

Chapter 12

Populism and media and communication studies in the Nordic countries

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the developments of and research on political actors called populist in the Nordic countries. The focus is on contemporary populist right-wing parties – the Sweden Democrats, the Danish People’s Party, the Finns Party, and the Norwegian Progress Party – though we discuss the history of Nordic populist parties on a more general level as well. Nordic research on populism has for the most part adopted political scientific, ideational, and empirical perspectives lacking genuine theoretical considerations. However, contextual differences can be found, and sociological and cultural approaches to studying populism have been promoted of late. The perspective on populism in media and communication studies has concentrated especially on the political communication of populist actors and the relationship between the media and populism. The future challenges for Nordic populism studies are linked to changing media and political environments, requiring a new look at their relationship.

Keywords: populism, radical right-wing parties, Nordic countries, party system, media

Introduction

Populism is difficult to define, being described as a slippery or chameleonic concept (Canovan, 2005; Taggart, 2000). Therefore, how populism and research on it are addressed in the Nordic countries depends on how populism is defined. If populism is understood, for example, in a Laclaudian (2005) sense as “a political logic” where a segment of the population identifies itself with “the people” as a total political agent antagonistically confronted by a hegemonic power bloc, then populism has been a common process in Nordic politics since the late nineteenth century. However, populism in the Nordic region is commonly approached from a political scientific and empirical perspective and associated with political parties challenging domestic party systems and

more traditional mass parties. Therefore, populism in the Nordic countries is currently manifesting itself as so-called new populism, that is, in the form of populist radical-right political parties – which have been emerging in the late twentieth century in many European countries.

New populism has been characterised as anti-establishment protest movements criticising bureaucratised states and the alleged corruption of established elites and parties (Taggart, 2000). Several scholars have connected it to nationalism and to a “nativist ideology” consisting of anti-immigration policies, xenophobia, and the racism of extreme or radical right-wing movements (see Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2004). Such sentiments are often combined with a general criticism of the European Union as a political project restricting national sovereignty.

In this chapter, we provide a comparative review of the developments of political populism and its relationship to media and communication studies in the Nordic countries. Starting with a short historical introduction of political actors called “populists” in the Nordic countries, we then focus on Nordic research on populism that has applied especially to political sciences, media and communication studies, sociology, and cultural studies. After the research review, we then discuss the similarities and differences between populism in the different Nordic countries, while also explaining in part the variation in research approaches used in the Nordic region. We conclude by briefly reflecting on the challenges that populism research currently faces in the Nordic countries.

Populist actors in the Nordic countries

Historically, populism in the Nordic countries has been connected to particular political parties, mainly to the Finnish Rural Party (1959–1995), the Finns Party (1995–), the Danish Progress Party (1972–), the Danish People’s Party (1995–), the Norwegian Progress Party (1973–), New Democracy (1991–2000) in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats (1988–), and the Best Party (2009–2014) in Iceland. In addition, a populist style has been linked to individual politicians mainly representing the parties listed above. Populism has also been connected to other minor movements, and some mainstream political players have occasionally been called populists.

Jungar (2017) has identified three waves of Nordic populist movements. First, the “agrarian populist” wave was seen in the late 1950s in Finland, with the establishment of the Finnish Rural Party. The second wave appeared in the early 1970s in Denmark and Norway, during which anti-taxation protest parties were electorally successful. The third wave emerged in the late 1980s, when the nationalist and nativist Sweden Democrats was launched and populist parties in Finland, Denmark, and Norway began to adopt anti-immigration policies

as an important part of their agenda. Jungar (2017) calls this last wave “new populism”, even if some other scholars do not associate the term self-evidently with extreme nationalism or anti-immigration policies.

*The first wave:
Agrarian populism of the Finnish Rural Party*

The Finnish Rural Party [Suomen Maaseudun Puolue] (SMP) was established in 1959 when its founder Veikko Vennamo separated with his followers from the Agrarian Party [Maalaisliitto], the predecessor to today’s Centre Party [Suomen Keskusta]. The party was popular, especially among small farmers suffering from the effects of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation policies. It combined anti-establishment appeals with leftist socioeconomic policies and conservative values. The party was somewhat popular in local elections in the 1960s, but enjoyed heavy success in the 1970 parliamentary elections, in which it gained 18 members of parliament (MPs) by promoting a strong anti-elite approach while appealing to “the pure people”.

