Anti-elitism in the European Radical Right in Comparative Perspective

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To better understand the communication of anti-elitism in contemporary politics, this study conceptually differentiates between specific anti-elitism geared toward specific, materially powerful elites ('Angela Merkel') and general anti-elitism referencing broader discursive constructs ('the elite'). The study analyses the online communications of radical right parties in the 2019 European Parliament elections from six countries (Germany, France, Italy, Austria, Poland and Sweden). This more fine-grained analysis of anti-elitism highlights some areas of transnational convergence, such as a tendency to focus on specific political elites, rather than other sectors such as the media or discursive constructs. The findings also reveal stratification according to parties' position in national power structures: opposition parties tend to target national-level elites while governing parties focus on the European level. The findings highlight that anti-elitism is used in a highly instrumental way, and help us to better understand the intersection between anti-elitism and the multilevel politics of EP elections.

Introduction

In recent years, many radical right or right-wing populist parties have established themselves as powerful forces throughout Europe, either as oppositional challengers of governmental politics or as members – and even leaders – of national governments. Their electoral success and their influence on political agendas and civic culture are perceived as severe risks to liberal democracy and the process of European integration (Zielonka, 2018).

Anti-elitism plays a central role in the challenge posed by these parties, particularly through the populist opposition between the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2007). Part of the efficacy of this discursive strategy is the 'Manichean outlook' (Hawkins, 2010, p. 34) which separates these categories into binary oppositions of good and evil, while constituting them as internally homogeneous. Yet in addition to this Manichean outlook, right-wing populist actors also implicate specific elites in their critiques in highly strategic and selective ways – such as blaming some while valorizing others (Caiani and della Porta, 2011). Reflecting this diversity in the expression of anti-elitism, communication research has taken different approaches to operationalizing the presence of anti-elitism within political communication: some focusing exclusively on references to diffuse categories like 'the elite', and others also including harsh critiques of specific elite actors like political parties. There remains an open question, then, about how to properly conceptualize and measure anti-elitist communication, and to therefore understand how right-wing populist parties' characteristics influence which forms of anti-elitism prevail under which circumstances.

This paper combines manual and computational content analysis to examine patterns of anti-elitism among European radical right parties (RRPs) online. Our findings stem from Facebook post data and website articles from RRPs and party leaders from six European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden) in the period around the 2019 European Parliament elections (Jan–May 2019). EU elections have traditionally been viewed as 'second-order elections', that is instances in which election contests are dominated by domestic issues and party competition, and in which voters primarily judge national government performance instead of EU politics and policies (Hix and Marsh, 2011). Recent scholarship, however, sees European RRPs more and more as a 'discourse community' characterized by convergence in content and strategies, geared toward collectively pushing their influence and their positions (Rettig, 2020). In this respect, the 2019 EP election has been seen as a critical juncture for European integration given the rise of Eurosceptic and populist parties throughout Europe and increasing attempts at EP-level cooperation (Kantola and Miller, 2021).

We understand anti-elitism as a strategic endeavor, and as such, highly context-dependent. We argue that party and country specific context factors are among the key dimensions in these dynamics. We test how the *structural power position* of a party in the national and European supranational political system influences their expression of anti-elitism, in particular reflecting the significance of underlying material power relations when parties target specific types of elites. Yet, anti-elitism as one element of populist communication is likewise employed and rooted in a nationally specific *cultural-discursive opportunity structure* more prone to tolerate or rather refuse populist communication which we take into account when discussing further variations between the parties and countries we analyse.

Our paper is structured as follows: first, we introduce anti-elitism as a key feature of populism and conceptualize elites and distinct types of anti-elitism, differentiating between specific and general anti-elitism. Second, we discuss the context-dependency of anti-elitism, focusing on parties' structural power position and the country-specific cultural-discursive context. Section three outlines the study design and the data and methods of our study. We describe our method of structured annotation by human coders (labelling the presence of references to elites within these online texts, and coding the elite type, scope, evaluation and form of anti-elitism) and an automated dictionary-assisted classification of instances of general anti-elitism. We then report the types, the targets and the scope of anti-elitism across the six parties analysed in our study. Our study demonstrates that in the context of the European Parliament elections, RRPs tend to direct their anti-elitism to specific materially powerful actors in the political sector rather than diffuse discursive constructs. We also demonstrate that this specific anti-elitism is a flexible communication style which parties adapt instrumentally according to their strategic context, especially as governing parties target the European level while opposition parties target the national level.

I. Radical Right Parties in Europe and Anti-elitism

Since the 1980s, RRP have established themselves and developed into a significant force in Europe and other democracies across the world. This party family, while including a heterogeneous set of parties, has been defined and characterized by a shared 'core of

ethno-nationalist xenophobia and antiestablishment populism' by Rydgren (2007, p. 242) and by 'a core ideology that is a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism' by Mudde (2007, p. 23). Populism in this context is more than a political communication style but, as Mudde conceptualizes it, 'a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite"' (Mudde, 2007, p. 23), which is closely linked with the underlying core nativist ideology in RRPs.[1] The criticism inherent in *anti-elitism* as one of the key ideological features of such populism emphasizes the distance between the citizens as 'us' and a dominant and established elite as 'them' (Bracciale and Martella, 2017, p. 1316). Ernst and colleagues conceptualize anti-elitism on three dimensions: (1) discrediting the elite, (2) blaming the elite, and (3) detaching the elite from the people (Ernst *et al.*, 2017a, 2019a). All three dimensions capture antagonistic sentiments towards the elites; they include negative attributes such as 'corrupt' or 'criminal', 'harmful' and 'irresponsible' (see Table 1 in Ernst *et al.*, 2019a).

