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## Populism in the European Union: cause or consequence of distrust?

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### Abstract

European Union has been a stabilizer for many decades but is now facing two internal problems: rise of Eurosceptic populism and low trust levels. This paper examines whether there is a relationship between these two variables and finds that although the results differ in regions of Europe, there is no significant effect neither of populism on trust, nor of trust on success of populist parties. Furthermore, a presence of a populist party may increase voter turnout, especially if the party is salient on antielite message. However, the disconnect between populism and distrust implies that separate tools may be needed to solve the problem of mistrust and prove the illegitimacy of populist parties. While access to information may increase transparency and thereby trust, the way in which the information is spread, and the directness of communication are key to effectively oppose populism.

The views stated in this thesis are those of the author and not necessarily those of the supervisor, second assessor, Erasmus School of Economics or Erasmus University Rotterdam.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	3
LITERATURE OVERVIEW .....	5
TRUST IN EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS.....	5
VOTING BEHAVIOR.....	6
POPULISM .....	7
DATA AND METHODOLOGY .....	8
TRUST MEASUREMENT .....	8
DEFINITION OF POPULIST PARTIES .....	8
METHODOLOGY .....	9
DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS .....	10
TRUST IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT.....	10
POPULIST PARTIES IN EUROPE .....	12
VOTER TURNOUT IN EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS.....	13
REGRESSION RESULTS.....	14
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRUST IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND POPULISM.....	14
EFFECT OF POPULIST PARTIES ON VOTER TURNOUT .....	15
ALTERNATIVE TIME LAGS.....	17
DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS .....	18
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRUST IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND POPULISM.....	18
EFFECT OF POPULIST PARTIES ON VOTER TURNOUT .....	19
LIMITATIONS .....	20
CONCLUDING REMARKS .....	21
APPENDIX.....	22
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	23

## INTRODUCTION

The idea of a unified Europe was born as a solution to the disruptive events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1951 the old continent first came together under the name of European Coal and Steel Community and based the relationship on international trade, with the underlying intention to preserve peace. One cannot deny the project's success at preventing war conflicts in the continent, but The Union has also become much more than just an economic association. Starting with only six members, the European Union is now comprised of 28, with Croatia being the last one to join in 2013. The six core institutions of the EU (European Parliament, European Commission, Council of the EU, European Council, Court of Justice of the EU and the European Central Bank) facilitate political, ideological and economic coordination amongst the Member States. 19 of them have also adopted Euro as the common currency, thereby entering into a monetary union. The eurozone allowed for deeper integration and encouraged trade amongst the member states (Bun, Klaassen, 2012), further ensuring the initial goal of the European project. However, although the EU has undeniable influence on every European's life through the regulations and resolutions issued by the intergovernmental political bodies, the people only have a direct influence on who represents their country in the Parliament. In this sense the EP is the most accessible and transparent institution of the EU regulatory bodies, greatly differing from the closed-off practices of the Councils.

However, despite the seemingly successful past of the Union, it has been facing internal backlash in the past few years. After the Euro and refugee crises, the population of the Core European countries seems to have a less positive outlook on the benefits of the EU and has expressed this position at the national elections and referenda. Most prominently, the UK followed Boris Johnson's invitation to "leave" in 2016. In 2017 Marine Le Pen, former leader of France's National Rally party (Rassemblement National), came in second in the presidential election. In the same year, Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) became the third biggest party in the Bundestag.

All these rising figures and ideologies run with a Eurosceptic message, putting national values above European ones, and enhancing the discrepancies between the two. Such

populists promise to focus on the wellbeing of the nation, singling it out of the Union. The fact that such rhetoric resonates with Europeans can be taken as a warning sign that they are lacking trust in the EU institutions and are looking for someone who would change the current political practices and make them more favorable for an average person. This results in greater support for populists. On the other hand, if the majority in European Parliament (EP) belonged to Eurosceptics, that is also unlikely to spark confidence in an institution that is meant to unite but consists of representatives who do not see the benefits of integration. Thus, the question of this research is:

*do election outcomes affect trust in Europe, or does trust in Europe affect election outcomes?*

More specifically, does the level of confidence in the European Parliament affect people's decision to vote for a populist party? Or is it that trust levels only react to the elected officials, in which case a greater coalition of Eurosceptics should have a negative impact on trust in the EP. Furthermore, what is the relationship between voter turnout and the presence of populist message? One can hypothesize that perhaps the representation of a nationalist ideology encourages nationalist-leaning citizens to show up to EP elections and to a certain extent offsets the losses in voter turnout seen in this millennium.

Analyzing the interaction between the European Union and its constituency is vital to ensure further prosperity of the European project. This research fills the gap in the existing literature which although extensive on trust, Europe and populism separately, has not investigated the two-way relationships among these variables. Finding out more about how trust in the EU is formed, is key to maintaining, or rather rebuilding the decaying relationship for the benefit of the society. Only with the confidence of the people can the institutions fulfill their legislative, managerial, and protective duties.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, an overview of relevant literature on trust in the EU, voting behavior and populism will be presented. Then a section on data and methodology to be used in this research will be followed by a descriptive analysis and regression results. Finally, a discussion the findings of the paper, as well as its limitations will be presented. Concluding remarks will summarize the research and its implications.

