

# Deepening Euroscepticism

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The effects of the 2005 referendum in France and the Netherlands  
on the rise of far-left Eurosceptic discourse



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## Introduction

In the last few years, radical parties, both at the far-right and the far-left of the political spectrum, have been quite successful. This has had a considerable impact on national, European and international politics alike, with radical leaders coming into power in countries such as Italy, Hungary, or Brazil. This phenomenon has been largely documented and analysed in the literature, although most observers focused on the rise of far-right parties. However, while far-left parties have been less noticeable in most parts of the world, they have been on the rise as well, with parties such as *Podemos* in Spain or *Syriza* in Greece for example. Since most radical parties tend to hold Eurosceptic views, politics in the European Union (EU) have been particularly affected by this rise, with events such as Brexit, and the 2014 European Parliament elections.

Today, Euroscepticism is a major trend in virtually all Member States, and Eurosceptic parties have gained significant shares of the vote. They have not only scored points nationally, but also in European Parliament elections, where they now represent almost 30% of all MEPs.<sup>1</sup> They managed to capitalize on the growing resentment against the EU among the public, something that mainstream parties are more than reluctant to bring up (Ray, 2007 ; Ivaldi, 2006). Parties such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Danish People's Party, or the Freedom's Party in Austria have scored important electoral victories both nationally and in the last European Parliament elections in 2014. On the side of the far-left parties, they have also gained significant ground by holding Eurosceptic positions, with the parties mentioned above especially, but also with far-left parties gaining momentum in parliamentary elections, such as communist parties in Eastern Europe especially, or the Scottish Socialist Party for example (March, 2011).

Several events have been pointed at for having caused a rise in Euroscepticism in the general population as well, or for having been a result of it. The Brexit referendum, the 2014 elections, but also the success of radical parties in national politics across the EU are a few examples of instances where Euroscepticism could be practically observed. The debates around enlargement, the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2015 migration crisis have also been singled out to explain the growing anti-EU sentiment across Member

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<sup>1</sup> While this is an important number, two-thirds of the seats were still won by pro-EU parties, and Eurosceptic parties did not achieve the breakthrough polls had predicted (Charlemagne, 2014). Their success was also limited in the 2019 European elections.

States. On top of this, some events have served to increase the salience of EU affairs in national politics and foster a Eurosceptic sentiment in Member States, such as the Maastricht treaty referendums in 1992.<sup>2</sup> Another event which can be named here is the 2005 referendum on the ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE) in France and the Netherlands, where ratification was rejected on May 29<sup>th</sup> and June 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 respectively. On top of derailing the whole project of a common constitution for the European Union and creating a colossal crisis in Brussels, this outcome and the whole campaign that came before it had a considerable impact on national politics in both France and the Netherlands. Since most of the mainstream parties in both countries campaigned for the Yes, the victory of the No also meant the victory of marginal and radical parties. This event gave them more political momentum than they enjoyed before, and gave more salience to the EU, and Euroscepticism, as an issue in national politics. This is the event we will be focusing on in this thesis.

In France and the Netherlands, Euroscepticism has won a lot of ground in the last decade. Far-right parties especially, such as the *Rassemblement National* (RN)<sup>3</sup> and the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV), have adopted Eurosceptic ideas as part of their ideology and taken advantage of events such as the Eurozone or the migration crises to gain political momentum. Although far-right parties seem to be the biggest winners (cf. Marine Le Pen's results in the 2017 presidential results, the PVV's results in the 2017 general elections), far-left parties have also scored great victories in the national arena, especially in recent years. Indeed, parties such as *La France Insoumise* in France (LFI), or the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) in the Netherlands have become major players in both of their national political scenes. But the argument could be made that they gained a lot of their momentum during the 2005 referendum campaign. Indeed, while LFI was created long after the referendum, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the party's leader, became a household name thanks to his split from the Socialist Party (PS) following this opposition to the party's position on the referendum, and parties such as the communist party capitalized on the victory of the "no" for a long time after 2005. Jan Marijnissen and Harry van Bommel from the SP also saw their popularity rise, and the party scored

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<sup>2</sup> The 1992 referendum in France about the Maastricht Treaty was won very narrowly by president François Mitterrand, with barely 51% of people voting in favor of ratifying it.

