To Stay or to Go?

How European right-wing populist parties are adjusting to the
post-Brexit era public opinion

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Abstract

Since the 1990s a great deal of literature has been written predicting the behaviour of right-wing populists explaining their policies and ideology. Until Brexit, there had been no such clear victory for right-wing populist policies. Drawing from the current state of the art, data from the national and European electoral party manifestos as well as Eurobarometer survey data from France, Germany, Italy and Sweden, this dissertation employs Strom's rational choice-based party behaviour model to explore how the internal structure and each country's political and institutional environments have mediated the right-wing populist parties' reaction to the upswing of positive opinions about the European Union among European public opinion since Brexit. They have done so in two directions: by either continuing their promise to leave the EU or by dropping the promise and instead advocating institutional reform, in those cases where the parties seek to govern.

Keywords: Brexit, Right-wing populism, Radical Right, Populism, Euroscepticism, Political Parties, European Union, Party Behaviour

Word count: 19782

List of Abbreviations

AfD: Alternative for Germany

CDU: Christian Democratic Union

CSU: Christian Social Union

EC: European Commission

EP: European Parliament

EU: European Union

FDP: Free Democratic Party

FN: *Front National*

M5S: Five Star Movement

RN: *Rassemblement National*

RPP: Right-wing populist party

SD: Sweden Democrats, *Sverigedemokraterna*

UK: United Kingdom

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1. Introduction

The exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union (EU), better and more commonly known as 'Brexit', has been hailed as a critical and important moment in the history of the European Union and of the United Kingdom itself. David Cameron's decision to call the 2016 referendum and the unexpected victory of the 'Leave' side by a small margin on 23 June was widely welcomed in continental Europe by right-wing populist politicians like Marine Le Pen, from the *Front national* or Matteo Salvini, from the *Lega Nord.*

But the process of leaving the European Union has become, by all accounts, a complicated one, reflecting the deep divisions within the Leave campaign and generally of the ruling Conservative Party over the specific form of Brexit, that is 'soft' Brexit advocates and 'hard' Brexit advocates as well as so-called 'Remainers'. The resignation of David Cameron after the announcement of the Brexit referendum results, the calling of a general election that deprived Theresa May of a majority forcing her to rely on the hardliner Democratic Unionist Party were all part of a succession of events that have driven the British economy to a standstill (Financial Times, 2019) and complicated the negotiations of an exit deal. During the negotiations, the various British 'red lines' over the government's rejection of freedom of movement, the European Court of Justice's jurisdiction or membership in the EU's customs' union to have an independent commercial policy have greatly complicated reaching an agreement, especially as some of the British government's demands have appeared to jeopardise the principles underlying the Good Friday Agreement, a basic government framework that underscored the fragile situation in religiously-divided Northern Ireland (Financial Times, 2019b).

Over time, it has become likelier, or at least seemingly likelier, that the United Kingdom will depart the EU without an agreed-to deal, which would be expected to have important negative consequences for the country. Concurrently, it appears that European public opinion has moved away from supporting their countries' own exits from the European Union (European Parliament, 2018, p. 21). Data from Eurobarometer, for instance, reflects not only a recovery of trust in the EU institutions and the euro but also in support for the European integration project in at highest since 1983 (ibid., p. 7).

This shift in European public opinion has occurred across the political spectrum, as Catherine De Vries (2018) and the 2018 Eurobarometer points out (EP 2018, PE-621.866, p. 21). According to de Vries' study, the shift, shortly after the 2017 invocation of Article 50, was visible among the mainstream right and left parties, albeit the drop in Eurosceptic party voters was negligible (de Vries, 2018, pp. 49-50).

The right-wing populist leaders who originally hailed Brexit as a first victory towards their own countries' 'liberation' from the EU have thus to reckon with the changes in the mood of the own countries' voters. This is bound to be problematic for a party family that has seen significant growth across all of Europe thanks to the crises that have impacted Europe since 2007.

The eurozone fiscal and economic crisis first, and the migration crisis of the summer of 2015 secondly brought to the forefront of European public debate concerns about immigration as well as heightened Eurosceptic criticism of the European Union, both issues 'owned' by right-wing populists, like the *Front National* (Ivaldi, 2018; Odmalm & Hepburn, 2017, p. 3). As a result, right-wing populist parties topped the polls for the 2014 European Parliament election in countries like France or Denmark, and generally greatly improved their results in national elections. This was particularly the case in France, Austria, Sweden or Italy where right-wing populist parties attained their best results to date. In France for instance, Marine Le Pen obtained a third of the vote in the second round of the country's 2017 presidential election, an unheard-of result. In Austria and in Italy, they entered government as junior partners, and even entered the federal parliament in Germany, a historical first.

All these successes however have come with complications at the time of the writing of this work. The question of exiting the Eurozone played a major role in the Le Pen-Macron face-to-face presidential debate against Emmanuel Macron. Le Pen was widely considered to have lost precisely due to her lack of grasp with European issues (Ivaldi, 2018, p. 286). Likewise, Brexit has presented a challenge to all right-wing populist parties across Europe for this reason.

According to de Vries (2018) "[p]eople are only willing to take the risk of voting for their country to leave the EU … when they think that the alternative to membership is better" (p. 41). As prior to Brexit, there were no other example of

departure from the EU against which to compare, Brexit would thus represent the first precedent (de Vries, 2018, p. 39) that would allow for comparisons against a country's *status quo*. Indeed, even prior to Brexit, the perspective of leaving the European Union involved a great deal of uncertainty, as it would be based on the counterfactual of whether one's country would be better or worse off if it weren't in the Union (ibid., p. 42).

Based on De Vries' (2018) work, it would be thus possible to assume that the worse the Brexit negotiations and their outcome goes, the worse a precedent it would be for other countries' voters, regardless of their ideology. As a result, the pressure from a country's public opinion will affect how all political actors, including right-wing populist parties, would adjust accordingly, or in some instances, would not. It is important to mention however that this reflect short-term changes, as over time, the perception of Brexit as a success or a failure is subject to change on the basis of the United Kingdom's future performance on social, economic or other fields (ibid., p. 51). As such, this is a subject that merits further study once enough time has passed as to provide researchers with the necessary hindsight.

In the national elections that have taken place since the trigger of Article 50 of the Treaty on the European Union (29 March 2017) and the ensuing Brexit negotiations, right-wing populist parties have had good electoral results across Europe's national elections.

The way that the different right-wing populist parties have changed their position to the European Union, by moderating their revindications (or not) in order to meet the challenge of an increasingly anti-exit public opinion in light of the negative perception of Brexit leads itself to the research question that inform this work. To formulate it in a clear fashion, it would be enunciated as such:

- '*How does public opinion on the EU affect Western European right-wing populist parties' messaging on the EU in the post-Brexit era?'*

That is to say, that this dissertation will seek to explain the way in which public opinion reacted to Brexit and subsequently how right-wing populist parties have changed their message on the European Union. It will do so by taking into consideration both endogenous factors, like a party's internal structure

(horizontally- vs. vertically-organised party) as well as exogeneous ones, such as the surrounding political environment (the degree of a party's institutionalisation, its relationship with the political mainstream) as well as the institutional environment (like the electoral system and a country's institutional set-up). The combination of these factors, according to Strøm (1990) will determine the strategies that these parties adopt ahead of the 2019 European Parliament election in light of the ones used in previous electoral cycles for both national and European elections.

The institutional environment is an important element in determining party behaviour and the incentive structure. Every European country has their own, specific political and institutional environments. The members of the European Union feature parliamentary, presidential and semi-presidential systems. Member States hold their elections under majoritarian electoral systems (like France or the UK) or under proportional electoral systems that vary in terms of the proportionality of their system (for instance, Sweden as well as pre-2018 Italy, or more extremely, the Netherlands) or which mix both systems, as is the case of both Germany and Italy after the 2018 election.

Likewise, political environment plays an important role too. The degree to which mainstream political parties engage with right-wing populists or in the reverse, exclude from the political arena by imposing a cordon sanitaire incentivise in different fashions the various strategies wright-wing populist actors can follow. For instance, parties that suffer such an exclusion from office would therefore need not concern themselves with seeking to promote their ability to hold office. Likewise, right-wing populist parties that have become institutionalised, here defined as continuous presence in national and subnational parliament over time and with a stable voter base (Janda, 1980, p. 19) would not be incentivised to pursue vote-seeking strategies to guarantee their electoral viability.

To answer the research question, this dissertation is divided into four main sections (excluding the introduction) as well as a reiterative conclusion. Firstly, it delves into the current state of the academic literature on right-wing populist parties and the to-date limited analysis of Brexit from academia, although there is a breadth of non-academic analysis readily available. After that, this dissertation lays down the core theoretical concepts and the derived propositions that serve as the way to

answer the research puzzle that this work seeks to answer and the approach to doing so, its research design. Finally, the empirical element of this work is divided in four case studies corresponding to four different parties within their specific country and a comparative section between the party behaviour exhibited in the four temporal case studies.

The importance of understanding how right-wing populist actors have adjusted their course due to a major external shock such as Brexit is important for two different reasons. From an academic perspective, it seeks to reinforce the current literature's dominant understanding of these parties as opportunistic vote-maximisers (Luther, 2011, p. 454) with a relatively thin ideological core (Mudde, 2017, p. 30). This could be best seen from observing their adaptation to the perceived failure of what would be one of their previous main policy proposals. The way in which they prove able or unable to shift away from a potentially failed policy position and shift according to the mood of public opinion would serve to also explore that factors that influence these parties' strategies and predominant behavioural tendencies within Strøm's (1990) behavioural space.

Secondly, in a more practical manner, knowing how right-wing populist parties reacted to Brexit helps provide a more nuanced understanding of political development that will take place following the May 2019 European Parliament election, providing a ready-made example of these actors' ability to adjust to new political and institutional environments, which will prove important given the projected larger presence in national governments, with the implications for EU-wide governance also through the European Council and the Council of the European Union. But this work also leaves a question unanswered, as only time can tell: If right-wing populist parties drop their desire to leave the European Union, what are the political implications in the future?

2. State of the Art: Right-wing Populism and its Behaviour

Together with the electoral rise of the right-wing populist party family across Western Europe since the 1990s, there has been a growing body of academic research and debate about these parties' policies, positions, motivations and even classification (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p. 8). The debate thus ranges from highly-specific aspects of their rise and their position vis-à-vis the so-called political mainstream to more prosaic aspects, like the correct appellation for the party family. Indeed, multiple terms abound in academic and non-academic literature: 'Extreme right', 'far-right', 'radical right', 'radical right-wing populism', 'right-wing populism', 'national populism', 'anti-immigrant', 'nativist' among others (Mudde, 2007, p. 12). For this reason, authors like Mudde are contributing to develop a more precise terminology and to more clearly delineate the concrete ideological aspects of this party family, in spite of the considerable academic debate over the very nature of populism, one of the core elements of its ideological profile, as it is explained in the following page.

Using terms of everyday language such as 'radical right', or 'right-wing populist' presents challenges. Generally-speaking, although conventionally associated with the right, right-wing populist parties today advocate for economic policies that chime with those of the mainstream right. Instead, this is because this categorisation is due to these parties' underlying opposition to post-modernity and conceptual egalitarianism, concepts identified by Minkenberg (1998) as underscoring right-wing political thought, especially as they feature "a discourse of order grounded in nature" (Seidel, 1988, p. 11). As Inglehart (1990) puts it, it would be "whether one … opposes social change in an egalitarian direction" (p. 293) that determines location along a right-left axis, and right-wing populist advocacy of anti-immigration and nativist thought goes hand-in-hand with the anti-egalitarian tendencies of the right.

2.1 What is Populism?

Authors like Mudde (2017), Ostiguy (2017) or Weyland (2017) criticise the lack of rigour in the way of defining populism, another core component of the right-

wing populist ideological core. This is an important ideological discussion given the role of left- and right-wing populism in Europe's contemporary politics but also elsewhere. A clear definition is important because, currently, in non-academic circles and occasionally in academia as well, nativism is identified as a basic tent of populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 1674), although this is only true of right-wing populism, not of left-wing, inclusionary populism common in Latin American and more recently also in crisis and crisis-stricken Spain and Greece (ibid.), nor of neoliberal populist parties like Italy's *Forza Italia* (ibid.).

This is a reflection of the diversity of perspectives on the populist party family. Currently, there are four major approaches to the study of populism, the ideational, the political-strategic, the socio-cultural and the discursive. The ideational approach's tradition traces back its origins to Canovan's (1981) work, and identifies populism as an ideological construct, albeit a thin-centred one (Mudde, 2017, p. 36), that will typically require adjectivisation (ibid.). Adjectivisation would be the addition of further ideological components to refine the party's specific socio-economic agenda, such as a defence of egalitarianism (left-wing populism), nativism (right-wing populism) or even individualism (neoliberal populism) as a result of the impossibility of basing populism on specific economic policy planks on its own (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p. 14).

According to ideational approach authors, as socio-economic aspects are excluded, populism thus forms around three core concepts: the people, the elite, often defined *ex negativo*, and the general will. All these concepts are brought together into an ideology featuring a moral, black-and-white division between a virtuous, good people and the elites, beholden to 'special interests' (Mudde, 2017, p. 33).

Against this understanding of populism as an ideology stands the political-strategic approach to populism as developed by Weyland (2001, 2017). According to Weyland (2017), populism is not an ideology, but rather "a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government based on direct, unmoderated, un-institutionalised support from large number of mostly unorganised followers" (Weyland, 2017, p. 50). Unlike ideational strategy advocated, the political-strategic perceives populist leaders as concerned with the pursuit of power and unconcerned with ideological content, which distinguishes

populism, pure and opportunistic and hence vote-maximising, from other charismatic movements, like, specifically, the right-wing radicals like Jean Marie Le Pen who would not sacrifice ideological congruence and radicalism for electoral gain, expanding their vote share (ibid., p. 62). According to this approach, thus, what this work calls right-wing populists would be usually excluded from the categorisation of populism.