## LITERATURE OVERVIEW

### Trust in European Institutions

The most relevant study on the topic at hand has been published in 2017 by Dustmann et al, titled "Europe's Trust Deficit: Causes and Remedies". By the means of two data sources also used in this research (European Social Survey for trust levels and Chapel Hill Expert survey for party evaluations) they find a strong correlation between relative trust in the European Parliament and the chance of voting for populist parties. However, the methods that allow for such conclusion differ from those applied in this research, which will be discussed later. Dustman et al (2017) also compare trust in national governments with trust in the European Parliament and find that macroeconomic shocks have stronger effect on the confidence in local government than the EP. Another research though, by Algan, Guriev, Papaioannou and Passari (2017), finds a relationship between decreased employment and thus lower trust in the European Parliament after the crisis in 2008. They claim that the decline in trust and the rise of extreme left and extreme right parties go hand in hand but abstain from the question of which variable drives the other. In the view of Algan et al (2017) economic insecurity and "cultural backlash against progressive values" simultaneously drive both distrust and election of non-center parties. Inglehart and Norris (2016) find strongest support for the cultural backlash line of reasoning instead of the economic one. On the other hand, Foster and Frieden (2017) point out that although the inherit trust in national governments as well as in the EU is conditioned by non-economic factors, such as ideology and values, the fact that distrust has been rising disproportionately faster in the countries more affected by the Euro-crisis points that this shift is driven by economic variables.

It is, however, not only the political EU institutions that are being looked down upon: the European Central Bank suffers from distrust mostly due to its independence from other EU institutions and therefore its disconnect from the voters (Kaltenthaler, Anderson, Miller, 2010). Roth (2009) found that trust in ECB dropped significantly after the 2008 crisis, which indicates that the confidence level also depends on the performance of the institutions. Whatever the causes may be, low trust levels should be seen as a serious source of concern for anyone who possesses any hope for the future of Europe. Only by retaining confidence

can institutions successfully exercise their regulatory powers in a democratic society (Kaltenhaler et al, 2010; Arnold, Sapir, Zapryanova, 2012).

### Voting behavior

Literature on voting behavior is not scarce. In addition to the most prominent Median and Mean Voter theorems (Black, 1948; Caplin, Nalebuff, 1991), more recent studies have tried to further analyze the determinants of voting decision. Alvarez, Boehmke and Nagler (2006) find that voters tend to act strategically and vote for a party that is likely to win, rather than for one which has low chances of success. This would lead to believe that the success of a populist party in France or Germany could have positive externalities for populist parties across Europe which should materialize in the coming elections. In their paper on voter turnout Krishna and Morgan (2011) assume the alignment of personal and party ideology to be the main determinant of the voting choice. Giving basis for such an assumption is a work by Tomz and Van Houweling (2008) who test different voting theories by conducting surveys on hypothetical voting choices, and conclude that proximity voting (“citizens prefer candidates whose positions are closest to their own”) is the one with the highest explanatory power, relative to discounting and directional voting theories. Discounting theory suggests that voters base their decision after discounting the promises candidates make to what they think is realistic to be achieved. If this was true, populist parties prominent for suggesting very ambitious goals (sudden increases in minimal wage or drastic tax cuts) should not amass many votes, as their promises should face high discount rates. On the other hand, based on directional voting theory, extreme right or extreme left parties should attract voters by seeming more strongly devoted to their “direction”, meaning their ideology. Data from the 1988-1992 elections to the US senate in fact supports the directional and discounting theories over proximity voting (Adams, Bishin, Dow, 2004).

Regarding voter turnout, Krishna and Morgan (2011) argue that obligatory voting only leads to the socially optimal outcome when the penalty for not voting is not too large. This might explain why in the EU only Luxembourg has a compulsory voting system (in Belgium one has to present themselves at the polling station but is not required to actually cast a vote) although voter turnout to EP elections has been falling, with the recent 2019 elections

amassing only half of the eligible voters (European Parliament website). In the research done by Immerzeel and Pickup (2015) using European Social Survey data, it was found that the extreme right-wing populist parties have an effect on voter turnout that differs by region of Europe and voter's socioeconomic conditions. In general, educated and politically involved Western European voters were found to be mobilized by the right-wing populist parties, while in Eastern Europe the negative message of populism disincentivized voting, especially amongst the younger generation. However, such effects seemed to outweigh each other and their model for the whole Europe showed no effect of right-wing populism on voter turnout.

### Populism

Populist parties are known to present themselves as standing up for “the people” in the fight against “the elite” (Mudde, 2004). As Stanley (2008) put it, “populism has only been able to insist that ‘the people ought to get what they want, when they want, however they want’”. This presents a certain short-sightedness, as the question of feasibility is neither posed nor answered, and such promises tend to crumble after elections. This has been pointed out by Guiso, Herrera, Morelli and Sonno (2017), who define populist parties as those who run on “short-term protection policies while hiding their long-term costs by using anti-elite rhetoric to manipulate beliefs”. Although the definition of populism is still a point of discussion, the common denominator seems to be the antielite message and fight against corruption (Mudde, 2004; Polk et al, 2017; Guriev, Papaioanou, 2020). The latter is more likely to occur and more likely to be beneficial for parties in Southern and Eastern European countries where corruption is a bigger issue than in Western Europe (Bågenholm, Charron, 2014). According to Polk et al (2017), Western European countries such as Germany or France have mostly seen the rise of populism based on antielite rhetoric.

