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Evidence from mainstream
European Parliament parties

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Summary

The main research questions of this paper are how mainstream European Parliament parties conceptualize populism, and how they respond to the rise of populism. The paper, which has come out of the Horizon 2020 project “Demos”, is based on semi-structured interviews with top officials of non-populist parties in the European Parliament (“Europarties”), such as the ALDE, EPP, the Party of European Socialists and the European Greens. The research technique of the paper is thematic analysis, performed on the responses obtained from the aforementioned interviews. Europarty officials identified populist parties by associating them with core themes such as anti-migration, Euroscepticism, and the tendency to make undeliverable policy promises. As for the effectiveness of anti-populist strategies, the interviewees converged on the idea that the problems posed by populists cannot be ignored and that clear and concrete policy solutions are what mainstream parties need, if they are to defend themselves against the evasive political discourse of populist parties.

Introduction

Much attention has been paid to the conceptualization of populism (Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy 2017, De la Torre 2019, Mudde 2017, Ostiguy 2017, Weyland 2017, Laclau 2005), but less research has been conducted into how non-populist politicians understand populism and what strategies they consider suitable for limiting populism's influence. This paper maps the different conceptualizations of populism by non-populist parties in the European Parliament (EP) ("Europarties" in the rest of this paper), and discusses how these mainstream Europarties assess different strategies for fighting populism in the light of interviews conducted with top party officials.

A substantial academic literature has come into being on how mainstream political parties react to new, entrant and niche parties (Meguid 2005, Albertazzi and Vampa 2021). However, politicians who experience rather than analyze political party competition, and who face competition from populists, may have their own understanding of populism as well as their own thoughts on how to stem its rise. This paper aims to describe and explain how non-populist politicians who practice politics at the EU level view populism. They, rather than national-level politicians, have a multi-faceted experience of populism in both their countries of origin and at the European level.

Outline of the paper

In what follows, a brief theoretical framework is presented and case selection discussed. A short analysis of core themes in Europarty manifestos is followed by a more extensive analysis of the responses of top Europarty officials to questions posed in semi-structured interviews; this constitutes the main body of the paper. The paper continues with the strategies adopted by anti-populist parties, as these are discussed in the relevant academic literature, in the light of which the responses of top Europarty officials are interpreted. The paper concludes with an assessment of the strategies that have proved most successful at constraining the influence of populist parties.

Theoretical framework and case selection

This paper subscribes to a commonly used minimum definition of populism, which is understood as a political ideology (Mudde 2004 and 2017). Reduced to its essentials, populist ideology pits the people against the elites, considering the people virtuous and elites to be unrepresentative, corrupt or both. Examples of such elites include politicians from mainstream parties, big business entrepreneurs, intellectuals, senior civil servants and high-ranking officials from international entities, such as the EU. Populism is a malleable concept, and its core elements may vary from one historical period and/or party system to another.

However, politicians, including the senior Europarty officials interviewed for the purposes of this research, do not fully subscribe to this or any other academic conceptualization of populism. Rather, they understand populism with reference to the core elements one finds in the discourse of populist parties: the euroscepticism, nationalism, anti-globalization, and anti-business sentiments which, in various combinations, form the kernel of populist rhetoric at the European level.

Case selection

In the EU, most but not all the parties included in classifications of populist parties (e.g., Timbro, POPPA, PopuList) are Eurosceptic in the soft or hard sense of the term (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004), with recent research showing that there are populist parties in EU Member-States—examples include Berlusconi's Forza Italia party in Italy and Borisov's GERB party in Bulgaria—which are not Eurosceptic (Taggart and Pirro 2021).

Conversely, pro-Europeanism, in the sense of supporting EU institutions and the process of European integration while recognizing their shortcomings, is a theme of several non-populist Europarties, namely the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), and the European Greens. The Party of European Socialists (PES) includes centre-left, socialist and social democratic parties from all over Europe, including non-EU countries. Among the members of this party family, some but not all come from EU Member-States and have formed the "Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats" parliamentary group in the EP. The "Progressive Alliance" was approached in the context of this paper's research and an interview with a top party official requested.