Socio-cultural approaches to understanding populism rely on an understanding of modern politics as an orthogonal space with two crossed axes, the traditional socio-economic left-right one and a cultural one, divided by the 'high' and the 'low', with the 'low culture' being identified with the local, country-bounded habits of private people and the 'high''s cosmopolitan tendencies and habits (Ostiguy, 2017). According to this thesis, populism is defined as a particular kind of relationship between a (political) leader and a sector of society that receives certain performative and representative appeals positively due to socio-cultural historical reasons. (ibid., p. 80). This relationship is a two-way street (unlike in the political-strategic approach), characterised by the 'flaunting of the low' through the use of deliberately unapologetic, coarse, languages that showcases the difference between representative, 'low' political entrepreneurs from the manners and behaviour of the 'high' or mainstream politicians, attached to cosmopolitan values and a more formal, polished and impersonal language and habits (p. 81).

The political-strategic approach as especially developed by Weyland, with its emphasis on flexible, opportunistic behaviour is too focused on the behaviour of 1990s Latin American populist political entrepreneurs as a model for behaviour (Ostriguy, 2017) and it would therefore exclude from the category of populist nearly all the major anti-establishment, charismatic parties in Europe, which appears exceedingly limiting, as well inconsistent with work on right-wing populist parties, like Ivaldi (2016), that reflect how despite the change in tone, the *Front National's* programme – one prime example used by Weyland – has not shifted significantly from Jean Marie Le Pen to his daughter, despite the change in the way in which the employed rhetoric is more populist in nature. Ultimately, Western European right-wing populist parties do appear to exhibit opportunistic behaviours, but these are circumscribed to a set of clear ideological commitments that are not beholden to major U-turns. For instance, no European right-wing populist party has

abandoned its anti-immigration stance, and it is unlikely they would, even if it would prove to be a vote-winner.

That is not say however, that the political-strategic approach lacks merit, instead, it is very useful as a way of understanding how these parties operate within the – admittedly broad – boundaries set by the ideational approach. For instance, the ability of these de-institutionalised parties to shift position in non-core issues can help to explain the right-wing populist's ideological evolution on economic issues and European integration. Likewise, the socio-cultural approach is particularly adept for explaining the way in which a demand for a more populist approach to politics arises as a result of the cultural disconnection between traditional party elites and a certain category of voters alienated from what Ostiguy identifies as the 'high' mannerisms, and thus susceptible to the use of anti-establishment rhetoric.

Indeed, all three approaches can be combined. Weyland's critique of ideational approaches as too vague might be appropriate for populism as a whole, however his work, more centred on a very specific sort of populism, 1990s Latin American neoliberal populism is less relevant to the subject of this work. Ostiguy's socio-cultural approach is very useful however in separating between more traditional forms of the radical right and the far-right, historically unsuccessful and right-wing populism, which has proven electoral successful over the last three decades across Europe. Another important element that can be drawn from Ostiguy's work is the focus on the cultural connection, more than the ideological sincerity of the parties. This is a useful element in understanding the ability how rapid ideological changes in non-core issues do not appear to represent a major concern right-wing populist electorate.

This division between ideational approaches and political-strategic approaches is also replicated in the study of Euroscepticism, along a fault line dividing two schools of thought, one emphasising ideological-programmatic factors; the other, strategic-tactical factors. These are the so-called North Carolina school and the Sussex school. The North Carolina school of thought emphasises party leadership-focused analysis and favour ideological approaches, and particularly the development of the GAL-TAN socio-cultural cleavage, somewhat similar to Ostiguy's high-low dichotomy, between cosmopolitan and libertarian

attitudes on one end, and nationalist and authoritarian on the other (Kriesei et al., 2008). The Sussex school works on a more country-based look into Euroscepticism as a strategic-tactical factor and employing a more cross-country comparative methodological approach.

Ultimately however, as this dissertation will seek to demonstrate, insofar as supply-side Euroscepticism from right-wing populist parties is concerned, it would appear that although a nativist concern about supranational governance exists, this is more opportunistic, perhaps indicating a more mixed approach, in line with the works of Lieberman (2005) or Gerring (2006) and as advocated by Mudde (2012).

2.2   What motivates right-wing populists?

In this dissertation and in line with a rational choice explanation of party behaviour, an important element behind explaining the way in which right-wing populist parties have modulated their message in the pre- and post-Brexit period is determined by their motivations and how these shape the behaviours of parties in line with Strøm's 1990 unified behavioural theory. Here too, however, academic literature on this party family has not reached a consensus.

Indeed, authors like Heinisch (2010) or Ezrow et al. (2011, p. 288) consider that right-wing populist parties are policy-seeking parties, generally unconcerned with the swings of public opinion. This line of thought is taken to a more extreme point by authors like Pedersen (2012) who consider right-wing populist parties as not only not motivated by office-holding but rather an extreme form of policy-seeking behaviour, a 'policy purifier' role.

This assumption about the nature of right-wing populist parties as reticent to pursue office-seeking strategies also builds upon analytical works by Heinisch (2010) or Akkerman and de Lange (2012), who consider that office-holding has proven detrimental to right-wing populist parties' electoral success due to the trade-offs that they may encounter as a result of losing the protest party profile, thus losing protest voters (Akkerman et al., 2016) as well as a lack of adequate preparation and capacity to take on the challenges of government participation (Luther, 2011, p. 468), particularly in managing the conflict between beneficiaries of public office and the rest of the party.

However evidence from Albertazzi and McDonell (2015) in a study about the record of the *Lega Nord* in government in Italy found that (right-wing) populist parties can indeed successfully thread together both government participation and anti-establishment rhetoric (p. 109), which stands in contrast, for instance, with the record of the FPÖ's first stint in government in the early 2000s (Heinisch, 2013; Luther, 2011). Albertazzi and McDonell's look into how neither the *Lega Nord* nor the Swiss SVP suffered from participating in a coalition government would prove the opposite pattern (2015, op. cit.). Altogether, this might indicate that government participation only causes these parties electoral damage on the basis of their ability to 'sell' their share of pursued policies and party leaders' ability to manage the internal conflict (Luther, 2011).

Part of this divergence might also be explained, as Akkerman et al. (2016) indicate, by the historical context, with right-wing populist parties having followed vote-maximisation strategies in the 1990s and early 2000s (p. 13), more focused on vote-seeking as a way to guarantee their viability. Indeed, the authors ultimately point out that perhaps this responded to a short-term strategy that included policy-seeking and office-seeking goals in the medium-to-long term. As the majority of right-wing populist parties, at least in this study, can be considered as 'institutionalised', then they can shift to office-seeking strategies, in accordance with those exhibited by the *Front National*, the Sweden Democrats or, needless to say, the *Lega*.

This is perhaps surprising as right-wing populist parties generally exhibit internally centralised structures in which the leadership holds considerably more power than the rank-and-file (Heinisch & Mazzoleini, 2016, p. 239). This sets them apart from the typical horizontal structure that characterises other niche parties as defined by Meguid (2005) although it does fit within Wagner's (2011) more ideological understanding of what a 'niche' party is, that is, one which emphasises non-socio-economic issues, as is the case of immigration, Euroscepticism and tough law-and-order policies, for right-wing populists. Ultimately, this major difference will, as this work shows, explain a great deal of variation from the expected behaviour of a typical 'niche' party, which is expected to act as unbeholden to the shifts of public opinion (Wagner, 2011, Ezrow et al., 2011).

2.3 Brexit

Brexit remains, as of May 2019, still an unfinished process without a clear end-point. As a result, there is, as of yet, only a limited amount of academic work on the phenomenon seeking to explain the 'why' and the potential consequences, particularly in how it will affect the development of Euroscepticism in the rest of the European Union, both institutionally and at the ground level, on Europe's public opinion.

Press and academic analyses of the reasons behind the 'Leave' victory in the 2016 referendum have pointed out at the complicated relationship that the United Kingdom had with the EU and the pooling of sovereignty from even before joining the Union in 1973 (Wind, 2017, p. 229) whereas others prefer to point out to the Leave victory as a symbol of right-wing populist politics' victory. Other authors prefer to look into socio-economic factors, such as the division between 'losers' and 'winners' of globalisation and the resulting fears among the losers regarding immigration and European integration (Hobolt, 2016, p. 1273) although these authors also acknowledge the higher degree of Euroscepticism present in the British public opinion even before Brexit took place, compared to other European countries, and the ability of Eurosceptic issue entrepreneurs to link EU membership with immigration fears (Schimmelfennig, 2018)

Works like Taggart and Szczerbiak's (2018) indicate that of the three major crisis that have induced a growth in Euroscepticism across the European Union. 'Brexit' has played the most minor role (p. 1211), although the authors hold off from making any predictions with regards to either short-term or long-term effects. Needless to say, the long-term effects remain at this point impossible to assess, due to a simple time factor, however, there is some work already on the (very) short-term consequences of Brexit in continental Europe, namely that of de Vries (2017) examining how Brexit affected European public opinion immediately after the Leave success of the referendum. Most importantly, the author argues that "eurosceptic political entrepreneurs that vocalize demands for exit will be crucially important in framing what Brexit means in popular debate" (De Vries, 2017, p. 51). As it appears that these very actors have withdrawn from these claims, future works, in line with this dissertation will see that, short-term, Brexit had a negative effect

on Euroscepticism in the EU27, as de Vries herself also pointed out in a 2019 piece (The UK in a Changing Europe, 2019).

3. Theory: Understanding Party Behaviour

This section seeks to engage with the current academic literature in order to build a theoretical framework. This framework builds upon the foundations of Strøm's model of party behaviour, focused on party incentive structures, which condition and determine their strategies. This is done in order to develop a set of propositions that are applied in the analytical section in order to answer the research question.

The rational choice, institutionalist approach to understanding the behaviour of parties was developed for the Anglo-American two-party system by Anthony Downs. In Western Europe, however, this specific modality of a party system is often absent. Instead, multi-party systems abound. In multi-party systems, minority governments and multi-party coalition governments are quite common. This has a significant impact on changing the expectations and incentives of parties operating in these systems.

In order to understand how governments are formed, it is important thus to understand how parties behave in their environments. There have been various explanations, from theories emphasising the importance of closeness between the ideological positions of parties (cohesion) with emphasis on policy motives, but also the more traditional focus on the establishment of a 'minimum winning coalition'. The former approach rests upon the idea that parties are primarily policy-seeking entities, whereas the latter rests on the idea that parties are primarily office-seeking.

These two various strands, together with the understanding of parties as primarily vote-seeking rests at the heart of Strøm's (1990) unified model of party behaviour. According to this model parties thus exhibit three different primary behavioural motivations: Vote-seeking, office-seeking and policy-seeking[1]. Most parties are situated somewhere in between these three ideal motives, instead being located somewhere inside what area Strøm calls the 'behavioural space' (1990, p. 571). That is to say that parties typically don't only pursue one goal, as they are often not mutually-exclusive.

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[1] Can also be referred to as office-holding and policy-influencing.

Nevertheless, some objectives are easier to combine than others. Indeed, they typically involve trade-offs. Office-holding as an objective in order to pursue specific policies (thus policy-seeking motives) are very compatible (ibid. p. 573). Vote-seeking and policy-seeking is also somewhat compatible, and indeed it is a strategy that right-wing populist parties follow to radicalise centre-right positions on their core issues. The opposite however is true for the combination of office-holding and vote-seeking aims. They are typically contradictory, due to the so-called 'incumbency test', the reward or punishment that voters award governing parties on the basis of the gap between the policies promised during opposition and during the electoral campaigns versus the policies – successfully – enacted while in office.

The general aims that parties will follow depend on two fundamental sets of incentives: Endogenous and exogenous ones. The former relate to the balance of power within each party as to whether the party's leadership is stronger than its membership along a spectrum; whereas the latter is determined by a party's degree of institutionalisation, its inclusion or exclusion from cooperating with other political parties (political environment factors) or a country's electoral and political structures, such as its electoral system and the constraints it imposes (institutional environment factors)

3.1 Ideological Flexibility

Mudde (2007) argues that the right-wing populist parties' ideology consists of three key components: 'nativism', authoritarianism and social traditionalism. Of these, the most versatile is arguably nativism. Nativism here is defined as a doctrine "which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state" (Mudde, p. 17).

Nativism operates by developing an 'us versus them' framework with a black-and-white distinction between the 'good' us and the 'bad' them. The 'them' can be defined as both outsiders and insiders. The 'within' enemies are typically establishment figures, the 'elite' (p. 65) on both populist and nativist lines. Likewise, figures associated with cosmopolitanism are denounced (p. 71). There also 'outside' enemies, particularly immigrants from non-European countries, but

also occasionally from Eastern European countries (p. 70). In particular Islamophobia has become a central point in these parties' ideology and propaganda (p. 84).

Springing from this conception of the homogeneous nation, ethnically and ideologically, as the ultimate party goal, right-wing populist parties display a considerable flexibility in (re-)adapting and (re-)framing all other policy issues in light of this. Ranging from economic and social welfare policies to foreign and trade policy issues, all are subordinated to the nativist objective and to tactical considerations on the basis of the most politically-convenient approach (Mudde, 2007, p. 133).

A good example of this flexibility is these parties' economic and European agendas. In the first instance, the economic policy of right-wing populist parties is designed as a way to put into practice their three core ideological tenets: nativism, authoritarianism and populism.

For instance, although right-wing populist policies have been generally protectionist (p. 125) and oriented towards the protection of small businesses (p. 127), the parties feature radically more state-focused or more economically-liberal agendas depending on the country (the Austrian FPÖ or the Swiss SVP as opposed to the *Front National*) or indeed over time, as in the instance of the shift of the *Front National*'s economic programme for Reaganite-style economics to 'welfare chauvinism', that is the defence of an extensive welfare state, but excluding immigrants and those exhibiting parasitical attitudes (p. 131).