Besides empirical research, Guiso et al (2017) have also created a model of supply and demand of populism in which the earlier discussed economic insecurity is a common denominator for the appearance of populist parties and for the support for them. This is in line with the findings about decreasing trust in European regions most affected by the euro crisis (Algan, Guriev, Papaioannou, Passari, 2017; Foster, Frieden, 2017). However, Taggart

(2004) claims that although it comes in overwhelming waves, there is no space for long lasting perseverance of populism in Europe, as the proposals of the populist parties are only short-term ones. However, it would be reasonable to consider whether the major crises experienced since Taggart's observations in 2004 have now created the environment for nationalist populism to thrive.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

### Trust measurement

The research will examine data from the timespan of 2002-2019. This includes four European Parliament elections, and eight rounds of European Social Survey (ESS). Since 2002, ESS has been carried out every two years in most European countries, with approximately 2000 respondents in each country per surveying round. The survey question that will be used in this research is that where respondents evaluate their trust in the European Parliament on a scale from 0 to 10. This will be used as a proxy for their trust in the EU. From the individual-level data, a country average will be calculated using design weights to account for non-random sampling, and population weights when calculating regional means.

### Definition of populist parties

To divide the national parties into populist and not, I will follow the practice of Guriev and Papaioannaou (2020) and use the data from Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). CHES is a unique collection of descriptive national party statistics on various economic and social issues, provided by local political experts. According to Guriev and Papaioannaou (2020) the "lowest common denominator used in modern political science" to define populism, is that it emphasizes the fight between *the people* and *the elite*. The authors use two questions on "salience of anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric" and "salience of reducing political corruption" from 2014 CHES to discern which parties are primarily focused on populist rhetoric. For each of the questions a party receives a score from 0 to 10, 0 meaning that those issues are not important to their ideology, and 10 extremely important. Because those questions were only asked in the 2014 wave, there are no evaluations for the parties



in the previous years, which include the EP elections in 2004, 2009 and 2018 (although there was another CHES survey in 2017 but it only included few countries). I assume that parties have not drastically changed their rhetoric and thus apply the scores from 2014 to other years as well. For the countries for which the data is available, the 2017 evaluations are matched with their performance in 2019 election. Not all parties have been included in the survey, thus the results represent the parties that have maintained some popularity overtime, while usually leaving out those that were only successful in one election. This poses a problem in countries where party turnover is high. For example, in Italy half of the parties that participated in 2009 election, did not participate in 2014 and do not have a CHES score, and therefore cannot be rated on populism. Data on EP election outcomes in 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019 are included in the CHES data file as well. Voter turnout is obtained from the European Parliament website.

The dataset for this research thus combines ESS results for reported trust in Europe, CHES evaluations for party ideologies, and European Parliament data on voter turnout. Due to lack of consistent ESS data, Croatia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania are removed from the sample. The rest of the countries have at least three years of ESS results and will be included in total and regional statistics. To evaluate regional effects, Europe will be divided into Southern (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain), Northern (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK) and Eastern (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia).

### Methodology

The combined panel data allows to perform regressions to evaluate the relationships of interest. To begin with, a simple regression with independent variable trust in EP will show its effects on EP election outcomes for the populist parties. Trust levels from 2002, 2008, 2012 and 2018 are each matched with elections of 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019 respectively, this way eliminating the possibility of reverse causality in these regressions. The dependent variable is a sum of the vote shares of populist parties in one country, capturing the total support for populism. These regressions will show the effect trust in the EP has on the success of populists in EP elections.

Then, a reverse regression with EP election results for populists as independent variable will be performed to see if the election of populist parties has an effect on the people's trust in the EP. For these regressions, the results of 2004, 2009 and 2014 elections are paired with reported trust levels in 2006, 2010 and 2016, thereby again only testing the one-way relationship of populism and trust.

Finally, a simple regression of presence of a populist party on voter turnout will be run. It will be considered that a populist party was present in an election, if the party scored above regional average on at least one of the two criteria: antielite or anticorruption message salience. In this case, a dummy variable will take value of one, and the regression will estimate the effect of a populist party's presence on voter turnout in an EP election. In this case, the populism criteria are measured in the same year as the election takes place.

All regressions will be performed on regional levels and on the full set of countries in the sample, thus showing the differences of the populist-distrust relationship among Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe. For robustness checks, the regressions with populist vote share and trust will be performed with longer time differences between the trust measurement and EP election (3-4- and 5-6-year differences, as opposed to the 1-2-year lag in the original regressions). Regressing the historical values of one variable on the other will further allow to establish whether it is the distrust that drives populism, or populism that lowers trust.

## DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

### Trust in the European Parliament

The overall trend in confidence in the EP has been decreasing in Europe, with a slight recovery in the most recent years. The reported trust levels vary substantially across countries and across the regions of Europe. Table 1A in the Appendix contains country-level data. The reported trust varies from 2.568 in Greece in 2010, to the high of 5.993 in Cyprus in 2008. The volatility of trust in these countries, notably strongly affected by the euro crisis, drives the drastic changes in confidence in the South overall. Figure 1 summarizes the

weighted regional averages overtime, as well as shows the continental trend. The high points in all three regions were reached in 2002, while 2014 had the lowest values, after which there seems to have been a recovery up to 2012 levels of trust, and even 2010 levels in Eastern Europe. The regions showed more differing attitudes in 2002 than in 2016 when the trust levels almost converge, with 4.14 in the North, 4.12 in the East and 4.11 in the South. However, this convergence is only the result of decreased trust in the East and especially the South, which started off with a level of 5.264 but reached the low of 3.78 in 2014. Not surprisingly, the sharpest drop is observed comparing the pre-crisis 2006 trust levels, with 2010 results. The South, hit strongest by the crisis, shows a decrease in trust by almost 1 point. This drop seems to be somewhat lagging in Eastern Europe, where trust is increasing in the period of 2008-2010 and drops in the following years. Overall, reported trust in the European Parliament fluctuates around 4.5 in the scale of 0-10, which is hardly satisfactory for any Europhile. However, the recent developments give hope: trust in the European Parliament has been increasing since 2014 in all three regions, with the greatest recovery in the South where the reported trust increased by 0.6 points compared to the low reached in 2014.

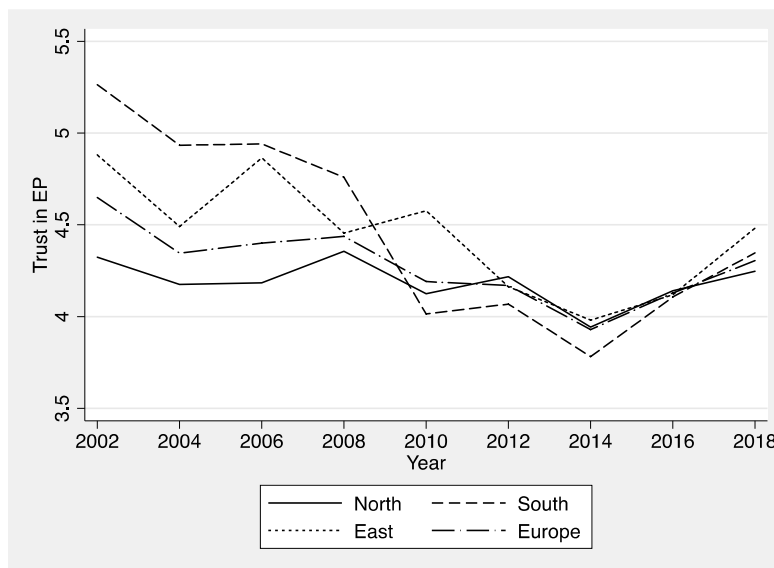
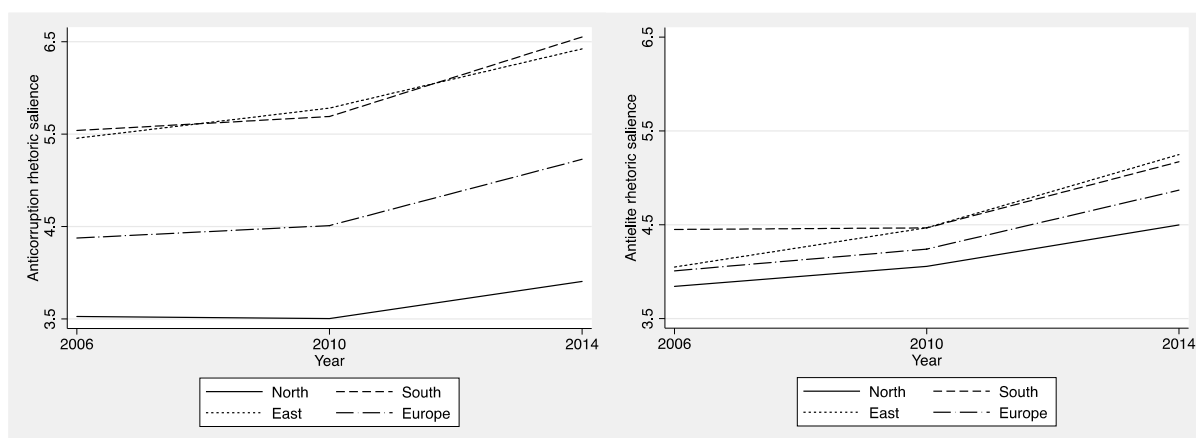


Figure 1. Reported trust in European Parliament. Weighted regional averages based on ESS data from 2002-2018.

