Convergent or Unresponsive?

The effect of austerity and mainstream party positioning on the electoral success of left-wing populist parties in Western Europe

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Abstract

While several populist parties with ties to the left side of the ideological scale have become more prominent in the electoral arenas across Western Europe, the literature on populism still has a disproportionate focus on the right. To enhance the existing research on explanatory factors to the electoral fortunes of left-wing populist parties, this study tests two competing theories using multivariate regression analysis. The first theory concerns the effect of mainstream party convergence, and the second, the increased tension between governing parties’ responsive role towards the electorate and their responsible role as national leaders, here operationalized as the implementation of fiscal consolidation. The results show that austerity is conducive to left-wing populist success, and correspondingly supports the theory of the tension between governing parties’ responsibility and responsiveness. However, the effect is weaker when controlling for economic factors, which might be an indication of a partly spurious relationship or the included variables being endogenous. Despite a flexible operationalization, the convergence theory receives marginal to no support and the direction is opposite to what is expected in two of the models, rendering the results even more ambiguous and difficult to analyze. Whereas a lack of variation in the data denotes that the findings should be interpreted with caution, there is hence an indication that existing theories concerning the success of the populist left should not be taken for granted as long as empirical research is limited.

Key words

Left-wing; Populism; Mainstream party convergence; Ideology; Responsiveness; Responsibility; Austerity; Fiscal consolidation

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1 Introduction and background

The concept of populism has increasingly attracted the attention of scholars across countries all over the world. However, potential causes to the varied success and failure of populist parties is still an issue of academic debate. Populism has not only developed into a smear word which is often used carelessly by numerous actors outside of its conceptual frame, but also as an umbrella-term despite its empirical research being based almost exclusively on the right side of the political spectrum. While right-wing populist parties have unquestionably been more successful than their left-wing counterparts in party systems around Europe during the last decades, the decrease in support and trust for mainstream parties provide all populists with the possibility to influence policies and government compositions, both nationally and as members of the European parliament, even when they have only obtained a marginal share of the votes (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 98). It is therefore necessary to enhance the existing knowledge and further develop theories on the electoral success of populist parties, on both sides of the political spectrum, to fully comprehend the future development of European democracies.

Ideological convergence between mainstream parties has often been stated to have both long- and short-term effects on the success of right-wing populists and anti-establishment parties in Europe, since it may allow these parties to convincingly portray themselves as the only true opposition against a unified elite (Abedi, 2002, 2004; Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Carter, 2005; Loxbo, 2014: 256; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 113). According to Downs (1957: 39) spatial theory, parties are rational actors with the sole pursuit to maximize their votes in upcoming elections, and will therefore change their policy positions if it is regarded as favorable. The rise of radical right parties (RRP) is accordingly assumed to have pressed Social Democratic parties towards the right, possibly creating a vacuum for niche parties to fill, as well as to have increased the number of cordon sanitaire coalitions and cooperation across party lines (Bale et al., 2010; Van Spanje, 2010). Although mainstream party convergence is therefore believed to have a similar effect on the rise of populist parties on the left (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 113; March, 2008: 7), cross-national empirical research to support this notion is limited.
An alternative theory regarding the rise of populist parties in Western Europe, incorporates the rising tension between parties’ responsiveness towards voter preferences and their responsibility to govern. This tension is claimed to have increased over the years, partly due to multi-level governance, the economic crisis and the decline of mass parties (Mair: 2009; Bardi, Bartolini and Trechsel, 2014: 244). The rise of populist parties has thus been expressed as a consequence of the unresponsiveness by elected governments towards their electorates, reflected in their implementation of unpopular policies that they deem necessary in order to upheld their role as responsible leaders (Van Kessel, 2014: 99–100). Since left-wing populist parties are focused on socio-economic issues and anti-austerity measures, and have been successful in the aftermath of the great recession, it is probable that the rise of the populist left could be a result of governmental negligence of voter preferences, here understood as complying with fiscal rules and agreements with lenders.

In order to partially fill the gap that has emerged due to an exaggerated focus on right-wing populists, these two competing theories, i.e. the effect of governments’ unresponsiveness to voters in favor of their responsibility to govern as well as the convergence of mainstream parties regarding the general left-right divide, will in the following thesis be tested empirically.

1.1 Objective

Even though few scholars have provided empirical evidence to support these two competing theories regarding the rise of the populist left, these claims are often broadly accepted. The objective of this thesis is therefore to empirically test the presented theories and thus enhance our understanding for underlying explanatory factors concerning the rise of the populist left. Previous research on the electoral success of left-wing populist parties has mainly been focused on definitional issues, single-country studies and case-studies with few observations (Mudde, 2004; Otjes and Louwerse, 2015; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). This thesis therefore set out to conduct a comparative cross-national study over time and statistically assess two competing explanatory perspectives, namely the convergence thesis, and the increase in the tension between governing parties’ responsiveness and responsibility, operationalized as the implementation of austerity measures.
It is important to note, that whilst mainstream party convergence and unresponsiveness towards the electorate may prove favorable to left-wing populist parties, it is merely a series of possibilities that can be exploited, not a guarantee for electoral success (Mudde, 2007: 255–256). Moreover, the theories are not mutually exclusive, since many different factors might explain the rise of left-wing populist parties and a country could theoretically experience both mainstream party convergence and an increased tension between responsibility and responsiveness. It is therefore crucial to take both demand and supply side factors, such as the level of radical ideology, electoral thresholds, organizational factors and the presence of a charismatic leader, into account to fully comprehend the varied success of left-wing populist parties in Europe (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 97), which unfortunately cannot be done within the scope of a master’s thesis. The objective is thus merely to test both theories to elucidate which one that has the strongest explanatory value and/or if they receive support in an empirical study.

The research question addressed in this thesis is:

*How may mainstream party positioning, or an increase in the tension between governing parties’ capability to be responsible and responsive, affect the electoral success of left-wing populist parties in Western Europe?*

1.2 Outline

This thesis will be outlined as follows: Chapter two includes a thorough discussion on definitional issues and the concept of populism, followed by a literature review concerning the emergence of the populist left, party system change, multidimensionality as well as theories in relation to mainstream party convergence and the tension between responsibility and responsiveness. The end of the chapter is devoted to a presentation of hypotheses derived from the theory. Subsequently, chapter three includes the chosen methodology and research design, which incorporates delimitations and critical assessments of the study as well as a detailed presentation of the chosen data sets, operationalization in relation to the theories and included variables. Chapter four provides a presentation of descriptive statistics and variables used in the thesis and a demonstration of the regression models with an accompanied analysis of the results. The thesis is then completed in chapter five, by a discussion on further research and some concluding remarks.
2 Theory and previous research

The following chapter includes a thorough discussion on definitional issues regarding the concept of populism in general and left-wing populism in particular. Subsequently, previous research on the success of left-wing populist parties, the change of Western European party systems, electoral volatility and multidimensionality, as well as on the convergence thesis and the theory regarding the rise in tension between responsibility and responsiveness, will be presented and discussed. The chapter will conclude with hypotheses, which will serve as a base for the operationalization that will be presented in the following methods chapter.

2.1 The concept of populism and definitional issues

Populism is a notoriously contested concept and has consequently been defined as an ideology, a political strategy, a syndrome, an organization, a political style, a political philosophy, a discourse, a political logic, a doctrine as well as a rhetoric posture (Canovan, 1999; Brett, 2013; Katsambekis, 2017; Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017; Weyland, 2001; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Laclau, 2005; Hawkins, 2009). Most scholars define populism as a set of ideas which incorporate people-centrism, anti-elitism and popular sovereignty, although there is a disagreement on these set of ideas being a political strategy, a discourse or a thin-centred ideology (Van Kessel, 2014: 101; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017; Gerodimos, 2015: 608; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014).

The definition of populism used in this thesis is inspired by Mudde (2004: 543) and is acknowledged by many scholars, since it allows the author to consider both demand and supply side factors of electoral success, and is minimal enough to be used when pursuing cross-national studies (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Gerodimos, 2015: 608). Mudde (2004: 543) defines populism as a thin-centred ideology that separates the population into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the pure people and the corrupt elite, where the populists claim to be the expression of the general will of the people and accordingly the *vox populi*. Consequently, organizational aspects such as the existence of a charismatic leader, is not regarded as a defining component of the concept of populism, even though it often coincides.
As a thin-centred ideology, unable to provide a full set of guidelines or policy suggestions on how societies should function, populism can be attached to fuller ‘host’ ideologies such as socialism, liberalism or conservatism (March, 2011: 119; Ramiro and Gomez, 2017: 112; Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017; Van Kessel, 2014: 102; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 19). March (2017: 287) argues that at higher levels of abstraction, populism can be regarded as a discourse, but when the concept is used as a classifier rather than a descriptor, it is more suitable to treat it as an ideology and hence as a dichotomous rather than a continuous concept. By defining populism as an ideology, the concept thus becomes the property of the actor, i.e. their populist messages are perceived as a prolongation of their core set of values. This allows for parties to be divided into populists and non-populists, rather than parties that strategically use a type of discourse that can be expressed sporadically by anyone and in different degrees (Van Kessel, 2014: 99–101; Rooduijn, De Lange and Van Der Brug, 2014).

Several scholars have argued that populism could as a redemptive force represent a democratic answer to the exclusion of important issues from the political debate, with the potential to reclaim the political power to the people (Laclau, 2005; Canovan, 1999). Populism in Europe is accordingly not anti-democratic per se but against liberal democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 95). Instead, the ideal of a more majoritarian or popular democracy, based on the general will of the people, is often endorsed. While this might be regarded as a way to redeem the flaws of liberal democracies, it is important to note that majoritarian democracies might lead to the dismantling of institutional checks and balances, if it is regarded as better for ‘the people’, which could in turn result in the support for authoritarian tendencies (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 18; Mudde, 2007: 236). Admittedly, as pointed out by Akkerman (2017), left populists are less anti-pluralist than their counterparts on the right. However, their lack of respect for opposing views, might correspondingly lead to the down-sizing of independent institutions and procedural norms, such as freedom of expression and the rule of law, that are set up to protect the people from totalitarianism and the tyranny of the majority (Hawkins, 2009: 1044; March, 2011: 122; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 80–81).