SMP experienced internal conflicts during the 1970s, but it made an electoral comeback in the 1983 parliamentary elections, receiving 10 per cent of the vote (17 MPs), and was invited to take part in the government. SMP had previously not been considered a party with governmental credibility due to its criticism of Finland’s specific foreign policy relations with the Soviet Union. After the death of the long-serving President Urho Kekkonen in 1983, who had personified a friendly relationship between Finland and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, SMP was rehabilitated. Moreover, Pekka Vennamo, the far less antagonistic and provocative son of Veikko, had been elected party leader, which paved the way to governmental incumbency. Assuming governmental responsibility resulted, though, both in petty internal disagreements and electoral decline. SMP went bankrupt after the 1995 parliamentary elections, in which the party won only one seat.

*The second wave:
Anti-taxation protests in Denmark and in Norway*

The second Nordic wave of populism was economically liberal in nature. The Danish and Norwegian progress parties were critical of the growth of the tax-based welfare states. The Danish Progress Party [Fremskridspartiet] was established in 1972 and received 15 per cent of the vote in the 1973 parliamentary elections (Jungar, 2017). The party was strongly personified by its popular leader, the lawyer Mogens Glistrup, whose provocative and folkish style differentiated him from other politicians. The party gained its best result in the first parliamentary elections in 1973, with 28 seats in parliament, by adopting

a strong anti-taxation protest agenda seemingly reflecting the “voice of ordinary people”. However, the party’s organisation remained loose and centred on its leader, contributing to a continuous decline in support. Glistrup also used nationalist and anti-Islamic rhetoric, especially during the 1980s, though the issue of anti-immigration only became more salient in the 1990s with the Danish People’s Party [Dansk Folkeparti] (DF) (Bächler & Hopmann, 2017). In the 1998 parliamentary elections, the Progress Party won only four seats, and in 2001 it lost all of them. After that, the party for the most part lost its significance in the Danish political field.

In Norway, Anders Lange’s anti-taxation movement was established in 1973. The party received 5 per cent of the vote that same year in the parliamentary election, but after Lange’s sudden death in 1974, the leader-centric protest movement encountered difficulties (E. H. Allern, 2013). The party changed its name to the Progress Party [Fremskrittspartiet] (FrP) and its longstanding leader, Carl I. Hagen (1978–2006), began invoking a strong neoliberal ideology. Basically, FrP is the only political party called populist in Norway, even though intellectually driven, anti-establishment, and anti-EU movements were titled Populist Work Groups in the early 1970s (Jupskås et al., 2017). During the 1980s, FrP started to promote anti-immigration approaches and its popularity began to increase (Andersen & Bjørklund, 2000). In the 1989 parliamentary elections, FrP experienced a parliamentary breakthrough and gained 13 per cent of the vote and 22 seats in parliament.

The third wave: Nativism and the anti-immigration approach take over

Sweden was described for years as a European exception with no right-wing populist parties having successfully gained a seat in parliament (Rydgren, 2002). The anti-establishment and economically liberal New Democracy Party [Ny Demokrati] was elected to parliament for one term between 1991 and 1994, but it was not before 2010, with the rise of Sweden Democrats [Sverigedemokraterna] (SD), that a nationalist party gained seats in the Swedish parliament (Strömbäck et al., 2017).

SD was formed already in 1988, but with its background in neo-Nazi movements, the party remained marginal and was excluded from collaboration with other political parties and mainstream media (Baas, 2014). The first party leader, Anders Klarström (1992–1995), had a background in neo-Nazism, but soon thereafter the new party leader, Mikael Jansson (1995–2005), started to distance the party from its extremist legacy. The current party leader, Jimmie Åkesson (2005–), has continued to transform SD by building up a nationwide party organisation and taking distance from its past. Over 100 members have been expelled, and the Sweden Democratic Youth organisation was dissolved

in 2015 with the aim of developing a more electorally attractive party with governing potential.

Even though social conservatism was added as a second ideological pillar to nationalism in the party programme of 2011, anti-immigration is the most salient issue for SD voters. SD gained almost 13 per cent of the vote in the 2014 parliamentary elections, and in the 2018 elections the party received 17.5 per cent of the vote, making it the third largest party in the country. However, SD still remains isolated because no other party is prepared to collaborate with it in government. Nevertheless, the political parties have taken different stances towards SD after the 2018 elections. The process of forming a government was complicated and put a (temporary) end to the two-bloc dynamics in Swedish politics. In 2019, the party leaders of the Christian Democratic Party and the Conservative Party met with SD and announced that they would cooperate in policies where they have shared interests, such as immigration, criminal policies, and nuclear power.