Such a worldview constructs 'the elites' or 'the establishment' as outgroups that are to blame for problems or negative outcomes. Anti-elitism is likewise a communicative strategy used by RRPs to convey an image that they stand in opposition to established political parties as the true representative of the common man, even in cases where they entered power (Rydgren, 2007; Akkerman and De Lange, 2012). The effects of anti-elitism as both ideology and communicative strategy are not trivial. Urbinati (2018) sees anti-elitism as capable of destabilizing democracy and civil rights through its rejection of pluralist party competition in the name 'of "the part" that populism declares to be superior or that deserves supremacy'. Empirical research also indicates that anti-elitism is associated with a higher propensity to vote for a populist party (Hameleers *et al.*, 2018), and that especially right-wing leaders can gain from populist rhetoric (Bos *et al.*, 2013). In fact, populist anti-elitism has been seen as crucial for RRPs success (Rydgren, 2007), and it has been shown to be the most prominent strategy of populist rhetoric, with blaming and discrediting elites used most frequently, which is overall mostly applied by political actors at the extremes (Ernst *et al.*, 2017b).

Against this background, it is urgent for political scientists and communication scholars to understand the contexts and conditions of anti-elitism better. In our research we, therefore aim at a better understanding of variation among RRPs as sources of anti-elitism. Hence, our study addresses the following research question: *how do party characteristics and country-specific cultural-discursive contexts influence a) the salience of different types of anti-elitism, b) the targeted sectors, and c) the scope of anti-elitism by RRPs online?*

II. Conceptualizing Anti-elitist Communication

Over the past decade, communication research has conceptualized and operationalized anti-elitism in conflicting ways. Namely, is anti-elitism exclusively communicated through "general" references to diffuse categories of actors (for example 'the political class') or can it also be communicated through particularly harsh critiques of the specific actors themselves (for example 'Angela Merkel is corrupt')? Some scholars have

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[1]Mudde prefers the term populist radical right to further specify that it is a populist form of the radical right (2007, p. 23).

restricted their focus on the more general and diffuse anti-elite reference (for example Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Caiani and della Porta, 2011).[2] Other studies have additionally measured the presence of anti-elitism through harsh communicative references to particular political actors such as individual parties (Bracciale and Martella, 2017; Engesser *et al*., 2017).[3] We can therefore conclude that while all studies agree that harsh references to 'the elite' as a diffuse category can communicate anti-elitism, not all studies share the same approach regarding harsh references to particular elite actors. This presents a challenge for communication science in generating comparable findings about anti-elitism, given the possible lack of equivalence in this central concept.

We argue that anti-elitist communication should be conceptualized as the combination of two elements: a harsh critique (here we adopt Ernst *et al*.'s typology described above of blaming, discrediting and detaching); and an elite target (which can be classified as either specific or general). Since the novelty of our approach lies in attempting to systematically differentiate between specific and general elite targets, we will briefly establish the basis for this distinction before linking it back to anti-elitist communication.

Elites can be defined in ontological terms as 'groups or individuals with regular and substantial influence on important decisions within an organization or a society' (Hoffmann-Lange, 2018, p. 79). Yet when we try to apply this definition from elite studies to communication, we confront a semiotic ambiguity in the two contrasting ways that eliteness can be apprehended, as discussed by Thurlow and Jaworski (2017). The first way is tied to material conditions and as such anchored in objective indicators (for example whoever possesses 'money, stuff and land'), while the second is linked to more subjective symbolic orders of meaning which are at times completely untethered from material conditions (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2017, p. 250). We are informed by this distinction in classifying 'specific' and 'general' elite targets in communication.

We define a 'specific elite target' as a term describing a relatively concrete actor or group of actors, whose eliteness is apprehended connotatively as a product of material conditions and influence. Specific elite targets include individuals and groups across a range of societal sectors such as government officials and legislators, top businesses, head judges, high-ranking media executives, as well as top academic institutions (Scott, 2003; Hicks *et al*., 2015; Mayerhöffer, 2019). The referent of a specific elite target therefore remains stable across communicative instances and is more objectively determined. For example, terms like 'the EU' and 'Angela Merkel' connote eliteness through the actor's possession of influence, and refer to the same actor across different texts.

A 'general elite target' in contrast describes a relatively abstract category of actors, whose eliteness is denoted in terms which are primarily affective and relational. General elite targets therefore include instances of the classic populist discursive construct contrasting the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2007). The referent of a general

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[2]Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011, p. 1275) explicitly justify that 'Critique on a specific party or a particular politician is not general enough, and was therefore not coded' whereas Caiani and Della Porta (2011) make this choice implicitly by coding for both general and particular references but focusing their analysis solely on descriptions of 'the politicians' as a more diffuse group.