The concept of populism has often been used by political actors to demean their opposition and to portray them as inexperienced and illegitimate. Consequently, populist parties have often been treated as a threat to democracy, as a pathology, as outsiders or even as societal pariahs, which as a result has led to political actors refusing to be associated with the concept.
(Katsambekis, 2017; Canovan, 1999). Not only do populist parties and movements renounce the populist label, but they also frequently refer to the general left and right spectrum as obsolete, and hence commonly refuse to be positioned along these lines (March, 2011: 119; Ramiro and Gomez, 2017: 111). The possibility to define certain political actors as populists has therefore proven to be as challenging as to define the concept itself. Nevertheless, numerous populist parties have what Sartori (1976: 122–123) refers to as blackmail potential (being able to affect the party dynamic by its mere existence), or coalition potential (being able to affect the governing parties in one direction or the other), which classifies them as relevant parties in a party system. Since Sartori’s (1976) classification of relevant parties has proven to capture important elements of party competition that would go amiss by simply counting the number of parties in a system, populist parties should be regarded as the relevant political players that they are. One therefore needs to further specify what de facto separates the populists from the mainstream.

Even though populism is an old phenomenon in Europe, the increase of parties and references to the concept is extensive. Mudde (2004) even argues that populism has become so mainstream that the current political landscape is characterized by a Populist Zeitgeist. To test Mudde’s (2004) theory, Rooduijn, De Lange and Van der Brug (2014) conducted a study that focused on election manifestos. They compared both populist and mainstream party manifestos over time, to see if there had been an increase in how many times, and in what way, the parties referred to the people and criticized the elite. Their results show that there has not been a shift towards a more populist discourse, which contradicts the notion that populism is contagious in the way that Mudde (2004) has suggested. Furthermore, March (2017: 290–292) underlines that The Populist Zeitgeist might rather be a demotic Zeitgeist, since the combination of all three core components of the populist concept is rarely present. While mainstream parties have increased their references to ‘the people’ over time, this increase has not been the same regarding anti-elitism and popular sovereignty. When mainstream parties do use anti-elitism, it is rarely as a reference to a division of societies into two antagonistic groups (March, 2017: 292–293).

It is thus possible to divide parties into populists and non-populists based on their references to populism’s three core components, i.e. people-centrism, anti-elitism and popular sovereignty. Hence, mainstream parties are different from populists since the combination of the three criterions are absent or inconsistent in their political message. To call them populists
would therefore be to stretch the concept, which could obstruct its usefulness (Van Kessel, 2014: 103-105). Populism is therefore regarded as a thin-centred ideology and a classical concept in this thesis and hence as a core feature and characteristic in populist parties, rather than a style that is merely used as a political strategy.

2.2 Defining Left-wing populism

March (2007: 67-68) underlines that despite their different backgrounds, left-wing populists can be referred to as a party family, but also adds that it is important to highlight the difficulties in defining a concept where the two most prominent features, populism and left-wing politics, are both contested. Nonetheless, when mentioning left-wing populism in this thesis, it refers to parties that not only comprise the three core components of Mudde’s (2004) definition of populism, but are also grounded in ideologies connected to traditional left-wing politics, which supports values such as egalitarianism, social justice and anti-capitalism. Additionally, left-wing populists have almost entirely shifted discursively from the classical socialist proclamation of being ‘the protector of the proletariat’ towards the role as ‘the voice of the people’. They have less concern for conventional socialist values, such as class struggles, but have a sustained focus on injustices connected to socio-economic and distributive issues, which they blame the powerful, the wealthy and the corrupt elite for (March, 2007).

Left and right populists are often divided into inclusionary and exclusionary versions of populism, based on their conceptualizations of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012). Left populists are more inclusive and pluralist than their counterparts on the right, in both Latin America and in Europe, due to their left-wing ideologies. This is demonstrated by how parties such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece have included marginalized groups such as the LGBTI-community and religious minorities, in their notion of the people (March, 2017: 294-295; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 48; Stavrakakis, Andreadis and Katsambekis, 2016: 5-6). However, as March (2017: 298) underlines, no populist party is completely inclusionary due to their moral view of society as divided into two antagonistic groups. While all populists are exclusionary to ‘the corrupt elite’, only right-wing populists are also rejecting cultural groups horizontally, claiming them to be ‘a dangerous other’.
This highlights the vagueness of the two most important concepts concerning populism, i.e. anti-elitism and people-centrism (March, 2011: 120; Katsambekis, 2017). The concept of the elite has been used as a reference to ‘la Casta’ by Podemos, the Troika and the German government by Syriza, and ‘the oligarchy’ by la France Insoumise. Additionally, the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank have also been accused of being part of the corrupt elite when it has suited the purpose (Ramiro and Gomez, 2017: 111; Polk and Rovny, 2017: 358-359; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 37). Accordingly, ‘the people’ have e.g. been used to refer to the electorate, to blue collar workers or to ‘ordinary citizens’ (Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017: 194; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015: 5). The targeted groups therefore depend on contextual factors and whilst people-centrism and anti-elitism are common denominators for all populist actors, the ways in which they use these concepts are highly dependent on their core-ideology, which supports the notion that it is possible to place these parties on a left-right dimension (Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017: 200; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 22). Also, the fact that ideology has been proven to be more important than populism per se in shaping the behavior of populist parties, further supports the notion that they should not only be examined as an overall phenomenon, without taking the respective host ideologies into account (March, 2017: 299-300; Stavarakakis, Andreadis and Katsambekis, 2016: 5-6; Otjes and Louwerse, 2015). Left-wing populist parties can hence be separated from right-wing populist parties, based on their core ideology and since they are not explicitly focused on issues connected to anti-immigration, ethnic nationality or welfare chauvinism.

2.3 Previous research on the emergence of the populist left

Whilst the literature on right-wing populism in Europe and left-wing populism in South-America is extensive, conceptual and empirical studies concerning left-wing populism in Europe is still highly limited (March, 2007: 63–64; Yabanci, 2015: 18). Most explanatory theories are instead based on empirical evidence provided for right-wing populists, radical left parties, niche parties or anti-establishment parties in general.

However, March (2008) presents several potential demand and supply side factors that could have contributed to the formation and rise of radical left parties (RLP), which he later tests empirically, through a large N-study in the article “Out of left field? Explaining the variable electoral success of European radical left parties” written with Rommerskirchen in 2015.
The study incorporates several left-wing populist parties in the definition of the radical left, and the results of their study show that these parties are more prone to succeed in countries with high levels of unemployment, Euroscepticism and anti-globalization sentiments, low electoral thresholds as well as where radical left parties have been successful in the past. However, they only study cases up until 2008, rendering it uncertain if this could correspondingly explain the electoral success for left-wing populists that were founded more recently. March and Rommerskirchen (2015) also conclude that party competition against green and radical right parties has a large impact on radical left party success. This argument is supported by Dalton and Weldon (2005) that claim that left-wing populist parties will only be successful in party systems that lack right-wing counterparts. Whilst this has been proven inaccurate, by parties such as Syriza in Greece, it indicates that party competition is likely to nevertheless have an impact on the success of the populist left.

March and Rommerskirchen (2015: 40-41) underline that the increase in RLP success was stable and/or increasing before the start of the economic crisis, but nevertheless emphasize that it has been favorable for them. On a similar note, Kriesi (2012) refers to the economic crisis as an example of how economic voting can affect the electoral success of opposition parties, especially in countries with plurality systems, where the voters have a clearer picture of which actor stands responsible for implemented economic policies, than in countries with proportional electoral systems where coalition governments are more common. Kriesi (2012) argues that it is mainly populist parties that can benefit from lower trust in the national government but he only studies the parties to the right. If this is factual for the left is therefore unclear.

2.4 Party system change and the contagion from the right

Downs’ (1957) Spatial Theory regards parties as rational actors, that will change their party positions if deemed necessary in order to maximize their aggregate vote share. Van Spanje (2010) and Bale et al., (2010: 413–414) support this theory, and argue that several mainstream parties have made a right-wards move, by adopting stricter policy stances on immigration issues, in countries which have witnessed a rising electoral support for radical right-wing parties. Bale et al., (2010: 410–412) and De Lange (2012) further highlight the fact that the electoral success for right-wing populists has led to a three-folded challenge for Social
Democrats. First, policy issues that are generally emphasized and owned by traditional right-wing parties are becoming more salient. Second, new coalitions formed by the mainstream right and the populist right are changing the party competition in systems around Europe, which affects the responses available to the mainstream left. Third, traditional working-class voters, which have historically been loyal to Social Democrats, have started to shift their support in favor for populist or radical parties. Several scholars therefore argue that this ‘contagion from the right’ has forced many mainstream left parties to change their policy positions to become more catch-all in their approach, which could have damaged their credibility and consequently resulted in internal disagreement (Bale et al., 2010: 413–414; Van Kessel, 2016).

Nachtwey and Spier (2007: 124–125) argue that the transformation of Social Democratic parties and their shift towards a more market-based friendly policy stance, might explain the decline in support amongst traditional workers, rather than a shift in voter preferences, since the demand for social justice has been stable over time in these groups. Stoehrel (2017: 570) argues in the same lines that Podemos’ electoral success is due to the rightwards-shift of the Social Democratic party in Spain, and the fact that they claim to be the true representative for egalitarian policies. This right-wards shift of the mainstream left suggests that a potential convergence of mainstream parties in party systems around Europe has occurred, albeit conditioned upon the decision by the mainstream right to stick to their guns. It is important however, to mention that there is a scholarly disagreement on the de facto influence that the radical right has had on party systems and party competition. Dalton and McCallister (2015), for instance, argue on the contrary that the ideological positioning of mainstream parties has remained stable despite the rise of new challenger parties.

