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Beyond 'economic nationalism'? The (limited) influence of populist parties on public procurement in France and Germany

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the populist stance on public procurement policies and how populist parties exert influence on public procurement. The assessment of this influence is grounded in an original analysis of media reporting, and parliamentary questions posed by right- and left-wing populists in France and Germany. Despite the financial significance of procurement and its potential to bolster and protect national economies, the study reveals a relatively low level of salience. There is limited evidence supporting the assumption that populists actively push for more 'economic nationalism'. Rather they mainly criticise perceived corrupt elites, reflecting a consistent trend of anti-establishment contestation across both semi-presidential and parliamentary systems. Where such advocacy occurs, 'cultural' and 'economic nationalist' positions prevail across both right- and left-wing populists. Theoretically, these findings contribute novel insights into the link between thin-populist and thick-host ideologies.

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Introduction

Populist influence is frequently believed to push 'economic nationalism' (Eichengreen, 2018). The Brexit debate was marked by calls to tear down EU common market paradigms, and US President Trump loudly advocated *Buy American*. Yet, *Buy National* policies are not limited to populist rhetoric. President Obama's *US Stimulus Act* 'required that any manufactured goods purchased with stimulus funds be American-made' (Kono & Rickard, 2014, p. 658), and it was President Biden who broadened the scope of the *Buy*

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America Act and proposed the *Inflation Reduction Act* (IRA). In Europe, too, mainstream parties call for using subsidies and public buying power to create, bolster and protect national economies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, President Macron declared, '[d]elegating our food supply […] to others is madness. We have to take back control', and shortly after, Finance Minister Le Maire asked the public to *Buy French* (France 24 (28.03.2020)). This questions whether there really is a populist push for 'economic nationalism' that could fundamentally alter trade and economic policy if populist gain more power.

Public procurement is a policy that allows to bolster and protect national economies in a way few other policies do. Yet, the above examples highlight that it is unclear if there is a specific populist push for 'economic nationalism' understood to 'bundle support for domestic free market policies with strong protectionist stances' (Colantone & Stanig, 2018, pp. 936–937). Given exclusionary nationalist positions among right-wing populists one could expect this push comes from right-wing rather than left-wing populists. To explore the populist influence on public procurement policies, this paper analyses two country cases, France and Germany, asking two questions. What is a populist stance on public procurement policies, and what are the differences between right- and left-wing populist parties in this context? How do populist parties influence public procurement?

What populist parties say and do about public procurement is empirically and theoretically relevant. Public procurement refers to the process by which public authorities purchase goods, services, or labour from companies. It applies to anything from purchasing food for public school canteens and the supply of medical equipment to large-scale infrastructure tenders. In France and Germany, general government procurement spending makes up 16 and 18 per cent of GDP, respectively (OECD, 2021). Its broad application, ranging from health and social protection to defence, underlines the societal importance of this public policy. At the same time, there is literature on vote buying via procurement (Dahlström *et al*., 2021, p. 668) and by populist right parties in particular (Oellerich & Bohle, forthcoming). Recent analyses provide the first evidence of a change in procurement by populist parties to 'strategically supply unconditional policy commitments', producing 'a larger share of procurement contracts with cost overruns' (Bellodi *et al*., 2024).

The paper offers a nuanced theoretical understanding of how thin populist ideology and thick host ideology inform public policies and contribute to the debate about differences in right-wing and left-wing populist positions. It builds on and advances the burgeoning populism literature in three aspects. First, the analytical and empirical focus of populism research lies in the interplay between public opinion and party political positions (cf. Meijers & Zaslove, 2021). Typically, these are analysed based on partisan

programmes. Consequently, fundamental aspects, such as populist positions on concrete policies, their influence on such policies, their importance for policy change e.g., under conditions of party competition, and the pathways on which influence runs, remain unexplored (cf. Jones & Thomas, forthcoming). Second, examples of existing research that have studied the positions of populist parties on public policy largely relate to the authoritarian dimension of the policy space (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). This research covers policy areas like immigration and EU integration (McDonnell & Werner, 2018; Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023), anti-discrimination and gender equality (Kantola & Lombardo, 2019) or environmental policy (Buzogány & Ćetković, 2021). Welfare state policies are increasingly studied, too (Abts *et al*., 2021; Fenger, 2018). The position of populist parties on other public policies, particularly those situated on the classical right-left axis, is less clear. Filling this lacuna and empirically assessing the positions of populist parties is a research desideratum, especially where they are more difficult to deduce from the ex-ante theorised positions of populist parties. Third, and closely related to greater attention on specific policy areas, the literature tends to focus on right-wing populists rather than left-wing populists (Mendes, forthcoming). This focus on right-wing populism might bias our assessment of influence towards exclusionary nationalism while other dimensions remain understudied. Theoretically, it remains an open question how thin and thick ideologies link and how right- and left-wing populists differ in this respect. Is 'nationalism […] the underlying feature that unites the radical right and the radical left' (Halikiopoulou *et al*., 2012, p. 505) or are collectivist positions – more likely to be illiberal – found on 'the left end of the economic left-right dimension and the right end of the cultural left-right dimension' (Huber *et al*., 2023, p. 990). Widening 'the traditional scope of analysis' (Caiani & Graziano, 2022, p. 570) can thus capture populist influence on public policy more systematically by studying right and left-wing populists.

In light of these desiderata, the study examines if and how populist influence materialises in the agenda-setting of procurement policies. It analyses the influence of populist parties on procurement agendas. Studying the cases of France and Germany confirms that despite the great financial importance of procurement, populists pay little attention to the topic. Nevertheless, where public procurement is addressed, populist contestation is clearly visible, highlighting the potential for agenda change in the direction of populist parties. Concerning the type of contestation, rhetoric on 'corrupt elites' dominates, while positions framed about 'the homogenous people' are scarce and show no systematic difference in the use right- and left-wing populists make of 'cultural' or 'economic nationalist' positions. Populist pressure to use subsidies and public buying power to create, bolster and protect national economies is rare. Finally, the analysis invites us to rethink the link between thin-populist and thick-host ideology as it finds substantial

evidence of mainstream parties presenting populist positions and questions arguments that expect substantive differences between right- and left-wing populist positions.