DF was established in 1995 by former members of the Progress Party who were dissatisfied with the weak organisation of their party. Pia Kjærsgaard was elected as the first party leader of DF. Her aim was to establish an anti-immigration and EU-sceptic political party that would be able to influence policy-making by building up an efficient and centralised party organisation. In the parliamentary elections of 1995, the party received 7.4 per cent of the vote, and DF acted as a support party to centre-right coalition governments from 2001 to 2011. From this position, DF was able to influence immigration policies. The party succeeded in growing its electoral support, which varied between 12 and 14 per cent in Denmark's parliamentary elections during the 2000s. In the 2015 parliamentary election, the party received 21.1 per cent of the vote and was the second largest party after the Social Democrats. Pia Kjærsgaard stepped aside after the 2011 election and was replaced by the new leader, Kristian Thulesen Dahl, who also was a founding member of DF.

With Thulesen Dahl, DF continued to primarily focus on nationalist and nativist approaches confronting “the Danish people” with respect to immigrants – especially Muslims – and the European Union (see Bächler & Hopmann, 2017). The party also adopted a more centrist socioeconomic position. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the electoral growth of DF came to a halt: DF received only 8.7 per cent of the vote and lost 21 seats. The mainstream parties both to the right and the left had adopted the immigration and migration policies of DF, and the Social Democrats, in particular, were successful in taking votes away from DF. Moreover, in the 2019 election, DF faced competition from two even more extreme parties – the New Right [Nye Borgerlige] and Hard Line [Stram Kurs].

The Finns Party, previously the True Finns [Perussuomalaiset] (PS) was likewise established in 1995 as a successor party to SMP. The long-standing

leader of the party, Timo Soini (1997–2017), was the last party secretary of SMP, carrying forward the original populist spirit of an agrarian “heartland” (Taggart, 2000). However, PS became electorally more popular only after Soini started to flirt with nationalist and nativist agitators, such as the late MP Tony Halme and party’s current leader, Jussi Halla-aho, who came to be known as a leading anti-immigration figure through his blog writings during the 2000s. PS enjoyed success in the 2008 local elections, but in “big bang” parliamentary elections of 2011, the party surprised everyone by receiving 19.1 per cent of the vote (Arter, 2012).

PS refused offers to join the government and remained in opposition, securing 17.7 per cent of popular support in the 2015 elections. However, after the 2015 elections, PS opted to participate in the conservative right-wing government. At the 2017 party conference, PS split when Jussi Halla-aho and his followers were elected as party leaders. Since then, PS has continued in opposition as a clearly radical right-wing party, whereas Soini and his followers remained in government, forming the new Blue Reform Party [Sininen tulevaisuus]. In the 2019 Finnish parliamentary elections, the Blue Reform Party did not receive any parliamentary seats. In turn, PS became the second largest parliamentary party, with 17.5 per cent of the vote, only 0.2 per cent less than the Social Democratic Party. In party polls taken in autumn 2019, PS showed a support rate of more than 24 per cent, making it the largest party in Finland.

In Norway, FrP was the most successful in the 2009 parliamentary elections, in which the party received almost 23 per cent of the vote with its new leader, Siv Jensen (2006–). According to opinion polls, support for the party topped 30 per cent in 2008, but the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Anders Behring Breivik in Oslo and on Utøya Island in the summer of 2011 had dampening effects on anti-immigrant rhetoric in the country (Figenschou & Beyer, 2014). However, even if it then lost some of its popularity, FrP remained the third largest party in 2013 and joined a minority government together with the Conservative Party [Høyre], supported by the Liberal Party [Venstre] and the Christian People’s Party [Kristelig Folkeparti]. The government reformed after the parliamentary elections of 2017, and the support parties were included as partners in the new government.

However, the internal level of conflict increased within government after the broadening of the governmental base, and FrP left the cabinet in January 2020. FrP could not accept the decision of the other three coalition parties to bring back to Norway a 29-year-old Norwegian woman with Pakistani background and her sick child – who had lived in the ISIS-controlled area of Syria – from the al-Hol detention camp. FrP perceived that it had been unsuccessful in obtaining support for tougher immigration and integration policies, such as the restriction of immigrants and family reunification. Support for FrP had dropped in the opinion polls and, now once again removed from governmental responsibility,

FrP could fight the 2021 election campaign as an opposition party. As such, with its 45-year lifespan and seven years in government, FrP has been the most long-lived successful populist party in the Nordic countries.

Contemporary Nordic populism: Part of the radical right-wing-party family

Discussion about populism in the contemporary Nordic context is generally in reference to four nationally successful right-wing populist parties (see Table 12.1). Historically, the Nordic populist parties have ideologically converged and are today part of the Nordic, as well as the European, radical-right-party family (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014). They increasingly cooperate bilaterally and transnationally: SD, PS, and DF are members of the same party groups in the Nordic Council (Nordic Freedom), whereas they are currently divided in the European Parliament. Until the European elections of 2019, the parties were members of the Europe of Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). After the 2019 elections, SD remained in the ECR, whereas PS and DF joined the more radical Identity and Democracy group, which also includes the Lega (Italy), the National Rassemblement (France), and the Austrian Freedom Party. FrP refrains from collaborating with the other Nordic populist parties, as they are perceived as being too extreme. Instead, the party has had bilateral contacts with the Liberal Party in Denmark and the Republican Party in the US.