2.5 Ideological voting and electoral volatility

The traditional left-right political spectrum has been the subject of critique by many scholars, that underline that it only provides a simplified picture of reality, since ideologies have different meanings depending on normative views, differing country- and contextual features as well as the fact that citizens rarely comprehend what ideologies de facto stand for and represent (Converse, 2006). Mair (1997: 158–159) further argues that by focusing on a one-dimensional scale, the party competition in a system is lost, since some niche-parties that rally around specific issues or represent religious, regional or linguistic groups, do not always
compete based on traditional ideological grounds. Along similar lines, Feldman and Johnston (2014) therefore assert that multidimensionality is needed to capture the effect of opinions concerning economic, social and cultural matters.

However, Van der Brug (2010) provides a thorough list on how electoral behavior has changed across generations and argues that after the decline of mass parties and class voting, ideology became a simplistic way for voters to classify parties and orient themselves in the world of politics. He underlines that ‘ideological voting’ is still the strongest explanatory factor to electoral behavior across all generations. Contemporary voters in Europe are classified as highly volatile, but while party identification and loyalty are decreasing, certain political core values are thus still strong explanatory factors to electoral behavior. Furthermore, a vote for populist parties has often been referred to as a mere protest vote against the political establishment, which would render theories on ideological voting regarding populists as useless, and the explanatory value of the convergence thesis as inadequate. However, ideological affiliation still proves to be an important underlying motivation for why citizens cast their votes for both right-wing and left-wing populist parties in Europe (Van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2000; Rooduijn et al., 2017; Gastaldi, 2016).

2.6 Mainstream party convergence

Several scholars have presented empirical evidence in support for the theory that ideological convergence of the mainstream parties will result in electoral fortunes for anti-establishment parties (Abedi, 2004; Carter, 2005: 136, 141; Loxbo, 2014: 239–240; Kitschelt and McGann, 1995: 17, 20–23, 48, 53). The argument states that ideological convergence obstructs the possibility to present the voters with different alternatives, which fuels the idea of the mainstream parties being alienated from parts of the electorate and identical to each other as part of a political elite. Left without a differentiated option that fits their preferences, alienated voters will then turn to challenger parties that present policies that are distinguishable from other parties in the same system. Mainstream party convergence on the traditional left-right scale may hence establish a favorable political opportunity structure for challenger parties, since it allows them to portray themselves as the only true opposition, and creates a vacuum on the fringes of the spectrum that niche and anti-establishment parties could be able to fill (Abedi, 2004: 23, 27–28, 104; Hainsworth, 1992: 11).
Whilst Kitschelt and McGann (1995), Carter (2005), Mudde (2007), Hainsworth (1992) and Loxbo (2014) are focused on how ideological convergence might affect the radical right, Abedi (2002, 2004) focuses on anti-establishment party success in general, incorporating parties regardless of their ideological affiliation. All the above-mentioned researchers have provided support for the convergence thesis. Mudde (2007: 240–242) emphasizes that all radical parties should be able to benefit from mainstream party convergence, including those that he refers to as social populist parties, since the electoral bases for all radical parties share similar traits, attitudes and socio-demographic characteristics. Furthermore, Abedi (2004: 138–139) argues that ideological convergence between mainstream parties as well as a de-alignment amongst voters, making them more volatile, are conducive for the success of anti-establishment parties.

The convergence thesis has been challenged by Ignazi (1996: 557–559) who argues that convergence is only favorable for extremist parties after a party system has experienced polarization, since the initial divergence both legitimize them and institutionalize their role in the party system. Whilst Abedi (2002) found no evidence to support Ignazi’s (1996) claims after he analyzed his theory empirically, March and Rommerskirchen’s (2015) study is in line with Ignazi’s (1996) reasoning since they have shown that radical left parties are more prone to succeed in countries characterized by a legacy of previous radical left parties. Kitschelt and McGann (1995) have also been criticized by scholars such as Veugelers (2001) who by testing a more dynamic measurement argues that earlier results are misleading since they only measure one point in time. Nonetheless, Carter (2005) who remedies Kitschelt and McGann’s (1995) work, by including data from several points in time, still reaches similar conclusions as they did. There is hence no universal understanding on the explanatory power of the positioning of mainstream parties on anti-establishment party success. However, Mudde (2007: 239) emphasizes that most empirical studies are in support of the convergence thesis, but highlights that there is a scholarly disagreement regarding which parties that should converge in order for anti-establishment parties to benefit from it. Some scholars stress the importance of the convergence of all moderate parties in a system, whilst others focus on the convergence between the two major right and left-wing parties (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Hainsworth, 1992; Abedi, 2002, 2004).

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 105) emphasize that mainstream party convergence strengthens the credibility in populists’ accusation that traditional parties are all identical and hence all
part of the ‘corrupt elite’. This could have been further accentuated by the fact that the rise of challenger parties on both sides of the political spectrum has led to established parties opting for centre-left and centre-right coalitions across party lines, often founded as a cordon sanitaire against the radical right, rather than to stick to their guns or surrender their incumbency to extremist parties (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 111–113). Since the host ideology has been proven more important than populism per se, in the shaping of populist parties’ policy preferences (March, 2017: 300; Rooduijn et al., 2017), it is plausible that mainstream convergence can also explain the success of populist parties on the left, as they might attract voters that perceive mainstream parties as defectors to its previous left-wing ideology.

2.7 Responsibility vs. responsiveness

The theory of the tension between governing party responsiveness and responsibility conditions that parties have two roles. First, parties need to be responsive and attentive to voter preferences and to serve as their representatives by translating their demands into policies. Second, parties have a responsibility to govern, i.e. they must also secure long-term needs for its citizens, as well as honor their agreements with international partners by being accountable, predictable and consistent (Mair, 2011: 10). They also need to uphold their responsibilities as members of international treaties and/or honor their commitment to common markets, in order to maintain their international credibility (Mair, 2011; Bardi, Bartolini and Trechsel, 2014: 237).

The tension between responsibility and responsiveness has always been present in liberal democracies but is claimed to have intensified and become more incompatible over time, since governments have chosen or been forced to prioritize their governing role (Mair, 2006, 2011: 1). The economic crisis, multi-level governance, globalization, European integration and an increase in international interdependence have been stated as reasons for the rising incompatibility between the two roles of governing parties, since they put higher pressure on national governments to uphold their external responsibilities towards the international community (Mair, 2011; Kriesi, 2014; Bardi, Bartolini and Trechsel, 2014: 235–236, 244; Laffan, 2014: 272–273). Furthermore, the decrease in party membership, party loyalty and mass parties, as well as voter volatility and a disconnection between parties and civil society further obstructs the possibility for governments to be sufficiently responsive to the

The change in party competition and systems around Europe, has thus hindered governments’ abilities to acknowledge the opinions of their citizens and weakened their possibility to act as their representatives. Meguid (2005) highlights the fact that niche parties (including several populist parties) are increasingly challenging mainstream parties, as they claim to be *the vox populi*, and correspondingly build their electoral platforms on promises which prioritize their motives as responsive parties, rather than as future responsible governments. The perceived negligence of the responsiveness towards the electorate is reflected in the historically low approval ratings for political parties and low levels of political trust amongst citizens around Europe. An increase in this tension might hence lead to political parties being perceived as less legitimate in the eyes of the electorate which could create a fertile breeding ground for populists (Mair, 2011: 8; Kriesi, 2014).

The implementation of fiscal austerity measures in the aftermath of the great recession has led to political instability in many southern European countries, since these measures are highly unpopular and have consequently been met with resistance from the people (Laffan, 2014: 272–273). The implementation of fiscal consolidation is thus often presented as a clear example of the rise in tension between responsibility and responsiveness, since the measures are perceived as necessary by governing parties despite them being highly unpopular amongst the electorate. Accordingly, Bini Smaghi (2014: 7–8) argues that governments that postpone decisions on how to deal with the decline of the economic situation, until they have no other alternative than to implement strong austerity measures, might enable the rise of populists. These measures are sometimes referred to as TiNA-politics (There is no alternative), by parties which claim that their responsibility towards international organizations outweigh their possibility to be responsive to the electorate. Since voters are often claimed to be shortsighted and to vote according to their decrease in living standards, which they blame the incumbent government for, it is not surprising that most parties that have been deemed responsible for the implementation of austerity measures have been punished at the polls (Laffan, 2014: 270–273; Nyman, 2014).
Many governments have resided to blame avoidance, often towards the EU, which could delegitimize the union and its leaders in the eyes of the people and obstruct the information-sharing to the public concerning how fiscal consolidation might be favorable in the long-run. Furthermore, if voters perceive their governments as incapable of preventing the implementation of fiscal policies, ‘forced’ on them by the EU through the stability and growth pact, it might further decrease their democratic legitimacy since the people might perceive them as unresponsive or weak (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 102). Hobolt and Tilley (2016: 977) further argue that the consensus among mainstream parties regarding the need to implement austerity measures after the outbreak of the economic crisis, could have raised the electoral success for challenger parties that claims to present an alternative to this consensus.

There are hence several reasons why the support for left-wing populist parties could supposedly rise due to the implementation of fiscal consolidation, especially since several left-wing populist parties have launched their electoral platforms based on the termination of austerity measures and on the demand for a more responsive government (Kotroyannos et al., 2017: 53; Mudde, 2004: 558; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 13; Hobolt and Tilley, 2016: 977). The increase in distrust for political parties, political institutions and the EU, might thus lead to populist party success in general. Furthermore, since austerity measures are often partially funded by cuts in social welfare services, populists that adhere to left-wing politics should be able to profit even more than their right-wing counterparts. Hence, by prioritizing their governing role and acting in accordance to what they believe to be right, to the expense of their responsive duties towards the electorate, parties in power might have paved the way for populist party success (Laffan, 2014: 272–273).