## Populist parties in Europe

Figures 2A and 2B contain party evaluations from CHES conducted in 2006, 2010 and 2014. The graphs show average scores parties of different regions received in each year. Overall the message of anticorruption seems to be more common than antielite rhetoric, especially in parties in Eastern and Southern European countries, which is to be expected based on the earlier findings of Bågenholm and Charron (2014). In countries, where corruption is a bigger problem, parties are more likely to employ such a message, relevant to the places where it is less of an issue. Furthermore, the fact that anticorruption message is in general more common than the antielite message, is easily explained by the fact that parties in the government are quite unlikely to attempt to present themselves as antielite. However, such parties are likely to be overrepresented in the CHES sample, as mentioned in the previous section. Meanwhile, the anticorruption message can be expected to figure in any party's ideology, and thus adds to the higher mean relative to the antielite rhetoric. Northern Europe has maintained the lowest score for both measures: average political party in Northern Europe had a salience of anticorruption rhetoric score of 3.53 in 2006 which increased to 3.906 in 2014. The South is at the top of the list with the importance of anticorruption message rated at 5.54 in 2006 and 6.55 in 2014. Both of the populism measures have increased in all European countries in the time period 2006-2014, which could imply two things: either more strictly populist parties emerged, or the existing parties started employing a more populist measure. In both cases, populism seems to take up more political space now than in the past.



Figures 2A and 2B. Salience of anticorruption and antielite rhetoric in party ideologies. CHES data.

Although the populist messages have become more prominent, the trajectory of populist parties' success is not as monotone. Its pattern somewhat resembles the development of trust in the EP discussed earlier: share of total votes that went to populists was increasing from 2004 to 2014 everywhere, it became lower in the last six years in Northern and Southern Europe. The Southern measure dropped by almost 15 percentage points and gave up the lead for Eastern Europe, where nearly 50% of all votes in the 2019 EP election went to populist parties after steadily increasing from 22.43% in 2004.

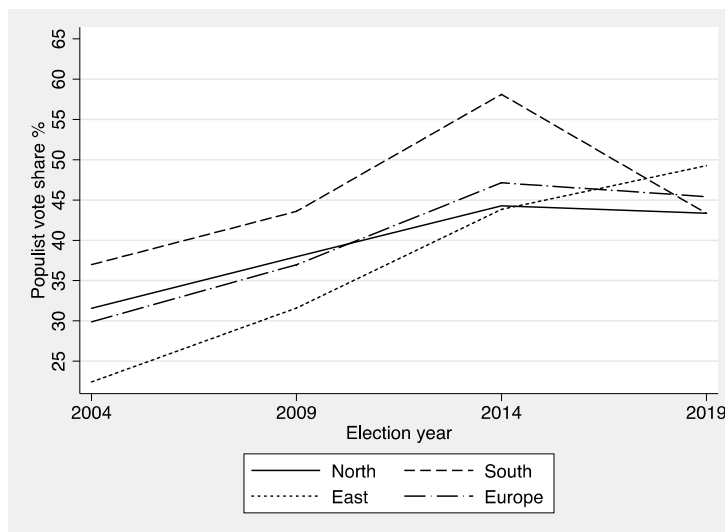


Figure 3. Share of votes for populist parties in 2004-2019 EP elections. CHES data.

### Voter turnout in European Parliament elections

Voter turnout in EP elections shown in Figure 4 reveals significant differences across the regions of Europe. Eastern Europe has had drastically lower voter turnouts since 2004 relative to the continental average, which increased for the first time in the most recent election in 2019, yet only reaching just above 35%. Turnout in the South fell from 60.86% in 2004 to 49.22% in 2014 but then slightly recovered in in 2019 ending up at 50.56%. The Northern voter turnout has shown most stability, while also increasing by over 5 percentage points from 2014 and reaching 56.27%. The recoveries since 2014 observed in all regions resemble the increases in trust in Europe shown in Figure 1. This suggests that populist parties might have a positive impact on voter turnout, perhaps by providing the feeling of representation.

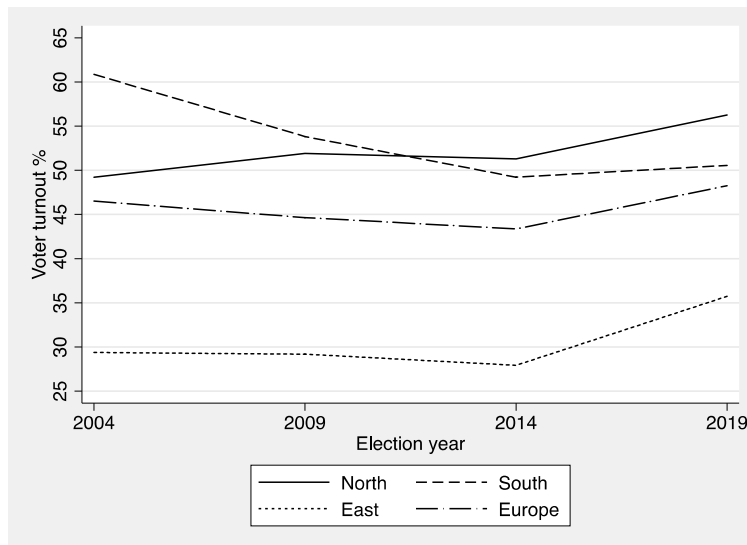


Figure 4. Voter turnout in European Parliament elections. European Parliament website.