<sup>3</sup> Previously called the Front National (FN)

significant electoral gains directly after the referendum and remains to this day one of the biggest left-wing party in the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup>

Several questions then arise regarding the influence of the 2005 referendum campaign on these parties : did it make them more Eurosceptic, and if yes, is this a reason for their success? The research question we will try and answer here is then as follows : to what extent did the 2005 referendum influence the rise of Euroscepticism in far-left parties in France and the Netherlands?

As stated before, the 2005 referendum outcome was a ground-breaking event and came as a shock to both European and national elites. It had deep repercussions of course on the European level, but also on the national one, and was one of the first expressions of the growing Eurosceptic feeling among the general population. It is then crucial to understand all the consequences of this vote, since they can help us understand current political events and trends. If this thesis shows that it did have a non-negligible impact on the rise of major political actors, it would mean the ramifications of this events are still growing until today. It would also show that while some claim that the financial crisis of 2008 was a turning point in the rise of Euroscepticism in party politics, this growing resentment against the EU was present before this, and was being used by political parties to score electoral gains (Brack and Startin, 2015). On top of this, the Netherlands and France are not particularly Eurosceptic countries, and although they are the only ones for which the 2005 referendum was so significant, studying its effects can give us an idea of the impact of such referendums on Euroscepticism in other Member States as well, such as Ireland and Denmark, who have both seen their fair shares of EU-related referendums. Finally, it is highly relevant and important today to focus on the rise of the far-left, rather than on the far-right. Indeed, other than the fact that most academic work on the subject focus on right-wing parties, the far-left has gained incredible momentum in Europe, often taking over traditional left parties, and sometimes seems more accepted by the general public and the media than the far-right. This is clearly the case for the LFI, which enjoys a pretty good reputation among the general public in France, unlike the RN, which is usually portrayed as a xenophobic movement. The far-left should not be

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<sup>4</sup> Although it has seen a decline in its popularity in the 2010s, and was the biggest loser of the last 2019 provincial elections, and it lost all of its seats in the 2019 European elections.

underestimated in terms of its reach and influence on the national, and on the European level, it is or seems to be set to become a major actor at both levels.

In this thesis, we will try and prove or disprove three hypothesis, which are explained further below : (1) that the 2005 referendum led to a rise in Euroscepticism in far-left parties, (2) that this constituted a conscious effort from leaders of these parties to gain more electoral support, and (3) that this strategy was in fact successful, and that it led to electoral gains for these parties.

## **Literature review**

The academic literature is of great help on the topics of radical parties (both left and right), Euroscepticism and European referendums, which are three fields this thesis hopes to contribute to. Indeed, many scholars have studied radical parties, their characteristics, their ideologies, and their rise. These are of great interest for this thesis, as it seeks to offer a new explanation in the rise of radical left parties (the 2005 TCE referendum), but must first determine what kind of movement is being dealt with here, and what possible alternative explanations could be found for their success. First of all, the Oxford Dictionary defines a radical party as a party “advocating or based on thorough or complete political or social change” (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). As the word alludes to, a radical party is one that advocates deep and far-reaching reforms in different areas, and is located on the fringes of the political spectrum, either to the right or the left. Mudde (2007) claims radical right parties (RRPs) have three main features : nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. On the other hand, March and Mudde (2005) define radical left parties (RLPs) as being parties who reject the capitalist system, who primarily advocate for a new set of collective economic and social rights, and who are internationalist, in that they believe in the global root of local socio-economic problems (although they favour national solutions to said problems). In line with these definitions, RRPs tend to run their platforms on issues of immigration and security, while RLPs while focus more on social rights and anti-globalization sentiments. On top of this, both extremes tend to adopt Eurosceptic position far more than mainstream parties (van Elsas and van der Brug, 2015).