Of more concern for this work's topic, right-wing populist parties' European and foreign policy attitudes have greatly varied over time. Today, right-wing populist parties are closely associated with anti-European or Eurosceptic attitudes, however, this is a more recent phenomenon that usually recognised. Indeed, until about the signature of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, this party family was supportive of European integration (p. 159), if not Euroenthusiastic (ibid.). Mudde argued in 2007 that instead the parties had become 'Eurosceptic' in that they do not reject the underlying notion of European integration itself but its current shape (p.

164) instead preferring a 'confederal' model[2] characterised by a preference for a more limited degree of cooperation (p. 168). By the time of the Brexit referendum however, as a result of the institutional and economic crises suffered by the EU and the rise of Euroscepticism within the EU, these parties had moved towards the rejection of EU membership altogether.

This is manifested in a political rhetoric that, similarly to that employed in the national political landscape, is clearly populist, drawing a clear-cut distinction between the 'people' and an out-of-touch socio-political and cultural elite. This elite in the EU case is identified with the EU's political class, particularly its bureaucracy (especially the European Commission) who are generally accused of "the same vices as the native elites within the country, i.e. corruption, leftism, and treason" (Mudde, 2007, p. 73). Equally, the EU also serves as one element in the RPPs' conceptualisation of globalisation as a threat to the nation (ibid., p. 193) but European cooperation is also understood as a mean to check its advance. Indeed, right-wing populists remain favourable to the use of European institutions to provide protection to European businesses from non-European competition and some degree of closer military cooperation (p. 169).

These parties' ability to adapt significant elements of their ideological profile outside the core socio-culturally radical, nativist positions enables them to re-adjust on the basis of their electoral strategies to cooperate, if the opportunity arises, with other political forces or to pursue strategies that seek to draw a higher percentage of voters into their ranks.

3.2   Exogenous Incentives: Institutional and Political Environments

The incentive structure that affects the way in which parties behave is marked by their institutional and political environments.

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[2] This is not the case in traditionally Eurosceptic countries like the United Kingdom or Denmark, where right-wing populist parties, like UKIP exhibit outright Euroreject views. In Mudde's typology these means they hold negative views of both the EU and European integration as a concept.

3.2.1 Institutional Environment

The institutional environment is determined by 'rules of the game', that is the way in which the political system operates – the electoral law, particularly whether an electoral system is proportional or majoritarian; the way in which the executive is elected, indirectly, as in a parliamentary system or directly, like in a presidential systems. But even there, there are gradations: Most Western European electoral systems (with the exception of the UK and France) are proportional, yet they can have a high or a low threshold, or no threshold for entering parliament, which affect the incentive structure. Likewise, constituencies can range from a single-national one to very small ones on average. This impacts the way in which parties behave.

In an electoral system where the relationship between electoral weight (votes) and legislative weight (seats) is predictable, parties less of an incentive to behave in a vote-seeking manner. Likewise, where a party system is very competitive, where the translation from votes to seats is closer to zero-sum, vote-seeking strategies are much likelier (Strøm, 1990, p. 582). The best European examples are the United Kingdom and France, with majoritarian quasi-two-party systems. These countries' political systems are, at least until in 2017 in the French case, characterised by the existence of large, vote-seeking parties for which "voting power leads virtually directly to policy influence and office benefits" (ibid, p. 592). These parties typically seek to obtain 50%+ of the vote, or of the seats and to govern in a majority single-party government, and thus seek vote-maximisation to hold office (ibid.), an example of office-seeking motives through vote-seeking strategies.

Another factor to take into account are the expected benefits from holding or supporting an executive. In countries where legislative collaboration between government and opposition parties is more likely, like in Scandinavia, then office-seeking incentives are reduced, as the policy influence differential is reduced (ibid., p. 587).

3.2.2 Political Environment

The exogeneous incentives, as previously mentioned, are not solely determined by the formal institutional set-up of a polity. Instead, they are also determined by the political environment to which a specific political party within a polity is subject to. This is largely determined by a party's position within the party system, its

ability to cooperate with other or the degree to which it is excluded, as well as the degree of institutionalisation, that is the amount of time said party has managed to remain present in national and sub-national assemblies and successfully managing a leadership transition over a prolonged period of time (Janda, 1980).

Parties in a political system can be conceived as either 'mainstream government parties', 'mainstream opposition parties' or 'challenger parties' (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012). The first two kinds of parties have a limited interest in introducing new issues into the political arena due to strategic considerations about both current and future government coalitions that strongly incentive them to reinforce the pre-existing party competition dynamic (p. 250). This incentive is stronger in multi-party systems where the introduction of new issues complicates coalition-building (p. 251). This apprehension about the introduction of new issues is non-existent in 'challenger parties', which seek the opposite. These parties will seek to bring about new issues into the political arena in order to mobilise and gain voters by reframing political conflict to their advantage (ibid.).

De Vries and Hobolt's (2012) 'challenger party' definition by-and-large matches the concept of a niche party[3]. Niche parties are defined by Wagner (2012, p. 847), as "parties that compete primarily on a small number of non-economic issues … [meaning that they] do not emphasize economic issues and … [instead] emphasize non-economic issues". As a result, the issues these parties cover fall outside the traditional class cleavage and cross across traditional cleavage lines (Meguid, 2008), instead focusing on the social-cultural axis. Examples of non-economic issues vary, but they include immigration, European integration or the environment. Ideologically-speaking, niche parties are usually green, post-communist and right-wing populist (Wagner, 2011; Meguid, 2008; Jensen & Spoon, 2010), although this classification is somewhat disputed.

Of these parties, right-wing populist parties have been, subject to an extreme form of differentiation from the political mainstream, like in the case of the Sweden Democrats or the Flemish *Vlaams Belang*. In this form of differentiation, all other parties in a polity rule out any active or passive collaboration with them, this is a *cordon sanitaire*.

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[3] Niche party is the preferred terminology that will be employed throughout this work.

This political isolation has resulted in a 'structural opposition' behaviour (Luther, 2011, p. 454). To countenance this isolation, right-wing populists depict themselves as representing the people against a self-serving political establishment. The rhetorical corollary of this approach is that these parties employ an aggressive style designed to pursue a strategy of vote maximisation (vote-seeking behaviour).

In some European counties, the mainstream right and right-wing populist parties cooperate, however in others, they are excluded from any degree of cooperation at any level, like in Germany (Bräuninger et al., 2019, p. 83) or Sweden (Heinze, 2018, p. 298). There are also intermediate situations with cooperation only at the sub-national level. Parties suffering from political exclusion have limited available resources for party-building and have high costs of activism (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2014, p. 1143), meaning that they would be expected to electorally stagnate as a consequence of their ideological rigidity (ibid.).

Cordon sanitaires can also have the effect of depriving parties from resources and preventing or reversing their growth, as in the case of the Belgian *Vlaams Blok*, later *Vlaams Belang* (Pauwel, 2010, p. 78), particularly if this *cordon sanitaire* is not solely political, but also mediatic (de Jonge, 2019, pp. 204-5) and if there are less extreme alternative parties to co-opt some of the issues owned by RPPs (Pauwel, p. 79), because "a sustained strategy of containment combined with an attempt to provide democratic alternatives for dissatisfied voters will, in the end, convince extremist voters that their vote is, indeed, a wasted one" (Rummens and Abts, 2010, p. 663). Seemingly the ideological flexibility of RPPs has not led to this outcome (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2014, p. 1153).

Over time, niche political parties can equally move towards the political mainstream. A good example of this pattern are green parties. Green parties appeared in the 1980s as quasi-single-issue parties in the 1980s which, over time, moved towards the political mainstream by developing and adopting a centre-left socio-economic agenda alongside their socio-cultural concerns.

Institutionalisation is a situation where a party is "reified in the public party so that "the party" exists as a social organisation apart from its momentary leaders, and this organisation demonstrates recurring patterns of behaviour [sic] valued by those who identify with it" (Janda, 1980, p. 19). This is done on the basis of six criteria: year of origin (age), name changes, (dis)continuity, leadership competition,

legislative presence (in)stability and participation or absence in elections over time (Janda, 1980).

An institutionalised party has had a stable, continuous presence in legislative assemblies for a considerable amount of time, has continuously run for election for a determined period of time, has undergone a leadership transition and has had few or no name changes over the course of its history (ibid.). In the specific case of this work, thus, the AfD is not an institutionalised party, as it is of very recent origin, but it has however been present for half a decade in now in the German national and sub-national legislatures and has undergone several leadership changes while retaining its original name, even though it has shifted ideologically (Lees, 2018).

As a result, institutionalised right-wing populist parties are motivated a distinct set of exogeneous compared to non-institutionalised ones. Parties that have not become stable over time are concerned about their viability, particularly in countries with an electoral system that imposes high entrance thresholds or a high uncertainty in terms of the translation of votes into seats, like in a majoritarian system (Strøm, 1990, pp. 582-583). For the opposite reason, institutionalised parties have lower incentives to pursue voter-seeking strategies, as they have obtained electoral continuity and consolidation, and thus, viability. Because of this, newer, smaller parties in a multi-party system may be satisfied with mobilising new issue demands among a smaller cohort of voters (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012), and seek a more indirect manner of influencing policies.

3.3 Endogenous Incentives: Structures and Leadership

Much like how the institutional and political environment of a polity determines, from a rational choice perspective, the way in which political parties behave, the same is true for the parties' own internal structures. For instance, parties with more centralised internal structures are incentivised to pursue office-seeking goals, whereas those that feature horizontal, democratic structures are typically beholden to the base's preference for policy-seeking and policy purism (Schumacher et al., 2013, p. 474). Indeed, the balance of power between party leaders and party activists makes parties more or less likely to respond to varying environmental incentives (p. 475).

Party leaders and the party's activists and base typically hold opposite behavioural tendencies. Party leaders seek to maximise material and status-oriented goals through seeking and obtaining office (ibid., p. 465). Electoral victories and political office-holding serve as a safeguard for party leaders, maintaining their position within the party and staving off potential internal challenges (p. 474). Party activists are instead mostly concerned with policy-seeking and less so with holding office (p. 465), as they are unconstrained by the need to maintain their own position within the party apparatus. This pattern of behaviour seems to be generalised regardless of political parties' specific ideologies.

This is not to say that party leaders do not care or do not want to influence policy-making. Rather, office-holding is the most straightforward way of influencing and, evidently, implementing a party's preferred policies. However, there are other ways of influencing policies without direct participation, particularly by providing external support, a practice that has been employed by right-wing populist parties supporting centre-right governments, like in Denmark.

Party logistics play an important role too in determining the balance of power between party leadership and party membership. In order to get their message across, parties rely on specialised, paid professional staff, as access to media, and on the labour-intensive work of the parties' rank-and-file through activities like canvassing (Strøm, 1990, p. 576).

Typically, mainstream parties feature a dominant pragmatic office-seeking leadership. These parties' access to media, financial resources necessary to hire professional staff reduce their dependency on the party's activist base (Strøm, p. 581, Schumacher et al., 2013, p. 465). This is particularly the case when a leadership-dominated party is undergoing a period of office exclusion, which serves as the main reason for changing policy orientation (Schumacher et al., 2013)

The opposite is usually true for 'niche' parties. These parties feature both more democratic internal organisation mechanisms with a much more constrained party leadership and are also much more dependent on the kind of labour-intensive work than can only be carried out by activists, as these party's financial means constrain them from hiring a large number of professional staff members (Wagner, 2011, p. 849).

In sum, political parties, including right-wing populist ones, have internal structures that range from possessing more centralised, vertical organisations to more democratic, horizontal ones. The combination of this variety of internal structures with the previously-mentioned, opposed preferences of party leadership and base means that depending on where the internal balance of power stands, parties will care more about the policy location of the median voter (a proxy for public opinion) for vertically-organised parties, or the median party voter, for horizontally-organised parties (Strøm, 1990; Schumacher et al., 2013).

Although in most academic literature, right-wing populist parties are defined as 'niche' parties by virtue of their emphasis on the socio-cultural axis, they diverge significantly from other niche parties in terms of their internal organisation. Needless to say, every party's organisation varies (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016), however, they all share a series of commonalities. Right-wing populist parties are "de-institutionalised parties orientated towards charismatic personalities and as organisations seeking to maintain movement character while engaging in spectacular forms of self-presentation" (Heinisch, 2010, p. 91).

In fact, right-wing populist parties epitomise the model of a leadership-led party. In these parties, although a degree of complex organisation is needed for their durability (de Lange & Art, 2011; Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016, p. 227), a strong party organisation is typically replaced by a hyper-centralised leadership style that emphasises loyalty to the party leader and his preferred goals and strategy (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016, p. 226). Parties like the *Front National* and the *Lega* have hyper-centralised leadership structures with a central, national leadership that is charged with candidate selection, control of the funding and drafting of the manifestos. (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, p. 228-229). Similarly, although the Sweden Democrats feature a more mainstream model of internal organisation, the authoritarian internal policies of a small, coherent leadership group exist, and continue to set it apart from other Swedish parties (ibid, p. 228). Even in federal countries, where due to the countries' power structure right-wing populist parties feature more decentralised governance, they remain much more centralised than the rest of the political system (ibid., p. 227).

3.4 Propositions for Exploration

The combination of the right-wing populist parties' ideological flexibility beyond their nativist core, their tactical flexibility thanks to the dominance by an unconstrained leadership makes these parties capable of changing policy orientation in order to reap the benefits of their strategies, whether vote-seeking, office-seeking or policy-seeking. As a result, right-wing populist parties have behaved as vote-maximisers, albeit with what appears to be a medium-to-long term strategy of office-holding, as would be expected of a political party where the leadership is so internally preponderant (Luther, 2011).