## REGRESSION RESULTS

### Relationship between trust in the European Parliament and populism

In order to answer the research question, simple regressions are performed. The first row of Table 1 shows results for a regression with the share of the votes populist parties received as the dependent variable and the reported trust as the independent. A party is deemed populist and its votes are added to the total share if it scores above regional average in one of the two criteria for populism: salience of antielite rhetoric, or salience of anticorruption rhetoric. The regression results show no significant effect of trust on election outcomes for populist parties. The relationship is negative, as expected, in the East and the North, as well as in Europe as a whole. This means that stronger confidence in the EU lowers the success of populist parties. As seen in the statistics of ESS, the trust has decreased by 0.23 points between 2004-2014 in the North, thus the vote share populist parties received should have increased by 1.56 percentage points between the 2004 and 2014 EP elections. As the trust has been increasing since 2014, populists in 2019 election should get 2.04 percentage points less votes in Northern European countries, and 4.88 percentage points less Eastern Europe, compared to the 2014 election. The relationship is positive in the South, implying that increasing confidence in the EU is reflected in more support for populist Eurosceptics. This contradicts the intuition and the results seen in the descriptive analysis section.

Table 1. Relationship between trust level and election outcome for populist parties.

	East	South	North	Europe
Effect of trust on election outcome	-9.74 (9.225)	3.587 (11.839)	-6.714 (5.699)	-3.956 (5.25)
Effect of election outcome on trust	-0.007 (0.006)	0.019* (0.009)	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.003)

Note: data on elections in 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019. Trust levels from 2002, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2016 and 2018. Sample includes parties that score above regional average on either their anticorruption message salience or antielite message salience. Asterisks indicate significance, \* meaning significant at 10%, \*\* significant at 5% and \*\*\* significant at 1% level.

The second row of Table 1 shows the results of testing the opposite relationship: what effect the election outcomes have on the citizens' trust in Europe. The dependent variable is now trust, while election outcomes (two or one year prior to the trust measurement) are the independent variable. The regression is estimating only the effects of populist parties' results on the reported confidence in the EP. The coefficient is still positive and significant at 10% in the South, while Eastern and Northern regions, as well as the whole Europe, have negative, insignificant coefficients, as would be expected. It is important to note that they are all noticeably smaller than the effects of trust on election outcome in the first row: an increase in the populist vote share by 1 percentage point would decrease trust by 0.7 points in the East and 0.4 points in the North. Thus, it seems that confidence in the EU is robust to the changes in who is elected to represent the Member States in the European Parliament.

#### Effect of populist parties on voter turnout

Proceeding onto the subquestion on the relationship between populism and voter turnout, the expectation is that the representation of antielite views incentivizes Eurosceptics to participate in EP elections. The dependent variable is thus voter turnout, and independent variable is a dummy which takes value 1 if in the election year there was a populist party, based on one of the two criteria, each presented in rows 1 and 2 separately. As the benchmarks of what is a populist party are based on regional. The results for parties focused

on anticorruption differ significantly across regions of Europe. Regression for the Northern countries reveal a negative relationship, meaning that a prevailing anticorruption message (relative to the regional average) discourages voting, and showing a negative effect of a populist message on voter turnout. The South and East of Europe have positive although much smaller and insignificant coefficients, indicating that an increase in the persistence of a populist message by one point would increase voter turnout by 1 and 0.22 percentage points in each region respectively (the predicted decrease in the North would be by 3.05 percentage points).

Table 2. Effect of presence of populist party on voter turnout.

	Voter turnout			
	East	South	North	Europe
Anticorruption rhetoric salience dummy	0.221 (1.696)	0.997 (2.169)	-3.048 (1.852)	0.164 (1.371)
Antielite rhetoric salience dummy	1.081 (1.666)	2.759 (2.142)	2.058 (1.953)	-0.199 (1.381)
Constant	30.253***	49.676***	52.592***	45.846***

Note: each dummy takes value 1 if the score of antielite or anticorruption message salience is greater than the regional average. Asterisks indicate significance, \* meaning significant at 10%, \*\* significant at 5% and \*\*\* significant at 1% level.

Row 2 of table 2 show the results of the same regression, but now the sample is only made up of parties with a stronger than average antielite message. Such parties have statistically insignificant effects on voter turnout in all three regions and the whole Europe. However, the European coefficient is now negative, while data from separate regions show a positive relationship, suggesting that a locally prominent antielite rhetoric incentivizes voters to participate in elections. A presence of a populist party running on an antielite message would increase voter turnout by 1.08, 2.76 and 2.06 percentage points in East, South and North respectively.



### Alternative time lags

In the original regressions, the relationship between trust measurement and an election two years prior was tested (or one year prior, for the 2009 and 2019 elections). The same time lag was applied in examining the opposite relationship. Table 3 presents the results with longer time lags.

Table 3. Relationship between trust level and election outcome for populist parties.

