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HOW TO STEM THE POPULIST TIDE?

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Can Populists Win the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections?

How to Stem the Tide?

Isabelle Hertner¹

For over two decades, far-right populist parties have been successful in winning votes and seats across Europe's national parliaments. In a number of countries, such as The Netherlands and Denmark, far-right populists have supported minority governments. In other countries, such as Austria, Finland, and Italy, far-right populist parties have joined governments as coalition partners. Yet, populism is also embraced by parties on the far left side of the spectrum, even though these parties have overall been less successful in supporting or entering government. The notable exceptions are the case of Syriza, a far-left party in Greece, which entered government in 2015, and Podemos, a far-left party in Spain, which currently supports the Socialist government of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez in certain legislative projects. Occasionally, however, even mainstream parties of government, at the centre of the political spectrum, employ populist appeals.

But what makes a party populist? There is now an abundance of academic definitions. In this paper I draw on Cas Mudde's definition of populism as 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.'² Mudde also adds that populism is a 'thin-centered' ideology, which means that it addresses only parts of the political agenda. For instance, it has no opinion on what the best economic or political system is. Consequently, almost all

¹ I would like to thank Dr Ana-Iuliana Postu for her insightful feedback .

² Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39 (4): 541–63, (2004).

populist politicians combine populism with a so-called host ideology, normally some form of nationalism on the right and some form of socialism on the left.³

Like national parliaments, the European Parliament (EP) has not been immune to populism, both on the left and the right side of the party spectrum. If anything, the EP has become an important political platform for populists. In recent years, the number of populist party groups in the EP, and so-called 'Europarties' outside the EP, has grown steadily. Despite this populist wave, the mainstream parties of the centre-right and centre-left have managed to set the tone and hold on to the most important jobs in the European Parliament. The question is, however, whether the 2019 European parliamentary elections will be a turning point that could see populists win a majority of seats and change the centrist consensus of the European Parliament. If recent national elections in Italy, France, and Germany are anything to go by, we should brace ourselves for more far-right populist seats in the next European Parliament.

In this paper, I will argue that although an increase in votes for far-right populist parties is very likely in May 2019, it will not lead to a complete change of direction. Rather, we can expect the centrist parties to hold together and build – even more so than now – a grand coalition in the EP. I will also argue that the appeal of populism will not wane any time soon, and that there are no quick short-term fixes to this problem. In the next section of this paper, I will discuss how and why the European Parliament has become an important platform for populist parties. This will be followed by a brief overview of the current political climate in the European Union, which is shaped by multiple crises, all of which have played into the hands of populist parties. I will then introduce the current voting predictions for the 2019

³ Cas Mudde, "Populism isn't dead. Here are five things you need to know about it." *The Guardian*, July 7, 2017.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/07/populism-dead-european-victories-centrists>

European Parliament, which, however, need to be interpreted with caution. Finally, I will point out a few potential solutions to the populist tide, all of which are complex and long-term, and involve a collective effort of politicians, journalists, and citizens.

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: STEPPING STONES FOR POPULISTS?

European elections have been described as ‘second-order national elections’. Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, who coined this term originally in 1980 and have reconfirmed it since, demonstrated that voters do not perceive European elections to be as important as national parliamentary elections.⁴ Therefore, they tend to use European elections as mid-term contests to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the incumbent national government. There are a number of implications stemming from the second-order nature of European elections. First, political parties across Europe have used European election campaign mostly to speak about domestic politics and policies rather than European policies and politicians. For example, in my recently published book on centre-left parties and the European Union, I show how EU themes were avoided even by the pro-integrationist parties of the centre left, such as the German Social Democrats, the French Socialists, and the UK Labour Party.⁵ Domestic themes and politicians were at the forefront of their European campaigns, even though the *Spitzenkandidaten* process in 2014 led to a certain degree of Europeanisation of the campaigns in Germany and France. Second, depending on the electoral cycle, voters use European elections to reward or penalise the party/parties in government, regardless of their past performance in the European Parliament. Third, opposition parties and small parties tend to do well in European elections. Last but not least, as European elections are seen as less relevant than national elections, the turnout tends to be much lower. For example, when the European Parliament was elected directly for the first time in

⁴ Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, “Nine second-order national elections – a conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results,” *European Journal of Political Research*, 8 (1): 3-44, (1980).