[3]For example, Bracciale and Martella (2017, p. 1320) code anti-elitism as present in the tweet 'Freedom of conscience for Democratic Party = freedom of pissing in voters' mouth', while Engesser *et al*. (2017, p. 1117) highlight a social media post where in contrast to 'the political elite in a more general sense', 'the political elite assume a more concrete shape and are embodied by a series of political parties'.

elite target is unstable and indeterminate even within a single given communicative context; as De Cleen (2019, p. 35) argues, '[t]hese labels lump together different kinds of opponents under one banner'. Terms such as 'the elite' and 'the political class' therefore denote eliteness intersubjectively, and can be interpreted as referring to different actors by different audiences and across different communicative instances.

As stated previously, we conceptualize anti-elitist communication as comprised of both harsh critique and an elite target. This means that both kinds of elite targets can occur with or without the presence of harsh critiques. It is important to note that our aim here is to conceptualize and operationalize different kinds of anti-elitism directly, rather than merely as an indicator for the presence of populism. Based on our review of the literature summarized some scholars will take the view that specific anti-elitism can be populist, and others will disagree. We remain deliberately agnostic on this theoretical question, and instead only claim that specific and general anti-elitism are meaningfully related to one another, particularly in the strategic political communication of RRPs.

Apart from clarifying this conceptual confusion introduced at the start of this section, we suggest two further benefits of differentiating between specific and general anti-elitism which we hope to illustrate in the empirical sections of this study.

Firstly, specific elite targets, by virtue of their fixed referential relationship to particular actors, can also be analysed in terms of the characteristics of those referenced actors. In our study, two characteristics which we focus on are societal sector (political, economic, media and so on, as outlined in Rooduijn, 2014) and scope (for example national and transnational – see Koopmans, 2002). These characteristics are difficult or impossible to code for general anti-elitist references such as 'the corrupt elite'. Yet attention to the relationship between specific anti-elitism and the characteristics of referenced elite actors allows investigation of relevant research questions, such as when European RRPs attack national elites and when they target elites at the EU level.

Secondly, specific and general anti-elitism may perform different functions and have different social and political consequences. In the context of European integration, diffuse Euroscepticism has been seen as a major challenge to legitimation of the EU (de Wilde *et al.*, 2014) as diffuse Eurosceptic claims do not provide sufficient information to allow reasoned preference formations and judgments. Diffuse claims primarily spread under-specified critique, and they are unclear expressions of discontent (de Wilde *et al.*, 2014, p. 774) difficult to counter by reforms.

III. Context Dependency of Anti-elitism

Types and targets of anti-elitism are thus manifold, and the strategic enactment of anti-elitism is closely related to the structure of political competition (van Kessel and Castelein, 2016). RRPs differ with respect to their actual position in a given political system, and scholars have researched how this position affects parties' behaviour and political communication (Akkerman and De Lange, 2012; Akkerman *et al.*, 2016a). In line with this research, we expect that a party's *structural power position* plays a decisive role in explaining its propensity toward and form of anti-elitism. In electoral contests, parties in power should be less inclined to resort to anti-elitist rhetoric than challenger parties who aim at replacing governments. For challenger parties, it is the natural role to formulate criticism, and thus populist communication styles could be more appealing.

Large-scale empirical studies comparing parties in Western European countries and the US find bivariate evidence that populist communication is more prevalent among opposition and challenger parties than parties in government (Ernst *et al.*, 2017b; Bernhard and Kriesi, 2019). We thus expect that the governing parties in our study will engage in anti-elitism less overall than the opposition parties (Hypothesis 1).

In addition, as discussed in the previous section, we differentiated specific elite targets according to a range of actor characteristics, two of which form the basis for further hypotheses. Regarding the sector targeted by specific anti-elitism, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) argue that the 'all-encompassing' view of elites as belonging to a range of sectors such as the media and the intellectual class is a marker of the intensity of anti-establishment sentiment; they correspondingly show in their study that the Belgian opposition party Vlaams Blok includes more anti-state and anti-media references, while the other parties' criticism focuses on criticizing concrete political actors (p. 329). In line with our first hypothesis that governing parties have a structural incentive to engage in anti-elitism on a more selective and strategic basis, we also predict that governing parties will target specific elites in the political sector more than oppositional parties, who are expected to target a broader range of specific elites from different sectors of society (Hypothesis 2).

