1). If we take into account the fact that Finnish papers published the fewest election articles during the sample period and Danish papers the most (cf. Herkman 2015), the relative share of populism discussions was significantly higher in the Finnish press than in the other countries, especially Denmark.

A total of 167 primary and 52 secondary framings could be coded. The analysis was focused on political populism, but 12 articles (six in Sweden, three in Denmark, two in Finland, and one in Norway) of the 170 approached populism predominantly through the meaning of “cultural populism” (McGuigan 1992). In Sweden, for example, it was reported that the cultural taste promoted by political institutions or the media had become hostile towards the high arts and was more supportive of popular taste.

Cultural populism was also linked to politics through secondary framing, however. For example, in *Dagens Nyheter* politicians were criticised for favouring easy-going popular culture (16 September 2010) or being populist in their national film industry policies (23 September 2010). Thus, cultural populism did not appear as an independent frame as such but was diffused with the framings of political populism. Except for two articles (published in *Aftonbladet* and in *Verdens Gang*), cultural populism was only discussed in the quality papers.

Table 2. Share of primary (and secondary) frames (%) in the different newspaper types

Paper type/frame	Nationalism	Nativism	Empty rhetoric	Political movement	Voice of the people	Total (%)
Quality	17 (14)	30 (11)	38 (5)	8 (2)	7 (1)	100 (33)
Popular	6 (8)	34 (3)	34 (5)	16 (6)	10 (5)	100 (27)
Mean	12 (11)	32 (7)	36 (5)	12 (4)	9 (3)	

Note: N=170.

In general, the quality papers favoured slightly more critical frames than the popular papers (see Table 2). Quality papers also concentrated more on the populism discussion, especially after polling day in both Sweden and Denmark. The dominance of the quality papers regarding negative or critical framings (nationalism, nativism and empty rhetoric) supports the alleged difference in paper types and their relationship to populism (cf. Mazzoleni 2003: 8).

Table 3. Share of primary (and secondary) frames (%) in the different countries

Country/frame	Nationalism	Nativism	Empty rhetoric	Political movement	Voice of the people	Total (%)
Sweden	5 (8)	50 (5)	29 (3)	14 (3)	2 (2)	100 (21)
Finland	15 (25)	23 (9)	31 (7)	16 (7)	15 (5)	100 (53)
Norway	12	32 (8)	48 (8)	–	8	100 (16)
Denmark	28	5 (16)	52	–	5	100 (16)
Mean	15 (8)	28 (10)	40 (5)	8 (3)	8 (2)	

Note: N=170.

The national emphases found in the framings are shown in Table 3. However, more substantial qualitative analysis is needed to explore the ways the press constructs the meanings of populism. Therefore, a qualitative frame by frame analysis of the 170 articles is made below.

The nationalism frame

The nationalism frame was most emphasised by the Finnish papers, but it was also relatively popular in the Danish press (see Table 3). In Finland the frame often featured as a secondary framing with nativism, but in Denmark it was often used as the primary frame when discussing the lack of real European politics, for example, in a commentary article written by left-wing candidates who criticised Danish political discourse for being too parochial (*Politiken* 31 August 2011).

The nationalism frame was typically located in a non-domestic context rather than a domestic one, especially in Sweden, for example, when discussing the Belgian (*Dagens Nyheter* 9 September 2010) and Finnish (*Dagens Nyheter* 11 September 2010) contexts and when defining debates over minority language rights. Swedish newspapers generally favoured the nativism frame, however. In Finland the nationalism frame was popular in *Helsingin Sanomat*, especially in several editorials and commentaries. That frame was crystallised two days after the Finnish election in a column written by political journalist Olli Kivinen, who claimed that Asian-driven globalisation and the recession in Europe's

economies had led to the rise of populist movements holding nostalgic ideas about the nation state (*Helsingin Sanomat* 19 April 2011).