The next section theorises populism and presents the paper's analytical approach, capturing the influence of populist parties on public procurement. Subsequently, the choice of France and Germany is justified as similar cases that diverge in theoretically relevant dimensions, followed by the introduction of the data basis in Section three. Section four is dedicated to the empirical analysis of populist influence discernible in media and parliamentary questions. Section five summarises the main contributions of the study.

Theoretical approach: expectations on populist parties' positions on public procurement

Populism as a concept remains highly contested. Following today's dominant ideational approach to populism (e.g., Hawkins *et al*., 2018), populism is defined as a thin-centred set of ideas that fundamentally places two homogenous groups in opposition: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2004). These thin-centred populist ideas combine with thick host ideologies. Their combination shapes concrete policies, such as trade deals, industrial policy, and public procurement, and can become visible in economic nationalist positions.

Different theoretical arguments can be made about the link between populism and economic nationalism. Two (connected) aspects are particularly important: the question of who are 'the people' and the relationship between populism and economic policy on the right and left of the political spectrum. First, populists argue that politics should represent the will of 'the people' as a homogenous and oppressed group (Müller, 2016). However, what 'the people' are differs from case to case. For Mudde (2004), 'the people' can be 'the nation', but also 'the electorate', 'ordinary', or 'hardworking citizens' (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017, p. 194). Understood as a specific group, 'the people' are then pitted against political and economic elites at the national, regional (European Union, in this case), or international level. The underlying rationale is a less pluralist vision of democracy that establishes a more direct link between the representatives and the represented group – those filling the construct 'the people' (Thomas, forthcoming).

Second, the link between thin populist ideology and thick host ideology is likely to differ on the right and on the left of the political spectrum. How exactly these two sides differ remains contested in the literature. Once we accept that populism expands along the ideological spectrum, two arguments can be distinguished. On the one hand, scholars argue that we are likely to see the opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite' framed in cultural terms on the right and in terms of economic inequality on the left. Huber

et al. (2023, p. 993) explain that these different positions emerge from the relationship of thin-centred populist ideas to thick collectivist positions: nativism or nationalism (on the right) and socialism or communism (on the left).[1] Others highlight that nationalism is the shared element of populist ideology. On the right, it works by associating a nation with cultural homogeneity and protection as a safeguard against non-native sources. On the left, 'the true people' are defined by their class, and protection – for jobs, labour standards, etc. – is sought at the national level from competitors abroad. In Europe, this is likely to materialise as Euroscepticism (Halikiopoulou *et al*., 2012, p. 508). In both readings, populists on the right and left differ in the way they refer to 'the people'.

Thus, building on this literature, the expectation is that populist parties on the right and left can espouse economic nationalist positions. Populist parties on the left are expected to contest procurement policy by pitting economically disadvantaged groups ('the people') against the political and economic elite and might be particularly critical of the European Union. Populist parties on the right, in contrast, are expected to be more willing to criticise procurement by using cultural contestation. In this case. 'the people' is likely to be understood as a homogenous nation. These expectations are probabilistic rather than deterministic and open to empirical exploration. They help shed light on how populists might change public procurement as a key policy area for economic nationalism.

These theoretical considerations contribute to deepen understanding of the public policy effects of populism. Burgeoning literature classifies populism based on expert surveys or programmatic partisan documents (Huber *et al*., 2023; e.g., Hutter *et al*., 2016; Meijers & Zaslove, 2021). Building on and adding to this literature, it is useful to consider the meaning of populist positions on procurement when it comes to concrete policy agendas.

One of the pathways along which the influence of populist parties on public policy unfolds is agenda-setting (Schmidt, 2023). The agenda is defined as the 'set of issues that are seriously considered in a polity' (Princen, 2007, p. 28). From this perspective, an agenda is influenced by (a) the issues themselves that attract the attention of the governing elites and wider audiences (substantive position) and (b) the relative priority that is given to these issues in light of the rivalry of problems and limited attention of politicians (salience) (Kingdon, 1984). This paper is particularly interested in indirect agenda influence, where the causal mechanism runs through electoral competition. As opposition members of parliament, populists voice their interests and show political positions. Mainstream parties will adapt to these positions to avoid electoral losses or to gain over populist voters. This assertion that populist parties indirectly influence the agenda on public procurement with populist positions is a theoretical question that can be tested empirically.

How does one tell if a policy position is populist? Authors differ in the labels and the exact number of dimensions they assign to populism as a thin ideology. However, a consensus emerges that populism (a) criticises the corrupt and detached elite – advocating an anti-establishment stance, (b) perceives the people as an indivisible and anti-pluralistic group, and (c) emphasises the central position and political sovereignty of ordinary people – frequently contesting processes and institutions of democracy (e.g., Rooduijn, 2014). Based on these dimensions, theoretical expectations on the justification and framing of populist positions on public procurement are derived. These expectations consider the substance of public procurement rules as well as government practices when calling for tenders, awarding contracts or implementing procurement.

- The *anti-establishment* dimension should translate into a portrayal of the elite as corrupt when it comes to tendering and awarding or implementing and monitoring procurement.
- The perception of the *people as a homogenous and indivisible group* should lead to the contestation of procurement policies in an anti-pluralist framing. In the left-wing populist stance, this could result in a demand to protect those 'segments of society that bear most of the adjustment costs of international trade' (Colantone & Stanig, 2018, p. 936). From a right-wing populist stance, procurement policies should be underlined with sentiments that pit 'the national' against 'the foreign' by stressing the (positive national) origin of products or the (negative international) quality of procurement services purchased abroad.
- Regarding procurement rules, criticism should be justified through the central position and *political sovereignty of ordinary people*. Procurement policies that reduce the influence of ordinary people should be contested, such as those of non-majoritarian institutions or intermediaries, as well as EU public procurement policies and CJEU rulings that illegitimately take away power from the people (Halikiopoulou *et al*., 2012, p. 508).

This analytical framework guides the empirical analysis of this research.

Empirical approach

Two country cases: France and Germany

The influence of populist parties on public procurement policies and practices is traced empirically in two country cases: France and Germany. Given the limited study of the policy effects of populism, an explorative approach is adopted, where it is beneficial to select cases that share basic features but differ in terms of (potentially) influential factors. France and Germany

share central features of public procurement. However, they differ in terms of the role of the state in economic policy.