⁵ Isabelle Hertner, *Centre-left parties and the European Union*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

1979, 61.99 per cent of voters went to the polls. By 2014, the EU-wide turnout for the European elections had dropped to an all-time low of 42.54 per cent.

Thus, given the second-order nature of European elections, it is perhaps not surprising that populist parties from the far left and right have done rather well in recent years. They have benefited from being seen as alternatives to unpopular governments, and from the low electoral turnout. We also need to keep in mind that the electoral system used for European elections, proportional representation, makes it easier for small parties to win seats. For example, whilst the electoral systems of the United Kingdom and France have made it hard for parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the National Rally to win seats in the House of Commons and the National Assembly, the European Parliamentary elections have provided these far-right populist parties with the seats, funding, and political platform they often lacked at home. These are the unintended consequences of a proportionate electoral system.

HOW CRISES HAVE FED POPULISTS

Yet, it would be wrong to just 'blame' the second-order nature of European elections for the successes of populist parties. The reality is a lot more complex, and it is worth looking into the factors that have made populist parties palatable to an increasing number of European voters. Whilst a certain share of the population might always have voted for the far left and the far right, the increase in these parties' support is due to a number of developments. For a start, the European Single Market's free movement of labour, goods, services, and capital has not been met with the same degree of enthusiasm across all countries and all parts of the population. The 2016 vote for 'Brexit' revealed the dissatisfaction of British voters in parts of the country that had experienced high levels of immigration over a short amount of time, often from other EU countries, but also from other parts of the world, and social

deprivation.⁶ In these deprived areas, UKIP and other far-right movements thrived, as many voters did not experience the economic and cultural benefits of the EU-wide freedom of movement. The Brexit referendum had therefore offered an opportunity to voice dissatisfaction with immigration and what was seen by voters and constructed by UKIP and parts of the Conservative Party as an 'open border regime'. The leave campaign's slogan 'take back control' spoke to many voters' concerns. However, the vote for Brexit must also be seen in the context of the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, which hit Britain very hard. The crisis led the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-15) to introduce 'austerity' in the form of harsh spending cuts affecting all public services, including hospitals, schools, care services, and basic infra-structure such as roads. The politics of austerity had hit the already deprived areas of the UK the hardest, and it was in these areas that voters supported Brexit in large numbers.

In the southern member states of the European Union, such as Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, the global financial crisis also had very harsh effects, and especially on the poorest. Unlike the UK, these countries are inside the Eurozone, use the Euro as their currency, and are therefore bound by the interest rates set by the European Central Bank. For Greece in particular, the financial crisis has led to years of harsh austerity policies and oversight by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. As a consequence of this shock, the relatively young, far left, anti-austerity and Eurosceptic Syriza dethroned the longstanding, centre-left Pasok. Syriza entered government since 2015, led by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, and supported by a small, far-right populist party called ANEL. Meanwhile in France, the far-left (former socialist) politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his party, *La France Insoumise*, has also gained an increasing amount of support in recent years. In 2017, Mélenchon and his party entered the French National Assembly with 17 seats. Mélenchon has positioned himself on the left of the Socialist Party, claims to represent the ordinary French people against the corrupt elites, and is very critical of the European Union. Meanwhile, on the far-right side of the party spectrum in

⁶ See Sara B. Hobolt, "The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23 (9): 1259-1277, (2016).

France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally blames the 'elites' for neglecting the concerns of the 'common people' and blames Muslim migrants for almost all of France's social and economic woes.

In Italy, we also witness the rise of populist parties, but mainly on the far-right side of the spectrum: the well-established Northern League and the relatively young, anti-establishment, right-wing Five Star Movement were elected into government in March 2018 on an anti-austerity, anti-immigration, and anti-Euro platform. Italy and Greece have experienced not just the harsh economic effects of the Eurozone crisis, but also the tragic events of the 2015- refugee crisis, as refugees from Syria and other unstable and war-torn countries in Africa and the Middle East have tried to cross the Mediterranean in order to reach Italy and Greece's shores. The European Union, despite making a deal with Turkey that has drastically reduced the number of refugees entering the EU, has still not been able to find a sustainable long-term solution as to how to deal with the incoming refugees in a fair and humane way. Proposals to allocate refugees across the EU have been blocked by some central and Eastern European member states – notably Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic - that refuse to accept refugees from Muslim countries.