In a similar vein, parties in government might be inclined to circumvent harsh blaming or discrediting elites in their immediate environment due to their own belonging to the national elite (Akkerman *et al.*, 2016a). Such 'blame avoidance' (Weaver, 1986) has been described as a central political communication strategy. Another strategy is 'blame shifting' (Hood and Rothstein, 2001), and the multi-level system of European politics provides an additional layer to target entities beyond the national scope. As Gerhards and colleagues argue, for national governments as those in power and responsible for political decisions, directing criticism towards the opposition is no viable strategy due to their lack of decision-making power. However, the supranational European level provides additional layers to attribute responsibility and blame for perceived failures, either by discrediting power holders from other countries or directing criticism towards European supranational institutions (Gerhards *et al.*, 2009, p. 535 f.). Following this argumentation, we can expect that where parties in government criticize elites, the scope of this anti-elitism will be primarily transnational (either horizontally targeting elites of another country or vertically targeting EU-level actors as such), while national opposition parties, in contrast, are expected to engage primarily in anti-elitism of a domestic scope, attacking domestic elites of their own country (Hypothesis 3).

Yet, research found significant country differences between the extent and framing of anti-elitism also among actors sharing far-right ideologies (Caiani and della Porta, 2011; Staykova *et al.*, 2016). Neither are RRPs in Europe a homogeneous block (Akkerman *et al.*, 2016b) nor is the structural power position sufficient for understanding varieties of anti-elitism across RRPs. In fact, studies show counter examples against such unidirectional trends (Bernhard and Kriesi, 2019) and emphasize the importance of the specific opportunity structure in which populist communication is strategically employed (Ernst *et al.*, 2019a; De Bruycker and Rooduijn, 2021).

This research highlights that the strategic use of anti-elitist communication is carefully adjusted not only to fit an actor's structural political position but likewise to the

"cultural-discursive opportunities" (Caiani and della Porta, 2011, p. 184; see also Koopmans and Statham, 1999) that render populist discourse more or less strategically opportune. This perspective focuses on the fit of RRPs extreme ideological position with the wider political culture of a society, that determines 'which ideas are considered "sensible", which constructions of reality are seen as "realistic", and which claims are held as "legitimate" within a certain polity at a specific time' (Koopmans and Statham, 1999, p. 228). This means that RRPs strategic communication will partly reflect the nationally-specific acceptance of radical right positions and populist rhetoric as a legitimate part of public discourse. A favourable cultural-discursive opportunity structure could manifest empirically in various ways. On the demand side, higher mass opinion polarization can be expected to incentivize populist communication by RRPs (De Bruycker and Rooduijn, 2021). On the supply side, the strategic choices of other parties and media actors influence the salience and ownership of issues favourable to RRPs and populist communication; over time this interplay of strategic choices shapes the degree to which RRPs themselves are either dismissed and marginalized within a political system, or else accommodated and legitimated (Golder, 2016, pp. 486–8). In the following, we therefore ask the open question how parties' patterns of anti-elitism align with specificities in their cultural-discursive opportunity structure when interpreting our results.

IV. Study Design and Data

The analysis includes RRPs from six European countries: Austria's Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ); France's Rassemblement National (RN); Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD); Italy's Lega; Poland's Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS); and Sweden's Sweden Democrats (SD).

We triangulated information from the Manifesto Project, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey and the European Social Survey to select parties that are positioned on the radical right in their respective country and have achieved some electoral success in previous national elections.[4] The sample includes RRPs that vary regarding their structural position either in the center or the periphery of their national political system – that is, comparing parties in governmental and in oppositional roles. SD and AfD represent younger opposition parties which are rather shunned by the majority of parties and public discourse, the SD due to their roots in the white national movement and AfD due to the country's nationalist past (Arzheimer, 2015; Strömbäck et al., 2017). RN established itself throughout the 1980s as a relevant political force in France (Ivaldi, 2019). The FPÖ, PiS, and Lega are three government parties. PiS holds the strongest power position with 45 per cent of votes in the EP election 2019 while FPÖ was in 2019 junior partner in a governing coalition. PiS transformed more recently from a conservative party to a more radical and populist right party in the wake of the so-called 'refugee crisis' (Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski, 2018). FPÖ has a

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[4]Data from the Manifesto Project (https://manifestoproject.wzb.eu/), the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (https://www.chesdata.eu/) and the European Social Survey (https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/) have been used to triangulate party's positions based on electoral manifestos, expert assessments and political orientations of parties' voters. Weighting the country means by the fraction of seats in national parliaments allowed us, in cases of multiple far-right parties in a country, to select the most relevant party based on political power and popular support.

long tradition known for its strong populist communication style and its far-right ideology advocating ethnic nationalism and strong anti-immigration policies (Rydgren, 2017).

The Lega, founded in 1991 as a then regionalist party, radicalized after 9/11 (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018) and redefined its ideological position with a focus on nationalism, Euroscepticism and immigration. Thus, we include RRPs that diverge in their structural position and their cultural-discursive opportunities, the strength and endurance of far-right ideological positions and populist communication styles in particular, and how they resonate in broader society.

Our design includes the parties' communication on their official websites as well as on Facebook. Political parties' use of websites is a central and well-established electoral tool, encompassing both longstanding features of 'Web 1.0' such as providing information about candidate positions as well as more interactive features around supporter mobilization (Vergeer *et al.*, 2013). Facebook, meanwhile, is the top social media and messaging platform in the countries we analyse. In each country, at least 50 per cent of the total population uses Facebook (Newman *et al.*, 2019). Besides, social media and networking platforms such as Facebook have been shown to be essential communication venues for political actors on the extremes who are sometimes less represented or even shunned in mainstream media coverage (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014).