These Europarties have not systematically made Eurosceptic pronouncements at the European level, nor have their members been Eurosceptic at the national level, which is to say at the level of EU Member-States. Moreover, the four Europarties mentioned above rarely, if ever, include recognizable national populist parties, unlike other Europarties such as "Identity and Democracy", the "European Conservatives and Reformists" or the party of the European Left. The "Identity and Democracy" Europarty, for instance, includes many populist parties (e.g., the German AfD, the Italian Lega, the Danish People's party, the Finns party, etc.), as does the "European Conservatives and Reformists" Europarty (the ECR), whose members include the Polish Law and Justice party, Sweden's Democrats, and the Italy's Fratelli. It could be argued, on the other hand, that the European Left includes cases of left-wing populism (e.g., Greece's Syriza and Spain's Podemos). In addition, the four Europarties selected for inclusion in this research have targeted populism in their communicative and EP electoral strategies.

Data and methods

The paper draws on the texts of Europarty manifestos and, primarily, on semi-structured interviews with top officials from four mainstream Europarties. Interviews were conducted between February and October 2021 via Zoom, while recent party documents, namely the manifestos published by the Europarties for the EP elections of 2019, were also reviewed. The purpose in all cases was to locate common themes relating to populism.

The research method of thematic analysis was used for the paper (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis is widely used in the political and social sciences and is a straightforward method that helps researchers study research findings in a systematic way, while taking into account the research subjects' subjective points of view.

It is a qualitative "method for identifying, analyzing and reporting 'patterns' of meaning (themes) of qualitative data" (Clarke and Braun 2016) in a qualitative data set—interviews conducted by the

researcher, for instance, or available texts. The method generates ‘codes’ (‘building blocks’) on the basis of which ‘themes’ are constructed. Organized around a core idea, ‘themes’ provide a framework for the analysis of qualitative data. The practice of thematic analysis involves compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting and reaching conclusions about a qualitative data set (Castleberry and Nolen 2018). Thematic analysis can be “inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven)”, but always seeks “to capture both explicit and underlying meaning” (Clarke and Braun 2016).

This paper follows the first path, as it focuses on a theoretical framework for populism (the “ideational approach”; Mudde 2017) and on the alternative responses of mainstream political parties to (populist) challenger parties. Based on semi-structured interviews with top party officials conducted over the internet (and, to a lesser extent, on published party documents, as explained below), the paper’s qualitative data set does not lend itself to either an inductive “bottom-up” construction of themes or to the inclusion of observations on non-verbal communication.

As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), our analysis of the interviews with senior party officials involved familiarizing ourselves with the texts of the interviews, coding the data, and transforming the codes into themes. The themes were specific concepts which were relevant to the paper’s research question and used repeatedly by the interviewees. Each theme comprised a set of codes (e.g., repetitions of points of view on what populism is and how to fight it) associated with the research question. Once a theme was conceptualized, selected quotes from the interviews were juxtaposed upon them.

Party manifestos issued by Europarties

Mainstream Europarties produced manifestos and electoral platforms before the 2019 EP elections; in them, they addressed *inter alia* issues which were raised, to varying degrees, by populist challengers. Such issues included migration, globalization and European integration, to which populist parties across Europe had taken a critical stance in the mid-2010s, accusing governing elites and European institutions of neglecting the people and serving the interests of powerful groups.

However, the Europarties’ official documents did not necessarily include the terms “populism” or “populist”. On the one hand, these concepts are notoriously elusive; on the other hand, political party documents rarely dwell on academic concepts. Overall, the documents did not contain any insights into how to meet the populist challenge. Electoral and communicative strategies are not advertised in advance in competition between parties, and are not of interest to the prospective voters at whom manifestos and electoral platforms are addressed.

Thus, the manifestos or electoral platforms of mainstream Europarties make scant references to “populism”; and when they do, they are usually in conjunction with “nationalism” and “authoritarianism”. However, populism is one of the challenges facing mainstream Europarties. Though they do not contain an exhaustive analysis of populism, Europarty manifestos do usually indicate trends which they associate with the rise of populist parties. Such trends typically include nationalism, economic hardship, and populists’ drive to acquire political power.

Europarties do not share a common interpretation of the rise of populism. The EPP links populism with nationalism (EPP 2019), while the PES and European Greens, though they do not address populism directly, imply it by stressing the aggression and nationalism which various groups use in order to gain power (PES 2019, European Greens 2019). The European Left associates the rise of Right-wing populism with three trends: neo-liberalism in economic policy, militarization in international affairs, and military-like oppression in domestic affairs (“outward and inward militarization”, Party of the European Left 2004 [2018]).

In short, the texts of the mainstream Europarty manifestos proved not to be a rich source of data on the conceptualization of populism or on anti-populist strategies. However, another source of primary data beyond party manifestos—personal interviews with top Europarty officials—has proven to be a useful source for further analyzing how Europarties conceptualize and respond to populism.