Thus, combined with the anti-austerity mood, an anti-refugee/immigration sentiment has taken hold of Europe and played into the hands of far-right populist parties. In addition, populists have hit the headlines by blaming 'liberal' elites working for the government, universities, newspapers, NGOs, and businesses for not listening to the concerns of 'the ordinary citizens'. Thus, populists have exploited the multiple European crises and the mistrust in elites and used this febrile mood to their advantage. The populist strategy of blaming liberal elites in Brussels and elsewhere for ignoring the needs of the ordinary people; of blaming immigrants for taking away jobs and benefits; and of painting the world in black and white colours seems palatable to people who are unhappy with the modern world and favour simple and straightforward answers to highly complex and long-term problems. Ironically, these problems require European and global solutions. Thus, the various European crises have offered populists the opportunity to make their voices heard,

and many of these parties have succeeded in getting attention from the media and in getting elected in domestic and European elections. This leads us to the next question: how many votes and seats might the populists win in the 2019 European elections?

THE 2019 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: A POTENTIAL TURNING POINT?

The European elections will take place in May 2019, and as everyone knows, six months can be a very long time in politics. It is therefore necessary to take any prediction with a pinch of salt. What is more, a number of recent election polls (e.g. the polls ahead of the Brexit referendum and the 2017 UK parliamentary elections) did not predict the correct outcomes. Let us therefore be cautious when we analyse the current polls for May 2019. Over the past decades, we have seen a decline in support for the large parties of the centre-right and centre-left across Western Europe, a development that has led to an increasing fragmentation of the European Parliament's party landscape. Yet, despite their decline in seats, the centre-right European People's Party group and the centre left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats group have remained the two largest groups in the EP ever since its beginnings. They have been the key players when it came to influencing the EP's voting outcomes, its overall political strategy, and the allocation of important parliamentary jobs.

A poll of polls produced by Politico⁷ on 12 November 2018 predicts major losses for the centre-left S&D group, which would achieve its lowest ever result of 142 (out of 750) seats, down from 191 seats in 2014. In particular, the German Social Democrats and the Italian Democratic Party are expected to lose many seats. Meanwhile, the centre-right EPP would still be the largest group, as it has been since the 1999 European elections, at 183 seats, but would also lose a significant number of seats

⁷ "European election results 2019: Poll of Polls," *Politico*, November 15, 2018. <https://www.politico.eu/interactive/european-elections-2019-poll-of-polls/>

(37 in total), down from 220 in 2014.⁸ Thus, according to this poll, the S&D and EPP groups would together win 325 seats; the lowest ever result for these two groups that tend to form a grand coalition in the EP. In the past, the EPP & S&D have voted the same way 80 per cent of the time.⁹ The third largest group is predicted to be the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) at 71 seats. This result would mean a small gain for ALDE, which had won only 67 seats in 2014. After years of losses, the ALDE group would appear to stabilise in terms of its size, but would probably regroup. After all, it is a strong possibility that the French president Emmanuel Macron's party LREM (*La République En Marche*) might join the ALDE group in 2019. This would mean an estimated extra 18 seats for ALDE. It should be added that in the past, ALDE has often voted with the EPP & S&D. Whether a newly formed, more self-confident ALDE group will continue to do so in 2019 remains to be seen. It might ask for more powerful positions inside the EP and for more concession in the legislative process.

The Greens/European Free Alliance is currently predicted to win 45 seats – five less than in 2014. These parties are, by and large, part of the political mainstream - or the centre - in the European Parliament. By contrast, one party group that sits awkwardly and uncomfortably between the centre-right and the far-right populist groups is the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group. The ECR was set up in 2009 by the British Conservative Party. For the Conservatives, the EPP had become too pro-integrationist and federalist. The ECR group soon became an umbrella for Eurosceptic, anti-federalist parties of the right, including the Polish Law and Justice party. In 2014, the ECR won 70 seats. As the Conservative Party (and other British parties) will no longer be represented in the European Parliament in 2019, the group's future is currently uncertain. The current polls predict 48 seats for the ECR, but whether the group will even continue to exist without the UK Conservative Party remains to be seen.