Parties' communication on their own *official websites* as well as on *Facebook* thus serves as an ideal access point to their strategic communication. For the websites, we collected all articles posted on the official site of a party. For Facebook, our data stem from the *official party account* on Facebook as well as the account of the *top candidate* (front runner) of the party for the European elections.

The study rests on all official articles on the parties' websites and the official posts of the Facebook account holders in the period from the beginning of January to the end of May 2019 prior and around the EU election. We consider every act of communication as strategic and therefore relevant, irrespective of the more concrete topics or subjects addressed. The website data have been collected from the official websites of each party. Using the functionality of the R package 'rvest' (Wickham, 2016) we stored all news stories published on these websites in the time frame of our analysis. The Facebook data have been collected using Netvizz (Rieder, 2013), an API that allowed us to retrieve data from publicly available profiles. Since the front runner of the Sweden Democrats for the EP Election, Kristina Winberg, did not allow access to her account, we included the account of Jimmie Åkesson, one of the most influential politicians of the Sweden Democrats. In total, our analysis is based on a corpus of 13,146 documents. For analysing *specific* elite references and related anti-elitism, we draw a random sample of 1,150 documents, reflecting a minimum sample size of 140 documents from each country, while expanding samples on a country-by-country basis to account for the distribution of entities and establish more robust test samples. Those 1,150 documents were manually annotated according to the procedure as described in detail below. All 13,146 documents have been considered for the computational approach of measuring *general* elite references and the subsequent manual annotation of related anti-elitism.

V. Methods

As outlined in the theoretical section of this study, we operationalize two different forms of anti-elitism: *specific* anti-elitism and *general* anti-elitism. We describe our methods for detecting instances of each of these forms of anti-elitism below.

Stage 1: Identifying Specific Anti-elitism Using Structured Annotation

In order to identify specific anti-elitism, this study implemented a structured annotation approach using the browser-based software BRAT which enabled coders to annotate labels against individual words in our corpus documents.[5] The coding was based on a standardized codebook (see online supplement), which defined the identification criteria for specific elite references and the following variables attached to each elite. 'Sector' recorded the actor's affiliation to different societal sectors such as politics, the media, business, law and culture/academia (based on the categories in Rooduijn, 2014). Meanwhile, 'Scope' recorded the scope of the elite's influence, contrasting national elites in the speaker's home country versus national elites in other countries and elites active at the transnational level (such as the EU).

In terms of the anti-elitism directed toward the referenced elite, we used the framework and codebook developed by Ernst *et al*. (2019a) to capture the presence of anti-elitist discrediting, blaming and detaching; if any of these indicators were present, then we categorized the reference as anti-elitist. Different coder teams with language proficiency and knowledge in the country context of our case studies, which had been trained extensively in several rounds, performed the coding. A key challenge for coder training was differentiating between anti-elitism as operationalized by Ernst *et al*., and the routine critique that forms part of any democratic election. We achieved reliability after directing coders to label a reference as 'anti-elitist' when a harsh critique was directed at the inherent qualities of an elite actor rather than towards a policy. To measure the reliability of retrieving elite references from the unstructured text we used F1 scores, designating one coder's results as the 'true' labels.[6] All countries showed F1 scores above 0.80, showing a strong operationalization of the concept of elite actors.

To measure the reliability of coded variables attached to each elite reference, we used Cohen's kappa in order to account for the possibility of chance agreement and were able to achieve kappa scores above 0.80 for all variables (except for one score of 0.78 in the Austrian data for the Elite – Sector variable). We were not able to formally test reliability in the Italian data, since as the results section reports the number of anti-elitist references was too low to statistically test. However, the bilingual coder team analysing the Italian data had already established inter-annotator reliability when analysing the French data, so we have confidence in the reliability of the data for this final country case. Unfortunately, a lack of shared language across all coder teams and datasets prevented a more comprehensive and formal cross-national reliability test, so cross-national consistency was primarily achieved through coder training and feedback being delivered by the same researcher.

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[5] https://brat.nlplab.org/

[6] F1 scores are the harmonic mean of precision and recall – this achieves a balance between making accurate predictions (precision) and retrieving all correct matches in the text (recall). Where Cohen's kappa and similar scores are effective in measuring reliability when coding variables attached to a predetermined sample of observations, F1 scores are therefore useful in measuring reliability when classifying an unknown number of observations within a given text.