Interviews with Europarty top officials

Research for this paper involved contacting the aforementioned four mainstream parties and arranging for personal, semi-structured interviews over Zoom with top party officials (there is a list of interviewees at the end of the paper). The interviews included factual questions, but had two analytical and strategy-related questions at their heart, the responses to which are analyzed below:

- (After naming a few populist parties of the interviewee’s choice) “What do you think makes these parties populist?”
- What do you think the best way of dealing with populist parties is? a) Ignore them, b) attack and isolate them, or c) compromise and collaborate with them in areas where there is some convergence?

Core themes

The thematic analysis of the answers given by the top Europarty officials to these open questions is summarized in Table 1 and analyzed below. (Europarty names in parentheses signify the parties to which interviewees of our research belong).

Table 1 Themes from the discourse of senior officials from mainstream Europarties on populism

Theme No	Theme title
1	<i>Populists make promises but fail to deliver on them</i>
2	<i>Populists appealing to emotions</i>
3	<i>Euroscepticism</i>
4	<i>Anti-immigration</i>
5	<i>Unrealistic populist solutions to policy problems</i>
6	<i>Sources of legitimation of populists</i>
7	<i>Address policy problems, not populists</i>
8	<i>Confront populists with facts and clear solutions</i>

Theme 1: Populists make promises but fail to deliver on them

Based on the interviews, this theme reflects the populist practice of behaving like demagogues before elections, offering everything to everyone, but then, if called upon to govern or participate in a coalition government, of tending to forget their promises. To put it another way: “Populist leaders give fantastic speeches, but do not want to deliver anything” (EPP), or “Populists promise a lot, but are unable to deliver” (ALDE).

Theme 2: Populists appealing to emotions

The electoral and communicative strategies of populist parties draw primarily on emotions rather than rational argumentation. For instance, one interviewee noted: “The populist way is the easy way. Media love populists, because they have wild messages” (EPP), while another said: “Populists appeal to the heart and the stomach, not to the mind” (ALDE). In short, “the narrative of populists is emotional” (European Greens).

Theme 3: Euroscepticism

Among populists in Europe, there are soft Eurosceptics, who criticize European institutions but do not call into question the merits of European integration, and hard Eurosceptics, who advocate “exit” from the EU. To illustrate, here are some codes or typical examples of the above themes: “[right-wing] populists claim that [...] the EU is worthless and that they have the solution for everything” (EPP); “Right-wing populists claim that the EU is a danger and/or that it is governed by large corporations (a claim made by left-wing populists)” (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats); and “Populists love to blame Europe” (European Greens).

Theme 4: Anti-immigration

Interviewees mentioned xenophobia, racism and nationalism as the sources of the anti-immigration policy stances of many populist parties in Europe. These stances translate into mobilization against asylum laws. In the words of one interviewee: “One of the cancers of democracy is nationalism” (European Greens).

Theme 5: Unrealistic populist solutions to policy problems

It was noted in the interviews that populists are evasive when addressing policy problems and rarely mean to reach a solution: “Populists offer alternative imaginary solutions that go nowhere” (EPP). Moreover, “Populists are not serious lawmakers, because they never seek a compromise”. In parliament, the only amendments populists propose to bills essentially reject the proposed legislation” (Alliance of Socialists and Democrats). In fact, an interviewee included this theme in her definition of populist politicians: “I consider them populists, because they do not provide solutions” (European Greens). This is why non-populists should require “responsibility in the sense of understanding the complexity of solving problems” from populist parties (European Greens).

Theme 6: Sources of legitimation of populists

Populists may provide wrong answers to public policy questions, but they attain political legitimacy by raising questions that are of concern to citizens. Indeed, “Populists at times see where the problems are”, and “people feel that they are not being heard, that nobody is paying them any attention” (ALDE).

Theme 7: Address policy problems, not populists

In view of the above (theme 6), all the interviewees noted that it is advisable to address the issues populists raise, rather than ignoring them.

Theme 8: Confront populists with facts and clear solutions

Given that populists put forward unrealistic solutions or make unsubstantiated claims, one possible strategy for countering populism would be to confront them with facts and clear solutions to policy problems; this is something all the interviewees agreed on.

Discussion of the core themes of European populism

What makes populist parties populist

Thematic analysis has shown that top Europarty officials pick out several core themes of European populism. They are themes that reflect the content of populist ideology and the format of populist participation in political competition for government power.