Iceland has not experienced right-wing populist movements similar to the other Nordic countries. Even if Iceland can be linked to similar media and political systems as Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, the remarkably smaller size of the media market, its geographic location, and particular political tradition make Iceland somehow a different case than the other Nordic “democratic corporatist” countries (Hardarson, 2008; see also Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir, Chapter 3). However, just as populism in different forms surges in popularity in response to political and other types of crises, Icelandic populism has been connected especially to the collapse of the banking sector in 2008, which shocked the whole country. During the crisis, comedian Jón Gnarr strongly attacked Icelandic politicians and banks and won the local Reykjavik elections in 2010 as head of the satirically named Best Party [Besti flokkurinn]. Gnarr served as mayor of Reykjavik from 2010 to 2014, but his populism cannot be associated with that of radical right-wing parties in the other Nordic countries – it has rather been compared to the Italian comedian Giuseppe “Beppe” Grillo and the early Five Star Movement [Movimento 5 Stelle] with its strong demands for direct democracy (Boyer, 2013). The Progressive Party has also been called a representative of “softer version” of populism for its explicitly nationalist communication style after the 2008 crisis (Bergmann, 2015).

Table 12.1 Contemporary right-wing populist parties in Nordic parliaments

	Year established	First parliament representation	Party leaders	Last election results	Government/ opposition
Norwegian Progress Party (FrP)	1973 (as Anders Lange's anti-taxation party)	1973 Votes: 5% Seats: 4	Siv Jensen (2006–) Carl I. Hagen (1978–2006)	(2017) Votes: 15.2% Seats: 27	Government (2013–2020)
Danish People's Party (DF)	1995 (1972 as Danish Progress Party)	1998 Votes: 7.4% Seats: 13	Kristian Thulesen Dahl (2012–) Pia Kjaersgaard (1995–2012)	(2019) Votes: 8.7% Seats: 16	Support party 2001–2011 and 2015–2019
Finns Party (PS)	1995 (1959 as Finnish Rural Party)	1995 Votes: 1% Seats: 1	Jussi Halla-aho (2017–) Timo Soini (1996–2017)	(2019) Votes: 17.5% Seats: 39	Opposition, government (2015–2017)
Sweden Democrats (SD)	1988	2010 Votes: 5.7% Seats: 20	Jimmie Åkesson (2005–) Mikael Jansson (1995–2005)	(2018) Votes: 17.5% Seats: 62	Opposition, cordon sanitaire

Source: Compiled by the authors

Research on populism in the Nordic countries

A literature review on populism research in the four Nordic countries was carried out as part of a large-scale, COST-funded project (European Cooperation in Science and Technology), in which a communication perspective on populism was emphasised (Aalberg et al., 2017). The studies covered the period until 2015, and much has happened since then. However, the main arguments crystallised in the literature review are still valid for this chapter.

First, even though some theoretical efforts to conceptualise and define populism have appeared in the Nordic context (e.g., Jupskås, 2013), the majority of populism research has been empirical. As the authors of previous studies remind us, the Nordic definitions of populism vary from popular discourse's irresponsible vote-seeking strategies to more nuanced discussions of populism as ideology or style. However, in all countries, the definitions of populism rely most often on those proposed by key scholars of the topic, namely Cas Mudde, Paul Taggart, and Margaret Canovan (Jupskås et al., 2017). The definition of populism with perhaps the most widespread support among current Nordic populism researchers is presented by Mudde (2007: 23):

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.

However, the definition is often supplemented by the ideas of "heartland" (Taggart, 2000) – the nostalgic yearning for an idealised (national) past – and populism as a non-liberal "shadow of democracy" (Canovan, 1999). Likewise, Moffitt's (2017) ideas of populism as a political style have recently been applied by Nordic scholars.

Second, most of the research has been connected to the Nordic populist political parties discussed in the previous section. Thus, contemporary Nordic right-wing populist parties and their predecessors have been studied, for example, as part of election studies to find out how these parties can be defined ideologically in contrast to other parties, why these parties have been supported, and who votes for them (e.g., E. H. Allern, 2013; Jupskås, 2013; Klages, 2003; Rydgren, 2004; Widfeldt, 2008). In regard to these themes, comparative analyses between two or more countries have also been conducted (e.g., Jungar, 2017; Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Rydgren, 2010; Widfeldt, 2014). During the early 2000s, Swedish researchers focused particularly on the "exceptionality of Sweden" in European party politics because no radical right-wing populist party had received many votes before the electoral success of SD in 2010 (Rydgren, 2002; see also Strömbäck et al., 2017).