	East	South	North	Europe
Effect of trust on election outcome in 3-4 years	-22.567** (9.145)	13.241 (11.983)	-6.581 (7.009)	-3.854 (5.436)
Effect of election outcome on trust in 3-4 years	-0.006 (0.005)	0.012 (0.008)	-0.008* (0.004)	-0.001 (0.003)
Effect of trust on election outcome in 5-6 years	-9.623 (7.643)	19.803** (7.671)	-0.609 (6.722)	2.482 (5.454)
Effect of election outcome on trust in 5-6 years	-0.013** (0.003)	0.023** (0.006)	-0.008* (0.004)	-0.004 (0.003)

Note: data on elections in 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019. Trust levels from 2002, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2016 and 2018. Sample includes parties that score above regional average on either their anticorruption message salience or antielite message salience. Asterisks indicate significance, \* meaning significant at 10%, \*\* significant at 5% and \*\*\* significant at 1% level.

In the first row, elections of 2004, 2009 and 2014 are matched with trust levels from 2008, 2012 and 2018 respectively. The signs of the coefficients remain the same as in the original regressions, and the effect appears to significantly stronger with a longer time lag in the East and in the South of Europe. The same regional signs are carried to an even longer time difference: how trust in, for instance, 2008, affects the election outcome for populist parties in 2014 (third row of Table 3). However, now the European coefficient turns positive. The results for Eastern and Northern Europe confirm that a higher level of trust in the EP, even 3

or 6 years prior, is disadvantageous for populist parties. In the South this relationship remains strongly positive throughout the years.

The effect of the populist parties' performance on trust maintains a negative sign when increasing the time period between an election and trust measuring. The South is again an exception with a positive coefficient in regressions with trust measured 3-4 and 5-6 years after an election, as well as the original regression, contrasting with figures 1 and 3 which show that in the South trust was decreasing as the performance of populist parties was improving. The negative coefficients in the other regions are thus in line with the data, as they confirmed the negative relationship seen between trust, which was strictly decreasing in 2002-2010, and populism.

## DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

### Relationship between trust in the European Parliament and populism

To summarize, I find a negligent relationship between confidence in the EU and the performance of populism. I do not find that the reported decreasing trust in the European Parliament would significantly influence people's decision to vote for a populist party. The reverse relationship, the effect of more populist parties in power on people's confidence in the EU is also not supported by the statistical analysis of the data. These findings conflict with the existing literature on populism and trust, namely the work of Dustman et al (2017), in which they find that support for populist parties is strongly correlated with trust in political bodies. Although they use the same ESS survey from the years 2002-2014, their trust variable is a ratio of trust in European Parliament relative to trust in national parliament. Perhaps most importantly, Dustman et al (2017) reduce their sample only to countries that have a populist party which received votes in the last general election (based on ESS responses). For some countries, such as Germany, Sweden, Czech Republic, Lithuania, and the UK, only the years in which there was support for a populist party are taken into the sample. If there was no such year, the country is excluded completely. This greatly reduces the reported trust sample to only 123 356 respondents, meanwhile this research takes into account more than 300 000 responses.

Including countries and people that do not confirm the hypothesis is crucial when trying to achieve an accurate description of the reality. It is no surprise that Dustman et al (2017) find such strong evidence of there being a tight relationship between distrust and populism when they only look at cases where both are present. This paper takes into account the countries which might have low confidence in the EU institutions but still do not have a prominent populist party, and influence the overall results to be not as striking as in the work of Dustman et al.

### Effect of populist parties on voter turnout

I also found that the presence of a populist party does not have a statistically significant effect on voter turnout in EP elections. The regression for North of Europe and anticorruption message gives a negative coefficient, meaning that anticorruption message disincentivizes people to vote. This might suggest that in the North the anticorruption agenda is recognized as populist and only increases disinterest in the European elections. On the other hand, it could be that corruption is not seen as a major issue in Northern Europe (at least relative to other regions) and is perceived as irrelevant by the potential voters. However, the coefficient is statistically not significant, thus the strength of the relationship is questionable. An antielite-focused party has no significant effect across the regions. However, the regional coefficients are positive, while the coefficient for Europe is negative, although also statistically insignificant. One way to interpret why the sign of the coefficient differs between regions individually and Europe would be that although a populist party manages to inspire people to vote in the regions that show lower trust in institutions, the party has to prominently stand out in the local political field with their anticorruption message, because being just above the European average (which is lower than the local averages in the South and East), has the opposite effect.

These findings on voter turnout are quite different compared to the earlier research of Immerzeel and Pickup (2015). Although they only analyzed the effects of right-wing populism, they found no relationship between voter turnout and emergence of populist parties in Europe as a whole. However, they established that there were differences in voter turnout between Eastern and Northern Europe, with the former being disincentivized and

the latter being mobilized by populism. In contrast, I find Eastern Europe to be inspired to vote by the presence of populist parties (both left and right-wing), while the North responds negatively to populism focused on anticorruption, and positively to populist antielite message. It is unclear whether focusing only on right-wing populist parties could cause these opposing results.