These party families have seen a spectacular increase in their electoral support since the end of the 1990s, in particular the radical right, with parties participating in

government in several European countries. Here, our focus will be on the radical left, which has also scored significant gains in the past two decades. Different reasons have been given for this rise, the main ones being economic distress, the permissiveness of the electoral system, other parties' competition, past success, and Euroscepticism and anti-globalization sentiments in the general population (March, 2011 ; March and Rommeskirchen, 2015). This last element will be of particular interest to us in trying to figure out what the effects of the 2005 referendum were, as some have argued that the "no" votes both in France and in the Netherlands were the expressions of the Eurosceptic sentiment present in the public (Ivaldi, 2006). Also interesting is the fact that past success in parliamentary elections seems to be a determining factor in RLPs' success. This is logical, as parties with seats in parliament get more visibility and resources, and also gain credibility in the eyes of the general population. This will definitely be something to keep in mind when studying the SP, who gained their first seats in Parliament in 1994, and then started gaining significant support in the beginning of the 2000s. However, what this does not tell us, and what will be studied here, are the effects of success in other types of campaigns and elections, such as referendums. While they do not give RLPs or RRP's most of the advantages which come with having parliamentary seats, they do offer them a large platform and a lot of visibility, and we expect that the success of marginal parties in the 2005 referendum especially had some effect on their electoral success, or at least on their Eurosceptic rhetoric.

Before going further, it is essential that we properly define Euroscepticism. For the purpose of this study, we will rely on Taggart and Szczerbiak's (1998, 2002) definition, with the distinction between « hard » and « soft » Euroscepticism. In their article, hard Euroscepticism is defined as being a « principled opposition to the EU and European integration » (2002, p. 4), characterized by a complete opposition to one's country's membership to the EU or the European project in general. Soft Euroscepticism is not a principled opposition to European integration, but an opposition to specific policies pursued by the Union. Using this distinction, Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002) then classify European political parties and divide them between soft and hard Eurosceptic parties. In their table, both the SP and non-communist far-left parties of the time in France are classified as soft Eurosceptic parties, since they do not completely oppose membership to the EU, but simply the organization's neoliberal economic policies (Usherwood and Startin, 2013). Still today, although they advocate for complete reform

of the EU, they do not actively ask for an end of their countries' memberships, which means they still fit this category (Milner, 2004 ; Socialistische Partij, 2014 ; *La France Insoumise*, 2017). To add to this classification, Usherwood and Startin (2013) identify four categories of Eurosceptic parties : single-issue parties that just oppose European integration in general ; radical right parties ; far-left parties ; and soft Eurosceptic mainstream parties. They explain that while far-right parties oppose the EU on issues of immigration and an *Euromondialiste* discourse, far-left parties largely oppose the EU based on its economic policies and the neo-liberal path it is going down on. However, it is also interesting to note that both party families have an element in common when it comes to their anti-EU attitude : they both seem to have adopted a nationalist discourse (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012). What comes out of this literature is that while RLPs do not categorically oppose European cooperation, they are against the EU's neoliberal economic policies, and that, while they were described by March and Mudde (2005) as being internationalists in their analysis, they use a nationalist discourse when discussing European integration. They then see the root of many problems as being global, but prefer national solutions to them. While these definitions are quite broad and not very specific, it is not the purpose of this thesis to try and find a definition for far-left Euroscepticism, but rather to figure out the effects of the 2005 referendums. In this context, these distinctions will simply be used to give more information as to the nature of far-left Euroscepticism.