2.8 Concluding remarks on theory and previous research

There are, as shown in the preceding text, several convincing theoretical arguments underlying the explanatory power and potential impact of both chosen theories on the success of left-wing populist parties in Western Europe. However, the amount of empirical support is not as substantial. For instance, even though Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 105) underline that mainstream convergence has an impact on the electoral fortunes of populists on both sides of the political spectrum, empirical research in support of this notion regarding the populist left is limited to non-existent. Whilst Abedi (2002, 2004) does include many radical left parties in his study, his research only incorporates cases up until the year 1999, and thus
exclude all left-wing populist parties that were founded in the beginning of the 21st century. This further supports the claim that additional research is needed in order to verify if the convergence thesis is indeed factual for left-wing populist parties or not. Similarly, whilst the implementation of austerity measures has been suggested to be the most important explanation to the success of populist parties, the fact that there is a lack of left wing populist parties in countries such as Portugal, that has been severely affected by the crisis, suggests that the picture is more complicated than how it is often presented (Ramiro and Gomez, 2017: 109).

Finally, it is important to note that austerity measures have sometimes been claimed to be equal to neoliberal politics, which would render the two presented theories as undifferentiated, since parties that have chosen to implement austerity measures could be said to have ‘converged’ towards neoliberalism. Within parts of the welfare state literature it is common to define austerity simply as cuts in welfare spending rather than as all discretionary actions that strengthen the budget balance, which undoubtedly implies a type of right-wing politics (Nyman, 2014: 4). The concepts fiscal consolidation, fiscal adjustment and austerity are used interchangeably in this thesis and refer to all discretionary actions that strengthen the budget balance, i.e. decreases in spending and increases in taxes, and these are perceived as a temporary solution, rather than as a permanent retrenchment of the welfare state. This will hopefully dismantle any uncertainties that the concept of austerity used in this thesis is identical to either neoliberalism or right-wing politics of any kind.

2.9 Hypotheses derived from the theory

The first hypothesis rests on the assumption that mainstream party convergence will increase the likelihood that voters perceive all mainstream parties as identical and will thus result in electoral success for left-wing populist parties.

\[ H1a: \text{Left-wing populist parties are more successful in party systems where mainstream parties are ideologically close.} \]

An alternative explanation is the ‘vacuum thesis’ which asserts that many major Socialist parties have moved rightwards as a response to the rise of right-wing populist parties, creating a vacuum on the left side of the political spectrum (Patton, 2006). Consequently, left-wing
populists should reasonably be able to benefit from this shift, since it strengthens the credibility of their accusation that mainstream left parties have abandoned their original values and joined the undifferentiated elite. Furthermore, this functions as a verification regarding if it is mainstream convergence or rather just a rightwards shift by the major mainstream left party that influence populist support.

_Hypothesis 1b: Left-wing populist parties are more successful in party systems where the largest mainstream left party is positioned further to the right._

The last hypothesis is based on the notion that increased tension between responsibility and responsiveness will result in electoral success for left wing populist parties. The implementation of austerity measures is regarded as a more responsible than responsive act:

_Hypothesis 2: Left-wing populist parties are more successful in countries where austerity measures have been implemented._

3 Methodology and research design

The following chapter includes a discussion on how the included theories and hypotheses will be operationalized. It also provides a detailed presentation over the data sources, selection of parties and variables, accompanied by remarks on delimitations as well as critical assessments.

3.1 Choice of method and data sources

Whereas a qualitative method would be more suitable when conducting a detailed case study on a specific left-wing populist party, it eliminates the possibility to generalize the results to the whole party family. As mentioned, the aim of this thesis is to test two competing theories which attempts to explain the varied success and failure of populist parties over time and across countries. A quantitative, statistical method has therefore been chosen to empirically analyze the effect of mainstream party positioning, and the tension between responsibility and responsiveness, on left-wing populist party success in Western Europe.
The data concerning mainstream party positioning is retrieved from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), which measures party positioning on both ideology and several other issue dimensions at five points in time, namely the years 1999, 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2014 (Polk and Rovny, 2017: 36; Bakker et al., 2015). The aggregate vote share for left-wing populist parties is retrieved from the Parliament and Government Composition Database (ParlGov), and several control variables, as well as the independent variable operationalized as austerity measures, from the OECD Economic Outlook No. 100. The dataset, incorporating 15 countries and 75 elections, should be large enough to avoid the selection bias that is often associated with small-N studies. Whilst ParlGov also includes data on party positioning, it is only available up until the year 2010 and CHES has hence been deemed more appropriate for this thesis. However, the data included regarding e.g. elections, seat shares and vote shares are all collected from ParlGov (Döring, 2012; Döring and Manow, 2016).

The CHES data is for each included year collected by over a hundred experts, and is based on their classification of party positions on both ideology and non-material issues, such as immigration as well as European integration (Polk and Rovny, 2017: 361). Since the measurement of convergence used in this thesis is based on expert surveys regarding party positioning and include several points in time, the data is comparable over time and across countries (Abedi, 2004: 107). There are however several issues concerning the use of expert surveys. The most obvious one being that the interpretation and party positioning conducted by country experts might differ, which could obstruct the possibility to compare the data across nation states (Steenbergen and Marks, 2007: 348–349). The credibility of expert surveys relies on the notion that respondents measure and classify party positioning in an equal manner, which might prove difficult since the left-right dimension and party systems differ slightly between countries and over time (Mair and Mudde, 1998: 218; Van der Brug and Van Spanje, 2009: 312). Furthermore, there is a risk that individual biases and underlying normative values could influence the classification conducted by individual scientists, especially if the interpretation is obstructed by vaguely formulated survey questions. However, this is remedied by the fact that expert surveys summarize and acknowledge the means and consensus of suitable experts’ opinions systematically, rather than to depend on a distinct few (Hooghe et al., 2010: 689, 693).
Regardless of certain weaknesses, expert surveys are widely acknowledged and used frequently by scholars in different fields. Since many parties in contemporary time refers to the ideological left-right dimension as obsolete, refusing to position themselves along those lines, expert surveys should prove suitable and even more helpful than before when studying party positions, instead of relying solely on party manifestos. Furthermore, Hooghe et al., (2010), Steenbergen and Marks (2007) as well as Bakker et al., (2015) have conducted studies to test the reliability and validity of the CHES data, mainly by focusing on the standard deviation in relation to placements conducted by the experts, and by comparing the results to other data sources such as the Comparative Manifesto Project, European Election Studies as well as the Benoit-Laver and Rohrschneider-Whitefield Expert Surveys. Their results support the notion that experts apply the left-right scale in an equal manner across countries (especially in relation to Western Europe) which makes the usefulness concerning the comparability of the data more credible.

3.2 Delimitations

This study has been limited to Western European countries that are members of the EU, in accordance with the available data in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey.\(^1\) The included countries are accordingly; Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg (only for 2014), Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. By focusing on the member states of the EU, this study can be regarded as a most likely case concerning both theories, since cooperation across party lines have been claimed to be increasingly common in Europe due to the rise of the radical right (Bale et al., 2010; Van Spanje, 2010; Hainsworth, 1992), which could indicate a convergence. Moreover, the great recession spurred the Euro-crisis and especially southern European countries experienced the implementation of austerity measures, often perceived as being forced on them by the EU.

Populist rhetoric has been shown to be more fleeting and parties overall more anti-establishment prone in some post-communist countries, which obstructs the classification of parties into populists and non-populists (Van Kessel, 2014: 109-110). Furthermore, the left-right scale in Eastern Europe is often claimed to be different, and their party systems more

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\(^1\) Parties included in the study will be presented more thoroughly in the following sections.
fluid, compared to Western Europe, due to their communist legacy, recent democratic transitions and a lack of institutionalization (Mair and Mudde, 1998: 213–214; Kriesi, 2014: 376). Due to the above-mentioned concerns as well as the fact that research concerning left-wing populists in Eastern Europe is at the time of writing highly limited (Yabanci, 2015: 18), only Western Europe has been included in this thesis, even though March and Rommerskirchen (2015: 42) argue that similarities between East and West have started to increase. The results of this study can therefore only be generalized concerning the included countries, but my hope is that the conclusions can be used as a base for future research.

The focus concerning convergence in this thesis is on the general unidimensional left-right ideological scale, inspired by arguments presented by Van der Brug (2010), Rooduijn and Akkerman (2017: 195), Van der Brug and Van Spanje (2009), and Abedi (2004: 107). They highlight that party positioning is still mainly shaped by the general left-right divide and emphasize that it has not been rendered obsolete, even though it has been claimed that party competition should be measured according to multiple dimensions (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Mair, 1997: 158–159). While right-wing populist parties have proven to have an increased focus on the GAL-TAN dimension and to conduct position-blurring on other issues than socio-cultural matters (Rovny, 2013), the traditional left-right continuum is still dominant regarding party positioning and electoral behavior (Abedi, 2004: 107). Furthermore, since my focus is on left-wing populists that are largely motivated by their traditional left-wing values with a strong focus on economic issues (March, 2017: 299–300; Stavrakakis, Andreadis and Katsambekis, 2016: 5-6; Otjes and Louwerse, 2015), the exclusion of other issue-dimensions, such as linguistic, religious or socio-cultural dimensions, should not prove to be an issue.