Public procurement is economically important in both countries, assigning the state an important role. Public procurement makes up 16 per cent of GDP in France and 18 per cent in Germany (OECD, 2021). In both countries, the greatest share is spent on health procurement (39,6 per cent in Germany and 38,1 per cent in France), followed by social protection procurement (13,8 per cent in Germany and 19,4 per cent in France) (OECD, 2021). Direct and indirect cross-border procurement are relevant in assessing procurement from foreign firms. In direct cross-border procurement, the contracted firm is located in a foreign country. In indirect cross-border procurement, the state purchases from a company in its own country, which is controlled by a company in a foreign country. Direct cross-border procurement is 1.9 per cent in France and 3 per cent in Germany (share of total value of public procurement contracts). Indirect cross-border procurement rests at 13.3 and 18.3 per cent, respectively. While substantial differences between sectors exist, these numbers are overall lower than the EU averages, with 3.9 per cent direct cross-border procurement and 22.5 per cent indirect cross-border procurement (all numbers taken from European Commission, 2021, p. 56).

Beyond these similarities, the two cases have differences in theoretically relevant dimensions. Most importantly, the role of the state differs. France is characterised by state elitism, *dirigisme* and bureaucratic statism, which implies a constitutional philosophy of the state acting in the public interest. French *étatism* incorporates a strong state intervention focusing on big infrastructure and modernisation projects, such as high-speed trains and transport more generally (Schmidt & Woll, 2013). In Germany, state authority is relatively restrained. This situation has to do with the handling of power after the Second World War and the primacy of legality (*Rechtsstaat*) with the checks and balances that come with federalism (Knill, 2001, p. 62). The ordoliberal approach carefully balances a liberal, back-leaning state with social compensation and corporatist governance (Schmidt & Woll, 2013, p. 120).

In Germany, the federal government, as well as the *Bundesländer* (federal states), can pass binding procurement legislation, which federal states have increasingly used since the early 1990s. Not only the legal framework but also the practices of procurement are strongly decentralised, with approximately 30,000 public buyers publishing tenders, awarding and signing contracts and monitoring them. Intermediaries play an important role. Social compensation and corporatist governance leave a footprint on procurement policies where these demand compliance with ILO Core Labour Standards along the supply chain and regulate wages in public works (Jaehrling *et al*., 2018). Historically, participation in public contracts was linked to the application of collective agreements – a link challenged by CJEU case law in

2008 (Rüffert C-346/06). Ensuing legislative change at the EU level triggered federal and state reforms (Sack, 2012).

In France, rules are formulated centrally and implemented by state entities. For a long time, no specific public procurement regulation existed; instead, general economic policies applied. Implementation duties from EU law served as catalysts for adopting the French Public Procurement Code (adopted in 2001) with subsequent reforms in 2004, 2006 and 2016. Since 2019, the *Code de la Commande Publique* has been in force. Furthermore, the *Climate and Resilience Act* (2021) requires that by 2026, public procurement contracts must include environmental and social goals (Erdogan & Stefan, 2022, p. 16). In this institutional setting, the government can use public procurement to 'do politics' (Schmidt & Woll, 2013, p. 115), for instance, to insert long-term unemployed and young people into the labour market, reserving parts of the contract for sheltered work centres.

For both cases, the period from 2017 to the present is investigated, capturing the increasing electoral success of populist right and left parties. This period allows a comparison to be made on agenda-setting before and after the COVID-19 crisis, which is important as many governments responded to its effects with massive state intervention in the economy and public interest in procurement increased during the crisis (e.g., medical equipment and vaccines).

In sum, public procurement is economically important in both countries and – relative to the EU – shows a comparable and low level of foreign contractors. However, the role of the state in economic policy differs, wherein France has a stronger role of the state and a greater potential to use procurement for 'economic nationalism' compared to Germany.

The empirical material: media reporting and parliamentary questions

Empirical studies interested in capturing right- or left-wing populist positions either do so on the basis of party manifestos or expert surveys (Huber *et al*., 2023; e.g., Meijers & Zaslove, 2021). Party manifestos, by definition, capture programmatic stances rather than concrete policies and their implementation. Expert surveys seldom include questions on public procurement. Thus, systematic evidence addressing the populist stance and influence on public procurement policy has to be gathered from other sources. Therefore, this paper employs media reporting and parliamentary questions as evidentiary sources. Before presenting these sources, an explanation is provided about the parties studied in the two cases, and the focus on political rhetoric to understand influence is justified.

As research on the influence of populism on public policy is limited, a 'hunting where the ducks are' approach is used to select two populist parties from each case country to analyse political rhetoric. Selecting *La France Insoumise* (LFI) and the *Rassemblement National* (RN, until June 2018 *Front National*) for France addresses the theorised differences between right- and left-wing populist parties. In Germany, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and *DIE LINKE* are selected. All four parties score high in the populist dimension, with DIE LINKE only moderately lower than the other three (Meijers & Zaslove, 2021, p. 392).[2]

Selecting populist parties does not mean that these parties are considered to hold populist positions ex-ante. Rather, their rhetoric, when justifying and framing positions, has to display populist dimensions (see below). Political rhetoric allows capturing substantive positions on issues in the political space and offers insight into their salience – both are relevant for agenda influence. The challenge of this approach is to provide empirical evidence that in their rhetoric, populist parties go beyond what is justified based on their right- or left-wing (economic) political conviction or government-opposition dynamic. The null hypothesis is that opposition parties always criticise governing parties, and all parties tend towards 'economic nationalism'. Thus, a comparison with other (mainstream) parties is added to this research to allow a view of whether some or all mainstream parties also make statements that display populist dimensions. If they do, they are also populist when it comes to public procurement.

Two data sources are combined to generate insights on party rhetoric. Media reporting displays parties' rhetoric as viewed by the public and offers insights into how salient a topic is and where populist parties are positioned relative to mainstream parties. What is more, other (potentially) relevant factors and the wider context impacting party positions become visible and contribute to understanding the scope of the argument. Regarding parliament, questions display party rhetoric in a dynamic of government and opposition. They are a means for individual members to exercise parliament's oversight function on substantive issues, as they must be answered by the responsible Minister within a certain period. Beyond, parliamentary questions are frequently used as strategic instruments to prioritise issues and to signal to the electorate (Palonen, 2019). While their influence on policies might be less powerful than that of votes and amendments (Proksch & Slapin, 2015), they are particularly suited to validly reveal indirect agenda-setting influence.