Stage 2: Identifying General Anti-elitism Using a Dictionary Search

The above method could not be applied to general anti-elitism in exactly the same way, primarily because general anti-elitism occurred much more sparsely in the unstructured text, making manual annotation of a large enough sample corpus resource intensive. For this reason, we opted for a dictionary keyword search approach to initially retrieve a high-recall, low-precision sample of general anti-elitism which could be manually reviewed. We compiled these dictionaries in several stages. We started with an aggregated list of all general elite references which had been annotated by coders during the training and reliability testing rounds. We reviewed this candidate list and excluded terms which were not related to anti-elitism (for example 'the politicians' which despite being a general elite reference did not in itself communicate anti-elitism). Finally, we designated any term which occurred more than 5 times in its country corpus as a 'key term', and tested cross-translations in all other countries as an additional precaution against cross-national differences between coder teams in the initial annotations which generated seed terms. We then ran these keywords across the whole corpus, which resulted in our low-precision sample of 667 potential general elite references. Those terms which occurred more than once, have been coded manually to confirm whether the individual references did in fact contain anti-elitism. These matches were double-coded with high rates of inter-annotator agreement across all coder teams (kappa > 0.8), resulting in a final set of 361 confirmed general anti-elitist references (full list of dictionary terms across the countries is listed in Table 2 in the Online Appendix).

VI. Results

Salience of Anti-elitism

The first overview of our results takes the document as the unit of analysis to provide a summary of the *salience* of anti-elitism across our different country datasets. In Table 1

Table 1: Distribution of Anti-elitism

Country	Corpus total	Manually coded sample	General anti-elitism (references in corpus)	Proportion of posts with general anti-elitism (%)	Specific anti-elitism (references in sample)	Proportion of posts with specific anti-elitism (%)
Austria – FPÖ	1539	140	84	4.29	129	32.14
France – RN	1907	190	92	3.51	62	14.74
Germany – AfD	958	200	155	11.69	294	45.00
Italy – Lega	6915	160	2	0.03	4	1.88
Poland – PiS	1114	220	14	1.08	50	14.09
Sweden – SD	713	240	14	1.40	98	21.67
Government parties*	2091	420	46	1.91	165	16.19
Opposition parties*	2091	420	168	6.03	325	28.10

*Stratified sample across three countries.

below we report on the frequency of documents containing *specific* anti-elitism in our coded sample, as well as *general* anti-elitism across our corpus.

There are several conclusions which can be drawn from Table 1. Firstly, we can compare between types of anti-elitism, to observe that specific anti-elitism appears to be consistently more salient in party communications than general anti-elitism. Despite the prominence of the discursive opposition between the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' for populist parties, in our datasets these parties more frequently communicated anti-elitism through critiques of materially powerful individuals and organizations. In part this may reflect the specific dynamics of the election period, which naturally creates incentives for parties' political communications to strongly differentiate between alternative candidates. It is also necessary to acknowledge that this could reflect differences in the measurement approaches for specific and general anti-elitism, so these differences must be interpreted with caution. It is nevertheless important to note that this kind of specific anti-elitism is less associated with a specifically populist mode of communication, and indeed non-populist parties could be expected to also engage in harsh discrediting of their political opponents at times. Precisely for this reason, we draw attention to the fact that the RRPs in our study perhaps unexpectedly engage more in this specific type of anti-elitism, as opposed to general anti-elitism which presents a more diffuse, radical and distinctively populist critique.

Secondly, we can compare between different countries to understand the overall salience of anti-elitism in their communication. Some caution needs to be exercised with these cross-country comparisons, particularly regarding specific anti-elitism: different languages were annotated by different coder teams, who had to take into local cultural and linguistic context when judging whether a critique was anti-elitist. Nevertheless, our data provides a basis for comparing governing and opposition parties in terms of their use of different types of anti-elitism. For each document, we computed specific and general anti-elitism as binary variables, where 1 indicates the presence of an anti-elitist reference in the text. We computed these values for specific anti-elitism in our coded sample documents, and general anti-elitism across the whole corpus. In order to then be able to compare government and opposition parties while maintaining equal weighting between countries, we took a stratified sample of documents, using the minimum country-level n across all 6 cases (140 for the coded sample, and 697 for the whole corpus). In these stratified samples, there was a significant relationship between governing position and both types of anti-elitism. Opposition party posts in our coded sample were more likely to contain specific anti-elitism than government party posts $\chi^2(1, N = 840) = 16.58$, $p < 0.001$, and the same relationship held for general anti-elitism across the whole corpus $\chi^2(1, N = 4,182) = 45.32$, $p < 0.001$). Accordingly, we find support for our first hypothesis that opposition parties engage in more anti-elitism than government parties, although we can also observe significant variation between individual countries who share a structural governing position.

Although we find some differences between anti-elitism salience in government and opposition parties this needs to be paired with individual attention to specific strategies and contexts. For example, Lega's posts contained almost no anti-elitism at all, which contradicts earlier research finding a high salience of anti-elitist populism in Salvini's and the Lega's routine online communication outside of electoral events in 2015 (Bobba, 2019). We argue that this difference might result from the specific context of

the EP election, in which Lega's governing position goes along with a communication strategy focused on short, promotional posts linking to candidate appearances in other media outlets and offline events. Thus, our findings rather reflect the ongoing campaigning and leadership style of Salvini particular to its structural position at that time.

Poland's PiS, on the other hand, reflects less this kind of divergent use of digital communications, and rather an underlying lower use of anti-elitism as a strategic communication style. This may in part reflect their strong governing position within their national political system and their more recent transition from a conservative to a more populist right party (Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski, 2018; Stanley and Czesnik, 2019).