⁸ See: European Parliament (01/07/2014) Election results. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html>

⁹ Tony Barber, "EU parliament's biggest parties vote together," *Financial Times*, March 11, 2015. <https://www.ft.com/content/97b8e7f5-bb4b-30c5-9a46-047ddd86f75f>

But what do the polls tell us about the results for the populist party groups? With their nationalist, Eurosceptic agendas, far-right populists make strange bedfellows in the European Parliament. Their groups are less stable than those of the mainstream parties, due to personal conflicts, funding scandals, and changing memberships. Far-right populists have used the European Parliament in different ways, but due to their internal divisions and poor levels of attendance, have not had a major influence on the EP's legislative work. For instance, whilst former UKIP leader Nigel Farage frequently made the headlines with his aggressive speeches in the European Parliament, UKIP had the poorest attendance record of any party sitting in the chamber and has missed many important votes.¹⁰

According to the poll cited above, the youngest far-right populist group, Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) would come fourth in 2019, with 61 seats. In addition, the older far-right populist party group, Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) would gain 46 seats (down from 48 in 2014). Together, these two party groups would win 105 seats in the European Parliament, which constitutes a critical mass. However, whether these Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) would attend Parliament regularly, get organised, and work together, is a different matter. If the far-right populists' performance of the past years is anything to go by, then these two groups will struggle to leave a mark. It might also not be in their interest, as many of them think of themselves as outsiders and protesters. In recent years, far-right populists have used the EP's plenary for filibustering by trying to talk legislative proposals to death. Whilst they can be expected to continue filibustering after 2019, it is likely that the mainstream party groups will pull together to prevent the far right from playing a major role in the legislative process.

¹⁰ "Ukip is Europe's laziest party, researchers reveal," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2015/jun/11/ukip-europe-laziest-party-parliament?CMP=aff_1432&awc=5795_1542812107_f137fb366931b18e053ce93c434583aa

Meanwhile, the far-left party group, the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (EUL/NGL) also displays populist tendencies. After all, *La France Insoumise*, Syriza, and Podemos are members. Yet, this is a rather heterogeneous group of radical and more moderate leftists. Whilst the group is critical of 'neoliberal' Europe in its current shape, it is in favour of European integration more generally. It is possible that the EUL/NGL group will support the mainstream parties when it sees fit, as it has done in the 2014-19 legislative period, where it has behaved like a responsible opposition. It is currently expected to win 58 seats, six more than in 2014, due to the increasing popularity of the far left in countries like France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Thus, even if the two largest centrist party groups are set to lose many seats in the 2019 European Parliament to smaller parties, it is unlikely that the far-right populists will set the tone. Instead, the EPP & S&D groups will have to rely on the support of changing coalitions of party groups – such as ALDE, the European Greens, the EUL/NGL, and occasionally even the ECR – if it continues to exist. This will be a more challenging, and perhaps, less stable political environment for the mainstream parties. It is, however, unlikely that the far-right populists will shape EU legislation in a profound way or take up the most important posts in the European Parliament, such as the presidency, committee chairs, and rapporteurs.

HOW TO STEM THE POPULIST TIDE?

In this paper, I have highlighted how the European Parliament has become a political platform for populist parties, and especially for those on the far-right side of the spectrum. As they are set to increase their number of seats in 2019, alarm bells will be ringing. However, I have argued that the two centrist and mainstream party groups, the EPP and S&D, can still be expected to hold together and rely on changing coalitions of support from the Liberals, Greens, and the far left. On the one hand, this produces more consensual and centrist politics and policies. On the other hand, however, it becomes difficult to 'politicise' EU politics along the right-left axis if all

major decisions are taken by a grand coalition. In other words, for EU citizens, clear left-wing or right-wing policies will not be available. And yet, having clear political alternatives to choose from could be part of the answer to the rise of populism. Indeed, consecutive grand coalitions between the centre-right and the centre-left in countries like Austria (until 2017) and Germany (2005-2009, 2013-) have led to situations in which the liberal democratic opposition in parliament is small, and at times, weak. The task of formulating alternative visions to the centrist programme of government was taken up by far-right populist parties who used this opportunity to spread their nationalistic, racist, Eurosceptic, and misogynistic ideas.