There had previously been a general consensus that Euroscepticism is almost exclusively present in marginal parties (van Elsas et al, 2016 ; de Vries and Edwards, 2009). However, in recent years, it seems this phenomenon is spreading even to mainstream parties (Brack and Startin, 2015), although this is still characterized by very soft Euroscepticism, and even simply "Eurocriticism" in some instances. Eurosceptic sentiments have been on the rise among the general population since the Maastricht treaty referendums of 1992 at least (Harkhverdian et al., 2013), and some scholars have written on the fact that mainstream parties still did not reflect them in their platforms, and avoided bringing EU issues into national political debates (Ray, 2007 ; Ivaldi, 2006). This created a gap between mainstream parties and the citizens, which would then be left to be filled by marginal parties situated on both ends of the political spectrum. This is made evident by van Elsas and ven der Brug (2015), who show the U-shaped relation between party positions and Euroscepticism, meaning that while radical parties on both sides adopt Eurosceptic positions, centre and mainstream parties



remain largely Europhiles. Startin and Krouwel (2013) also explain how some marginal parties have used the EU as an issue to get electoral victories and gain followers. Indeed, this distance between the mainstream parties and the citizens create the opportunity for marginal parties to make a certain issue their own and gain more supporters. Doing this increased even more the importance of Euroscepticism in national politics.

The most important element which comes out of the literature is the existence of this gap between the general population and mainstream parties with regards to the EU. Although a vast majority of people do not oppose membership to the EU or the project of European integration, they may be concerned by certain issue areas, such as the Union's liberal economic policies. Three main determinants of public opinion towards the EU are identified in the literature : utilitarian concern, identity, and cue-taking (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). The first theory suggests those people who lose from the Union's liberal economic policies will be more likely to vote against it in elections or referendums (Anderson & Reichert, 1995 ; Gabel & palmer, 1995). As we have seen, this is usually the focus of far-left Eurosceptic parties, who are anti-globalization and anti-modernization. The second focuses more on the idea of national identity and sovereignty, claiming that someone who has a strong national identity will see the Union as a threat to this and be more likely to oppose it as well (Carey, 2002). Far-right Eurosceptic parties tend to play on this concern. The third theory suggests people base their opinions of the EU on national cues, such as national media (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006), national political parties or government performance (Anderson, 1998). These elements are not only relevant for European Parliament elections or EU-related referendums, but they play a role in national elections as well. Indeed, if people do give more and more importance to the EU as an issue in general, this will also show in national elections, where they will vote for the party which best speaks to their fears and concerns. De Vries and Edwards (2009) have shown as well that Euroscepticism among the general population is greatly influenced by cues from national political parties. While right and left-wing extremist parties do not use the same issue areas to criticize the EU, they still manage to politicize the issue and increase the level of Euroscepticism in the public. This is where marginal Eurosceptic parties manage to score points, as we have seen that mainstream parties prefer to avoid the issue altogether (Ivaldi, 2006). It will then be interesting to see to what extent far-left parties in France and the Netherlands used Euroscepticism to gain political momentum nationally and if this strategy actually worked. It will also be interesting to see the relationship between

the economic situation and the rise of far-left Euroscepticism, as we have seen that economic factors can determine public opinion on the EU, and March (2011) has identified unemployment and anti-modernization as being key reasons for the rise of far-left parties.

The last strand of literature which will be of particular interest to us is the one related to European referendums. Historically, they have always been major events for European integration. Whether it be accession referendums in Iceland or Norway, or ratification referendums like in 1992 for the Maastricht treaty, or even the Brexit referendum in 2016, they represent the opportunity to grant more democratic legitimacy to the furthering of integration. However, they are also double-edged sword, since they give the people the possibility to considerably undermine the integration process, as was the case in 2016, but also in 2005. The 2005 TCE referendum was quite exceptional, since two founding members, France and the Netherlands, rejected the ratification of this historic treaty, giving rise to a true existential crisis in the EU. This led to the end of the project of a European Constitution, although most of the content of that treaty was later included in the treaty of Lisbon. But what were the effects of this referendum, and the campaign that went with it, on national politics?