The other country which deviates somewhat from the expectations of our first hypothesis is Austria's FPÖ, which also occupies a governing position nationally and yet nevertheless exhibits reasonably high salience for both specific and general anti-elitism. We can attribute this specific communication style to the FPÖ's long and increasingly intense 'populist history' (Heinisch, 2008; Bernhard and Kriesi, 2019). In addition, FPÖ operates in a discursive context in which right-wing views are an accepted part of public discourse and in which the mass media have been described as providing favourable contexts for right-wing actors and positions due to a market-focused and populist newsroom logic that helps right-wing and populist actors such as the FPÖ to get attention (Plasser and Ulram, 2003).

We also highlight the Austrian case to demonstrate the qualitative difference between discourses of general anti-elitism, as demonstrated by which terms comprise the respective country dictionaries. Comparing Austria and Germany as the two countries in our study which share a common language, we nevertheless observe dictionary terms which are somewhat less intense used by the FPÖ (for example 'Konzerne' or industrial groups), compared with the AfD (for example 'Herrscherklasse' or ruling class). We argue that the quantitative measure of overall salience can be usefully complemented by a qualitative review of the central anti-elitist terms to provide a more nuanced comparison of anti-elitism between different countries.

Targets of Specific Anti-elitism

Moving away from the above document-level analysis, we can take the anti-elitist reference itself as the unit of analysis to provide a more detailed picture of which kinds of elites attract anti-elitism across the different countries in our study. In the following section we report on variables attached to specific elite references, and so the number of data points across countries reflects the different salience summarized in Table 1: FPÖ = 129, RN = 61, AfD = 294, PiS = 50, and SD = 98. We have excluded Italy's Lega from these visualizations given their extremely low salience described above.

Firstly in terms of the sector of specific elites, anti-elitism was concentrated almost exclusively in the political sector (over 90 per cent of anti-elitist references across all parties – full figures available in the Online Appendix). While media is the next most prominent sector targeted by anti-elitism, these references still make up less than 5 per cent of anti-elitist references for all parties. In the context of an election we can expect that political actors will be generally more salient in political communication, as candidates attempt to differentiate themselves from their competitors. It is nevertheless worth

Figure 1: Scope of specific anti-elitism, by countries, in per cent. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
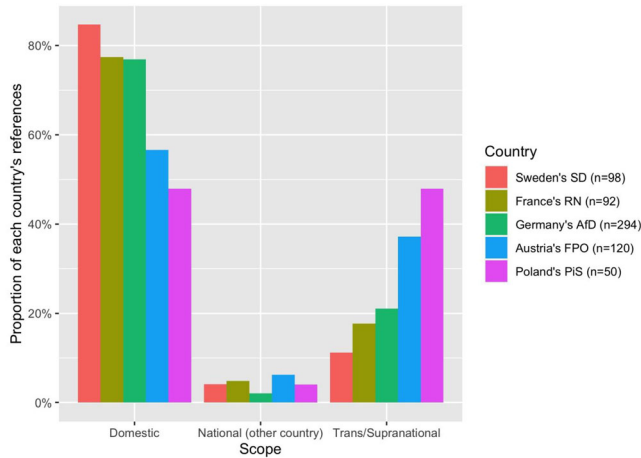
identifying the mismatch between the diverse sectoral composition of individuals who can be considered as 'elite' according to positional elite studies, and the narrower range of those targeted with anti-elitism by RRPs online. The strength of focus on the political sector across all countries means that we do not find support for Hypothesis 2; although we expected governing parties to target the political sector more than opposition parties, we found that the percentage of each targeted sector did not differ by the governing position of the party, $\chi^2(4, N = 636) = 7.2$, $p = 0.12$.

In Figure 1 we move to another key variable of elite actors, by examining the scope of those targeted by anti-elitism. In particular this involves a choice between the domestic national arena (such as RN targeting Macron as the incumbent national leader) and the transnational arena (such as PiS targeting the European Union or pro-EU EP candidates). In Figure 1 we can see that in fact the distribution of national and transnational targets varies between countries in line with our expectations about the role of government position. This relationship between governing position is significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 636) = 36.16$, $p < 0.001$, and so provides support for our Hypothesis 3. This means that we can observe that the three parties more likely to target the national arena all occupy opposition roles in their national political systems: Sweden's SD, Germany's AfD and France's RN. In contrast, the two parties more likely to target the transnational arena occupy government roles: Poland's PiS and Austria's FPÖ. Even if in a powerful position themselves, RRPs instrumentalize the multilevel system of European governance by redirecting their anti-elitism to the European level. Thus, while the oppositional parties use the context of the European election to contest the national government performance, governing parties are more likely to shift the blame and target entities beyond the immediate national political environment.

Conclusion

This study compared the online communications of six RRPs in the 2019 European Parliament elections, in order to provide a more fine-grained analysis of the dynamics of anti-

elitism within these parties' communication. We offer a conceptualization and operationalization of anti-elitism which differentiates between *specific* anti-elitism against materially powerful individuals and organizations, and *general* anti-elitism directed towards discursive constructs with ambiguous material referents. In doing so, we identify three patterns: stratification, driven by the governing or opposition position of parties within their respective national contexts; convergence, primarily related to the communicative context of the EP election; and divergence, according to the specificities of cultural-discursive contexts.