Moreover, researching the context dependency of populism, Hawkins and Castahno (2018) find that written statements feature lower levels of populism than speeches. Where populist positions are written in parliamentary questions, they might, therefore, indicate a substantial potential for agenda change. The fact that both the media analysis and the parliamentary

questions cover populist and mainstream party rhetoric also contributes to the external validity of the argument. The data was collected as follows:

- *Media analysis*: Two important national newspapers were selected for each country (*Le Monde/ Le Monde diplomatique & Le Figaro/ Le Figaro Magazine* for France, *Süddeutsche/ SZ Magazin & Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung/ FAZ Magazin* for Germany). A keyword search was conducted in full texts published between 1 January 2017 and 22 September 2022, resulting in a total of 49 articles. Almost two-thirds are published in France and only one-third in Germany (20 Le Monde, 11 Le Figaro, 8 SZ, 10 FAZ) – indicating greater public attention towards the topic of populism and procurement in France compared to Germany.
- *Parliamentary questions* in the *Assemblée Nationale* and the *Bundestag* Data collection proceeded in three steps (for details, see Table A2 Annex). First, all parliamentary questions raised by the four parties that deal with public procurement were selected. Second, questions mentioning procurement were qualitatively assessed to ensure they dealt with procurement policy, an existing procurement procedure or concession primarily, or in a detailed and substantial sub-question (at least 0.5 pages). This filtering process resulted in 15 questions in France and 82 in Germany. To this, add mainstream party questions. For pragmatic reasons, one year (2019) and two parties per country were chosen: *Les Républicains* (LR) and *Socialistes et apparentés* (PS) for France, *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP) and *Grüne* for Germany resulting in an additional 53 questions on procurement (17 FDP, 11 Grüne in Germany and 24 LR, 4 PS in France). Strongly varying numbers can be explained by differences in parliamentary function and culture between the two countries (Randour *et al*., 2022).

To assess whether a position voiced in a data source is populist, coding proceeds in two steps. First, contestation is assessed by coding whether the question genuinely aims to obtain additional information on the subject matter of the request or whether, in contrast, a question criticises existing procurement practices and procedures and suggests maladministration in procurement policy. In the next step, the types of contestations are coded. It is important to note that critical positions on the status quo (e.g., calling for strategic public procurement to support a green or digital transition) are distinguished from populist contestation.

Two research assistants hand-coded all parliamentary questions. Multiple codes could be assigned to the same parliamentary question.[3] The following three codes are used (for details, see Table A1 Annex):

- The *anti-establishment* dimension is coded as 'corrupt elites', suggesting inappropriate, misused, or wasted expenditure of public money or

circumvention of public procurement regulations by an arrogant, sinister or dangerous elite. The anchor example references using taxpayers' money in a dangerous way when purchasing by highlighting that 'it is constitutionally questionable if the federal government takes advantage of this circumstance and uses influencers for the targeted influencing of citizens' (BT N° 19/21691, 2020).

- The perception of the *people as a homogenous and indivisible group* is captured by two codes. The first refers to 'economic nationalism', suggesting that national purchasing should be preferred for economic reasons. An anchor example is a question highlighting that procurement 'is side-lining French industries and know-how, threatening French jobs, and preventing the creation of new ones' (AN N° 15/25912, 2020). The second code refers to 'cultural nationalism', highlighting the superiority of French or German contractors and the inferiority of foreign contractors in procurement for reasons of nationality. Here, the anchor example references 'a French company, eco-responsible and socially responsible, with 100% organic products meeting the highest health and environmental standards' pitted against 'the particularly questionable choice of interlocutors such as this American group' (AN N° 15/36166, 2021). The differentiation between the two codes is important to assess the theoretical claims on differences between right- and left-wing populism.
- The *central position and political sovereignty of ordinary people* are captured by three codes. The code 'control by non-majoritarian institutions' criticises the delegation of power to procurement bodies detached from the people and cannot be punished by the electorate. Here, the anchor example highlights spreading worries about 'possible data loss […] data protection and security problems' resulting from delegation (BT 19/1065, 2018). The second code, 'power to the people', suggests that decentralised or more local procurement is more efficient. The anchor example criticises that the 'entire local economic tissue […] is gradually being pushed aside from public contracts in favour of large national brands' (AN N° 15/19738, 2019). The third code, 'European sovereignty', captures references to changes in autonomy caused by procurement. The anchor centres on the government's commitment to a strategy of national digital sovereignty, seen to have been undertaken with 'the aim of sending a signal for IT security "made in Europe"' (BT N° 19/10952).

Analysing the populist stance on procurement

This section presents evidence of what a populist stance on public procurement looks like while – where appropriate – highlighting differences between right-wing and left-wing populism. The discussion starts with differences in

the importance of the topic between France and Germany, over time and across parties, before turning to populist positions indirectly influencing the government agenda on public procurement.

The importance of public procurement for populist parties

This section analyses media coverage and count data on parliamentary questions raised in the *Assemblée Nationale* and *Bundestag* to assess differences in the importance of public procurement and the typical conflict lines running between parties. Systematic media analysis brings to the fore a greater politicisation of public procurement in France, while public attention is focused on questions of state capacity and efficiency in Germany.

In Germany, the political debate on procurement revolves around the question of how to best use the steering power of public money. Political conflict lines run between the liberal FDP and part of the Christian-democrat CDU on the one hand and parties towards the left of the party-political spectrum on the other. For FDP and CDU, price efficiency is core, and they seek to unburden enterprises, particularly SMEs, from bureaucratic requirements. Towards the left, the social democratic SPD is eager to use social criteria strategically, and the Greens push for ecologically sustainable procurement. Yet, these debates hardly make it to the public agenda. Where procurement receives media attention, it is concentrated on maladministration and corruption around the purchasing of defence equipment (2018), autobahn tolls (*PKW Maut* 2019), or procurement of masks during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020).