In the case of Brexit, the victory of the Leave campaign in 2016 was welcomed by all the main right-wing populist leaders in Europe and was generally regarded as a victory for the right-wing populist, Eurosceptic cause (Iakhnis et al., 2018). If the European countries' public opinion perceived Brexit as a successful venture, or remained overall sceptical of the European Union, then it appears likely that right-wing populist would not change their policy preference. If instead, public opinion moves away from more Eurosceptic positions, then it would be possible to see how the interplay of internal structure and environmental factors determined the course of action for each actor.

There is precedent for working from the assumption that right-wing populists may shift their stated European policy preference to widen their appeal, or to avoid losing the electoral support gained over the last decade. Indeed, in the past, right-wing populist parties have engaged in similar strategies. Perhaps the most well-known one is the Front National's *dédiabolisation* strategy, that the party has pursued since Marine Le Pen took over the party from her father. *Dédiabolisation*, consists of improving the party's credibility through the modernisation and professionalisation of its image (including rebranding) and party personnel serves to detoxifying the party's image without losing its appeal amongst its traditional electorate (Ivaldi, 2016, p. 233). This is an example of 'ex ante adaptation' tactics common to right-wing parties that seek to prepare for incumbency's costs while still pursuing a vote-seeking strategy in the short-term (Luther, 2011).

The way in which the environmental incentives, both political and institutional, and the parties' internal structures work together merits consideration. Although

the political and institutional environments allow for the development of specific opportunities that right-wing populist parties take advantage of to advance their specific agendas and strategies, ultimately, it appears that, ultimately, it is the internal balance of power which determines how parties respond to the environmental incentives (Schumacher et al., 2013). For instance, even if there is a potential opening for pursuing a vote-seeking strategy, if a party is dominated by a policy purist membership, it might not take advantage of the possibility where a party with a strong, pragmatic leadership would.

For these reasons, it is possible to develop a series of propositions that help to explore and develop explanations about the (divergent) ways in which right-wing populist parties might react to an external shock such as the Brexit decision, especially in light of the way in which public opinion reacts to the event.

If as shown in De Vries' (2018) work, Brexit is perceived by public opinion as a failure, it would likely bounce on the opposite direction, regaining a more positive attitude towards the European Union. As a result, those right-wing populist parties that are institutionalised and possess an internal structure that is dominated by its leadership (vertical), they would shift away from defending a national exit from the EU, in line with their office-seeking behaviour priorities.

> *P1: If public opinion moves, after Brexit, towards a more positive impression of the EU, institutionalised, vertically-organised and politically included RPPs will move away from arguing for a Brexit-like departure from the EU.*

A vertically-organised right-wing populist party that has not reached long-term viability, and hence cannot considered to be institutionalised will not be concerned with office-seeking, instead pursuing vote-maximisation strategies in order to guarantee its viability (Luther, 2011). As a result, the party will continue to maintain a populist, anti-establishment policy plank in order to both retain its voting core and protest votes and has limited incentives to advocate for a policy shift more in line with the desire to hold office.

> *P2: If public opinion moves, after Brexit, towards a more positive impression of the EU, non-institutionalised, vertically-organised and*

politically included RPPs will not move away from arguing for a Brexit-
like departure from the EU.

Where a right-wing populist party instead possesses a membership-dominated internal structure (horizontal) the party would be expected to not shift according to the mood of the country's public opinion, as it would not have the incentives to move with it, rather remaining close to the policy preferences of the party's rank-and-file, preferring to maintain a policy-seeking behaviour by advocating an exit.

P3: Regardless of public opinion's shift, horizontally-organised RPPs
will continue to advocate for a Brexit-like departure from the EU.

In the case of those RPPs that are subject to a *cordon sanitaire*-like exclusion from the political arena, these parties would be expected to remain frozen in their pre-2016 policy position, due to their reliance on the core voters and the effects of *cordons sanitaires* on parties' ability to shift ideologically. As a result of this, policy-seeking along the lines of the preference of the party base are to be expected

P4: Regardless of public opinion's shift, politically-excluded RPPs, will
continue to advocate for a Brexit-like departure from the EU.

4. Methodology

This section explains the specific mechanisms for the exploration of the propositions and the relationship between variables elaborated in light of the current academic literature on political party behaviour and right-wing populist parties with the ultimate goal of answering the research question. The section is articulated into three distinct elements, in order: The case selection, the operationalisation of the independent variable and the moderating ones, and the approach to the within-case and cross-case analyses.

The dissertation is organised as a mixture of within-case and cross-case analysis in order to develop an explanatory work seeking to understand quasi-contemporary political developments. By exploring the response of four major Western European right-wing populist parties to the Brexit referendum, the British government's invocation of Article 50 in 2017, and the subsequent EU-UK negotiations, it would be thus possible to see how public opinion's shifts have affected right-wing populist parties on the basis of their national political and institutional environments as well as their own internal organisation. To do so, four parties are selected between the period determined by the four first-order national and the two European Parliament elections immediately preceding and following the 2016 referendum. These boundaries are fundamental, as a case is fundamentally a "spatially delimited phenomenon (a unit) observed at a since point in time or over some period of time" (Gerring, 2007, p. 19).

As a result of the selection of four geographical cases of study, this work is built upon a multiple case study. Works based on case studies present some well-known potential problems, like a researcher's case selection and cognitive biases (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 24-25), that results are only tentative nature and generally are hard to generalise given the very specific nature of the studies (ibid., p. 31). This last point is however is part of a trade-off typically associated with case studies: a narrower applicability in exchange of a higher degree of explanatory richness (ibid.). These criticisms are particularly geared towards single-case studies. This work, as a multiple case study avoids them to some degree.

The manner of data processing and observation in both the within-case and the across-case analyses is qualitative, even though it also presents cross-case analyses

which are typically more associated with quantitative methodologies (ibid., p. 29). Qualitative research can be defined as an "inquiry process … that explore[s] a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture … in a natural setting." (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). A qualitative approach is ideal for establishing a relationship between various variables in a setting in order to establish a cause-effect relationship (ibid., p. 17) as well as for answering 'how'-oriented research questions, as the one animating this work. This is also the ideal approach for the exploration of the validity of the propositions, which follows a logic akin to that of process-tracing and congruence-testing. Likewise, qualitative approaches go hand-in-hand with case studies insofar as they both seek to obtain a deeper, richer understanding of the interplay of the variables towards explaining variable behavioural outcomes.

4.1   Case selection

This dissertation is organised as a multiple case study. There are four cases under scrutiny: The *Front national*, now *Rassemblement national* (France), the *Lega Nord*, now *Lega* (Italy), the Sweden Democrats and Alternative for Germany. The case studies are compared both in terms of time and across borders. That is to say that they operate at two different levels: A comparison of each party's manifestos from before and after Brexit (temporal comparison) and an analysis of the observable patterns across time between the four different parties under study (geographical comparison).

The four case studies were not randomly chosen, but rather they represent an instance of purposeful sampling (Creswell, p. 62) in terms of their political and institutional environment as well as their own internal organisation. France's *Front National* is generally considered to be the 'prototype' of a right-wing populist party (Mudde, 2007, p. 41) and the *Lega Nord* has been present in the Italian Parliament since 1992, in fact being the oldest, continuously-existing party in contemporary Italy (Albertazzi et al., 2018, p. 645). The other two cases, the German AfD and the Sweden Democrats represent cases of a more recent success, having first entered the national parliament in 2017 (AfD) or in 2010 in the Swedish case.

Likewise, the parties present different degrees of institutionalisation as defined by Janda (1980). The *Lega* is, as of 2019, in the Italian national government and

also governs several Italian regions; the *Rassemblement national* while never having held an executive office at the national level is present in most sub-national assemblies and governs several French municipalities. The Sweden Democrats have been subject to a seemingly faltering *cordon sanitaire* (Heinze, 2018), while it appears that the German *cordon sanitaire* remains solid at every governmental level (Bräuninger et al., 2019, p. 83).

By deliberately choosing parties with different levels of integration into their political systems and subject to different political environments, this work seeks to be able to create generalizable results that can serve to remedy some of the disadvantages of case studies.

With regards to the chronological or temporal selection, Brexit serves as the pivotal axis for selecting the timespan. It covers from the first national election prior to Brexit (2012-2014) to the upcoming 2019 election to the European Parliament (23-26 May 2019). This means that the elections that are selected are as follows: The French presidential pledges from the 2012 and 2017 presidential campaigns, the Sweden Democrats' 2014 and 2018 *Riksdag* election, the 2013 and 2018 Italian general elections, the 2013 and 2017 *Bundestag* elections in Germany and the elections to the European Parliament in these four countries on 2014 and 2019.

In the French case, the presidential election is selected as opposed to the legislative election. Since the constitutional reform of 2000 when the presidential term was shortened from seven to five years with the goal of ending the *cohabitation* phenomenon, the outcome of the legislative election held shortly after the presidential election is by-and-large determined by the outcome of the immediately preceding presidential election, as a result, as proven by Dupoirier and Sauger (2010), "the institutionalization of electoral cycles that begin with a presidential election shifts the balance in favour of the president … increas[ing] the likelihood that a newly elected president will gain a working majority in the [French National] Assembly" (p. 38).

Country	Pre-Brexit (pre-2016)	Post-Brexit (post-2016)
France	2012: "Marine Le Pen. La Voix du Peuple, l'Esprit de la France"	2017: "144 engagements présidentiels. Marine 2017" 2019: "Pour une Europe des Nations et des Peuples"
Germany	2013: "Wahlprogramm Alternative für Deutschland" 2014: "Mut zu Deutschland. Für ein Europa der Vielfalt"	2017: "Programm für Deutschland" 2019: "Europawahlprogramm"
Italy	2013: "Programma elezione politiche 2013" 2014: "Elezioni europee 2014. Programme elettorale"	2018: "Elezioni 2018 – Programma di Governo" 2019: "Prima l'Italia! Il buonsense in Europa"
Sweden	2014 (N): "Vi väljer välfärd!" 2014 (E): "Mindre EU, mer Sverige"	2018: "Sverigedemokraternas valplattform 2018" 2019: "Valplattform Europaparlamentsvalet 2019"

Figure 1. Visualisation of the case selection's manifestos

In order to gauge the way in which right-wing populist rhetoric and proposals have shifted, it draws from the parties' electoral manifestos. These manifestos were retrieved from the parties' websites. There are three exceptions, however. In the case of the 2013 *Bundestag* election, the AfD manifesto was retrieved from the Comparative Manifesto Project's database. For the 2014 European Parliament election, the Front National released no specific manifesto, and as a result, the analysis only uses the 2012 electoral manifesto. Likewise, for the 2019 EP election, as of the time of the conclusion of this work, no manifesto had been released by the Lega, and as a result, the analysis could only draw from very limited propaganda material, such as brief videos by Salvini and campaign slogans.

Within these selected manifestos, the chapters to be analysed are specifically those that deal with the issue of both departure from the European Union (*Dexit*, *Swexit*, *Frexit* or *Italexit*) or the reform of its institutions and competences. These chapters are present in all the selected electoral programmes. They exist under a series of different names:

- In the French case, the 2012 presidential election manifesto's section on European institutional reform was known as "Retrouver notre liberté monétaire", and in 2017, "Rendre à la France sa souveraineté nationale". For the 2019 EP election, the section was "Un engagement pour une vraie Europe"

- In the German case, "Europapolitik" (2013), "Deutschland als souverän Staat erhallen" (2017), "Für mehr Demokratie und gegen EU-Zentralismus" (2014) and "Ein Europea der Nationen" (2019).
- In the Italian case, "Più Europa dei Popoli, meno euro-burocrazia" (2013), "Europa" (2018), "Il Deficit democratico dell'UE" (2014).
- In the Swedish case, "Ett nära europeiskt samarbete utan överstatlighet" (2014), "Den europeiska unionen" (2018), "Vi kräver folkomröstning om atergang till nationellt självbestämmande!" (2014, EP) and "Ett nytt EU-fördrag" (2019).

4.2   Operationalisation

4.2.1 Independent Variable: Public Opinion

The very nature of case studies underlines the importance of the context in order to place, present and explain the way in which variables interplay and result in a given outcome, thus proving or disproving the hypotheses. In order to place these specific texts in the appropriate political context, this dissertation works from the Standard Eurobarometer polling data on attachment and opinion about the European Union, specifically the survey question that reads "In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?"[4] from the Standard Eurobarometer 78, 80, 82, 86, 88 and 90 surveys, corresponding to the autumn of the years in which the analysed elections were held (2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017 and 2018 respectively).

In order to explore the cases in light of the propositions, some of the theoretical assumptions that underpin them are derived from the assessment from academic literature.

4.2.2 Moderating Variable: Political & Institutional Environment

The first moderating variable is the political and institutional environment. This is done by looking into the degree to which a right-wing populist party is

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[4] The same question had the same wording throughout all the Eurobarometer surveys used, albeit under different numberings. It was question A12 in EB 78, A11 in EB 80, A9 in EB 82, 86 and 88, and D78 for Eurobarometer survey 90.

institutionalised and its possibilities for cooperation with other political parties within its political system.

Institutionalisation is defined on the basis of Janda (1980)'s criteria, looking into the number of years that a party has been represented in the national parliament as well as their presence at the sub-national level (number of seats over time), as well as whether the party had undergone leadership transitions and name changes. The ability of a party to cooperate and interact, with the rest of the party landscape is assessed from secondary literature, and by observing whether these parties are subject to a *cordon sanitaire,* according to academic work, or have supported participated in governance at the national and/or sub-national levels.

4.2.3 Moderating Variable: Internal Structure

The second moderating variable is the internal balance of power within a party between leadership and membership. This is also assessed on the basis of secondary literature, that is, specific authors that have looked into the way in which these parties are organised. Specifically, this work draws on the work of Heinisch and Mazzoleni (2016) for the French, Italian and Swedish cases. For the German AfD, however, it works from the works of Franzmann (2018), Arzheimer (2015) and Siri (2018).