Looking firstly at the dynamics of stratification which relate to our hypotheses, we do find that parties' anti-elitism relates in part to their position within national power structures. In particular, not only do opposition parties generally display more anti-elitism in both its specific and general forms (Hypothesis 1), they are also consistently more likely to target national rather than transnational-level elites (Hypothesis 3). For example, we observe the AfD heavily targeting Angela Merkel, and RN likewise targeting Emmanuel Macron, as well as neologisms expressing general anti-elitism related to each leader – that is, 'Merkelists' (die Merkelisten) and 'Macronistas' (les Macronistes). We can observe, then, how anti-elitism is not simply a static, monolithic discourse which is 'applied' in particular country contexts but responds and adapts to nodes of concentrated material power: Merkel and Macron as powerful leaders at both a national and EU level attract particular antagonism, whereas Sweden's SD eschews their weaker national leader Stefan Löfven in favour of established governing parties. In contrast, the governing parties in our study direct their anti-elitism toward the EU level, with Poland's PiS and Austria's FPÖ the most strongly transnational in their anti-elitism, repeatedly singling out EU elites and EP candidates. This clearly suits the strategic context for parties' respective structural positions: whereas opposition parties deprioritize the 'second-order' EP election in favour of targeting incumbent elites at the national level, governing parties must be somewhat more selective in differentiating between positive self-assessments of those holding elite positions at a national level and negative assessments of those at a European level. Our findings suggest that anti-elitism operates as a flexible overarching communication style which enables this strategic switching between different scopes according to different needs.

Looking next at dynamics of convergence, we find that all parties direct their antagonism more frequently at specific rather than general elite targets, and consistently focus their specific anti-elitism toward political actors rather than other sectors like the economy or media (leading us to reject our Hypothesis 2). We interpret these findings to demonstrate the impact of the EP election in creating a shared transnational communicative context which focused parties' communications on mobilizing anti-elitism in their strategy around specific electoral contests. We could expect that the imperative to compete for positional elite influence would therefore shape a kind of anti-elitism which was both material and political in nature.

Finally, we can observe divergence at the national level which demonstrates the need for attention to specific cultural-discursive contexts. For example, despite Sweden's SD expressing strong critiques against specific elites, there is remarkably low general anti-elitism in their posts: as one illustration, they do not even once reference 'the elite' across the entire election campaign period. We interpret this relative lack of general anti-elitism in part as a reflection of the 'opinion corridor' (Oscarsson, 2013) which somewhat restricts how extreme publicly

expressed views in Sweden tend to be. In contrast, the political discourse of countries like France and Germany appears to accommodate a much wider and more conflictual range of political positions, which can therefore support more strongly expressed and generalized anti-elitism. In addition to these cultural-discursive factors, the case of Italy's Lega also shows how individual party actors can bring distinctive communication styles to online media: alone out of all the countries, Lega posts appeared to be short, self-promotional, and lacking in complex argumentation including anti-elitism.

Our study does face several limitations which must be noted alongside our findings. Our time period only collected data around the EP election campaign itself, meaning our interpretation of the impact of the election context must remain tentative. Future research could, however, usefully compare election and non-election time periods to test whether EP elections are in fact significantly related to both the quality of anti-elitism (that is, specific and political) as well as its degree of transnational convergence. Our sample of party organizations was also restricted to RRPs, making it difficult to test the relationship between ideology and anti-elitism. A future study might also usefully examine how different kinds of specific and general anti-elitism are distributed among left-wing populist and non-populist parties, which would also offer an avenue to clarify the relationship between specific anti-elitism and populism. Finally, the different methods used for measuring specific and general anti-elitism make direct comparisons between the two difficult; accordingly none of our three hypotheses involve this kind of explicit comparison, and instead we only report in our descriptive overview of findings that specific anti-elitism appears to be much more frequent than general anti-elitism.

In line with other studies, our findings reveal that anti-elitism is 'a matter of degree' (Bernhard and Kriesi, 2019, p. 1204) and that the forms of anti-elitism vary greatly. Attention to the different form of anti-elitism expressed by RRPs can uncover patterns which are either shared across countries (such as an apparent focus in our study on specific rather than general elites) or which vary according to national context (such as a focus on either the national or the European scope). These patterns have consequences for specific democratic contests, as some elite actors become the target for negative attacks while others escape notice. These variations also have potentially broader consequences for the impact of populist communication on democratic institutions and processes. For example, if we were to observe an election-driven focus on specific rather than diffuse anti-elitism as suggested in our study then this could even be viewed in positive terms, since resulting citizen antipathy would be more localized and channeled toward expression through the democratic process of the election itself. At the same time, the flexibility of anti-elitism in accommodating shifts between the national and European scope depending on structural and cultural-discursive context suggests its longevity as a political strategy for RRPs into the future.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Data S1. Supporting Information