In France, the question of how to procure is publicly debated and politicised across the political spectrum. Ideas about a *Buy European* policy were first launched in 1993 by then EU Minister Elisabeth Guigonand and prominently entered debate more than a decade ago under President Sarkozy in 2012 (Le Monde, 2017b, 2022). French presidents continuously pushed using EU-level industry policy to create European champions and adopt 'an offensive commercial policy in equal terms with other powers' (President Chirac 2007 cited in: Bora, 2023, p. 4). Since then, party political differences on public procurement have been featured in every national and EP election campaign. The yearly fair, *Made en France,* offers space for controversial debates, as do singular events like the *clause Molière*. The latter refers to an incident in 2017 when a number of departments decided – under the pretext of providing better security – that only French may be spoken on public construction sites (Le Monde, 2017a).

In light of these differences in public debate, the salience of public procurement in parliamentary questions can be addressed. Analytically, salience is a core dimension of agenda-setting. Only where an issue is

seriously considered in a polity can it be expected to influence the agenda (Princen, 2007, p. 28). In this study, salience is indicated by the number of parliamentary questions on public procurement relative to the total number of parliamentary questions raised. When comparing across parties and over time, the share of total questions controls for differences in parliamentary culture and in the number of parliamentarians (Randour *et al*., 2022). This approach does not allow conclusions to be drawn on the importance of public procurement relative to other topics but offers insights on the development of salience over time as well as between parties.

Measured this way, the overall salience of public procurement for populist parties seems to be low and rather stable. First, the topic does not attract more attention from populist parties than from mainstream parties. Rather, the exemplary comparison with mainstream opposition parties reveals similar salience for populist and mainstream parties. Second, over time, there is no visible effect of the COVID-19 crisis on salience. In line with results from the media analysis, parliamentary questions address medical mask procurement (DIE LINKE BT N° 19/22852, 19/25452, 19/27683 & 19/27796). Rather than marking a change after COVID-19, number and rhetoric patterns are comparable to earlier scandals on the procurement of defence equipment or autobahn tolls that characterise pre-COVID-19 questions in the Bundestag (AfD and DIE LINKE BT N° 19/4933, 19/2172 & 19/11780). This observation means populists did not exploit the crisis to reap electoral effects or push their positions onto the government agenda more aggressively via parliamentary questions. Third, public procurement as a topic in parliamentary questions is comparatively more salient for French populist parties than German populist parties, which makes sense in light of public attention expressed in the media (cf. above). Finally, regarding differences between parties, procurement seems to be somewhat more salient for left-wing populist parties than for the populist right. The left-wing populist LFI in France attaches increasing relevance to the topic in their questions after 2018. Party dynamics over time, however, should not be overestimated, particularly due to lower absolute numbers for the French populist parties.

Both types of data indicate that populist parties pay surprisingly little attention to the topic of public procurement. Partisan positions on procurement are more visible and politicised in France than in Germany. Still, a comparison between mainstream and populist parties reveals that neither country's populist parties push procurement onto the agenda particularly forcefully, even when the COVID-19 crisis offered a window of opportunity. The next section turns to the type of influence exerted on the government agenda.

Populist influence as opposition in parliament

This section analyses the indirect influence on agenda-setting by examining the substantive positions on procurement voiced by populists in parliamentary questions. A quantitative overview of the type of contestation voiced by populist and mainstream parties is presented before turning to a detailed qualitative analysis of rhetoric. In both, the data is discussed along the three dimensions in which populist influence can be expected: anti-establishment, homogenous people, and political sovereignty of ordinary people.

Asking for information or contesting government?

A key concern is to assess the effect of populism on public policy. Thus, an important question is whether the coded parliamentary interventions contest government procurement policy and practice rather than simply demanding information. Here, the data reveals that in France, 13 of 15 questions (87 per cent) challenge the government. In Germany, a more significant proportion of questions genuinely aim to obtain additional information about the subject of public procurement – to check and balance government. Yet, even in Germany, 59 of 82 questions (72 per cent) are characterised by contention. These levels are comparable to some mainstream opposition parties (in particular, the German FDP and the French LR, cf. Table A2 Annex), indicating that not only populist parties use populist rhetoric.

Dimensions of populist positions: above all, against corrupt elites

Table 1 presents a simple count of how frequently each dimension of populist rhetoric developed in the analytical framework appears in parliamentary questions in both countries. The upper section of the table presents parliamentary questions raised by populists 2017–2022; the lower section cross-compares populist and mainstream parties for a single year, 2019.

Table 1 clearly shows that anti-establishment positions represent the bulk of populist rhetoric for populist parties but also mainstream parties. Following with a wide margin are positions that stress the political sovereignty of ordinary people. This stance is somewhat more frequent among populist parties than mainstream parties. Further, they are more important in the German case than in the French case. Rhetoric referring to 'the people' as a homogenous group is an equally important marker of populist positions on procurement in France and Germany.

Contrary to theoretical expectations, no clear-cut differences between populist parties in a cultural and a nationalist variant can be observed in the count data. Rather, right- and left-wing populist parties both use cultural

Table 1. Populist dimensions in parliamentary questions

	Anti-establishment		The people as a homogenous and indivisible group		Political sovereignty of ordinary people	
	Corrupt elite	Economic nationalism	Cultural nationalism	Control non-majoritarian institutions	More power to the people	European sovereignty
Populist parties (2017–2022)						
AFD	10	2	2	2	0	2
DIE LINKE	43	1	1	6	1	2
LFI	4	1	2	0	0	0
RN	0	2	1	0	1	0
Total populist parties 2017–2022	57	6	6	8	2	4
Mainstream versus populist parties (2019)						
Germany (2019)						
FDP	8	2	0	0	0	2
GRÜNE	8	0	0	1	0	0
AFD	3	1	2	0	0	2
DIE LINKE	18	0	1	4	0	1
Total Germany	37	3	3	5	0	5
France (2019)						
LR	6	6	0	0	1	0
PS	1	0	0	0	0	0
LFI	2	0	0	0	0	0
RN	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total France	9	6	0	0	1	0

Source: Author's compilation based on codes in Table A1 Annex.

and economic nationalist rhetoric, and they do so in France as well as in Germany. However, rhetoric on 'the people' as a homogenous group seems less likely for mainstream parties. Populist party rhetoric is also studied qualitatively to capture *how* they influence public procurement. This approach allows an exploration of the nature of populist influence, including qualitative differences between the cases.