The latest CHES data on mainstream party convergence only lasts up until 2014, which is an issue regarding this study since left-wing populist parties such as Podemos and La France Insoumise did not participate in national elections until after 2014. I have nevertheless chosen to include the data from ParlGov regarding national elections up until 2017, even though this signifies that the measurement of mainstream party convergence is absent for the years 2015–2017. However, Dalton and McCallister (2015) argue that changes in mainstream party positions occur gradually, which suggests that the absence of three years of data will not substantially affect the results. I therefore claim that my choice is the most suitable in regard
to the existing data and that this study can work as a base for future research, when more recent data is available.

3.3 Selection of left-wing populist parties

In accordance with the recommendations from Van Kessel (2014: 112), I use populism as a classifier rather than a descriptor, since my focus is on a specific type of parties, which includes those that consistently express a combination of the core components of populist rhetoric, i.e. people-centrism, anti-elitism and popular sovereignty. Whereas being too strict concerning the classification would risk excluding parties that ought to be included for the results to be valid, to incorporate too many cases might instead risk comparing parties that should not be classified as similar. Hence, albeit that the risk of excluding relevant parties exists due to the application of a strict definition, the risk of concept-stretching and inclusion of non-populist parties has been minimized. However, the lack of studies regarding the classification of the populist left in Europe proved to complicate the selection, since very few scholars have attempted to present a list of this party family based on qualitative research. Since it was difficult to rely fully on earlier research, there is hence a risk that relevant left-wing populist parties have been excluded in this thesis, despite that several measures were taken to avoid this specific predisposition.

Nevertheless, eight parties in seven countries that have received more than one per cent of the vote share in national elections and which have according to earlier research been classified as left wing populists, corresponding to the given definition, have been selected. Namely; Die Linke, Sinn Féin, Socialistische Partij, Podemos, Syriza, Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC), Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and La France Insoumise.2 Furthermore, I have used ParlGov regarding party positioning, to verify that the included parties can be accounted for as left. Hence, all included left-wing populist parties scored between 0–3, which signifies that they can be accounted for as radical left parties. As a last control, it has also been verified that the included parties (except PRC and PCF) are the same as those classified as left-wing populist parties in its full term, i.e not just by factions of the party, by

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2 Die Linke, Socialistische Partij and Sinn Féin are part of the classification presented by March (2011: 18; 2008, 4) and have together with Podemos and Syriza been accounted for as left-wing populists by scholars such as Mudde And Kaltwasser (2017), Rooduin and Akkerman (2017); Stavvakakis and Katsambekis (2014), Bassets (2015); Otjes and Louverse, 2015 and Ramiro and Gomez (2017). La France Insoumise has been stated as a left-wing populist party by March (POP, 2017a) and Marlière (2017) among others. Van Kessel (2014) underlines that Socialistische Partij in the Netherlands have toned down their populist role lately, but since they are still expressing the core components presented by Mudde, they have nevertheless been included.
Although Roodjuin and Akkerman (2017) claim that their results provide the possibility to generalize that all radical left parties in Western Europe use populist rhetoric to a large extent and could hence be classified as populists, I find it hard to accept that claim since the number of parties in their study is highly limited. However, their results do affect my selection in such that the parties PRC and PCF have been included, since they have been proven to consistently use populist rhetoric. It is important to note that Rooduijn and Akkerman (2017) adhere to the continuous conceptualization of populism which differentiates from the one used in this thesis, since it focuses more on the message than the actor itself. However, as pointed out by Kriesi and Pappas (2015: 5), the discursive patterns and political communication strategies used by populist parties have proven a suitable source of information to operationalize the populist ideology, or as Kriesi (2014: 363) more eloquently expresses it: “As an expression of the populist ideology, populist communication strategies may be used to identify the populist ideology empirically, i.e. the operationalisation of the populist ideology may be based on an analysis of populist communication strategies”. The parties PRC and PCF have therefore been included despite the risks mentioned above, to avoid that my results will be skewed.

3.4 Selection of mainstream parties

Since scholars that have assessed the convergence thesis differ regarding their definition of mainstream and established parties, and/or have been less clear on if it is only the effect of the major parties on the left and right or all moderate parties in a party system that could influence niche and populist party success, two different selections of parties will be presented, based on a narrow and a broad definition.

The first is in line with the one used by Kitschelt and McGann (1995), Carter (2005) as well as Rovny (2013), and hence refers to the two major parties of the left and right (i.e. adhering

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3 Even though the Italian party MoVimento 5 Stelle is positioned as less than three on the scale presented by ParlGov and qualitative studies have supplied support for the notion that this party should be classified as populist, it has not been included in this study. This is due to the complex character of the party, which obstructs the possibility to position it along the traditional left-right continuum (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013). Furthermore, the party leader Beppe Grillo has consistently expressed anti-Semitic sentiments, endorsed President Donald Trump as well as President Vladimir Putin and the party has chosen to join the group “Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group” in the European Parliament, where they collaborate with national conservative parties such as UKIP, Alternative for Germany and the Sweden Democrats (POP, 2017b).
to a Social democratic, Christian democratic, Conservative or Liberal ideology) in each party system. Most commonly, this will encompass the governing and the main opposition party. It is important to note that since Belgium has two separate party systems, the two major mainstream parties in Wallonia as well as in Flanders have been selected. It is nonetheless acknowledged that this classification of parties might prove incoherent, since some of the included parties could not be accounted for as the largest party throughout the entire range of the included years.

Abedi (2004: 105) underlines that by only including the largest left and right-wing parties, one risks neglecting smaller, but nonetheless important, moderate parties that are positioned more polarized in a party system and which could function as an option for voters that perceive the major parties to be identical. More precisely, while the two major parties of the left and right might lose votes as a result of their convergence, these losses would not necessarily lead to an increased support for anti-establishment parties as long as there are other establishment parties that offer the voter a clear alternative. His solution is to instead calculate the distance between the leftmost and rightmost moderate establishment party in each system. Whilst his critique is important to consider, his definition of establishment parties would in contemporary time include many anti-establishment and populist parties since they have governing coalition potential, which could skew the results. Furthermore, to pursue his recommendations would risk an even greater inconsistency than the first presented classification, since a lack of time and resources obstructs the possibility to credibly select the left-most and right-most moderate party in each party system for every included year.

Nevertheless, inspired by Abedi’s (2004) advice to acknowledge minor moderate parties in a system, the second definition of mainstream parties will include all parties except those that are categorized as niche, one-issue or regional parties. Since they are not catch-all or moderate in their approach, they are often referred to as different from mainstream parties.

4 The list of mainstream parties is inspired by Stokland (2016), which in turn was inspired by Rovny (2013). The approach in this thesis follows Stokland (2016), who only includes the two largest parties in a system, since it simplifies the recoding of the variable measuring mainstream convergence. However, the Italian party Democratici di Sinistra has been used for the time points 1999, 2002 and 2007 (and is then replaced by Partito Democratico), instead of Partito Democratico della Sinistra, since it did not exist at the time. In accordance with Stokland (2016), Suomen Keskusta has not been selected, despite it being one of the biggest parties, since it is classified as agrarian/centrist by CHES. CD&V in Flanders is chosen over N-VA, since N-VA only received three per cent during the first included year of this study, and since they are classified as a regionalist and separatist party. Fianna Fail was chosen over Fine Gael, since their aggregate vote share over the included years is slightly larger than Fine Gael (Bakker et al., 2015; Döring and Manow, 2016).
programmatically, but also in their relation to how voters perceive them, in their political strategies and in their influence on party competition (Meguid, 2005; Wagner, 2012: 847, 850–851). The definition of niche parties used in this thesis is provided by Van de Wardt (2015: 94) and refers to Green, radical right and radical left parties. This denotes that agrarian parties have been included as mainstream, since they are neither niche, single-issue or regional in contemporary time. It could be argued that Green parties should also be accounted for as mainstream, since several of them have become “watermelon” parties, i.e. green on the outside and red on the inside, and that the environmental issue dimension has started to become absorbed by the general left and right. However, they have nevertheless been excluded, since a considerable amount of the literature on Green parties still classifies them as niche (March, 2008).

3.5 Independent and dependent variables

The first independent variable, namely mainstream party convergence, will be operationalized in two different ways. First, the two major mainstream left and right parties in each included country have been selected inspired by the list presented by Stokland (2016) and Rovny (2013), and a variable has been created which measures the distance between the two in each country. Second, the standard deviation of all mainstream parties from the mean in every party system will be measured and tested. In this version, all parties that are accounted for as niche, one-issue and regional parties will be excluded. According to the classification of parties by CHES, which in turn is based on the classification by Hix and Lord (1997), mainstream parties will account for those classified as Conservatives, Liberals, Christian democratic, Socialist and Agrarian/Center (Bakker et al., 2015).

A third independent variable, operationalized for the level of the positioning of the major mainstream left party, since the previous election, will be used to exclude the possibility that the effect is captured better by the vacuum thesis, and hence proving or rejecting hypothesis H1b.

To operationalize the independent variable regarding the level of fiscal consolidation, a measure for the budget balance, inspired by Nyman (2014), will be used. In detail, this is a measure for the cyclically adjusted net lending provided by the OECD. As Nyman (2014: 9) explains, this measurement presents the budget balance “...adjusted for temporary costs and
revenues associated with the business cycle”, and hence if measured correctly, will display changes in the budget balance caused by discretionary actions. An increase in the structural budget balance hence relates to increases in taxation, decreases in expenditure or both.

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 97–98) underline that agenda-setting and policy impacts could be used to measure success for political actors, but since this thesis is focused on potential effects on the electoral outcome, the dependent variable will account for the total percentage of the vote share obtained by left-wing populist parties in Western Europe in national elections. By focusing on national elections, the hope is to reassure that the dependent variable is not artificially inflated and biased, due to the nature of second order elections such as in the elections to the European parliament, where protest voting is a common phenomenon (Abedi, 2004: 29). Hence, the dependent variable, electoral success for left-wing populist parties in Western Europe, will be operationalized as the aggregate vote share, per country and election, in national elections between 1999–2017.