The nativism frame

The nativism frame was popular, especially in Sweden, where populism has usually meant extreme right-wing movements. SD was commonly portrayed through this frame and criticised heavily in both the quality and popular papers. *Dagens Nyheter* (17 September 2010) stated before the elections that the world-famous Swedish soccer player Zlatan Ibrahimovic “is not Swedish for SD”, because in “SD’s biologically coloured world” structural discrimination against immigrants was promoted. Journalist Anna Lundell provocatively stated in her *Aftonbladet* column that “SD’s racist propaganda is bullshit” (10 September 2010).

The political discourse in the Swedish press generally criticised SD and other political parties also refused to collaborate with the party (cf. Rydgren, 2005: 117). *Aftonbladet* even announced a counter-campaign called “We like different people” (22 September 2010) when SD entered parliament by attaining 5.7 per cent of all votes cast.

The Swedish press also framed populism as nativism in other European countries. *Dagens Nyheter* published several stories discussing extreme-right populism in the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Hungary, France and Lithuania, framing populism as inherently meaning xenophobic and anti-immigration policies. The leaders of the European radical right-wing parties have repeatedly and routinely been associated with populism in the British press as well (Bale et al. 2011: 121). However, the Swedish popular paper, *Aftonbladet*, did not associate populism with foreign right-wing movements but focused solely on SD; the focus of debate turning domestic also in *Dagens Nyheter* after the Swedish election.

The Finnish press partly resembled the Swedish model. *Helsingin Sanomat* published several articles about extreme-right movements around Europe before the elections but made no clear references to PS. After the unexpected success of the PS, *Helsingin Sanomat* often framed its articles with the type of criticism common to countries facing triumphant right-wing populists. However, popular paper *Ilta-Sanomat* barely used the nativism or nationalism frames.

The nativism frame was seldom used in the Danish papers, but if it was, it was used as a secondary frame accompanying the nationalism or empty rhetoric frames. In Norwegian papers the nativism frame was used relatively more often, but the majority of these articles debated whether the NFP was a populist party or not. The debate was especially promoted by the popular paper *Verdens Gang* in which the dominant argument was actually the “anti-nativism” of NFP; the writers stressed, unlike foreign media commentators (who were reputed not to understand Norwegian politics) and some domestic dissidents, such as Heikki Holmås from the Socialist Left Party, that the NFP was not an extreme-right movement. The debate culminated in a press conference intended for the foreign press and covered extensively by *Verdens Gang* (19 September 2013).

The empty rhetoric frame

The empty rhetoric frame was favoured as a primary frame in all Nordic countries and in both the quality and popular papers, even though the nativism frame was more common in

Sweden. This was also the dominant frame in the British press, which used populism in a mostly pejorative way but with significant variation between the topics and actors (Bale et al. 2011). In the Nordic context, the empty rhetoric frame was slightly more common in the quality than the popular papers, being relatively more popular in Denmark – but only in *Politiken* in such articles as Lasse Jensen’s column which criticises Danish media policies (30 September 2011), or Peder Rasmussen’s critical commentary on the Danish government’s strategy for branding Denmark as one of the world’s leading design nations (31 August 2011). The frame was quite often used with regard to foreign news like the European Central Bank’s action in the Euro crisis (*Politiken* 18 September 2011), or Antonios Samaras’ opposition policies in Greece (*Politiken* 21 September 2011).

It was typical of the empty rhetoric frame that it was used with a wide variety of topics and with many different actors (cf. Bale et al., 2011). Whereas the nationalism and nativism frames were connected to Europe’s extreme right or to anti-immigration domestic parties, the empty rhetoric frame was also used to describe domestic mainstream party politicians. The leading figures of both the mainstream left-wing and right-wing parties, respectively Mona Sahlin and Fredrik Reinfeldt, were said by *Aftonbladet* to use a “populist rhetoric” (12 September 2010). The leader of the Social Democratic Party and the Finnish Minister of Finance, Jutta Urpilainen, was called “a populist” in *Ilta-Sanomat* (6, 7, 14, 15 and 16 April 2011).