Anti-establishment

Table 1 indicates that 'corrupt elites' is the code assigned most often in our data. This dimension is particularly important for contestation by DIE LINKE und AfD in Germany and characterises about half of the questions raised by the French LFI. Yet, none of the parliamentary questions by the FN/RN qualify as populist in this dimension. There is an anti-establishment push from right to left across different political and parliamentary systems.

At the same time, the material shows that 'corrupt elites' mean different things to different populist parties. The thin populist ideology pits 'the people' against liberal economic elites (DIE LINKE) or the political and administrative establishment (LFI) on the left and overlaps with cultural nationalist positions on the right (AfD). This can be discerned where parliamentary

questions of populist left-wing parties stress government failure in managing processes related to the procurement of masks and medical equipment (DIE LINKE BT N° 19/22852, 19/25452, 19/27683 & 19/27796) or transport infrastructure (DIE LINKE BT N° 19/2172, 19/11780 & 19/7582). In another question, DIE LINKE highlights connections between the defence industry and government, stressing lobbyism and the use of the *Munich Security Conference* for 'business interests' along with a request to specify meetings and contacts between executives and more than 20 German defence firms (DIE LINKE BT N° 20/1459). Populist parties seek to challenge democratic institutions beyond single procurement processes with a framing that implies nepotism and influence peddling and highlighting systemic corruption (DIE LINKE BT N° 20/318, also N° 19/9376 and N° 19/30796, AfD BT N° 19/7128). This approach goes beyond the well-founded critique on the malpractice of awarding consultancy contracts without public tenders or economic viability checks when the AfD rhetoric highlights sharing secret documents and calls for better control of the executive to avoid nepotism (AfD BT N° 19/4933). Most typical for the AfD are, however, anti-establishment arguments related to development cooperation. These questions are characterised by an overlap with cultural nationalist positions on the homogenous people. Here, questions highlight corruption and lack of economic efficiency, calling for the reduction of money spent on development cooperation and, at the same time, for the involvement of superior German staffing and products (AfD BT N° 19/12525, 19/22906 & 19/30358).

Homogenous and indivisible people

For the code 'homogenous and indivisible people', Table 1 shows that questions are motivated by cultural as well as economic nationalism in all four populist parties. While less frequent in numbers, these questions are clearly populist by trying to push the government agenda towards anti-pluralist positions. Importantly, the material does not cluster in more 'economic nationalist' positions on the left and more 'cultural nationalist' positions on the right as expected theoretically.

'Economic nationalism' suggests that German or French contractors should be preferred in procurement for economic reasons. Examples are questions demanding the strategic allocation of public contracts to SMEs struggling with the COVID-19 crisis (RN question N° 15/36081) and independent bookstores competing with globalised online stores (LFI question N° 15/31899) and local businesses (LFI question N° 15/21301) – rhetorically exploiting the existing rural-urban cleavage (Jones, 2019, p. 16). 'Economic nationalism' also prevails in the rhetoric of the German populist right. Good examples are questions by the AfD on government responses to systemic competitors, notably China. One question accuses governments of failing to construct a highway bridge across the Rhine in Düsseldorf because they

awarded the contract based on the lowest price, leading to the use of cheap Chinese material markets (AfD BT N° 19/20937). Another question formulates the allegation of generally awarding, price dumping, and purchasing low-quality offers of systemic competitors rather than using social, green, and innovation criteria for their proactive exclusion from the market (AfD BT N° 19/8137).

'Cultural nationalism' suggests that German or French contractors are better suited to procurement than foreign contractors. French populist parties voice the most extreme positions. They criticise the procurement of foreign rather than French alimentary products likely to be used in public canteens (RN question N° 15/22200) and sanitary products for female prisoners (LFI question N° 15/36166).[4] A lack of quality in products of non-French origin is also at the centre of questions about the supply of firearms for the French forces (RN question N° 15/25912) and a range of products from Latin America covered by a French-Mercosur trade deal (LFI question N° 15/5552). In both cases, criticism comes with explicit economic concerns on the loss of income and employment for 'the French workers'. This disapproval is nicely illustrated in the following quote questioning the Defence Minister for a

> lack of national vision due to the endangerment of the French industry and French jobs as well as the loss of sovereignty of the armies in matters of defence and armament in relation to the recent order of pistols that was made. Indeed, her ministry has announced two major orders, one for 75,000 pistols and the other for 2,600 precision rifles. However, no French arms manufacturer has been selected. If it was already worrying that the assault rifles were no longer French and that they were ordered from a German arms manufacturer, Heckler and Koch, three years ago, it is once again just as worrying that the precision rifles are no longer French but Belgian, and that the handguns are becoming Austrian. […] By losing French military sovereignty in the field of armaments, the Minister is putting the armed forces in danger if she were to lose their supplies, but also, consequently, those they protect, the citizens. She puts French industries and know-how on the side-lines, threatens French jobs, and prevents the creation of new ones. […] France is not a third-world country or a country where foreign lobbies rule, unable to procure a national armament. France is a great country. A great country capable of having its own armaments. (RN N° 25912, published in the Official Journal on 21.01.2020, own translation)

Turning to Germany, populist parties equally raise questions that call for the use of national contractors in procurement and combine these with criticism of (potential) economic losses for national enterprises and workers. An example is a question asking for the number of procurement contracts provided by the government to foreign tenderers, differentiated by services, construction, and product procurement and over time (AfD BT N° 19/11751).

Political sovereignty of ordinary people

In quantitative terms, 'political sovereignty of ordinary people' holds similar weight to the dimension 'people as a homogenous group'. In the analysed sample, the corresponding code are comparably more important in Germany than in France. This finding is illustrated by the code 'control by non-majoritarian institutions' that applies exclusively to the AfD and DIE LINKE. They criticise delegation as undermining public functions and highlight the tension between assuring sovereign tasks and providing services that may escape state control. Yet, in the area of public procurement, these concerns are not directed at non-majoritarian institutions as the literature indicates. Despite the important role agencies and intermediaries play in public procurement in Germany, they are not subject to critique. Rather, delegation to private actors is the core of contention. On various occasions, the left-wing populist party criticised the involvement of private actors through procurement, such as private mailing services or evaluation of technical evidence on behalf of the government (DIE LINKE BT N° 19/1065 & 19/538). The underlying critique on the role of the ordoliberal state might explain why contestation is visible only in the case of Germany but does not characterise questions in the *Assemblée Nationale*.