Combatting the populist tide will be a complex and long-term task that requires a new vision of Europe and a sound political strategy. For a start, mainstream parties would be well advised not to try to outdo the populists in their 'us versus them' discourse. For example, employing an anti-immigration and anti-elite discourse that almost equals that of UKIP has not helped the British Conservatives solve their internal divisions over the EU and other topics. It has only made them worse, as it emboldened the right wing of the party. Similarly, the right-wing Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU), by trying to outdo the far-right Alternative for Germany, lost significant numbers of votes to a smaller, more centrist party (The Free Voters) and the Greens in the 2018 Bavarian state elections. Most voters see these desperate and opportunist attempts to steal populist ideas for what they are and turn away from the centrist catch-all parties. One of Oscar Wilde's (many wise) quotes could be taken as a piece of advice: 'Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.' However, by adopting this motto, the mainstream, liberal democratic parties should not be complacent. Whilst they should stay true to their core values, they need to address the problems laid bare by the financial and refugee crises: the rising social and economic inequalities between the haves and the have-nots, and the sense of hopelessness, anger, and cultural backlash amongst voters who have turned against migrants, multiculturalism, and the 'modern world' more generally. Populists divide the world into the 'us' and 'them'. The biggest task for responsible politicians, journalists, and every citizen is to change this discourse to 'no them, only us.' This requires solidarity amongst Europeans, in the shape of a more even distribution of

wealth, more social investment, and better education and training in areas of social and cultural deprivation. The EU was built on hope for a peaceful and prosperous future, and, today, these two aims are more relevant than ever.

A clever long-term strategy is needed when it comes to dealing with the populists' day-to-day behaviour inside and outside of parliament. Ignoring them does not seem to be effective, as they will shout even louder. Equally, the media's obsession with far-right populist party leaders like Nigel Farage, Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen, and Geert Wilders, has helped these politicians become more famous. A more reflective, sober, and measured approach would be more effective. Thus, rather than creating big stories of outrage about every single off-the-scale remark, journalists should hold populists to account for their party policies and actions. For instance, when the leader of the Alternative for Germany, Alexander Gauland, was interviewed by the German TV sender ZDF for their annual summer interview in August 2018, it became clear that he was out of his depth when he was asked to speak about pensions, climate change, and other salient topics. He was not asked about his party's single most favourite subject, Muslim refugees, and was therefore exposed for his party's lack of policies in the areas that most German voters actually care about.

Finally, we know that many far-right populist parties have been, or are, involved in party funding scandals. For instance, UKIP and the National Rally have used money from the European Parliament for their domestic campaigns, which EU rules strictly forbid.¹¹ When such scandals are revealed, they should be reported and discussed more widely. The European Parliament has also learned its lesson and has started to tighten its funding rules for Europarties as it became clear that many of the new, far-

¹¹ Jennifer Rankin, "Nigel Farage has MEP salary docked to recoup misspent EU funds," *The Guardian*, February 12, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jan/12/nigel-farage-eu-salary-docked-claim-misspent-public-funds>; Harriet Agnew, "EU court orders Marine Le Pen to pay €300,000 for misusing funds." *Financial Times*, June 19, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/3d583aca-73c1-11e8-b6ad-3823e4384287>

right populist Europarties were mere paper entities without any serious ambitions to become real parties.¹²

Thus, the populist wave will not disappear overnight. It has built up over more than a decade, and if recent national elections are anything to go by, it will be around for a while. Politicians at the national and European level, journalists, and ordinary citizens need to learn how to learn to fight back in a collective effort.

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¹² Isabelle Hertner, "United in diversity? Europarties and their individual members' rights," *Journal of European Integration*. (2018, online before print).