The rise of populist parties has been stated as a reason for the rightwards shift of party systems, as well as an increase in coalitions and cooperation between the mainstream parties. There is hence a risk for a simultaneity bias, since the dependent variable might influence the independent variables that measure convergence. However, right-wing populist parties have been more successful in Europe and are accounted for as more dangerous to democracy than their left-wing counterparts. Right-wing populists have hence plausibly had a larger effect on mainstream parties (by pressuring them to take a stricter stand on immigration issues) than left-wing populists, which minimizes the risk that it affects my regression models.

3.6 Control variables

The control variables are chosen in accordance with earlier research which lists party competition, previous electoral success, the state of the national economy as well as electoral thresholds, as reasons behind the success of left-wing populist parties.

The operationalization of party competition against Green, radical left and radical right parties will be used in the same manner as by March and Rommerskirchen (2015) who focus on previous seat share obtained by the challenger parties. This should prove more useful than to merely control for the existence of these parties in the same system, since Sartori (1976) has
demonstrated that a numerical count might risk important party competition dynamic to go amiss. The variable for party competition is thus created based on the obtained seat share in the previous national election by each party family using the variable “seats” in ParlGov.

A control variable regarding previous electoral success for left-wing populist parties is created, since parties that have managed to establish themselves on the national political arena will be more inclined to succeed in following elections as well. Furthermore, March and Rommerskirchen (2015) have explicitly stated that a successful past for the radical left is conducive for their future success. The variable is computed as to capture the result from the most prior observation, if existent.

Since the national economic situation and the level of unemployment have been claimed favorable to all populist parties (Abedi, 2004: 21, 27–28), a control variable measuring GDP growth during the election year as well as a variable for the level of unemployment, collected from OECD Economic Outlook 100, are included. However, it is important to note that there is a risk that these variables might have an effect on both austerity measures and the electoral support for left-wing populist parties, which would denote a spurious relationship. Furthermore, it is also plausible that they might be mediating variables, and will hence be included last in the models to avoid a bias.

The electoral system has proven to influence party competition. Proportional systems with low thresholds are claimed to have the largest impact on the existence of anti-establishment, populist and extremist parties, since it facilitates for marginal challenger parties to establish themselves on the political arena (Nachtwey and Spier, 2007; Meguid, 2005; Arzheimer och Carter, 2006; March and Rommerskirchen, 2015). Country fixed effects would normally control for variations that are constant over time within countries, such as electoral systems. However, Nickell (1981) argues that to include fixed effects in dynamic regressions might lead to a bias and should hence be avoided, especially in cases where the included observations are few. The variable that measures previous vote share is estimated to capture most of the variation that is lost by excluding fixed effects, since it should account for those factors that are constant over time and that have an effect on left-wing populist success. These factors most plausibly already had an impact in the previous election and are hence controlled for by including the variable for previous vote share.
3.7 Regression models

Since the dependent variable is continuous and the objective is to obtain results that can be generalized across countries, a comparative cross-national study over time will be pursued using multivariate OLS-regressions, with clustered standard errors on the country level as well as the inclusion of controls for time trends. The models control for the effect that the independent variables have had on the left-wing populist vote share in previous elections, through the lagged variable of LWPP vote share. Due to multicollinearity and a lack of sufficient variation in the data, it is difficult to isolate and separate the effect of the vacuum and the convergence thesis respectively, which is illustrated by the fact that when incorporating both independent variables in the same model, the standard errors increase substantially. The vacuum thesis will therefore be tested separately. The regressions will follow the same basic structure and will be presented in three different tables. The first two with the inclusion of the two diverse measurements for mainstream convergence and the third for the vacuum thesis. The independent variable for fiscal consolidation will be included in all models, and controls for time trends, party competition and economic factors will be inserted gradually.

The basic structure of the regression model can accordingly be written as follows:

\[ VS = a + b_1 \times prev.VS + b_2 \times MSC + b_3 \times FC + \delta \times \chi + e \]

In the equation, VS stands for left-wing populist party vote share, MSC for mainstream convergence, and FC for fiscal consolidation. The letter \( \chi \) illustrates the vector of control variables and the letter e that each observation accounts for a national election.

The observations in relation to the amount of years incorporated in this study are too few to include time fixed effects in the models, which would have allowed for a large degree of flexibility. A linear ‘year’ variable as well as a time dummy (before and after 2009) will therefore be included instead of time fixed effects, with the hope to obtain a seemingly precision despite the lack of data. This will control for a linear trend, as well as a potential jump in time trends after the economic crisis. Furthermore, since the observations included in the datasets are repeated on the same units (countries) over time, there is a risk for serial correlation of the
residuals. Whereas the lagged variable for previous vote share alone may be able to solve this issue, the standard errors have been clustered on the country level as an extra adjustment.

4 Results and analysis

Based on the chosen method and material, the following chapter will present the descriptive statistics over the included parties and variables as well as provide the results and an accompanied analysis of the regression models.

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 4.1 lists all included left-wing populist parties and their electoral results in national elections between 1999–2017. The vote share varies substantially between countries, with the largest vote share accounted for by Syriza in Greece with 36.34 % of the votes in the first of two elections in 2015 and the lowest by Parti Communiste Français with 2.72% in 2017.

Table 4.2 provides the descriptive statistics as well as the coding for the included variables in the thesis. It illustrates that there are large differences between countries regarding the level of implemented austerity measures. Positive values denote the implementation of fiscal consolidations, while negative values correspond to fiscal expansions. The lowest (-7.31%) as well as the highest score (15.64%) refers to Greece in 2004 and in 2015, before and after the crisis. Likewise, competition with Green, Radical Left and Radical Right parties varies extensively between countries, which is also the case for unemployment that ranges from 2.69% to 24.89%.
Table 4.1: Left-wing populist parties in Western Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Party name</th>
<th>Party name in English</th>
<th>National election year and vote share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France (FR)</td>
<td>La France Insoumise</td>
<td>The Unbowed France</td>
<td>2017: 11,03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy (IT)</td>
<td>Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (RC)</td>
<td>Communist Refoundation Party</td>
<td>2001: 5.03, 2006: 5.69, 2008: 3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain (ESP)</td>
<td>Podemos</td>
<td>We Can</td>
<td>2015: 12.67, 2016: 13.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ParlGov (Döring and Manow, 2016)
Table 4.2. Descriptive statistics of included variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vote Share – LWPP&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>7.55</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Convergence – Major Left/Right party&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Convergence – Standard deviation&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pos. mainstream left party&lt;sup&gt;4&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>5.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal consolidation&lt;sup&gt;5&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>-7.31</td>
<td>15.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – Greens&lt;sup&gt;6&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – RLP&lt;sup&gt;7&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – RRP&lt;sup&gt;8&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>7.31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate&lt;sup&gt;9&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>8.80</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>24.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP Growth&lt;sup&gt;10&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>-7.32</td>
<td>8.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>1</sup> Aggregate vote share for left-wing populist parties per national election closest in time before the time point of evaluation, measured in percent. Source: ParlGov (Döring and Manow, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> The ideological distance between the major mainstream Left and Right party per country and election. Original variable: lrgen = position of the party in YEAR in terms of its overall ideological stance (0=Extreme left, 1=Extreme right). Source: 1999–2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey trend file (Bakker, et al., 2015).


<sup>5</sup> Measure of the cyclically adjusted government net lending, i.e. changes in the budget balance in each country (increases in taxes, decreases in expenditure or both), measured in percent. Source: OECD Economic Outlook 100.

<sup>6</sup> Lagged variable of the seat share obtained by Green parties in the election most prior to the time point of evaluation in each country, measured in percent. Source: ParlGov (Döring and Manow, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Lagged variable of the seat share obtained by radical left parties in the election most prior to the time point of evaluation in each country, measured in percent. Source: ParlGov (Döring and Manow, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Lagged variable of the seat share obtained by radical right parties in the election most prior to the time point of evaluation in each country, measured in percent. Source: ParlGov (Döring and Manow, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> The number of unemployed as a share of the labor force, measured in percent. Source: OECD Economic Outlook 100.

<sup>10</sup> Annual GDP growth. Source: OECD Economic Outlook 100.

4.2 Regression results and analysis

The regression results will be presented in three tables. The first and second model includes bivariate regressions, the third includes the lagged variable for previous vote share and the fourth includes controls for time trends and party competition. As mentioned, unemployment and GDP growth are included last, i.e. in model five in all tables, since there is both a risk that they have an effect on fiscal consolidation and the LWPP vote share, which would suggest
that the relationship is spurious, or that they are mediating variables and hence endogenous controls. Furthermore, the standard errors have been clustered on the country level in all models.

Table 4.3 demonstrates the regression model that incorporates a broader definition of mainstream parties. Negative values for the independent variable denote an effect of mainstream party convergence as anticipated, i.e. that a smaller standard deviation between the positioning of the mainstream parties in each system will result in higher electoral support for left-wing populist parties. The results are somewhat ambiguous since the sign changes depending on the included control variables. Moreover, in model three and four where the results are significant at the 95% and 90% confidence level and the effects are the largest, the sign is positive, indicating that mainstream party divergence has a positive effect on the electoral support for left-wing populist parties, rather than what was expected as derived from the theory. For instance, the estimated effect in model three on the vote share for left-wing populist parties is an increase by 1.37 percentage points, when the standard deviation between mainstream parties increases one unit on the left-right scale. However, the statistical significance disappears, the sign changes and the standard errors increase when controlling for economic factors, rendering the results less credible and difficult to interpret.