'Power to the people' characterises only two questions in our sample. Both are linked to privatisation processes in concrete local entities, as illustrated by RN's contestation of government policy on dams. The RN considers them public services of general interest that 'belong to the industrial heritage of France' (RN question N° 12363). Rather than depending on the injunctions of 'the elite' in the form of unelected technocrats, power should remain with 'the (local) people' (also DIE LINKE BT N° 19/4041).

'European sovereignty' characterises populist positions on the right and left in Germany. While the literature leads us to assume that populists would contest the transfer of procurement powers to the European level, for example, by criticising EU directives and CJEU case law, the parliamentary questions in the sample offer a more ambiguous perspective on populist positions regarding the EU. In this respect, questions of the populist right in the Bundestag are particularly interesting. Criticising government responses to systemic competitors (China), the AfD raises a number of questions on the role of European industry and competition policy and calls for the creation of European champions (AfD BT N° 19/8137) or greater interoperability of weapon systems (AfD BT N° 19/8744). On the left, a similar line of argumentation can be observed in two questions. The first is about awarding the contract to carry out the Census 2022 to an US company. The second concerns the joint development and licensing of free software. With both questions, the government is criticised for not pushing for an EU solution (DIE LINKE BT N° 19/7130 and 20/2436). It remains an open

question whether firms in other EU member states are simply considered the lesser evil compared to international competitors or whether the position flows from a cross-partisan understanding that the EU Single market benefits the German economic model. This latter interpretation, in particular, contradicts the theoretical argument that left-wing populists oppose the EU as a form of international imperialism (cf. Halikiopoulou *et al*., 2012). Rather, when populist parties position themselves on concrete policies, it might be much harder to uphold Eurosceptic positions than in programmatic documents.

Interestingly, and despite the fact that the dimension of European sovereignty does not appear in parliamentary questions in the *Assemblée Nationale*, it features prominently in the media during the investigation period. A number of articles in the sample deal with differences between *Buying national* positions (advocated by the populist right and left as well as part of the conservative RN) and *Buying European* positions advanced by *En March* and the socialist PS (Bora, 2023, pp. 9–10). Calling for more Europe might go against the classical understanding of populist positions. On second thought, however, they might make perfect sense when populists call on the EU to increase their economic sovereignty.

Conclusion

Starting from a focus of populist parties on 'economic nationalism' as some works suggest and the potential of procurement to bolster and protect national economies, this research asks two questions: What is a populist stance on public procurement policies, and what are the differences between right- and left-wing populist parties in this position? How do populist parties influence public procurement? To address these questions, the study analytically differentiates populist positions along the dimensions of 'anti-establishment', of 'the people as a homogenous and indivisible group' and of 'political sovereignty of ordinary people'. It offers an original analysis that used different materials (media reporting and parliamentary questions) to empirically assess populist parties' influence on procurement. Three findings merit particular attention for a deeper understanding of how populists change key public policies.

First, despite the financial volume and societal importance of public procurement, the topic received little attention from populist parties highlighting that they may not be as focused on 'economic nationalism' as some work would suggest. Procurement, as a topic, is of little salience. This finding is rather stable over time and is an important contrast with much of the existing research that has discussed populism in policy areas highly salient for voters, such as migration, anti-discrimination, or environmental policy. Given that neither low salience nor the technicality of policy fields is

specific to procurement but frequently typical for public policy, it might thus require a reassessment of populist influence. Although Germany and France show comparatively low levels of cross-country procurement, which might, in part, explain the limited salience, technicality is a feature of many public policy areas likely to matter beyond the studied country cases. The fact that questioning of government public procurement policies is also visible among some (but not all) mainstream opposition parties, might further indicate that not all parties count on gaining from engaging in a policy space with low differentiation. For a more systematic understanding of the interplay between low salience and dimensions of the policy space (Huber *et al*., 2023), future analysis should study a broader range of policies and compare them systematically.

Second, there is little evidence of populist positions pushing 'economic nationalism'. This observation holds across countries with greater and lower potential to use procurement for 'economic nationalism' due to the role of the state in the economy. On the one hand, regarding different dimensions of populism, anti-establishment arguments are, by far, the most frequent. This finding is in line with a broader trend of populists revolting against elites documented in this special issue (cf. Schmidt, 2023; Thomas, forthcoming). On the other hand, 'cultural nationalism' and 'economic nationalism' characterise the positions of populist parties only seldom. Rather, the analysis of French media displayed positions of 'economic nationalism' across much of the party-political spectrum. The stronger orientation towards open 'economic nationalism' seems to be a core difference between France and Germany. National institutional and ideational contexts seem to matter more than populism.

Third, the interplay between thin populist ideology and thick host ideology theorised in much of the populism literature is informed by two findings. The first concerns the observation that in both country cases, mainstream parties also voiced populist positions on procurement. One interpretation is that thin ideology unites with thick ideologies across party lines in public policies. Alternatively, mainstream parties might have reshaped their positions in response to the indirect agenda influence of populist parties. The material in this paper does not allow testing these two competing interpretations. Yet, in both cases, a broader shift toward accommodating some variety of populism in the political mainstream might be observed. Consequently, populist influence on public policy is unlikely to come only from populist parties. The second notes that, theoretically, the research expected populist parties on the left to show greater affinity in defining 'the people' as economically disadvantaged and voicing 'economic nationalist' positions. Right-wing populists, in turn, were expected to define 'the people' on nativist grounds and voice 'cultural nationalist' positions. Findings do not support this expectation. Rather, on both ends of the right-left

continuum, populist rhetoric uses cultural and economic nationalist arguments. This finding points towards theoretical positions that consider right- and left-wing populism equally anti-pluralistic. A broader variety of countries, ideally displaying different varieties of left-wing populist parties, for example, from southern Europe and the Nordic countries, should be studied to understand how far this last argument can be taken.

Notes

1. Clearly, any thick left ideology is likely to criticise economic inequality. Only where this stance combines with a more general notion of 'the people' pitted against a political and economic elite do populist classifications apply.
2. Classification of the DIE LINKE party as populist is frequent (Huber *et al*., 2023, p. 993; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017, p. 195) but not uncontested (e.g., Schäfer & Zürn, 2021).
3. The first 20 parliamentary questions for each country case were coded in parallel by both research assistants, results compared and differences discussed. Throughout the coding process, in the few cases in which the codes could not be clearly assigned on the basis of the code book, an exchange took place between the research assistants to ensure intercoder reliability.
4. Procurement for canteens and prisons is an issue of debate at the central level, giving populists the opportunity to deplore the quality of foreign products vocally and to stress the superiority of national offers in the *Assemblée Nationale*.