The empty rhetoric frame was also used to describe Norway’s concerns over the direction of modern politics, for example, in 15-year-old Jacob Schram’s commentary on why Norwegian youngsters had lost interest in politics (*Aftenposten* 22 September 2013), or in Harald Reppensgaard’s opinions on the erosion of democracy in Norway. Reppensgaard argued that populist politicians sought media and opinion poll attention but lacked solid political principles (*Verdens Gang* 18 September 2013). Thus, the empty rhetoric frame usually signified populism in a pejorative way by referring to the supposedly empty political promises of political leaders.

The political movement frame

The political movement frame approached populist parties in a more neutral way. It was only used in Sweden and Finland, which can be partly explained by the fact that populism was discussed more often in the Swedish and Finnish papers than in Denmark or Norway. A further explanation is that SD and PS were gaining political ground in the beginning of the 2010s and there was a need to distinguish them from other parties in news stories. NFP and DF were more established in their countries, hence there was no need for the press to label them (see Herkman 2015).

The political movement frame was especially common in *Helsingin Sanomat*’s news stories, in which PS was considered one party amongst others in an analysis of an online candidate selector, a Web-application in which voters can test candidates with the help of their questionnaire responses before the elections (*Helsingin Sanomat* 20 April 2011), or in a story analysing why the Centre Party lost votes so heavily (*Helsingin Sanomat* 22 April 2011). This framing was also used in *Ilta-Sanomat*, though it generally favoured the voice of the people frame.

The political movement frame was also used to discuss the Swedish minority government’s challenges regarding the exercise of successful financial policies with a populist

movement (e.g. *Dagens Nyheter* 20 and 21 September 2010). However, in articles about SD the nuance was usually negative, such as when the prime minister asked: “Can we call on Jimmie Åkesson [SD’s leader] in times of economic recession?” (*Dagens Nyheter* 18 September 2010).

The voice of the people frame

Finally, the voice of the people frame was the only clearly positive media frame for populism, and it was the least common in the articles. In this frame, the media portrayed “the people” with the same kind of signifier as Laclau (2005) in his theory of populist reason. For example, after the elections, *Dagens Nyheter* published an article in which the supporters of SD from Skånean Almgården were allowed to speak for themselves (21 September 2010). Moreover, in another interview article Per Westerberg from the right-wing Moderate Coalition Party advised readers to respect “the Swedish people’s vote” (*Dagens Nyheter* 22 September 2010).

The Norwegian papers also published two articles in which the possibility of defining populism more positively from the viewpoint of “the people” was discussed, whereas in Finland this frame was mainly discussed by *Ilta-Sanomat*, which published several post-election articles introducing the new members of parliament or PS’s supporters. *Ilta-Sanomat* portrayed PS’s parliamentarians in the story “They Are Like This” (18 April 2011), in which an MP declared “he is a proud populist” and that “for him, populism means democracy”. In the same issue, a major article about PS’s election gala appeared with the headline: “The Forgotten People Triumphed”.

Ilta-Sanomat (19 September 2011) then interviewed newly elected Johanna Jurvanen (PS), whose political aim was to enhance the social security of the disadvantaged. Jurvanen was labelled a populist who “immigrants, gays and culture enthusiasts need not fear”. Furthermore, in a column published on 23 April 2011 *Ilta-Sanomat* declared, “Even the populist party [in Finland] is moderate, house-broken and cooperative.”

Conclusion and discussion

As in the British context (Bale et al. 2011), the Nordic papers seldom used the word populism, even though a political party generally termed a populist movement gained a significant share of the vote in the first elections of the 2010s. The avoidance of the term becomes clear when considered in comparison with all the other election stories published during the same period, in which more than 40 per cent discussed the domestic populist parties (Herkman 2015). Thus, most of these stories discussed the parties without using the term populism. The avoidance of the term would perhaps be an even more accurate observation during periods when no electoral campaign was in progress. Furthermore, when the term populism was used, its meanings were mainly constructed within negative framings. The word’s negative and pejorative connotations, in turn, limit its use by politicians and journalists, especially in Nordic consensus democracies, which have a modest political style and a rather “politics friendly media” (cf. Nord 2007).