Most of the above empirical studies can be categorised as an “ideational approach to populism” (Mudde, 2017). The main point behind the ideational approach is that populism is linked to ideologies or a “set of ideas”. With the ideational approach, populism is seen as a Manichean angle in relation to the political world, equating Good with “the will of the pure people” and Evil with a conspiring elite. According to the ideational approach, populism also stands in opposition to pluralism by emphasising the unity of the majority (Mudde, 2017).

The question of normativity is perhaps the most crucial issue separating different populism studies in the Nordic countries from each other. As already mentioned, much of the research treats populism rather neutrally as an empirical research subject, but some scholars take a more critical stance towards populism, seeing it as a negative phenomenon and even as a threat to democracy (see Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Some of the studies do not provide a definition for populism, but instead treat it as a commonplace idea referring to irresponsible vote-seeking strategies or even openly xenophobic rhetoric, while others identify populism with extreme right-wing movements and with historical connections to the totalitarian Nazi and Fascist regimes (see Müller, 2016). These kinds of approaches are common in popular scientific and politically-laden analyses (e.g., Baas, 2014) as well as in some academic studies (e.g., Pyrhönen, 2015). Such a normative perspective can be explained by the fact that contemporary populist parties in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway represent radical right-wing populism with exclusive anti-immigration attitudes, and populism in general is often associated with these attitudes.

Another specialty in the Nordic research on populism is an emphasis on Laclau’s (2005) populism theory among a group of Finnish scholars (e.g., Kovalainen et al., 2018; Palonen, 2009). As discussed in the beginning of the chapter, Laclau (2005) defines populism ontologically as a discursive process of political reasoning by which a group of people identifies as “the people” – as a total political agent – and antagonistically confronts other groups of the population, such as “the elite”. In this sense, Laclau’s definition is rather reminiscent of, for example, Mudde’s (2007) definition of populism and has also been linked to the ideational approach. However, what makes the Laclaudian tradition different from ideational approaches is its background in neo-Marxian radical democracy theory with strong normative emphases. Laclau developed together with Mouffe a theory of radical democracy in the late 1970s and early 1980s in which they associated progressive societal movements with populist discursive identification and signification processes (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Therefore, for Laclau and Mouffe, populism represents a positive possibility for societal change, political mobilisation, and challenging hegemonic power – even if Mouffe (2005) has also concerned herself with the negative effects of exclusive right-wing populism in the European political field.

Media and communication studies' perspectives on populism

When it comes to the communication dimension of populism, the COST-project mentioned above emphasised such an approach and included almost all European countries in addition to the Nordic region (see Aalberg et al., 2017). Essential in the communication approach to populism is the fact that populism is understood as a specific type of communication rather than as particular movements, ideologies, or political actors. As such, almost all political agents can employ populist political communication, in which the main characteristics are people-centrism and an anti-elite appeal or discrimination against out-groups, such as immigrants or sexual and ethnic minorities (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The empirical analyses of the COST-project have in particular included the Nordic countries Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (Reinemann et al., 2019).

Even though the communication perspective on populism as a specific and systematic approach is rather recent, several scholars have been studying the populist style of political communication in the Nordic countries for some time (e.g., Hatakka et al., 2017; Hellström & Hervik, 2014; Ylä-Anttila, 2017). Most of these studies have concentrated on the populist political communication of the new right-wing parties defined in the previous section. Some of the studies focus especially on the populist style and rhetoric of the populist right-wing party leaders (e.g., Klages, 2003; Niemi, 2013). However, current communication studies are increasingly focusing on the social media and online communication strategies of populist actors (e.g., Karlsen & Skogerbø, 2015).

Another important group of communication studies has specialised in the relationship between journalism – or “the media” – and populism. Extensive content analyses of the media attention given to the Nordic populist parties have been carried out especially in Sweden (Ljunggren & Nordstrand, 2010) and in Finland (Pernaa & Railo, 2012) after the groundbreaking election success of SD and PS in the early 2010s. Also, more theoretical and general approaches have been taken to the relationship between the media and populism (e.g., Andersson, 2010; Niemi & Houni, 2018). Herkman (2017) compared the media attention given to all four Nordic right-wing populist parties from the perspective of the so-called life-cycle model, in which the developments of the populist parties and resulting media attention are categorised via different life phases.