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Annex

Table A1. Operationalisation of populism codes in public procurement policy

Anti-establishment	
'corrupt elites' suggests inappropriate, misused, or wasted expenditure of public money or circumvention of public procurement regulations	Influencers usually maintain their own 'channels' on social media, such as YouTube. Their posts purport to be authentic personal expressions of opinion, which is precisely why they enjoy a high level of credibility, especially among younger Internet users. They use their image and authenticity to influence the views and behaviour of their followers. In the opinion of the questioners, it is constitutionally questionable if the federal government takes advantage of this circumstance and uses influencers to target citizens against payment from tax funds. (BT N° 19/21691, 2020)
People as a homogenous and indivisible group	
'economic nationalism' suggests that German/French contractors should be preferred in procurement for economic reasons	M. Sébastien Chenu alerts the Minister of the Armed Forces to her lack of national vision given the endangerment of French industry and French jobs, as well as the loss of sovereignty of the armed forces in terms of defence and armaments due to the recent order for pistols […]. If it was already worrying that the assault rifles were no longer French and that they were ordered from the German arms manufacturer Heckler and Koch three years ago, it is just as worrying that precision rifles are no longer French but Belgian, and that handguns are becoming Austrian. […] She [the Minister] is sidelining French industries and know-how, threatening French jobs, and preventing the creation of new ones. (AN N° 15/25912, 2020)
'cultural nationalism' suggests that German/French contractors are better suited than foreign contractors	A French company, eco-responsible and socially responsible, offered 100% organic products meeting the highest health and environmental standards for an estimated 150,000 euros for the 2,500 prisoners targeted by this scheme. 150,000 for the 2,500 prisoners targeted by this programme. […] Thus, after this mention of the 2020 programme and the particularly questionable choice of interlocutors such as this American group within the framework of a public order and for an amount that remains unknown to this day […], she [the deputy] asks him to specify from now on how the envelope of 5 million euros devoted to menstrual precariousness will be distributed for 2021. (AN N° 15/36166, 2021)
Political sovereignty of the ordinary people	
'control by non-majoritarian institutions' suggests lack of control of contracting institutions/ procurement intermediaries, criticises the involvement of non-majoritarian institutions in the procurement process	[T]he external mail of the German Bundestag and other federal authorities is at least partly handled by private service providers […]. The exact extent of and responsibility for the possible loss of data have not yet been determined. In the opinion of the questioners, it cannot be ruled out that problems with the possible external postal service provider may already have occurred in the

	past. This must be comprehensively clarified so that appropriate conclusions can then be drawn for the handling of postal services. In addition to data protection and security problems, the questioners believe that it must also be clarified whether and what negative consequences of privatisation and outsourcing of postal services may occur at the federal authorities and ministries and how these problems are to be solved. (BT 19/1065, 2018)
'more power to the people' suggests that decentralised ('more local') procurement procedures would be more efficient	This practice is contradictory to the declared will of the public authorities to set up short circuits, to promote local employment and to limit the carbon footprint of economic activity. In rural areas such as the Ardèche, it is in fact the entire local economic tissue that is gradually being pushed aside from public contracts in favour of large national brands, located outside the department or even outside the region. (AN N° 15/19738, 2019)
'European sovereignty' addresses the fact that procurement strengthens/ weakens autonomy at EU level	Regarding 'digital sovereignty' […] how many and which public contracts has the Federal Government awarded in the field of IT security since 2015 with the aim of sending a signal for IT security 'made in Europe'? (BT N° 19/10952) At the beginning of February 2019, it became known that the German government had excluded the F-35 from the bidding process for the successor to the Tornado. In the questioner's view, Germany is taking a special path compared to other European NATO countries […] repeatedly argued that there are too many different weapons systems. Efforts at the EU level to address the interoperability issue are surprisingly thwarted by the exclusion of the F-35. It is in the public interest to know what motives prompted the German government to take this step, and what the consequences will be. (BT 19/8744, 2019)

Table A2. Parliamentary questions in the German Bundestag and in the *French Assemblée*

	French populist right (*Front National*/ FN & *Rassemblement National*/ RN)		French populist left (*La France Insoumise*/ LFI)		German populist right (*Alternative für Deutschland*/ AfD)		German populist left (DIE LINKE)	
	questions	**related to procurement**	**questions**	**related to procurement**	**questions**	**related to procurement**	**questions**	**related to procurement**
2017	141	1	541	1	68	0	1.094	1
2018	49	2	226	0	3.594	1	10.402	20
2019	125	0	549	3	12.355	11	11.076	18
2020	195	2	537	3	8.721	6	9.687	4
2021	166	0	475	3	9.007	3	7.940	10
2022	63	0	101	0	6.089	2	5.938	6
total	739	5	2.429	10	39.834	23	46.137	59

	FDP		GRÜNE		*Les Républicains* (LR)		*Socialistes et apparentés* (PS)	
	Questions	**Related to procurement**	**Questions**	**Related to procurement**	**Questions**	**Related to procurement**	**Questions**	**Related to procurement**
2019	44.140	17	6.376	11	3.183	21	751	4
total	140.293	–	21.674	–	14.195	–	2.682	–

Nationale Bundestag (https://dip.bundestag.de/experten-suche) keyword search for 'Große und kleine Anfragen' with 'Öffentlich* Auftraggeber, Vergabe öffentlich* Aufträge, Öffentlich* Auftrag, Öffentliche* Aufträge*, Vergabeverfahren, Konzessionsvergabe', covering the two legislative terms under investigation (24.10.2017–22.11.2022).

Assemblée Nationale (https://data.assemblee-nationale.fr/) keyword search for 'Questions écrites, au gouvernement, orales avec et sans réponse' with 'marché public, droit des marchés, pouvoirs adjudicateurs, acheteur public, procédures de passation de marchés, procédures de passation de contrats, contrats de concession', covering the two legislative terms under investigation (27.6.2017–9.11.2022).