Table 4.3 also shows that the coefficients for fiscal consolidation are positive and significant throughout all models, and the standard errors are low in each multivariate regression. When controlling for time trends, previous left-wing populist success and party competition, the estimated effect of the increase of fiscal consolidations with one percentage point, denotes an increase in LWPP vote share with 0.379 percentage points. Nevertheless, model five illustrates that the inclusion of economic controls leads to a decrease in the effect, and the statistical significance drops to the 90% level of confidence. As mentioned, this might imply that unemployment and GDP growth are mediating variables or that the relationship is spurious, which would suggest either a downwards or an upwards bias in regard to the coefficient measuring the effect of fiscal consolidation. However, to verify which explanation that is factual is impossible by merely studying these models. It is still important to note that whereas the effect is weaker under the control of economic factors, a positive effect of the implementation of austerity on the vote share of left-wing populist parties prevails.
Table 4.3. OLS Regression: The estimated effect of the standard deviation of mainstream party positioning on ideology, and fiscal consolidation on the vote share of left-wing populist parties in Western Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1 Bivariate regressions</th>
<th>Model 2 Bivariate regressions</th>
<th>Model 3 Multivariate regression (incl. prev.VS)</th>
<th>Model 4 Multivariate regression (incl. prev.VS, time trends &amp; party competition)</th>
<th>Model 5 Multivariate regression (incl. all controls)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Convergence</td>
<td>-0.425 (1.187)</td>
<td>1.370** (0.551)</td>
<td>0.979* (0.495)</td>
<td>-0.996 (0.767)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal Consolidation</td>
<td>0.391*** (0.100)</td>
<td>0.386*** (0.119)</td>
<td>0.379*** (0.124)</td>
<td>0.218* (0.105)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous vote share for LWPP</td>
<td>1.075*** (0.059)</td>
<td>1.045*** (0.059)</td>
<td>0.886*** (0.058)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – Greens</td>
<td>-0.006 (0.089)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.041 (0.090)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – RLP</td>
<td>0.048 (0.084)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.068 (0.078)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – RRP</td>
<td>-0.086* (0.040)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.044 (0.041)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (dummy)</td>
<td>-0.775 (1.314)</td>
<td>-2.389 (1.361)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (linear)</td>
<td>0.131 (0.101)</td>
<td>0.227* (0.115)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.367*** (0.096)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP Growth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.116 (0.178)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>0.000 (3.077)</td>
<td>0.029 (1.663)</td>
<td>0.843 (0.902)</td>
<td>0.853 (202.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.343 (0.843)</td>
<td>4.382** (1.663)</td>
<td>-1.886* (0.902)</td>
<td>-264.3 (228.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses, * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

As illustrated in table 4.3, the coefficients for the variable that measures previous success for left-wing populist parties obtain values greater than one (1) in model three and four. The fact that the variable is created as a lag of the dependent variable, makes it impossible to interpret the long-term effect of the included variables on the electoral success of left-wing populist parties, since it indicates an infinite change. In other words, if one were to extrapolate a long-term effect given this model, it would be infinite, since the coefficient assumes that it will continue to increase and that the electoral support would then eventually be estimated to
exceed 100%. This indicates that the chosen model is thus no perfect representation of reality, but should nevertheless only have a marginal effect on the main results, since it can still be used to interpret short-term effects. Nevertheless, as expected, previous success has a positive and large effect on the vote share for left-wing populist parties in all three tables.

The sign for party competition against green and radical left parties change between model four and five and are not significant. Competition against radical right parties is statistically significant on the 90% confidence level in model four, but it disappears after the inclusion of economic variables. The sign is negative, indicating that a larger previous seat share for radical right parties could denote a decrease in the vote share for left-wing populist parties. However, all coefficients for the variables measuring party competition are close to zero, which suggests that it is not a strong explanatory factor to the electoral success of the populist left, at least not when operationalized as the previous seat share.

Table 4.3 also shows that the coefficient for the effect of unemployment is significant at the 99% level of confidence and the estimated effect of a rise in the unemployment rate with one percent is an increase with 0.367 percentage points in the vote share for left-wing populist parties. GDP growth has the expected sign, indicating that a rise in GDP growth results in a decrease in the vote share for LWPP. However, the coefficient is not significant and the effect is close to zero, which implies that GDP growth cannot be interpreted as a strong explanatory factor.

In table 4.4, the narrow definition of mainstream parties is used and hence measure the effect of the ideological distance between the two major mainstream parties in each party system on the electoral success for left-wing populist parties. The direction of the coefficients is negative, which denotes that an increase with one unit on the left-right scale (i.e. a larger distance), results in a decrease in the vote share for left-wing populists. In other words, this could have been interpreted as an indication that mainstream party convergence could lead to an increase in the vote share for LWPP. Yet, it is important to note that no statistical significance is obtained except for in model five, where it is only significant at the 90% confidence level, and the standard errors are continuously large in each model. The convergence thesis operationalized as the distance between the major two parties hence only receives a marginal support at best.
Table 4.4. OLS-Regression: The estimated effect of the ideological distance between the major mainstream left and right party in each party system, and fiscal consolidation on the vote share of left-wing populist parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1 Bivariate regressions</th>
<th>Model 2 Bivariate regressions</th>
<th>Model 3 Multivariate regression (incl. prev.VS)</th>
<th>Model 4 Multivariate regression (incl. prev.VS, time trends &amp; party competition)</th>
<th>Model 5 Multivariate regression (incl. all controls)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Convergence</td>
<td>-2.504 (1.477)</td>
<td>-0.469 (0.477)</td>
<td>-0.700 (0.476)</td>
<td>-1.032* (0.526)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal Consolidation</td>
<td>0.391*** (0.100)</td>
<td>0.368*** (0.118)</td>
<td>0.351** (0.122)</td>
<td>0.214* (0.100)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous vote share for LWPP</td>
<td>1.058*** (0.064)</td>
<td>1.007*** (0.069)</td>
<td>0.869*** (0.052)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – Greens</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.028 (0.080)</td>
<td>0.071 (0.084)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – RLP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.019 (0.072)</td>
<td>-0.036 (0.071)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – RRP</td>
<td>-0.083* (0.043)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.034 (0.041)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (dummy)</td>
<td>-1.043 (1.386)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.690* (1.388)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (linear)</td>
<td>0.206 (0.123)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.275** (0.124)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.366*** (0.078)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP Growth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.088 (0.163)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.841</td>
<td>0.856</td>
<td>0.891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>12.11** (5.494)</td>
<td>4.382** (1.663)</td>
<td>2.020 (1.447)</td>
<td>-409.1 (246.0)</td>
<td>-550.4** (247.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses, * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

The results concerning the effect of fiscal consolidation is close to identical in table 4.4 as compared to table 4.3, with positive and statistically significant coefficients throughout all regressions, albeit with a decrease in model five. Accordingly, in model four, the estimated effect of an increase in austerity with one percent is a rise in the vote share for LWPP with 0.351 percentage points. The standard errors are low in all models, but as mentioned, with the economic controls included, the credibility of the results is reduced.
Similarly, the results for party competition are almost undifferentiated in table 4.4 compared to table 4.3, with only the previous seat share for radical right parties showing any statistical significance (in model four, but not in model five), and the effect being close to zero in both models regarding all three party families. Unemployment is continuously significant at the 99% confidence level, the standard errors are low and a step in the right-wards direction is estimated to result in an increase in LWPP vote share with 0.366 percentage points. The coefficient for GDP growth is close to zero and displays no significance.

Table 4.5 presents the results for the vacuum thesis. The direction of the variable is positive and the effect is large which indicates that a step to the right by the major mainstream left parties on the ideological left-right scale, is estimated to increase the electoral support for left-wing populist parties. However, no statistical significance is detected and the standard errors are continuously large throughout all models, which denotes that the vacuum thesis thus receives no strong empirical support.

The implementation of austerity measures, and hence the theory regarding the tension between responsibility and responsiveness receives stronger support in table 4.5, than in the previous regressions where variables operationalized for mainstream party convergence are included. The coefficient is positive and statistically significant, and whereas the inclusion of economic controls reduces the effect in this table as well, fiscal consolidation is still significant on the 95% level of confidence in model five. An increase of fiscal consolidation with one percent is estimated to raise the vote share for left-wing populist parties with 0.364 percentage points in model four and 0.246 percentage points in model five.

As in the previous two tables, the estimated effect for party competition against Green and radical left parties is insignificant and close to zero in table 4.5, whilst competition against radical right parties is significant at the 90% confidence level. However, as in table 4.3 and 4.4, the effect is small and disappears when economic controls are included. The variable measuring unemployment is continuously positive and statistically significant on the 99% level of confidence, with an estimated increase in the vote share for LWPP with 0.332 percentage points, when the unemployment rate is increased with one percent. Higher levels of unemployment hence raise the likelihood that the vote share for left-wing populists will increase. As in the previous tables, GDP growth during the previous election period does not obtain any empirical support, albeit that the sign is negative as anticipated.
Table 4.5. OLS-Regression: The effect of the positioning of the mainstream left party on the electoral vote share of left-wing populist parties in Western Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 Bivariate regression</th>
<th>Model 2 Bivariate regression</th>
<th>Model 3 Multivariate regression (incl. prev.VS)</th>
<th>Model 4 Multivariate regression (incl. prev.VS, time trends &amp; party competition)</th>
<th>Model 5 Multivariate regression (incl. all controls)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positioning – Mainstream left party</strong></td>
<td>4.458 (3.96)</td>
<td>1.088 (0.651)</td>
<td>1.037 (0.642)</td>
<td>0.885 (0.679)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal consolidation</td>
<td>0.391*** (0.100)</td>
<td>0.370*** (0.112)</td>
<td>0.364*** (0.117)</td>
<td>0.246** (0.112)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous vote share for LWPP</td>
<td>1.050*** (0.056)</td>
<td>1.007*** (0.067)</td>
<td>0.894*** (0.050)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – Greens</td>
<td>0.001 (0.087)</td>
<td>0.086 (0.098)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – RLP</td>
<td>-0.015 (0.071)</td>
<td>-0.061 (0.067)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition – RRP</td>
<td>-0.088* (0.041)</td>
<td>-0.046 (0.040)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (dummy)</td>
<td>-0.763 (1.337)</td>
<td>-2.192 (1.347)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (linear)</td>
<td>0.162 (0.111)</td>
<td>0.205* (0.106)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.332*** (0.084)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP Growth</td>
<td>-0.095 (0.187)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>0.843</td>
<td>0.855</td>
<td>0.885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-12.46 (14.06)</td>
<td>4.382** (1.663)</td>
<td>-3.521 (2.461)</td>
<td>-328.5 (222.3)</td>
<td>-415.0* (212.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses, * p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