A common claim has been that populist politicians and leaders are charismatic, or at least expressive, in their communication style compared to other politicians. Indeed, some scholars have demonstrated the expressive power of, for example, the late leader of the Danish Progress Party, Mogens Glistrup (Klages, 2003), and the former leader of the Finns Party, Timo Soini (Niemi, 2013) – although, as Bächler and Hopmann (2017) argue, much of these discussions illustrate the populist communication style linked to the Nordic populist

parties in general rather than rely on systematic analysis. Instead, much of the communication analysis of the Nordic populist actors focuses more on their content or agenda than on their style. Especially in Denmark and Sweden, research has demonstrated how right-wing populist actors have concentrated on issues related to immigration and have had remarkable agenda-setting power in these debates (e.g., Hellström & Hervik, 2014; Rydgren, 2010). Some studies have also been carried out on gender (e.g., Norocel, 2013), demonstrating a general trend towards identity and morality-based framings in populist communication (e.g., Vigsø, 2012).

Expressive, morality-based communication is highly effective because it emphasises emotional public debates connected to populist actors. Wodak (2015: 19–20) uses the phrase “right-wing populist *perpetuum mobile*” to describe the tendency of these actors to use continuous provocations, such as insults and exaggerations, to gain public attention in the mainstream media. Analyses of the late leader of the Austrian Freedom Party, Jörg Haider, and Donald Trump prove the success of this kind of communication strategy in practice (e.g., Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Wodak, 2015). The number of public scandals linked to right-wing populist parties, especially in Finland and Sweden, also increased remarkably during the early 2010s, indicating the provocativeness of the Nordic populist communication style (Herkman, 2018). It seems that public scandals even contribute to the success of the movements because their supporters interpret scandals as “witch hunts” carried out by political and media elites.

Paradoxically, it seems that public scandals linked to FrP and PS have not decreased when these parties have become serious players in the governing cabinets, which can be explained by a “double-speech strategy” in which the leading figures of the parties appear to take a constructive approach and behave decently, whereas other party members appeal to the radical supporters with provocative and even insulting statements (e.g., Hatakka et al., 2017).

A common strategy of populist actors has also been to play the role of underdog in relation to the mainstream media by claiming that they receive, at least compared to other political parties, less and overly distorted media attention (Mazzoleni, 2008). However, the quantitative mappings of media coverage during the election campaigns demonstrate that the amount of media attention given to the Nordic right-wing populist parties has been relatively high (e.g., Ljunggren & Nordstrand, 2010; Pernaa & Railo, 2012), with the media quite often critically discussing the nationalist and nativist approaches promoted by these parties (Herkman, 2016).

There is some evidence that the popular press has been more positive towards domestic populist parties than the so-called prestige media (Herkman, 2017; Klages, 2003). In Norway, the commercial broadcaster has been seen as more populist and sympathetic to FrP than the public service broadcaster (Jupskås et

al., 2017). However, there are clear differences between the Nordic countries; Sweden has differed especially with almost exclusive critical media attention being focused on the domestic populist party SD, whereas in Denmark, Norway, and Finland, positive attention has also been promoted (Hellström & Hervik, 2014; Herkman, 2017).

As the liberal journalistic media tends to be critical of nationalism and the nativism promoted by the radical right-wing populist parties, social media has become a fruitful platform for their community formation and independent communication (Krämer, 2017). Several studies on the online communication of right-wing populist actors in the Nordic countries have found examples of more radical rhetoric (Hatakka, 2019; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016), direct appeals to the people (Niemi, 2013), and different platform strategies compared to mainstream parties (Larson & Kalsnes, 2014). However, the Nordic right-wing populist parties' online communication usually becomes more mainstream when they turn popular (cf. Karlsen & Skogerbø, 2015). In contrast, Hatakka's (2019) study demonstrates the tendency to polarisation and the strengthening of extreme voices in populist online communication. There is clearly still a need for further analyses of online communication linked to Nordic populist parties.

Similarities between Nordic populist parties

The Nordic countries are typical representatives of consensual multiparty democracies based on the welfare state model. This may partly explain why populist parties have been successful for a long time in these political systems; the consensual establishment can easily be labelled a "corrupt elite" by populists. Even if some country-specific differences can be found, the Nordic countries have been characterised as examples of the so-called democratic corporatist model of political and media systems, in which a reliance on corporative consensual decision-making is scrutinised by a highly professional and autonomous commercial media accompanied by strong public service broadcasting (Strömbäck et al., 2008). Populism in the Nordic countries is generally not seen as offensive in style as in Southern and Eastern European countries, where politics is traditionally more confrontational. For example, according to the European Social Survey, the supporters of the Nordic populist parties are quite different than the supporters of extremist populist movements elsewhere, because the former support a democratic society and want to be integrated within it (Mesežnikov et al., 2008).