In a study of the referendum in the Netherlands, De Vries (2009) identifies two major impacts it had on national electoral politics : it increased the salience of EU-related issues in national politics, and it increased EU issue voting, meaning that people voted more and more according to their attitude towards the EU. This meant that Euroscepticism, as well as the reverse, emerged as another important determinant of a person's vote. There is also evidence showing that Dutch people have grown more Eurosceptic between 1990 and 2008, which has been partly linked with the 2005 referendum (Lubbers and Jaspers, 2010). As this was the first referendum in modern Dutch history, it constituted a major event in Dutch politics (Nijeboer, 2005), and increased the politicization of EU issues among the political parties and the general public. Since it was such a major event, we expect to have had consequential effects on the way EU issues are being discussed in the Netherlands, and on the way the population viewed the EU.

In France as well, referendums have proved to be significant events, as the impact of the debate over of the Maastricht Treaty was consequential, since the referendum for ratification was won very narrowly (Criddle, 1993). Although some may see it as the

starting point of Euroscepticism, De Vries' (2009) work can lead us to believe the 2005 referendum must have had an impact on the rise of far-left parties and their increasingly Eurosceptic discourse. On top of this, Frank (2002) has argued that Euroscepticism in France was a cyclical phenomenon, and that the effects of 1992 were already started to wear off in 2002. It is then possible that the 2005 referendum might have been the start of another cycle of Euroscepticism across the general public of political parties. Since this referendum also represents an important milestone in the history of European integration, it is interesting to study the full effects it could have had on the national politics of the Member States.

Startin and Krouwel (2013) have also argued that Euroscepticism had been « re-galvanized » following the 2005 referendum in both France and the Netherlands, although they mainly focus on far-right parties. To the authors, this re-galvanization also led to a rise in the electoral favours of far-right parties. This adds again on De Vries' (2009) argument that the salience of European issues has increased after the referendum, although this time showing the level of political parties rather than the general public. They also claim the same phenomenon of “re-galvanization” happened with far-left parties, although they simply mention it, assuming the same model can be applied to far-right and far-left parties (Startin and Krouwel, 2013). This thesis will serve to prove, or disprove, this claim.

Through these different scholars, we can see that EU-related referendums, and the 2005 referendum in particular, have clear effects on national politics : they increase the importance of EU issues on the national scene and in voters' minds, which could lead to them being more Eurosceptical, and seem to encourage marginal parties to adopt Euroscepticism in their platforms. Unfortunately, most of the literature on the subject focuses especially on far-right parties, because of their particularly exceptional success in recent years. Far-left parties have however often used Eurosceptic discourse and have been on the rise as well since 2005. Some of the main figures of both the SP in the Netherlands and the LFI in France are products of the campaign against the TCE, and it is then highly interesting and relevant to study the exact impact of the referendum on their discourse and on their electoral successes.

## Methodology

Given all this existing literature, three hypotheses can be formulated to lay out what we can expect to come out of this study. Firstly, we expect far-left parties to have indeed adopted a more Eurosceptic discourse, and to have made the EU a more central issue in their platforms following the 2005 referendum (H1). The literature did point to the increased importance of EU issues in the national political arena following the referendum (De Vries, 2009), but it would be interesting to see if this led to political parties fully adopting Eurosceptic opinions as part of their official platforms. To prove this, we will conduct a discourse analysis of major leaders of the SP and three French far-left parties. The choice was made to focus solely on the leading figures of the parties so as to avoid having to big of a pool of data, and because it is assumed that the leaders' positions will reflect their parties' positions. For the case of the Netherlands, the analysis will be focused on Jan Marijnissen, the leader of the SP between 1986 and 2008, and Harry van Bommel, the foreign spokesperson and the leader of the 2005 referendum campaign for the SP, and a major figure of the party until his departure in 2017.<sup>5</sup> The case of France is slightly more complicated, as far-left parties were particularly divided and unstable throughout the time period which we will study here. Indeed, there was not only one major far-left party, but three main ones : the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF), the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR), and *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO). However, it would be wrong to assume that this instability is a sign of weak support for the far-left, as their ideas were wide-spread in the population and it consistently managed to get a group in the *Assemblée Nationale* at every parliamentary election for decades. We will here also focus on the main far-left figures in the French political landscape. The discourse analysis will then primarily focus on Robert Hue and Marie-George Buffet of the PCF, Arlette Laguiller for LO, and Olivier Besancenot for LCR.