Bale et al. (2011) indicate that the term “populist” was used pejoratively in the UK press by many commentators but that the meaning of populism varied so much that no common definition could be found. The use of the term in the Nordic press finds a similar

range of meanings. However, five dominant frames – nationalism, nativism, empty rhetoric, political movement and voice of the people – reveal recurring themes. The empty rhetoric frame was most often linked with populism and a broad range of subjects. The other frames usually connected populism to contemporary political movements. In particular, the nationalism and nativism frames linked populism to Europe’s extreme-right movements and/or assessed domestic populist parties from this perspective. However, the differences between the countries and the newspapers emphasise that the meanings given to populism can only be fully understood in their political and cultural contexts.

The Finnish and Swedish papers explicitly discussed populism more often than their Norwegian and Danish counterparts. This is explained by the different life phases of the domestic populist parties; PS and SD were experiencing their “insurgent phases” (Stewart et al. 2003: 219-220) in entering parliament, whereas DF had assisted conservative governments for two terms and NFP had been a prominent player in Norway’s political arena for decades. Therefore, DF and NFP were experiencing their “established phases”, suggesting their populism was no longer an issue as their media attention had been “normalised” (ibid: 223).

The Swedish papers stressed the nativism frame, which anchored populism to xenophobic and racist extreme right-wing movements (cf. Mudde 2007). That can be partly explained by the fact that SD differs from other Nordic populist parties as its roots lie in the National Socialist movement (Baas 2014). Another explanation is that populism, in the Swedish political discourse, is mostly used to refer to right-wing populism (*högerpopulism*), linking populism with racist and fascist connotations (Andersson 2009: 14, 54) and leading Sweden’s quality and popular papers to agree a *cordon sanitaire* – an exclusion of SD from the agenda setting (Andersson 2009: 47; Rydgren 2005: 117).

In the Danish press the nationalism frame connected discussions about populism to domestic political decision-making, but the extreme-right connotations of nativism were uncommon and not used in relation to DF. This is interesting because this study’s Danish newspapers had left-of-centre tendencies, which might have been thought to increase their use of populism in a pejorative way against right-wing movements (cf. Bale et al. 2011: 125). In general, populism terminology was rare in Denmark, either because it was unusable or was purposely avoided. This might indicate that the long-term influence of DF on immigration policies had, for example, normalised such policies, meaning they were no longer discussed in relation to European neo-populism (cf. Rydgren 2010; Bay et al. 2013).

The nativism frame was relatively common in Norway, but was used to prove the anti-nativism and thus anti-populism of NFP rather than to frame the party as xenophobic or racist. Consequently, most debates on populism in the Norwegian press reflected the domestic political environment, which was, according to the debaters, “misunderstood” abroad.

The Norwegian case reveals the “here–elsewhere” dimension in public discussions on populism. Due to populism carrying negative connotations, it is located outside the domestic environment. This contrasts with the British case, where the pejorative use of the term was more common in the domestic than the foreign news context (Bale et al. 2011: 124), possibly resulting from the different journalistic and political cultures of the UK and the Nordic countries. In Swedish and Finnish quality newspapers, populism was critically approached in the pre-election period through foreign examples of Eu-

ropean right-wing radicalism, but after the election, the approach focused on domestic right-wing radicalism.

The Finnish press differed from other countries in often favouring the neutral and positive frames of political movement and the voice of the people. However, the positive meanings of populism were promoted almost solely by the popular paper *Ilta-Sanomat*, while *Helsingin Sanomat* favoured neutral frames. Thus, the Finnish case demonstrates that a clear difference between the quality and tabloid media could be made (cf. Mazoleni 2003: 8).

The public meanings of populism are interesting not only because they reveal differences in national political and journalistic cultures, but also because they may have real political effects. Firstly, since the media have power in political agenda setting (see Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006; Van Dalen & Van Aelst 2013), media frames can influence politics because they assess political actors through populism, especially during election campaigns. Secondly, the analysis of the public or vernacular use of populism contextualises the academic usage of the term, in which negative and normative connotations are generally more frequent (Bale et al. 2011: 115). Thus, this analysis of the meanings given to populism increases our understanding of the phenomenon on both a theoretical and an empirical level, even though further study is required to obtain knowledge from different contexts.

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