4.3   Analysis Procedure

The analyses of this work are adopted from process-tracing and congruence-testing logics. Process-tracing is a typically qualitative methodology usually built on "relevant, verifiable causal stories resting in differing chains of cause-effect relations whose efficacy can be demonstrated independently of those stories" (Tilly, 2008, p. 87). It seeks to identify the causal process between one (or several) independent variables and the final outcome. It does so by forming a narrative accompanied with explicit and highly-specific causal hypotheses.

In the instance of this work however, a pure process-tracing cannot be used, as there is not *a priori* known relationship between an initial and a final event. As a result, the way process-tracing logic is applied in this work is by identifying the propositions derived from political party behaviour and incentive structures, as specified in the theoretical framework section. This is done via an analytical explanation, which consists of "analytical causal explanation couched in explicit

theoretical forms" (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 211). An important advantage of process-tracing logic is its recognition of the existence of alternative causal pathways or alternative causes; however, it does require the selection of the correct IVs for the cases, which can reinforce biases typically linked to qualitative research. This enables "drawing inferences to the relevance of theories from the congruence of concrete observations with predictions deduced from these theories" (Annamalai, 2010, p. 211), or in other words, congruence analysis to test the predicted patterns of behaviour in the propositions.

As a result, observations are drawn from the four parties' independent and moderating variables from which the propositions are further refined to each case, development an expectation of behaviour leading to different outcomes. In a second stage, the manifestos are analysed in light of the predicted patterns of behaviour. This approach is conductive towards determining the strength of the propositions or hypotheses (George & Bennett, p. 221).

The strength of undertaking this comparison is in order to reinforce the conclusions of this work to partially prevent the limited validity issue that is often associated with single-case studies. This also avoids the issue of comparative methods insofar as it avoids inferential errors.

5. Analysis

This chapter is organised into four different sections, the first three deal with the various variables and set out how they relate with the propositions. This is followed by an analysis of the manifestos from where observations are produced and matched against the expected behaviour from the theory-based propositions.

5.1   Public Opinion

When Brexit occurred, it was widely regarded as a major crisis for the European Union, the third consecutive one on the back of the just-finished financial and monetary crisis and immediately following the refugee crisis of the summer of 2015, and to a lesser degree, 2016. This is reflected in the way in which the net public opinion in all four cases worsened as reflected in the Eurobarometer of fall 2016.

This would, however, mark the nadir of Eurosceptic sentiment in the four case countries. Within a year, public opinion's views on the EU in all four countries had markedly improved by 10 to 15 percentage points.
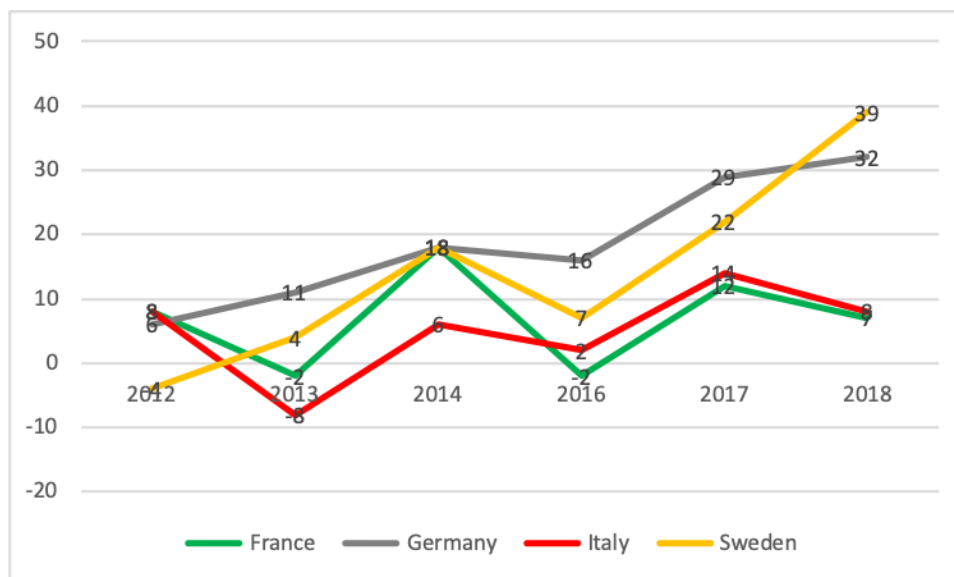

Figure 2. Evolution of the net opinion on the EU in the four cases

This marked improvement, which continued in Germany and Sweden into the autumn of 2018, could be an example of what De Vries (2018) considered a reaction to any exit from the European, using the negative perception in continental Europe of Brexit as a benchmark.

For mainstream political parties, the improvement in the public perception of the European Union would not represent a significant problem. Mainstream political parties are generally pro-European to various extents, and in some political systems, like Germany's, staunchly so (Arzheimer, 2015, p. 535). Therefore, an improvement in public opinion could be argued to be beneficial to their preferred policy options, reducing the gap between party preference and public opinion's preference.

This improvement in public opinion's perception of the European Union would however represent a challenge for right-wing populist parties, given their Eurosceptic belief system and rhetoric as well as their overall welcoming of the British decision to leave the European Union. Ultimately however, right-wing populist parties are tactically and ideologically flexible, at least in those areas beyond their nativist conception of the nation-state (Mudde, 2007).

Political parties largely operate on the national arena, however, and as a result, it is more relevant to identify trends within each specific country over the analysed time period.

5.1.1 France

At the time of the French presidential election of 2012, the French public opinion's perception of the European Union remained overall positive (+8) but on a downward trajectory. Indeed, by 2013, it had soured further, with a net positive of +2, and featuring a large mass of neutral views.
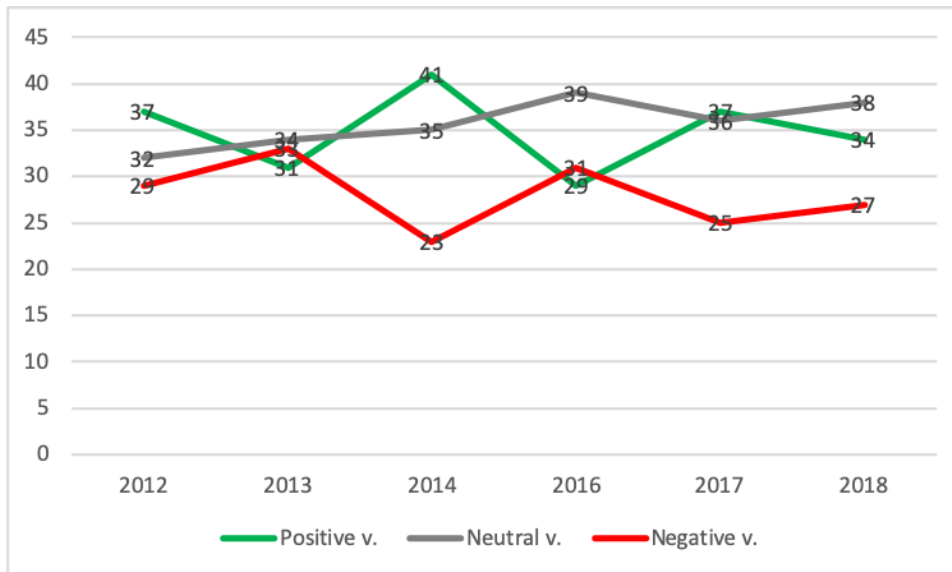
Figure 3. Evolution of French public opinion on the EU, 2012-2018

From the autumn of 2013 to the autumn of 2014 there was a marked improvement in the French public opinion's view of the European Union with a polarisation of views and a high net positive. However, by 2016, and most likely due to the migration crises and the recent occurrence of Brexit, France's public opinion featured a net negative of -2 (EC, 2016), although the number of neutral views remained stable.

By the autumn of 2017, after the French presidential election and the beginning of the Brexit negotiations however, the country's net opinion about the EU returned to a +12 positive (EC, 2017), perhaps as a result of anti-Brexit backlash. By the autumn of 2018 and ahead of the 2019 EP election, scores had somewhat stabilised with a net positive opinion but a stable mass of neutral views. Indeed, by this time, France's public opinion was roughly divided into three thirds of a roughly similar size, between positive, negative and neutral views' groups (EC, 2018).

5.1.2 Germany

Traditionally a very pro-European country, by 2012, the net opinion of Germans about the European Union was at its lowest point within the selected time range, at +6 (EC, 2012). It would progressively bounce towards a high net positive opinion ahead of the European Parliament election of May 2019. The 2012 poor overall views were largely caused by public opinion's unhappiness over the handling of the

European debt crisis and the successive bail-outs of various southern European countries, most notably Greece.
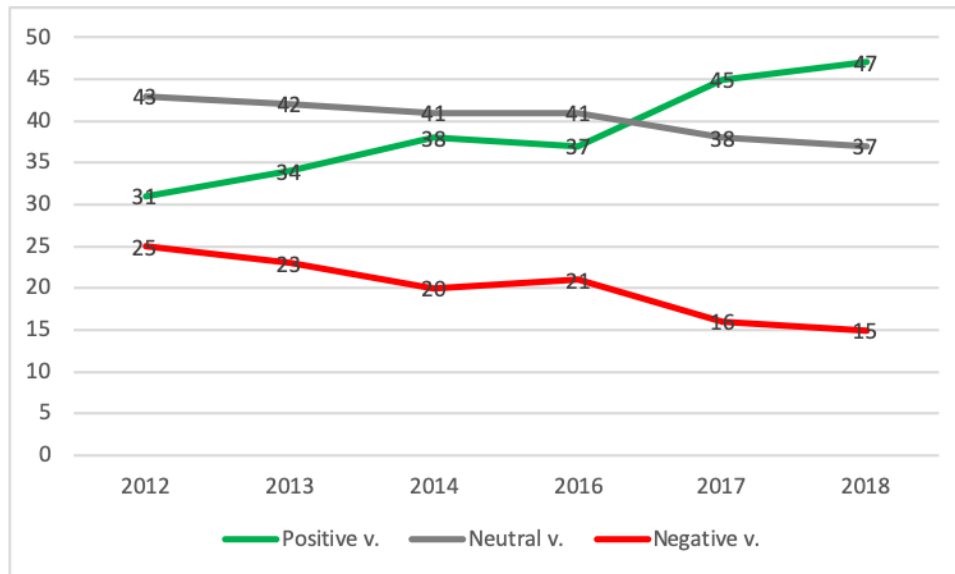

Figure 4. Evolution of German public opinion on the EU, 2012-2018

In every survey of the Eurobarometer since 2012, including the time immediately after the summer 2015 migration crisis and the Brexit vote, German public opinion has grown more favourable towards the European Union, with an especially marked improvement between 2016 and 2017, perhaps as a reaction to the Brexit negotiations in line with De Vries (2018) work, ultimately resulting in a net favourability of +32 (EC, 2018) by the last survey ahead of the European elections of 2019.

5.1.3 Italy

By the time of the autumn of 2013, after the country's 2013 general election had taken place, the Italian public opinion's net view of the European Union had worsened considerably from the previous autumn, down to a negative -6 (EC, 2013). This is very probably linked to the country's complicated economic situation during the Eurozone economic crisis, which the country suffered more than the other case countries in this analysis.
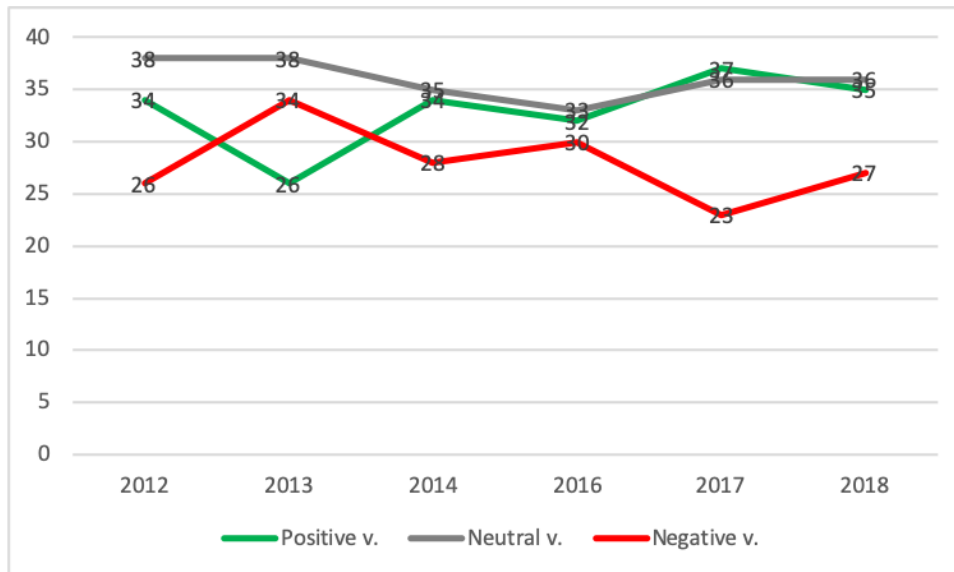
Figure 5. Evolution of Italian public opinion on the EU, 2012-2018

Since the time of the 2013 election, Italy featured a close-to-equal level of neutral, positive and negative views about the European Union, in which negative perception grew slightly between 2014 and 2016. However, from the autumn of 2016 to that of 2017, like France and Sweden, the country experienced a sharp decrease in the amount of declared negative views, from 30% to 23%, (EC, 2016, 2017).

5.1.4 Sweden

In the autumn of 2012, Sweden was the only case country that exhibited a net negative opinion about the European, although the country exhibited a growing positive trend.