Following the literature exposed above, all four of these parties can be classified as soft and far-left Eurosceptic parties. Indeed, none of them advocate for a complete reversal of their country's membership to the EU, although they disagree with the direction of European integration under the system of the Union. On top of this, they

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<sup>5</sup> Van Bommel left the SP at the end of 2017, after almost 40 years of membership to the party, mentioning some disagreements over the direction of the party (de Volkskrant, 2018).

are also strongly anti-capitalist and anti-globalization, and heavily criticize the neoliberal character of the EU and of the political establishment. A lexicon can then be compiled with the terms we expect to be part of far-left parties' Eurosceptic discourse. This lexicon will be used in our qualitative analysis to try and see how often Dutch and French far-left parties speak about Europe before and after the 2005 referendum, and if there is a shift on their rhetoric after the referendum.

In this discourse analysis, we will study these parties' platforms in campaign times both before and after the 2005 referendums, to see if the EU is a more prominent element in their rhetoric after the rejection of the Constitutional treaty. On top of looking at their official political platforms, we will go through major TV interviews, declarations, speeches, and opinion pieces. This should allow us to verify how frequently they bring up European issues, and compare their frequency before and after the 2005 campaign. Basing ourselves on Frank's (2002) claim that the effects of Maastricht were already going down in 2002, and many scholars' claim that the 2008 crisis had a major effect on Euroscepticism, we will limit the timeline of this thesis between 2002 and 2008, so as to have data from before and after the 2005 referendum, but also to ensure that the effects of both Maastricht and the financial crisis are limited and do not cloud our data.

Secondly, we expect this rise in Euroscepticism to have been part of a conscious effort by party leadership to fill in the gap left by mainstream parties and thus gain electoral support (H2). To verify this, we will rely on the same discourse analysis as for the first hypothesis, but this time examining if EU issues are being purposefully brought up by far-left parties and when arguing on themes where they did not usually bring them up before. For instance, such themes as migration or trade could be instances where they make links with the EU that they did not make before, thus showing they purposefully included a new dimension in their rhetoric in an effort to fill in the gap left by mainstream parties and gain more electoral support. We hope to observe this kind of behaviour especially in political debates and interviews, if they willingly decide to bring up the EU or stir the conversation in this direction while debating on national issues.

Lastly, we expect this strategy pursued by far-left parties to have paid off and to have led to a rise in their electoral scores (H3). This will be verified by studying their approval ratings and success rates in elections. While doing this, we will need to be cautious and account for unrelated elements mentioned in the literature which may have

also had an impact on their electoral successes (such as competition, past success, the electoral system, etc. Building on De Vries' (2009) work on the increasing salience of EU issues after the referendum, and Startin and Krouwel's (2013) work, we expect that the use of a more Eurosceptic discourse will have resonated with the population and allowed far-left parties to score electoral victories. We will then study their scores before and after the referendum, to try and see if there is change post-2005. On top of this, we will rely on existing literature and studies to try and explain divergences in success rates if they came to arise.

This topic touches on two highly relevant topics today : Euroscepticism and the rise of marginal parties. In the past decades, Euroscepticism has become a general trend in all Member States, and marginal political parties located on the far ends of the political spectrum have scored important electoral victories, some of them even gaining seats in national governments. Answering the research question and verifying our hypotheses can not only show the significant unintended consequences of the 2005 referendum, but also start explaining the rise of far-left Eurosceptic parties across Europe pre-2008.