However, as the Nordic populist parties did not garner greater success until they began to intensively criticise immigration in the 1990s and especially the twenty-first century, they are not that different from other successful European right-wing populist parties belonging to the same radical right-wing-party fam-

ily. They combine authoritarian policies – anti-immigration, traditional family values, and demands for stricter policies on crime – with socioeconomic centrist positions, such as tax-based redistribution of wealth, welfare chauvinism, a state-regulated market, and protectionism (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014). Immigration and law and order are the most important issues for all four parties. For SD and PS, social and moral issues outrank economic policies, and in the case of DF they are roughly equal. FrP is the only party for which economic issues are significantly more important than social and moral policies, although still not as salient as immigration and law and order (Bakker et al., 2012).

In all four countries, some of the most radical members of the right-wing populist parties have also faced public scandals and even court cases for making racist or discriminatory statements (see Herkman, 2018). In general, the rhetoric promoted by these parties on, for example, immigration, does not differ from the rhetoric of other European populist right-wing players to the extent that it would be possible to agree that the parties are quite different. The whole Nordic system has obviously turned towards the liberal model with more market-driven media and polarised political communication than before, making provocative political communication increasingly more normal (Herkman, 2009; Ohlson, 2015). Let us also not forget the changes that digitalisation and the spread of social media have had on the Nordic media systems as well, making populist political communication more accessible and salient than before. In practice, the populist parties have also become more similar over the years, whereas the populist parties in Norway, Denmark, and Finland have turned from traditional anti-elite protest movements into nativist right-wing parties, and SD, for its part, has changed from a neo-Nazi extreme right-wing movement into a radical right-wing populist party (Jungar, 2017).

Contextual differences in Nordic populism

In spite of the systemic, policy, and organisational similarities, there are differences between the populist political parties in the Nordic countries deriving from their different histories and particular political and cultural contexts. Since DF and FrP gained established positions in their domestic party systems earlier than PS and SD, they have somehow been normalised and become mainstream, whereas PS and especially SD are still particularities or anomalies in their political fields (Herkman, 2017). This applies especially to their parliamentary status and the media attention they receive.

The parliamentary experiences have also differed for the four Nordic parties. FrP joined a centre-right government 40 years after its formation, and in 2013, its experience with governing has been positive both in terms of policy and votes. FrP has been able to influence policy-making and has not experienced

any major incumbency effect in terms of its electoral support in government until recently. The governmental experience of PS has been quite different. PS joined a centre-right government after the parliamentary elections of 2015. As the party had to compromise on immigration, bailouts to euro-zone countries, and cutbacks in welfare provisions, its electoral support decreased rapidly, and the party split when Jussi Halla-aho was elected as party leader in 2017. The cordon sanitaire that was put on PS in 2017 has remained. However, such isolation was no obstacle to PS's success in the 2019 parliamentary elections. The fact that PS's party organisation remained intact after the split, that the party maintained its economic resources, and that it could benefit from being in the opposition are obvious explanations for its electoral fortunes.

When DF was formed in 1995 as a splinter of the Danish Progress Party, the main ambition of the party leader, Pia Kjaersgaard, was to form a well-organised party that could influence policy-making. Between 2001–2011 and 2015–2019, DF acted as a support party to centre-right minority governments. This parliamentary position allowed the party to influence Danish immigration and migration policies, which transformed radically during this period – without experiencing the electoral costs of governmental incumbency. This was the case until the latest parliamentary elections of 2019, in which DF suffered an electoral setback due to both increased competition from the mainstream parties that have adapted to the immigration policies of the DF and from the new, more extreme parties.

SD has been met with an isolationist strategy, a so-called cordon sanitaire, since it made its parliamentary breakthrough in 2010. Its historic origins in extremism and radical immigration policies have been the motivations for the refusal to negotiate with SD. However, with the continued electoral growth of the party and the resulting blackmailing position of SD, the process of forming a government has become quite complicated in Sweden: neither the left-green coalition nor the centre-right alliance control a proper majority anymore. However, the isolationist strategy has not prevented the electoral growth of SD nor the indirect influence of SD on agenda-setting or other political players increasingly adapting to SD's immigration policies. These kinds of contextual differences also explain the different levels of media attention that the four Nordic populist parties receive, because political publicity is inherently linked to such party parameters as government opposition positions and minister offices.