Figure 6. Evolution of Swedish public opinion on the EU, 2012-2018

This growing appreciation is very clear, as of all the case countries, Sweden has experienced the sharpest and most contiguous rise in net perception of the EU, from -4 to +39 in 6 years' time, (EC, 2012, 2018). With the exception of the period following the summer of 2016, coincidentally with the Brexit referendum, negative views have also decreased. Indeed, by the autumn of 2018, over half of all Swedes declare to have a positive view of the EU (EC, 2018).
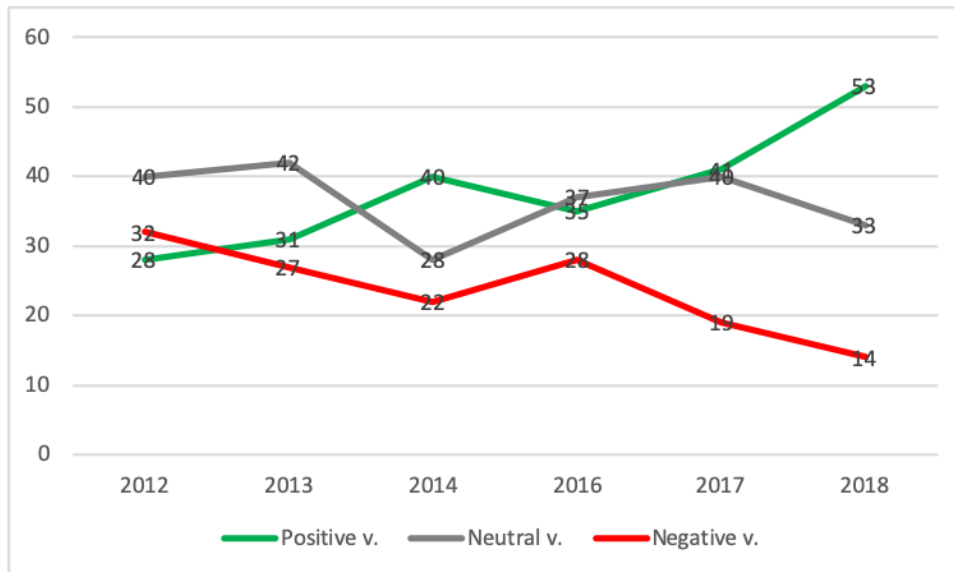
5.2 Political and Institutional Environment

5.2.1 France

The *Front National* was founded in 1972 but it only obtained its electoral breakthrough in the EP 1984 elections and the legislative elections of 1986 when proportional representation was used. From then until 2012, the party hovered at around 10-15% of the national vote. This was not reflected in the legislative weight that the *Front National* has in the French National Assembly. Indeed, the French electoral system at the national level is majoritarian, with a two-round system for both legislative and presidential elections. As a result, the FN has problems translating voting weight into parliamentary weight, in 2017, it obtained 8 seats (out of 577) with 13.20% of the vote.

Despite this lack of presence, the RN is somewhat better represented at the local, departmental and regional levels, thanks to the use of a partly-proportional

electoral system. At the European Parliament level, where the electoral system is fully proportional, the RN obtains an equal amount of voting weight as of legislative weight. As a result, the party has had a limited but constant presence at the sub-national and is the largest French party in the European Parliament since the mid-1980s.

A party's ability to have a permanent electoral presence is one of the qualifiers for being institutionalised (Janda, 1980, p. 19). Another one is its ability to successfully manage the transition from one leader to another: In this case, in 2011, from Jean Marie Le Pen to Marine Le Pen. Since then, she has replaced her father as the party's charismatic leader (Ivaldi, 2016; Carvalho, 2017). This generational change was also accompanied with a change in the party orientation towards a vote-seeking strategy trough the detoxification the party's image without radically altering its core positions (Ivaldi, 2016). This strategy, known as '*dédiabolisation*' is an example of what Luther (2011) labels 'ex-ante adaptation', whereby right-wing populist parties adapt in order to prepare for office-holding, which is otherwise costly for them (ibid., p. 455).

This is consistent with a change of behaviour in the party, coinciding with the replacement of the leadership, by seeking to cross the party's previous roof of around 15% of the electorate, also in order to ultimately hold power, a task facilitated by the European financial and migration crises of the late-2010s, that has propelled the party to receiving about a quarter of the vote in all elections since 2014.

The *Front National* has been subject to an informal agreement, the *Front républicain*, between the mainstream political forces in France to exclude the *Rassemblement National* from winning in any electoral second round. The future of this pact is in doubt, however. In 2017, France underwent a political realignment caused by the presidential and legislative victory of Emmanuel Macron's centrist political party. The consequent electoral decline of both mainstream parties may have meant a re-ordering of French politics around Macron's new party – perhaps enabling an alliance between the centre-right and the *Front National* (Elgie, 2018, p. 26), partly as a result of the mainstream right voters' radicalisation on socio-cultural issues since 2007 (Mondon, 2014, p. 313; Ivaldi, 2016, p. 241) and partly due to the post-2011 mainstream right's 'neither, nor' policy, where centre-right

voters are told to neither vote for the right-wing populist nor the mainstream left candidates, creating an equivalence (Ivaldi, op. cit.)

5.2.2 Germany

Alternative für Deutschland, founded in 2013, is the first successful German party placed ideologically to the right of the CDU/CSU since the mid-1950s. Although it came close to passing the 5% electoral threshold in 2013 with 4.7% of the vote, it only crossed it in the 2017 federal election, obtaining 12.6%. Between the party's near-miss in 2013 and its national electoral breakthrough in 2017, the AfD gained parliamentary presence in all state legislatures and in the EP, which use essentially the same electoral system as the one used at the federal level.

At 6 years of age, the AfD is still a very new party. Since its creation, the party has suffered numerous splits and two leadership crises (2015 and 2017) that resulted, for instance, in the party losing almost the entirety of its EP group (Franzmann, 2018, p. 11). Since its creation, the party's ideological profile has shifted significantly, from a liberal-conservative Euroscepticism to right-wing populism whose voters are motivated by anti-immigration animus (Schmitt-Beck, 2017, p. 137) and no longer represented a bourgeois electorate akin to that of the CDU or the liberal FDP (ibid., p. 143). As a result, the AfD does not yet meet the criteria for being an institutionalised party.

The German electoral system is a mixed-member proportional system, in which parties need to cross a threshold of 5% of the vote at the national level in order to enter the federal parliament, or *Bundestag*. Electoral thresholds, like Germany's, force voters to vote based off strategic expectation, in order to avoid 'wasting their votes' (Schmitt-Beck, 2017, p. 134) and as such favour the *status quo*. Extra-parliamentary parties thus need to pursue vote-maximising strategies to cross the threshold. Furthermore, extra-parliamentary parties, such as the AfD up to 2017, have incentives to behave as an anti-establishment force (Franzmann, 2018, p. 3). Combined with the lack of a stable faithful electorate that can be relied upon (Lees, 2018, p. 307) would thus incentivise the party to behave in a vote-maximising manner.

Out of all the analysed political and institutional environments, Germany is likely to have the strongest *cordon sanitaire* around its right-wing populist party.

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Indeed, all other German parliamentary parties, regardless of their ideological orientation, "consider the AfD a pariah and rule out any cooperation" (Bräuninger et al., 2019, p. 83) at any level.

5.2.3 Italy

The Lega Nord was founded in 1991 as a political party and it first obtained parliamentary representation at the national level in 1992, with 8.6% of the vote, their second-highest vote share until 2018's 17.4%. It is the oldest existing parliamentary party in Italy (Brunazzo & Gilbert, 2017, p. 626). Currently, the party is a junior partner in the Italian government together with the populist anti-establishment party, M5S. Unlike the M5S, however, the *Lega* has considerable experience in government. It has participated in governments between 1994 and 1995, and again 2001-2006 and 2008-2011.

The Italian electoral system has shifted on four occasions since the 1992 election, but in the analysed elections, it employed a proportional system with a majority bonus for the largest coalition (2013) and a mixed-member system in 2018. In both elections, the electoral system favoured coalitions through lower thresholds in 2013 and in 2018 via the use of single-member constituencies, and the Lega took part in the so-called 'centre-right' coalition, albeit in 2018 it broke with the coalition to form the current government.

The *Lega* is an institutionalised party under Janda's (1980) criteria. The party is over 30 years old, it has held the same name since its creation and it has maintained a continuous national parliamentary presence since 1992 (Brunazzo & Gilbert, p. 626) and it has been present in regional assemblies since 1990, and is present in the EP's Italian delegation since 1989. Furthermore, the party also managed the transition from the charismatic leadership of Umberto Bossi to that of Matteo Salvini in 2012 (McDonnell & Vampa, 2016, p. 115).

Having been in power on various occasions in coalition with centre-right governments (at the national and regional level) and on the local level also with the centre-left, the Lega cannot be considered to have ever been subject to a cordon sanitaire. At the time, however, the party was not considered as a right-wing populist one, but rather, a neoliberal populist and regionalist party (Brunazzo & Gilbert, 2017, p. 632). Indeed, this shift did not occur until after the 2012 election

of Salvini (ibid.), although the party had previously pursued anti-immigration policies.

5.2.4 Sweden

The Sweden Democrats were founded in 1988, although they only obtained parliamentary representation at the national level in 2010 when the party crossed the 4% threshold to enter the *Riksdag*. They party had first obtained representation at the county level in 2006, and in 2014, the party obtained representation at the European level.

Despite its recent arrival to the previously highly-stable Swedish parliamentary picture, the party could be considered as quasi-institutionalised. It is present in nearly all county assemblies since 2010, and likewise at the national level. The party has also managed the transition between three different leadership groups since 1988, although none since the ideological re-direction that took place after 2005's leadership change. The party's voting base is also remarkably loyal, with 90% of 2014 voters voting for the party again in 2018 (Aylott & Bolin, 2019, p. 7), which facilitates strategies other than vote-maximisation.

The party has undergone a very considerable, and deliberate, ideological evolution. Originally founded as a neo-Nazi party in 1988, after a leadership change in 1995, the party's moved towards presenting itself as a 'progressive-nationalist party' on the FN model (Heinze, 2018, p. 298). Since the arrival to power of the third leadership group in 2005, the party has moved towards an economically centrist, Eurosceptic and socially-conservative (Widfeldt, 2017, p. 139) line, ultimately resulting in its re-definition in 2015 as a "socially-conservative party based on a nationalist outlook" (Heinze, p. 300)

As a result of the party's fascist origin, the Swedish Democrats had been subject to a strong *cordon sanitaire* (ibid., p. 298), in which all parliamentary parties and the media took part on for the 2006 and 2010 elections, by for instance minimising topics that could favour the party's rise (ibid.). After 2010, however, the media's *cordon sanitaire* has faltered. On the political side too, politicians from the centre-right Moderate party and the Christian Democrats have become more open to cooperation, as revealed, for instance by the implicit acceptance by these parties of SD external governmental support (Aylott & Bolin, p. 9), fitting with

SD's rhetoric about forming a future conservative bloc with Moderates and Christian Democrats (ibid., p. 11).

5.3 Parties' Internal Structure

5.3.1 Rassemblement National

Out of the various right-wing populist parties analysed in this work, the *Rassemblement national* is most likely to be the one with the most heavily top-down structure. In the RN, the party leader is in an indisputable position: Marine Le Pen plays a key role in determining the major policy positions, closely guards media access, plays a major role in choosing candidates and can discipline members (Ivaldi, 2016). This power is reinforced by the vertically-structured inner organisation of the party, with limited local autonomy, symbolic party congresses and a small membership (ibid.). Since 2011, the power of Marine Le Pen has been further reinforced by the appointment of '*marinistes*' to the party's central executive organs. They now constitute about 70% of the leadership (ibid.).

An additional factor behind the Le Pen family's control is its financial capacity to fund it, as Jean Marie le Pen largely financed the party until the break with his daughter in 2015. After this date, Marine Le Pen has created her own financial institute to obtain financial autonomy from him (ibid.).

Despite this centralisation of power, the *Front National* is not a monolithic structure, but along tactical rather than ideological faultlines, representing the difference between the members willing to pursue a vote-seeking strategy (like Mégret or Marine Le Pen) and the policy-seekers, willing to remain a niche party, like Jean Marie Le Pen (Ivaldi & Lanzone, 2016, pp. 142, 147) or more recently, Florian Philippot, one of the former *marinistes*, left the party to create his own (La Croix, 2018) over the party's abandonment of the anti-common currency policy plank.

The combination of the party's small membership, highly-concentrated power around the party's leader, who also is the main financer of the party makes the organisation a vehicle for the ambitions of the party leader, and thus open for the strategic opportunism of Marine Le Pen's '*dediabolisation*' strategy to mainstream the *Rassemblement national*.

5.3.2 Alternative for Germany

If the French right-wing populist party features the most top-down structure of all the analysed parties, its German counterpart features the most horizontal and democratic one. The German federal parties' law sets limits to their ability to determine their internal organisation. They must comply with having democratic decision-making structures involving policy decisions and leadership and candidate selection through party member assemblies (Ceyhan, 2017, p. 70). Furthermore, the federal nature of the German state is reflected in its parties, with autonomous state-level branches. In the case of the AfD, for instance, there is a wide ideological gap between the national-liberal Western branches and the East German national-conservative ones (Franzmann, 2018, p. 10).

The AfD has become dependent on its links to far-right civil society movements, like *Pegida* (ibid., p. 3) and on its membership due to its limited funding (ibid.). The party's rank-and-file is very important in determining policy stances in the congresses (Arzheimer, 2015) in light of the leadership's weaknesses in controlling the agenda, due to the infighting between factions and the party's inability to enforce message discipline or sanction members (Siri, 2018). The most salient example of this weakness was the failure of the party's founder, Bernd Lücke to expel Thurigian's AfD state leader Björn Höcke over his neo-Nazi ties, resulting in Lücke's resignation instead (Franzmann. p. 11). Indeed, the AfD lacks a charismatic leadership, and the party's main leader, Alexander Gauland's important role is less due to this factor and more because of his ability to serve as a bridge between the party's various factions (Franzmann p. 9).

The strength of the party's rank-and-file in determining the party's programme and candidate selection, its record of rejecting decisions proposed by the party leadership, the autonomy of the state-level branches and the party's dependency on the membership all position the AfD as a horizontally-organised party.