### Limitations

The shortcomings of this research are such that the results reported on a regional basis differ from the country level results in a number of cases and thus might not be robust to exclusion of certain countries. For instance, although Northern Europe had negative coefficients in the two regressions presented in Table 1, only four out of ten Northern European countries confirm the negative sign of each regression, with most countries showing opposing signs for the two regressions. Results for Denmark, Finland and Sweden indicate a positive relationship between trust and populism, each variable having a positive effect on the other. Thus excluding some countries from the sample or defining the regions of Europe differently may significantly alter the results. The same issues are also relevant to the estimation of the effect of populism on voter turnout. However, none of the country-level results are statistically significant, neither with regards to trust nor voter turnout, thus the fact that the relationship is very weak still stands. Another problem is that the development of the political context in the regions has changed quite drastically since 2014 (e.g. the mentioned 15 percentage points drop in support for populists in the South), and follow-up data on trust levels since the 2019 election is still lacking. Although the election outcomes of 2019 EP election were included in the analysis, there has not been another ESS round yet which would allow to see whether trust levels reacted in any way to further developments such as Brexit. Furthermore, to assess whether the relationship between populism and trust is causal in either direction, many control variables should be included, from individual fixed effects, country fixed effects, to macroeconomic shocks, but this is left for future research.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The perception of the European Union and expectations about it are ever-changing. What once started as an instrument for peace, has developed into an institution with an unprecedented reach, affecting many sovereign governments and their constituencies. To maintain such position, the EU must survive the recent wave of populism most clearly seen in France, Germany, Italy and the UK. Next to populism, another rising issue is the falling confidence the Europeans have in the EP. It undermines the Parliament's legitimacy, limiting the extent to which it can ensure cohesive actions of the Member States. However, these two internal threats, populism and low trust levels, do not seem to be greatly correlated. This suggests that separate tools may be needed to solve each of them. The attempts to make the EU institutions more transparent by publishing the schedules of the Commissioners or the committee meeting summaries of the Parliament may increase trust, but they are not anti-populist measures. Populism thrives on the message that "the elite" does not care about "the people", so eliminating this belief is key to put the promises of populist parties into perspective and point out their illegitimacy. Additional level of information spread is needed, so that the workings of the EU could be observed passively with a TV in the background, rather than by digging through a database. Furthermore, the distance between Brussels and all Europeans has to be decreased, by strengthened communication between the representatives and their countries, sometimes even surpassing the intermediary of national governments.

As pointed out by Dustmann et al (2017), "the European Union may not survive the accession to power of populist, anti-EU, anti-globalisation leaders in one or more of Europe's large countries". Thus, these internal threats cannot be ignored, and require immediate attention to secure the prosperity of the European Union.

## APPENDIX

Table 1A. Reported trust in EP in European countries. Weighted averages from ESS data.

	Survey year									
	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	Average
Austria	4.213	4.022	-	-	-	-	3.589	3.83	4.414	4.014
Belgium	4.876	4.983	5.149	5.128	5.033	5.117	4.830	4.631	4.881	4.959
Denmark	4.836	4.833	4.959	5.048	4.97	5.159	4.78	-	4.564	4.894
Finland	4.879	4.996	4.993	5.153	5.086	5.042	4.652	5.174	5.4	5.042
France	4.392	4.306	4.367	4.622	4.271	4.123	3.914	3.73	4.006	4.192
Germany	4.522	4.183	4.068	4.298	4.022	4.357	4.076	4.439	-	4.246
The Netherlands	4.717	4.606	4.782	5.072	4.94	4.815	4.495	4.681	5.297	4.823
Sweden	4.02	3.955	4.49	4.658	4.962	4.707	4.722	4.759	3.838	4.457
The UK	3.637	3.548	3.493	3.601	3.363	3.429	3.149	3.68	3.511	3.49
Northern Europe	4.324	4.175	4.184	4.356	4.125	4.218	3.943	4.141	4.247	4.19
Cyprus	-	-	5.844	5.993	5.037	4.254	-	-	4.655	5.157
Greece	5.752	5.344	-	4.433	2.568	-	-	-	-	4.524
Italy	5.54	-	-	-	-	4.332	-	4.03	4.343	4.56
Portugal	4.847	4.037	4.555	4.329	3.681	3.157	3.398	4.088	-	4.012
Spain	4.817	5.051	5.03	4.953	4.46	3.915	3.855	4.22	5.005	4.59
Southern Europe	5.264	4.934	4.941	4.759	4.015	4.068	3.782	4.107	4.347	4.469
Bulgaria	-	-	4.759	4.631	4.829	4.25	-	-	3.299	4.354
Czech Rep.	4.669	4.383	-	3.944	4.052	3.942	4.164	4.152	4.173	4.185
Estonia	-	4.874	5.335	5.011	5.173	4.727	4.406	4.557	4.633	4.84
Hungary	5.666	5.223	4.963	4.044	4.746	4.221	4.849	4.392	5.076	4.8
Lithuania	-	-	-	-	4.294	4.738	5.218	5.624	-	4.969
Poland	4.753	4.261	4.795	4.52	4.714	4.218	3.65	3.915	4.643	4.354
Slovakia	-	4.738	5.138	5.27	4.41	3.72	-	-	-	4.655
Slovenia	4.648	4.534	4.978	4.834	3.745	3.83	3.408	3.939	-	4.24

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Eastern	4.881	4.491	4.865	4.455	4.577	4.163	3.981	4.119	4.482	4.446
Europe										

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Note: Reported trust, aggregated from individual responses using sampling and population weights. Evaluated on a scale 0-10, 0 meaning no trust and 10 meaning full trust.

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