Contextual differences also partly explain the different stances of the domestic populist players in public political communication. Even if several public com-motions have been linked to DF, SD, and PS, Herkman's (2018) study shows that between 2005–2015 only one of those affairs turned into a national scandal with longstanding and wide-ranging media attention in Denmark, whereas in Sweden and Finland they resulted in several large national scandals. Herkman (2018) explains the result by the differences in political cultures, in which the

Danish context is seen as more tolerant of nativist provocations than, for example, the Swedish or Finnish contexts. Several studies have demonstrated that so-called media populism (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2014), in which the Danish media bolsters the confrontation between ordinary citizens and the political elite and uses us-against-them appeals, has been common in Denmark (see Bächler & Hopmann, 2017). Another reason for the greater tolerance and normalisation of anti-immigration rhetoric in Denmark compared to the other Nordic countries may reside in the legacy of the Muhammad cartoon crisis, which was a decisive and repoliticising event for Danish political communication in 2005–2006 (Esmark & Ørsten, 2008).

The overall analysis of political scandals in the Nordic region also reveals that Sweden has been more fertile soil for scandals compared to other Nordic countries during the 2000s, indicating less tolerance for misconduct in political culture and a more aggressive media (S. Allern et al., 2012). However, at the same time, Swedish political communication has been called “politics friendly”, meaning that it focuses rather seriously on daily politics (Strömbäck & Nord, 2008: 118). This has anchored the Swedish media to the political cordon sanitaire against the SD and can be seen in comparative studies, illustrating that DF, FrP, and PS are more similar to other political parties than SD in terms of the media attention they receive (Hellström & Hervik, 2014; Herkman, 2017).

Norway differs from other Nordic countries in the sense that even if most Norwegian scholars tend to agree that FrP can be categorised as a populist party (Jupskås et al., 2017), the term populism has not been connected as eagerly to the party, and populism has often been located somewhere other than Norway (Herkman, 2016). The long history of FrP and its participation in government have gradually normalised the party, making it more reminiscent of traditional conservative right-wing movements than its Nordic counterparts – even if FrP’s strong emphasis on a nativist anti-immigration approach clearly connects it to the populist radical right-wing-party family and to other contemporary populist parties in the Nordic countries (see Jungar & Jupskås, 2014). Some analyses have indicated that the nationalist-patriotic appeals to the people might be more common in the Norwegian party system than in other Nordic countries (Jupskås, 2013), thus making a populist communication style perhaps more legitimate in Norway than in other Nordic countries.

Conclusion: Challenges in populism research

The success of right-wing populist movements indicates in part the radical challenges to and changes in the formerly rather enduring party systems of the Nordic countries (Arter, 2012). It is important to be sensitive to these transformations

by approaching them through multiple theoretical perspectives involving both institutional and cultural dimensions. Acknowledging at least three challenges is essential for the future understanding of and research on Nordic populism: 1) the ambiguities in definitions of populism, 2) the normative challenges caused by populism, and 3) the changing media environment.

One of the biggest challenges in populism research in general is the ambiguity in the very definition of populism, which contributes to difficulties in operationalisations of empirical research design. Therefore, scholars debate which political actors should be called populist and by what means. The debate on whether FrP is a populist party or not indicates this problem in the Nordic context, where right-wing populist parties have gained a rather established position and started to become normal players in their political field. Furthermore, there are scholars who claim that many of the right-wing radical parties currently called populist should rather be called nationalist – at least from a Laclaudian perspective (Stavrakakis et al., 2017). This also applies to the Nordic region, where traditional anti-elitist populism has been transformed into ethno-nationalist efforts to exclude outgroups such as immigrants. Therefore, there is also still a clear need for context-sensitive theorisations on populism in Nordic academia.

Secondly, the question of normativity in populism research derives from the challenge, and even threat, that the right-wing populist parties obviously pose to liberal-democratic values such as equality, basic human rights, and especially minority rights, making many scholars critical of (radical-right) populism in general and the associated political parties in particular (see Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). However, this may lead to one-dimensional interpretations and self-evident results in the research. Thus, more reflection is also needed regarding normative assumptions linked to populism in the Nordic context. The communication approach to populism may serve as one way out of these challenges (Aalberg et al., 2017), but combining it with ideational and cultural approaches may also create a new understanding of normative approaches to Nordic populism in the future (e.g., Hatakka, 2019).

Finally, the simultaneous rapid transformation of the media and communication environment renders the relationship between populism and the media even more complicated, demanding of scholars new skills to empirically study and theoretically understand populist communication in the contemporary “hybrid media system” (Chadwick, 2013). The changes in the media environment have helped populist movements enjoy more success and become more mainstream or normalised in their political field. Furthermore, all these changes together may transform the overall political climate and culture in ways that will have more devastating consequences for Nordic political life than we can perhaps imagine today.

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