4.3 Convergent or unresponsive?

The coefficients for fiscal consolidation are continuously significant and positive in all three tables, which implies that left-wing populist parties are indeed more successful in countries which have experienced the implementation of austerity measures. An improvement of the budget balance with one percent of GDP is estimated to result in an increase in the vote share for left-wing populist parties with approximately 0.3–0.4 percentage points (0.379 in table
4.3, 0.351 in table 4.4 and 0.364 in table 4.5), when controlling for time trends and party competition. However, as seen in model five in all three regression tables, the effect is weaker and the statistical significance decreases to the 95% and 90% confidence level when unemployment and GDP growth are included as controls. This suggests, as mentioned, that the correlation between austerity measures and left-wing populist support might partly be spurious or that the economic controls are mediating variables and hence endogenous controls. Nonetheless, the coefficients are positive throughout all models, the standard errors are relatively unchanged and the effect does prevail to a certain extent, which indicates that the independent variable measuring fiscal consolidation is nevertheless relevant as an explanatory factor. The results from the regression analyses thus support the notion that populist parties are more successful in countries where governments have implemented austerity measures, and hence prioritize their responsibility to govern over their responsive role towards the electorate. In short, there is a support, albeit a weak one, for hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 1a, which states that mainstream party convergence is conducive to the success of left-wing populist parties received marginal to no support in the regressions, regardless of the operationalization and definitional use of mainstream parties. Besides, the results from table 4.3, which illustrates the effect of the standard deviation of all mainstream parties in each system, is not in line with earlier research and suggests that mainstream party divergence rather than convergence has a positive effect on left-wing electoral support. The effect, demonstrated in table 4.4, of the ideological distance between the two major mainstream left and right parties received weak support, illustrated by the fact that the coefficient is only significant in model five and then only at the 90% level of confidence. The sign is negative which, as expected, indicates that the vote share for LWPP decreases when the ideological distance is larger. Hypothesis 1a can hence neither be completely rejected nor confidently endorsed.

Hypothesis 1b regarding the vacuum thesis, i.e. that left-wing populist parties are more successful when the major mainstream left party is positioned further to the right, receives no strong empirical support. Although the direction of the coefficients is positive as expected, the coefficients are not statistically significant and the standard errors continuously high. Whilst it can be argued that there is not enough variation in the included data to entirely reject neither hypothesis 1a nor 1b, the fact that the convergence and the vacuum thesis obtained little to no
support in the models, implies that scholars should not take these explanatory theories as a given concerning all populist parties.

In summary, the aim of this thesis has been to empirically test two competing theories and correspondingly answer the question: “How may mainstream party positioning, or an increase in the tension between governing parties’ capability to be responsible and responsive, affect the electoral success of left-wing populist parties in Western Europe?” The findings from the multivariate regression analyses show that the implementation of austerity measures may result in an increase in the vote share for left-wing populist parties, which lend some support to the theory of the increased tension between responsibility and responsiveness. However, the results concerning the effect of mainstream party positioning are more ambiguous, and suggest that both mainstream party convergence and divergence could lead to an increase in LWPP vote share, depending on if the concept of mainstream parties is defined more broadly or narrow. Additionally, no strong support was established for the notion that left-wing populist parties would be more successful when the major mainstream left party is positioned further to the right.

5 Concluding remarks and further research

The results from the multivariate regression analyses indicate a support for the notion that the implementation of austerity measures, and hence a stronger focus by governing parties on their responsible compared to their responsive role, may result in an increase in the vote share for left-wing populist parties in national elections. The rise of left-wing populist parties in the aftermath of the economic crisis might hence not be explained solely by the decrease in living standards and economic prosperity, but also by the distance between the popular will and implemented policies, here understood as the implementation of fiscal consolidation. Whilst it is important to note that the statistical significance is weaker when economic controls are included, the results in this thesis nevertheless indicate that by implementing restrictive fiscal policies, governing parties might create a fertile breeding ground for populism. A probability that thus needs to be considered when contemplating the demand for strict austerity measures, especially since political parties will have to continuously level how to balance their responsive role vis-à-vis their responsibility to govern.
Despite a flexible and rather generous operationalization of mainstream parties and their ideological positioning, neither the convergent nor the vacuum thesis receives strong support in the regression models, and the sign changes depending on the included controls. These non-findings do not denote that the convergence thesis and earlier research can be discarded, since there is a risk that the selection of mainstream parties, or a lack of variation in the data, might have affected the regression results. The ambiguity of the findings in this thesis however, suggests that it is plausible that conclusions in earlier research might suffer from a lack of empirical support, despite them being theoretically appealing. Theories that have been taken for granted regarding all populists should hence be applied with caution as long as empirical research is scarce.

There are still large gaps in the research field regarding left-wing populist parties in Western Europe and there is accordingly an extensive amount of possibilities regarding ideas for future research. For instance, Loxbo (2014) emphasizes the importance of voter perception on party convergence, rather than if parties are de facto proximate to one another, since voters might perceive mainstream parties to be identical even though it does not correspond to reality. The regression models used in this thesis do not take voter perception nor potential effects of coalitions and collusion between mainstream parties on populist success into account which Kitschelt and McGann (1995) highlight as important explanatory factors for party competition and populist success. Future research could therefore focus on voter perception on mainstream party convergence compared to their actual positioning, as well as the effect of coalitions across party lines, to examine if the results of the regressions would turn out differently. Moreover, as mentioned, the lack of a list regarding a coherent classification over left-wing populist parties, based on qualitative research, complicated the party selection encompassed in this thesis. A study with the objective to provide a list of this kind, preferably with an extended focus to Eastern Europe, could thus facilitate future comparative cross-national research, and continue to fill the existing research gap that is due to a disproportionate focus on the populist right.
6 References


Stokland, F. (2016). The success of the radical right in Western Europe - the effect of mainstream parties' policy positions? (Master’s thesis). Gothenburg: Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/2077/50721


## 7 Appendix

Table A1. Left-wing populist parties in Western Europe with >1% of the votes in national elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Countrycode</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Party ID (CHES)</th>
<th>Position left-right (ParlGov)</th>
<th>Election year and vote share (ParlGov)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France (FR)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>La France Insoumise</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,2</td>
<td>2017: 11,03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France (FR)</td>
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<td>Parti Communiste Francais (PCF)</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>1,3741</td>
<td>2002: 4,82</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2007: 4,3</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2012: 6,91</td>
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<td>2017: 2,72</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2002: 4</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>2005: 8,7</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>2009: 11,9</td>
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<td>2013: 8,6</td>
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<td>Germany (GE)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Die Linke/PDS</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>1,2152</td>
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<td>Greece (GR)</td>
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<td>Syriza</td>
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<td>2,8947</td>
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<td>2006: 5,69</td>
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<td>2008: 3,16</td>
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<td>Ireland (IRL)</td>
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<td>Sinn Féin</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>2,7935</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2016: 13,85</td>
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<td>Italy (IT)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (RC)</td>
<td>803</td>
<td>0,8849</td>
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<td>Netherlands (NL)</td>
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<td>Socialistiese Partij (SP)</td>
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<td>1,2146</td>
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<td>2012: 9,65</td>
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<td>Spain (ESP)</td>
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<td>Podemos</td>
<td>525</td>
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Source: 1999–2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey trend file (Bakker et al., 2015); Döring and Manow (2016)
Table A2. Major mainstream parties in Western Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Major mainstream left party</th>
<th>Party ID (CHES)</th>
<th>Major mainstream right party</th>
<th>Party ID (CHES)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreisch (SPÖ)</td>
<td>1301</td>
<td>Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP)</td>
<td>1302</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgium Flanders</td>
<td>Socialistische Partij Anders (SPA) – previously SP</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>Christen-Democratisch &amp; Vlaams (CD&amp;V) – previously CVP</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium Wallonia</td>
<td>Parti Socialiste (PS)</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>Mouvement Reformateur (MR)</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Socialdemokraterne (SD)</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>Venstre, Danmarks Liberale Parti (V)</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Suomen Sosialdemokraattinen (SDP)</td>
<td>1401</td>
<td>Kansallinen</td>
<td>1402</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Parti Socialiste (PS)</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP)</td>
<td>609</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
<td>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD)</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU)</td>
<td>301</td>
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<td>Greece</td>
<td>Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima (PASOK)</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>Néa Dimokratía (ND)</td>
<td>402</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Labour (Lab)</td>
<td>703</td>
<td>Fianna Fáil (FF)</td>
<td>701</td>
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<td>Luxembourg (Only 2014)</td>
<td>Lëtzebuerger Sozialistesch Aarbechterpartei (LSAP)</td>
<td>3804</td>
<td>Chrëschtlech Sozial Vollekspartei (CSV)</td>
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<td>Christen-Democratisch Appel (CDA)</td>
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<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Partido Socialista (PS)</td>
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<td>Partido Social Democrata (PSD) (Previously PPD)</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
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<td>Partido Popular (PP)</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
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<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Labour Party (Lab)</td>
<td>1102</td>
<td>Conservative Party (Cons)</td>
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Source: Rovny (2013); Stokland (2016); 1999–2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey trend file (Bakker et al., 2015)