5.3.3 Lega Nord

The *Lega Nord* is a hierarchical, vertically-organised party. Although the party formally has a democratic and decentralised structure, in practice the party's leadership ignores this formal structure, instead relying on an informal group

around the party leader (McDonnell & Vampa, 2016). This is perhaps best-reflected in the dissonance between the statute-mandated party congresses every 3 years and the lack of any congresses between 2002 and 2012. The 2012 congress furthermore was not an ordinary one, but rather, it was held to choose a new party leader.

The party's federal leadership drafts a 'standard' manifesto for the elections, which is later used by candidates at the lower levels. Likewise, it is the federal leadership that selects and approves party candidates, by-passing the party's membership (ibid.). Interestingly, the party has a very large membership, 110,000 members (Albertazzi & McDonell, 2015, p. 39), which play an important role in rooting the party in northern Italy's communities. This combination of strong local presence and mass membership beholden to a strong, authoritarian leadership is comparable to the Communist principle of 'democratic centralism' (Brunazzo & Gilbert, 2017, p. 628).

This centralisation of power at the top has increased since 2013, under Matteo Salvini, especially as the party is expanding towards southern Italy, where it has no ground organisation. As a result, thanks to the extensive use of social media, Salvini is personifying the party and thus by-passing the party apparatus (Albertazzi et al., 2018, p. 660). This is particularly important where the traditional Lega Nord brand was toxic, as in central and southern Italy. (ibid.).

5.3.4 Sweden Democrats

Part of the deliberate strategy to build up a mainstream party as a way to pave way for its vote-seeking and office-seeking behaviours, the Swedish Democrats are organised internally in a very similar fashion to other Swedish mainstream parties, not relying on an individual, charismatic leadership, with Jimmie Åkesson only acting as *primus inter pares* among the so-called 'gang of four'. Indeed, the party operates in a nominally democratic fashion, with the party congresses electing the party leader biennially (Jungar, 2016, p. 157).

In practice however, the party is led by the 'gang of four', and particularly Jimmie Åkesson, the party leader, and Mattias Karlsson, who is charged with drafting the party manifesto (ibid., p. 200). Unlike other right-wing populist parties, however, there is considerable overlap between membership of the party's parliamentary group and the party's top executive organ, the 'party board'. (ibid.,

p. 199) as well as a considerably degree of internal bureaucratisation (Jungar, 2016, p. 215). This is arguably a further, internal reason for the party's moderation over time (Strøm, 1990).

Although *Sverigedemokraterna*'s internal structure is more comparable to that of a mainstream party than is the case for other right-wing populist parties, the party still features a more centralised structure than any other Swedish party (Jungar, p. 211). For instance, the party leadership is charged with drafting the programme, not the membership, and the national leadership can dissolve local associations, possesses financial power and has a strict policy about expelling extremist members (Widfeldt, 2017, p. 139), particularly after dropping the party's ethno-nationalist ideology after 2007 (Heinze, 2018, p. 300).

5.3.5 Expectations

Based on the set of propositions as laid down on pages 24 and 25 applied to the specific countries cases, it would then be possible to predict that, as public opinion shifted since the autumn of 2016 towards more pro-European views, it would be expected that, in accordance with proposition 1, right-wing populists with vertically-organised internal structures, that are institutionalised politically included would move with public opinion on European issues. This would most clearly be the case of the *Lega Nord*.

Both the Sweden Democrats and the *Rassemblement National* are only partial cases here, however, and as a such could also fall not only under the theoretical expectation of proposition 1, but also propositions 2 and 4, which predict that non-institutionalised parties (SD) and politically-excluded ones (RN and SD) would have no motivation to shift with public opinion. As a result, it is unclear which direction, or which factors, whether endogenous or environmental would ultimately predict their behaviour, as it will depend on the interplay of them, particularly as both parties are pursuing 'mainstreaming' strategies to reach and prepare for office-holding.

The AfD as a horizontally-organised right-wing populist party that is subject to the strongest form of political exclusion from the mainstream, as a result, its behaviour would be predicted to follow the pattern of proposition 4, which it would

expect the party to not bulk to the shift of public opinion, and instead continue to advocate for, in this instance, 'Dexit'.

5.4 Adaptation of Policies: Policy Change across Manifestos

5.4.1 *Rassemblement national*: From 'Frexit' to the AEN

The Front National's 2012 programme defended the exit from the Eurozone because the euro had resulted in an "explosion of prices, unemployment, outsourcing [and] debt" (Front National, 2012, p. 2), returning to the franc. Likewise, the *Front National* advocated re-negotiating the European treaties by making use of Article 50 TEU in order to move towards a looser 'Pan-European Union' that would include both Switzerland and Russia (ibid.).

Whereas in 2012, the Front National had only mentioned Article 50 as a potential mechanism for EU reform, in 2017, Marine Le Pen explicitly promised a referendum on EU membership in order to "recover France's sovereignty" (Front National, 2017, p. 1) and to recover the country's monetary sovereignty (ibid.), although without outright mentioning the departure from the euro, despite the implicit nature of the message.

The introduction of the plebiscitary element to determine the fate of France's membership was a clear reference to the recently-held British referendum, which at the time had been warmly welcomed by Marine Le Pen and her party. Indeed, the *Front National* in 2016 understood and framed Brexit as merely a first step towards France's own liberation. Indeed, ahead of the 2017 presidential election, the European issue and thus, France's exit became a major issue for the *Front National*, also serving as a way of bringing up an issue that would likely favour the FN as the most Eurosceptic party given the negative view of the EU at the time.

Figure 7. 2016 FN poster reading "Brexit. And now France!"

During the 2017 presidential election, finishing off with a face-to-face presidential debate between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, in which Le Pen's European proposals were generally perceived as not well-thought out (Ivaldi, 2018, p. 286) contributing to her subsequent electoral defeat.

In line with the party' remained a strategy of moderation and de-toxification, for instance by rebranding itself as *Rassemblement national*, a name harking to the Gaullist party naming convention, defending an unpopular policy plank as 'Frexit' that had proven counter-productive in 2017 was unadvisable.

For this reason, the *Rassemblement national* underwent a major European policy turn since the electoral defeat of 2017. Indeed, the 2019 manifesto no longer mentions nor implies either 'Frexit' or departure from the euro. Instead, the RN advocates for a thorough institutional reform: Abolishment of the Commission, whose powers would be taken over by the Council and an indirectly-elected EP (Rassemblement National, 2019, p. 26). Likewise, the RN advocated for a model of *à la carte* cooperation between countries, favouring closer cooperation in defence and external border protection (ibid., p. 33, 37).

An interesting second element of the 2019 manifesto were the repeated mentions of the behaviour of the mainstream centre-right MEPs. This can be construed as a clear appeal to an electorate that is likely to have become the party's prime target as a part of its vote-seeking strategy to ultimately obtain office. This is

facilitated by the line taken by the mainstream centre-right, which has radicalised on socio-cultural issues and has become more Eurosceptic since Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency (2007-2012), especially after losing its more socially-liberal members to Macron's *En Marche* (Evans & Ivaldi, 2017, p. 327).

All in all, from 2012 until 2017, there are both elements of ideological continuity and likewise of major policy innovation. The *Rassemblement national* has continued to advocate for an intergovernmental-oriented reform of the EU from 2017 until 2019. However, there has been appreciable change in the two more significant elements of its European policy: From advocacy of exiting the European Union and abandonment of the single currency to an acceptance of both, instead proposing a reform of the ECB's mandate. Another appreciable element of change is a revalorisation of the EU as a mechanism for pursuing nativist policies, as the 2019 RN advocated for closer cooperation on the EU's external border (Rassemblement National, 2019, p.46).

5.4.2 *Alternative für Deutschland*: From soft Euroscepticism to 'Dexit'

The Alternative for Germany is the direct by-product of the euro crisis and it was founded as what was considered a 'single-issue' party that was opposed to the euro and demanded an end to the single currency because "Germany does not need the euro… [and] [o]ther countries are hurt by the euro" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2013, p.1).

Hence, the AfD appeared as a vehicle for expressing this unhappiness, given the widely pro-European consensus of the mainstream German political parties (Arzheimer, 2015, p. 535). This is reflected in the 2013 manifesto for the federal election, where the party called for a higher degree of subsidiarity in decision-making and indeed rejected either a "transfer union or even a centralised European state" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2013, p.1). Nevertheless, the party did not advocate 'Dexit', instead envisioning the European Union as "a Europe of sovereign states with a common internal market" (ibid.). This largely fitted the ideological profile of the founding core, including economist Bernd Lücke, who

represented a liberal-conservative group formerly associated with the CDU and the FDP (Franzmann, 2018, p.7; Lees, 2018, p. 300).

A similar line was used in the programme for the European Parliament election of 2014. In it, the party argued that the euro endangered the EU (Alternative für Deutschland, 2014, p. 8) and that there should be the possibility for "exiting the euro without exiting the EU" (ibid.). Beyond advocating for the dissolution or a "complete monetary reorganisation of the euro area" (ibid., p. 9), the party argued for a greater use of subsidiarity in decision-making, granting national parliaments a veto right over European legislation and more technical reforms, like improving and strengthening the role of the Court of Auditors as well as calling for a smaller Commission and EU budget (ibid., pp. 10-11).

Following the 2014 election, however, the AfD entered its first major internal crisis that would ultimately result in the change of leadership in the summer of 2015 and the party's subsequent ideological re-orientation. The party's original leadership had been weakened since 2014 as more socially-liberal members left, and their hold on the party was weakened following their election to the EP (Franzmann, 2018, p. 10).

After this, the party underwent a rapid evolution towards becoming a right-wing populist party (ibid.) with a nativist ideology that became the party's main profile position and source of appeal, combined with the populist, anti-establishment rhetoric. Accompanying this move towards right-wing populist positions was a move towards 'Euroreject' – in Mudde (2007)'s categorisation – positions on the European Union. Instead, the party advocated for a thorough reform of the European Union towards a 'Europe of the Fatherlands' (Alternative für Deutschland, 2017, p. 6). According to the 2017 programme, if this proved impossible, then the party would advocate for a withdrawal from the European Union "on the British model" (ibid.), that is, via referendum and triggering of Article 50.

This can be attributed to the strength of the party's far-right component, more interested in maintaining the party as a 'natural' opposition party (Lees, p.11) and contrary to any moderation in the pursuit of office-seeking goals. The dominance of this wing among the party base effectively handicapped the party's ability to shift its position on Europe. This conflict between the party's base, more

interested in policy purity at the expense of expansion of the vote base and the party's leadership, who wished to pursuit office, led to the resignation of party leader Frauke Petry in 2017 (Lees, 2018, p. 11.). This is a good example of, despite similar ideological preferences, diverging goals between party bases' and leadership.

Indeed, this would happen once more in the party congress of January 2019 where the party would set out its programme for the May 26 European election. In it, the party leadership advocated for dropping any mention of Dexit from the programme, which was rejected (The Guardian, 2019). The 2019 manifesto sets out the AfD's goal of transforming the EU into a "group of sovereign states" (Alternative für Deutschland, 2019, p. 11), in which legislative initiative belongs to the Member States, which work on an intergovernmental basis through unanimity and multilateral treaties (ibid.). In the manifesto, if this could not be accomplished, then AfD would continue to advocate for a German exit (ibid., p. 12).

5.4.3 The *Lega* and Europe: A Winding Road

The Lega Nord has had a more complicated relationship with Euroscepticism than the other parties under study in this work. The party had originally defended European integration as a way to weaken the Italian state vis-à-vis both the northern Italian regions (Padania) and as a way to make northern Italy closer to northern Europe (Brunazzo & Gilbert, p. 628) but after 1998, it adopted a more critical if nuanced line, voting, for instance, in favour of the Nice and Lisbon treaties.

The 2013 Lega programme for the Italian general election, the last one drafted before the election of Matteo Salvini as party leader, reflects this complicated relationship. While the party's programme rallies against austerity and calls for a 'Europe of Peoples', the programme advocated for the "acceleration of the four unions" (Lega Nord, 2013, p. 3), that is the political, economic, banking and fiscal unions, as well as for the creation of Eurobonds and a more powerful European Parliament and a directly-elected Commission (ibid). By all accounts, the 2013 programme could not be considered Eurosceptic.

The 2013 parliamentary election, however, also represented the nadir of the Lega's electoral fortunes. In the midst of the economic crisis, a new anti-

establishment, Eurosceptic party, the 5 Star Movement, surged, competing with the Lega for the populist message. This was a problem on top of the party's core issue (federalism) steadily losing political relevance throughout the 2000s (Brunazzo & Gilbert, p. 630).

Before 2014, the Lega had already deployed anti-immigrant and 'law and order' language in order to mobilise its base and define its profile, but it was not until Salvini's election that the focus of the party moved away from its core concern – representation of northern Italian interests – towards a nativist, Eurosceptic programme. In order to recover from the competition from the M5S and given the weakness of the mainstream centre-right *Forza Italia* party, Salvini moved rightwards, seeking the endorsement of other European right-wing populist leaders. To do so, the party downplayed northern Italian federalism, and replaced Rome with Brussels as "*the* place where incompetent and corrupt elites exploit ordinary citizens" (ibid., p. 626).

In 2014, instead of advocating for further integration, the EU was compared to the USSR (Lega Nord, 2014, p. 4) and the *Lega* now advocated for exiting the euro and returning to a pre-Maastricht Treaty Europe, with *à la carte* cooperation (ibid., p. 6) and much reduced competencies for the European institutions (ibid. p. 5). The subsequent electoral results emboldened the party, as it received votes from outside the party's traditional strongholds without seeking to do so (Brunazzo & Gilbert, p. 631).

This convinced the new party leadership to drop the old Padanian rhetoric and instead shift towards a new platform: An Italian nationalist, right-wing populist party, which combined and linked Eurosceptic positions with nativism, seeking to expand into central and southern Italy (ibid.).