The core themes are familiar to students of European populism. The theme on which all the interviewees converged was the populists' anti-immigration stance and its being imbued with nationalism and/or racism. The format for populist party participation in electoral competitions involves, first, unrealistic public policy solutions and/or non-complex policy solutions which populists propose for complex problems; and, second, the tendency to offer promises to the electorate but then to fail to deliver on them, if populists rise to government.

Meanwhile, during the usual four-year period of a non-populist government, populists in opposition adopt a non-committing mode (another point on which all the interviewees coincide). More specifically, populists do not contribute to policy formulation as much as one might expect, judging from the sweeping extent of their pre-electoral mobilization. In particular, if populists remain in opposition, their participation in sessions of legislative bodies is limited to either proposing amendments to bills that would essentially destroy the logic of the proposed legislation, or to abstaining from submitting concrete policy alternatives to those proposed by the government. This tendency can be interpreted in terms of the "all or nothing" mentality of populist politics. For a populist party, the formulation of concrete solutions to problems would transform it into a normal participant in parliamentary politics, a norm that populist leaders seek to distance themselves from (interview with ALDE top official).

In view of the above, it turns out that top Europarty officials are closer to the ideational approach to populism (Mudde 2017). While the European Greens do not agree that there is such a thing as left-wing populism (they do not consider parties like Syriza or Podemos to be populist), the remaining interviewees did make the conceptual distinction between Right-wing and left-wing populism, and believe that the majority of the themes were common to the two (apart from the theme of anti-immigration, which exclusively characterizes Right-wing populism). All the interviewees coincided on the view that populism relies, and thrives, on creating political adversaries, such as the European elites or EU institutions, and in then claiming to authentically represent the people.

Thus, the four interviewees do not refer to other, non-ideational elements which could potentially be included in a conceptualization of populism. They do not mention charismatic leadership, for example, electoral support by specific social strata (small shop owners and craftsmen, less educated voters, et al) or the direct, unmediated "rapport" between the populist leader and his or her followers which other analysts of populism (e.g., Mouzelis 1987) have highlighted. In contrast, the interviewees underscored another element which the ideational approach to populism has not adequately stressed: the way in which populists appeal to the emotions as a communicative strategy. Populists tend to downplay the rational exchange of arguments in public (e.g., in pre-electoral

debates or parliamentary sessions) and employ a communicative strategy founded in stirring up passions and exploiting stereotypes.

How to respond to the rise of populism?

Based on the academic literature on populism, there are three ways in which non-populist parties can react to the rise of populist parties: they can ignore them, they can fight them, or they can accommodate them—for example, by including part of the populist agenda in their own programme or manifesto, or by inviting populists to share government power. The relevant academic literature focuses either on new challengers entering the competition between parties and distinguishes between accommodative and adversarial strategies (Meguid 2005), or specifically on the rise of populism (Albertazzi, Bonasinga and Vampa 2021). The latter authors distinguish among three options which mainstream parties have used when faced with the challenge of populist parties: a) clashing with populists, b) marginalizing them, or c) co-opting them. In the first option, a mainstream party would directly attack a populist one on specific policy issues; in the second option, it would either not engage a populist party at all, or try to drive it off the political scene; and in the third option, it would try to slip into the populist party's shoes, so to speak, by hijacking the populist policy agenda.

There is abundant research on how mainstream, i.e., Centre-Right and Centre-Left or social democratic, parties have reacted to the rise of populism. However, what the most common response to populists is, and which strategies work, in the sense of helping to prevent the ascent of populists to government, remains inconclusive.

Thus, for instance, Meguid has reservations against the strategy of attacking Right-wing populists, as that strategy may have increased the political influence of J.-M. Le Pen and his Right-wing populist Front National (FN) party in France (Meguid 2005). Other commentators maintain, however, that by avoiding attacks on populists, mainstream parties help legitimize populists on the national political scene (Arzheimer and Carter 2006: 439–440).

What about giving ground to populists on migration and economic policy issues? Again, there is a divergence of opinion. If Centre-Right parties do give ground, they are not necessarily successful in attracting potential Right-wing populist voters, who go on to vote for the Radical Right (Abou-Chadi, Cohen and Wagner 2021). As Van Spanje and De Graaf (2018) show, an accommodative strategy on the part of mainstream parties will only work if it is combined with ostracization of the populist opponent.