When Leave won the referendum in June 2016, Matteo Salvini publicly welcomed it by tweeting "FREE! Now is our turn!" (Salvini, 2016). This was part of the heightened language used by the League, in line with the 2014 programme's one. By the 2018 election, the *Lega*'s programme returned to the same themes: The party expressed its desire for returning to a pre-Maastricht Treaty state of affairs (Lega Nord, 2018, p. 9), advocating for a withdrawal from the euro and the European Union if the party's desired changes to the EU's institutional setting could not be accomplished. It also presented nativist linking of Europe with the

immigration issue, as the party advocated for the end to Schengen and the Dublin regulations (ibid., p. 10).

Ahead of the 2019 European election, the League has shifted away from the viscerally anti-European messages of the two previous elections and instead is more focused on nativism. This is reflected in the way in which the party's 2019 electoral campaign was organised. The Lega's slogan '*Prima l'Italia. Verso l'Europa del buonsenso*' ('Italy First, Towards a Common Sense Europe!') clearly marks the party's shift to Italian nationalism, but also a more moderate course on European issues: Salvini no longer advocates for departing from the Union or the euro, but instead is focused on making Europe be in charge of protecting its external boundaries, fused with populist language about replacing a 'Europe of bankers and bureaucrats' with one of 'citizens'. (Salvini, 2019).

5.4.4   *Sverigedemokaterna* and the EU: Abandoning Swexit

In the manifestos for both 2014 elections, SD argued that the EU had acquired a "supranational character and is far from the freedom and peace project it marketed itself as before" (Sverigedemokraterna, 2014a, p. 4; 2014b, p. 20). Euroscepticism was used here as a differentiating issue by signalling the complicity of the Social Democrats and the centre-right parties in accepting the supranational project by approving the Lisbon Treaty (ibid.). In its stead, the Sweden Democrats favoured a referendum on the continued membership of the European Union, in which they would advocate for an exit (Sverigedemokraterna, 2014a, p. 4). In the case that this was not the outcome, however, the party advocated for an end to Schengen and a permanent Swedish opt-out from the monetary union. (ibid.)

Like with many other right-wing populist parties, the result of the British referendum on EU membership was warmly received by the Sweden Democrats, who reacted to the Leave victory by saying "A large congratulations to Great Britain's people who chose independence! Now we await #swexit!" on Twitter (Sverigedemokraterna, 2016).

This line was maintained even in the elections of 2018, Although the language of the manifesto was more moderate than 4 years before, SD still remained committed to a referendum on European membership (Sverigedemokraterna, 2018,

p. 16) but also in favour of intergovernmental European cooperation. The party's line largely remained unaltered, and in line with 2014, favourable towards creating a Danish or British-like permanent exception from joining the Eurozone for Sweden (ibid.).

As the centre-right parties in Sweden are pro-European, hard Euroscepticism served as a useful wedge issue for the party to differentiate itself and capture votes from voters across society (Aylott & Bolin, 2019, p. 8), as opposed to 2010 when the party mostly drew from former Moderate supporters (Heinze, 2018, p. 300). But following the 2018 election, as a result of the weakening of the *cordon sanitaire* from the right, a more moderate line was most likely deemed necessary to facilitate future cooperation by focusing on core nativist policies, like tougher law-and-order approaches and harsher immigration rules.

This shift not only was announced in early 2019 by Jimmie Akesson in an editorial in Aftonbladet (2019) but is also clear from the party's European election manifesto. In it, any mention of a Swedish exit from the European Union had been dropped. In its stead, the Sweden Democrats proposed a 'new treaty' (Sverigedemokraterna, 2019, p. 4). Indeed, the manifesto states that this new treaty goals would be to "emphasis … national self-determination, more effective democracy and strongly limited power for the EU. The Union should focus on free and common trade and the internal market" (ibid.).

The treaty would facilitate à la carte cooperation, by making opt-outs from common policies easier, like for instance, the euro, *snus* or Schengen in the case of Sweden (ibid.). In the programme, the party advocates for a softer institutional reform, to "increase the transparency of the EU legislative process through a more democratic and open order" (ibid.). In line with its new focus on emphasis on institutional reform, the party also advocates for a lessened role for the European Commission in decision-making, although a clear alternative set out (ibid., p. 5) and a return of competences to the state-level by "depriv[ing] [the EU] of the right to decide on national matters such as social policy, defence, tax, criminal law and labour market" (ibid.).

5.5　How RPPs have adjusted to public opinion

The way in which the electoral manifestos'' section on Europe evolved throughout the period prior and following Brexit is a good indicator on the way in which the right-wing populist parties altered or maintained their rhetorical course of action in pursuit of their objectives and an example of their behavioural tendencies.

Those parties that featured the two most powerful leaderships internally, the *Rassemblement national* and the Lega shifted course from advocating exit from the EU to a project of institutional reform. The same can be said of the Sweden Democrats, that also have a powerful leadership, albeit in a manner more akin to that of a mainstream party than the hyper-centralised decision-making of the RN and the *Lega*. As a result, all three parties moderated their language following the marked improvement of public opinion's perception of the EU. From advocating for exiting the European Union through the application of Article 50 with (or without) a referendum (Front National 2012, 2017; Lega Nord, 2014; Sverigedemokraterna 2014a, 2014b, 2018) by the time of the European Parliament election of May 2019, these parties had come to reverse their position, instead advocating for a more thorough (Rassemblement National, 2019), or less thorough (Lega Nord, 2019, Sverigedemokraterna, 2019) reform of the current EU institutional set up in an institutional, decentralising direction.

The ability to shift message in these parties with a powerful leadership is nowhere clearer than in the rapid shift from exit advocacy to reform advocacy within a year (2018 to 2019) for both the SD and the *Lega*, and indeed for the *Lega* from pro-Europeanism to Euroscepticism between 2013 and 2014, in line with the tendency exhibited by their countries' public opinion. This would appear to validate the observations and empirical insight and thus proposition 1.

In the only instance of a right-wing populist party where the party's membership seems like more powerful than the party leadership for policy decision-making, the Alternative for Germany, the improvement of German public opinion's view of the European Union has not affected it. In fact, the

party has undergone a process of radicalisation in the period 2013-2019, transforming from being a quasi-single-issue Eurosceptic but liberal-conservative party at the time of its founding to, by 2019, a right-wing populist 'niche party', dominated by its members, more concerned with policy purity and maintaining a 'structural opposition' role than obtaining votes or office.

The behaviour of the Lega appears is consistent with the party's long-standing attempt to own certain issues, like the 'security' issue and now, Euroscepticism, as well as the *Lega's* strategy to avoid the contradictions that populist parties face in power via a deliberate selection of fights which serve to show their responsiveness to the party's constituency while still appearing as competent, reliable government partners, a 'one foot in, one foot out' strategy (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015, p. 109)

The result of this organisational model has been the party's radicalisation over time. Indeed, while originally only advocating for the end to the common currency in non-nativist terms in 2013 and 2014, for the 2019 EP election, Alternative for Germany is the sole case study party that continues to argue for 'Dexit' (see: Alternative für Deutschland, 2019), confirming its status as a niche party, with limited electoral appeal outside its pre-existing voting base. This would thus appear to confirm the expectations of proposition 3.

Although the *Rassemblement national* and the Sweden Democrats are subject to *cordon sanitaires* by mainstream political forces, these appear to be faltering. Instead, the cordon around the AfD is the strongest one. As a result, proposition 4, which predicted that politically-excluded parties would not shift with public opinion appears to be correct, albeit only in the case where these parties are subject to a firm cordon, eliminating any possibility of shifting from it. This would be in line with the current academic consensus, where by excluding right-wing populist parties, they lose any incentive to moderate, given the heightened dependency on the party's base and the lack of political incentives to moderate as avenues for cooperation are closed off.

Proposition 2, that predicted that non-institutionalised vertically-organised RPPs would not shift away from advocating for their countries' exit from the European Union does not appear to hold. The Sweden Democrats, the

only (partial) instance of this combination of factors, have indeed moved with public opinion. This would be in line with SD's ideological 'mainstreaming' course, deliberately taken by the party since 2005 (Widfeldt, 2016, p. 139) with the clearly stated objective of forming a 'conservative bloc' with the more right-wing parties of the Swedish mainstream right.

From these observations, it appears possible to argue that Brexit has had a moderating factor in all those right-wing populist parties in which the leadership is internally strong, with the ability of almost single-handedly drafting party policy and enforcing discipline. Those parties engaged in office-seeking behaviour due to the strategic or tactical preferences of its leadership have strong incentives to moderate on the basis of the shift of public opinion's perception of the EU following Brexit.

Ultimately, it appears that the more determinant factor in the interplay between the various variables, the independent one and the moderating ones is the parties' internal balance of power between leadership and membership and their opposing tactical preferences. For instance, in early 2019, the AfD leadership advocated for the abandonment of 'Dexit' as a policy position but was overruled by its party congress (The Guardian, 2019). This could thus serve to hypothesise that the willingness to pursue policy-seeking and policy purist agendas is more related to the policy direction preferred by the party leadership or imposed upon it by the party's membership, than an exogeneous factor such as its degree of inclusion in the political system.

In the instance of the Sweden Democrats and the *Rassemblement national*, two parties with a stronger leadership than membership and which are politically-excluded, they appear to have rhetorically moderated on the European issue, at least as of 2019. This might be caused by the de-toxification and mainstreaming strategies that these parties are pursuing, motivated by the leadership's office-seeking desires through a vote-seeking strategy, subject to the country's peculiar electoral systems. In the French case for instance, the two-round system would force the RN to moderate in order to appeal to a sufficient number of votes as to win in the second round, whereas the SD would appear to be changing its profile in order to facilitate participating in office-holding with mainstream right parties.

Indeed, ultimately the reason why the AfD's line would not appear to moderate is not due to the unwillingness of the party leadership to seek office and the benefits associated with it, but its inability to impose it or by-pass the membership's policy purism preferences.

6. Conclusion

This work set out to answer the question of how right-wing populist parties had adjusted their message on Europe in the post-Brexit period compared to the period immediately before the vote.

Immediately following the 'Leave' victory in the 2016 referendum, right-wing populist leaders across Europe welcomed the British decision to leave as a 'liberation' and hoped that their own countries would follow suit. It was, amidst the background of the Mediterranean migration crisis, considered as a great victory for the nationalist cause, setting an example for other countries. Instead, by spring 2019, all these parties had dropped any programmatic reference to a national departure from the EU – with the one exception of the AfD.

This would thus mean that the majority of these parties had moderated their position as a result of public opinion's backlash against Brexit and the overall improvement of the EU's public image across the continent, in line with de Vries (2018) empirical findings, and which correlates, *prima facie*, with the sharp increase of support for the EU between autumn 2016 and autumn 2017.

This major U-turn reflects the right-wing populist parties' ability to react to changes in public mood. Indeed, they will pragmatically adjust to the overall evolution of public opinion in those matters outside of their (limited) core ideological concerns, that is the trifecta of nativism, social conservatism and authoritarianism. Specifically, these parties have shifted from desiring to leave the euro (in the case of Eurozone members) and the European Union to instead desiring to reform it from within towards a more intergovernmental model.

The way in which they react appears consistent with the current academic state of the art with regards to how internal organisation of parties frames their behaviour. As a result, those parties that have more centralised internal decision-

making structures are less constrained by previous positions and have the ability to readjust their position on non-core issues in pursuit of vote-maximisation, as proven by the Sweden Democrats in 2018-2019 and the *Lega Nord* between 2013 and 2014, where successive electoral manifestos displayed significant U-turns on European policy in the span of less than a year. This is explained by the desire of the party's leadership to obtain office, and these leaders' ability to impose their views on the party apparatus.

The opposite is also true, for those parties like the *Alternative für Deutschland,* whose membership had a major stake in internal decision-making, due to both internal formal (structures) and informal (weak leadership, several leadership changes in a brief period of time) that ultimately resulted in the party evolving towards positions akin to a niche party, relatively uninterested in the evolution of public opinion.

Overall, based on this study, it can be argued that endogenous factors to the parties have affected their strategies more than their surrounding institutional and political environment. For instance, in the case of the *Front national* and its immediate successor, the party's office-seeking behaviour has forced the party to moderate, particularly in light of the country's two-round system, which favours moderation by voting for the 'least bad' candidate, it more so part of a deliberate strategy by the party's new leadership to break the previous electoral ceiling that the party had seen from the mid-1980s until 2007.

Nevertheless it is hard to separate both elements, as political environments are flexible, and mainstream parties react differently to the behaviour exhibited by right-wing populist parties, thus also changing the external incentives under which these parties operate, for instance with the breaking down of the *cordon sanitaire* around the SD on the Swedish mainstream right. The way in which endogenous and exogenous incentives interplay requires further academic research, this is exemplified by the way in which for instance the AfD was subject to a feedback loop: by having an internally horizontal organisation, the party was subject to membership-driven radicalisation overtime, which quickly resulted in the party's political isolation by other actors, which further reinforced the need of the party to rely on its rank-and-file. This specific phenomenon is already addressed in works about the role of *cordon sanitaires* like Akkerman & Rooduijn (2015) but an

academic understanding of this interplay would aid in the understanding of the behaviour of challenger or niche parties.

A factor that also deserves future study, particularly for the European Parliament elections is the development of trans-national networks. This factor had to be excluded from this analysis due to space and time concerns, but the progressive development of common EP groups and the release of common manifestos point towards the development of mainstream party-style Europeanisation of right-wing populist parties that can have the ability of constraining these parties' ability to drift ideologically in the future, at least at the EU-level.

Altogether, the right-wing populist party family has become a permanent fixture in European politics. The way they react to ideological setbacks, such as the current perception of Brexit, reflects their ability to adjust to changes in order to gain political power, as well as their attitudinal shift towards the EU, identifying it as a new potential arena for the promotion of their nativist agenda, as a new *lieu* for enforcement of their policy proposals on the external border of Europe.

7. Literature

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