If Centre-Right parties shift towards more Eurosceptic positions, this does not prevent populist parties from scoring electoral successes (Meijers and Williams 2020). The same probably occurs when mainstream parties adopt anti-immigration positions: by acknowledging the salience of migration policy issues, they actually promote the causes of the populist Right (Dahlström and Sundell 2012), which is not a safe strategy either. Centre-Right parties may constrain the rise of Right-wing populists, if they align their (new) position that immigrants pose a threat to cultural identity with a position that underlines the economic hardship of the people in conditions of economic crisis (Pardos-Prado 2015: 355 and 366). One could argue, of course, that such an alignment would transform a non-populist party into one that is nearly or fully populist.

Other research shows that, firstly, mainstream Right-wing party voters will vote for anti-immigrant populist parties, if the mainstream party (for which they used to vote) adopts stricter positions on immigration; and that, secondly, these voters will do so to a greater extent, if mainstream parties of the Left also adopt stricter positions on immigration (Down and Han 2020). Interestingly, there is research which shows that parties on the Left gain votes by adopting a stricter stance on migration policy (Spoon and Klüver 2020).

The Europarty officials whose views are studied in this paper diverge somewhat from the thrust of the aforementioned literature in terms of their responses to rising populism. In brief, the party officials would opt for a mixed strategy in which they seek to dethrone populists from the centre of the political scene, or to prevent them from acquiring centre stage, while recognizing policy problems (e.g., the challenge of immigration) and clearly articulating non-populist policy solutions to the problems.

To illustrate, here are codes or examples relating to this dominant theme: “Refuse the temptation to become populists” (EPP); “Don’t get trapped into focusing on populists; don’t ignore the policy problems they may pose, but ignore the populist parties themselves” (ALDE); “Avoid giving centrality to populists, but combat populists with policy proposals and offer clear arguments against populists” (European Greens).

However, not all the mainstream parties agree on the above strategy. There is the option of engaging populists: “Without losing your party identity, engage with populists in order to reveal their lies or even to hijack their populist themes” (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats).

Compared to the options suggested in the relevant academic literature, we see that the Europarty officials do not choose opt for one of the three strategies (clashing with, marginalizing, or coopting the populists). They prefer a combination of options: neither marginalization nor conflict, but a flexible mix of the two. Some politicians interviewed for this research (ALDE, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats) elaborated on this strategy, which could be summarized as “Ignore the populist parties, but don’t ignore the questions they raise”.

Non-populists may want to engage with populists along those lines. While they would not directly engage with representatives of populist parties, they would address issues central to populist political discourse by incorporating selected questions raised by the populists into their political agendas, and providing a non-populist reply to them. Obviously, there is always the risk that adopting even part of the populist agenda would undermine the party identification of mainstream party voters and reinforce support for the original agenda-setters (the populists), rather than their belated imitators (the non-populists).

Conclusions

In this paper, the main research question was twofold: How do mainstream European Parliament parties conceptualize populism, and how do they respond to the rise of populism? The term “mainstream” parties included non-populist parties in the European Parliament (“Europarties”), such as the ALDE, EPP, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (essentially the PES) and the European Greens.

Thematic analysis, the research technique used in this paper, was performed on the responses obtained from the aforementioned interviews. Results of analysis were interpreted in the light of the existing academic literature on the ideational nature of populism and on the strategies which mainstream political parties adopt to counter the rise of challenger parties, such as populist ones.

Overall, it is difficult to come up with a single conceptualization of populism. Instead of struggling to understand populism through a definitional straitjacket, the Europarty officials who were interviewed mentioned typical, recurring themes which they feel make populist parties populist. The interviewees identified populist parties by associating them with core themes such as anti-migration, Euroscepticism, and the tendency to make undeliverable policy promises.

As for the effectiveness of anti-populist strategies, while the academic literature is inconclusive, the interviewees converged on the idea that policy issues raised by populist parties cannot be brushed under the carpet. Rather, clear and concrete policy solutions are what mainstream parties need if they are to defend themselves against the evasive political discourse of populist parties.

At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, populism in Europe may be on the wane. The national elections held across Europe between 2019 and 2021 did not result in the formation of coalition governments led by populists, but rather to the return of mainstream parties, such as social democratic or socialist parties, to government.

In the era of the Covid-19 pandemic, intensifying climate crisis, regional tensions on the periphery of Europe, and complex technological risks and opportunities, the tendency of populist parties to offer evasive messages regarding solutions to policy problems, promising everything to everyone, may have run its course. However, as noted in this paper, mainstream parties in Europe seem aware that while populists may not win arguments over concrete policy measures, they might win voters' hearts.

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List of interviewees

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