## **1. Discourse analysis**

We will then start in this first section by carrying out a discourse analysis of top officials of far-left parties in France and the Netherlands, and try and verify our first two hypotheses (H1 and H2). Through analysing the discourse of party leaders between 2002 and 2008, we will try and determine whether it shifted to be more Eurosceptic after the 2005 referendum, and if this was part of a conscious strategy to score electoral victories in their countries. In France, the core of the study will focus on Arlette Laguiller, the leader of *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO), Robert Hue and Marie-George Buffet, leaders of the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF), and Oliver Besancenot, leader of the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR). For the Netherlands, the study will focus on the SP and two of his main figures of the time : Jan Marijnissen and Harry van Bommel.

In order to best verify the hypotheses laid out above, we will use a qualitative methodology, which will be supported by a lexicon concrete examples. First, a qualitative analysis of all of the politicians' discourses will be carried out, and we will try and extract their evolution and the general trends which can be observed. We will focus especially on how often they talk about Europe, the harshness of their vocabulary

or position, and if they bring up the EU as an issue purposefully. Then, we will dive more deeply into the studied speeches with the help of the lexicon we established of far-left Eurosceptic discourse, to try and see if this kind of vocabulary is used more often and with more strength after 2005. The goal of this exercise will be to bring to light any change in the exact vocabulary used by far-left parties after the referendum. In the end, we hope to have a full picture of the Eurosceptic discourse of far-left parties before and after the referendum, and observe that some changes were made post-2005.

### 1.1. In France

We will first turn to France. Between 2002 and 2008, France saw two presidential and legislative elections (2002 and 2007), and the European elections in 2004, on top of the referendum. It is important to remember this, so we can have an idea of the context in which these different politicians speak. To analyse the far-left in France, we will focus on the PCF, LO and the LCR, each time studying the discourse of their leading figures and main candidates for the elections. We will first analyse the period between 2002 and 2005, and then between 2005 and 2008, so that the differences between the pre- and post-referendum can be observed most clearly.

#### *1.1.1. 2002-2004*

Between 2002 and 2005, Europe as an issue was barely present in national French politics, with the partial exception of the 2004 European Parliament elections campaign and the referendum campaign in 2005. This absence is particularly evident in 2002 and 2003, where discussions really revolved around national politics, and Europe was not that big of a subject, even in the presidential and legislative elections campaigns of 2002.

While it was present in Robert Hue's manifesto for the 2002 presidential elections, the topic of Europe only occupied a minor place, as it was only present in one out of his 25 proposals (Parti Communiste Français, 2002). While elaborating on it, he develops his Eurosceptic views, although his position and language are very mild. He clearly opposes the Stability Pact and the directive opening competition for public services, but he does not attack the nature of the EU, and simply said that it needs to be

reoriented towards more social policies. In his discourse, he seems to convey a very hopeful message that the EU is not lost and simply needs a push to go in a more social direction. He uses words such as “reorient”, “promote” and “develop”<sup>6</sup> in a positive way, and seems to suggest that the EU is not a lost cause and a change in the right direction can still happen (Parti Communiste Français, 2002). In a declaration, Marie-George Buffet also re-affirms that the PCF would “renegotiate European treaties” to build a more social Europe, which shows the party’s lack of support for the current status quo, although she again uses mild language which can only be classified as very soft Euroscepticism (Buffet, 2002b). It is however important to note that their mentions of Europe are generally marginal, and that their discourse and presidential campaign focuses heavily on domestic concerns. The same trends can be observed in 2003, as Buffet only mentions Europe very briefly in her New Year speech, and in her speech at the opening of the National Forum on Public Services – Europe conference, aimed at examining European affairs, her discourse was quite moderate (Buffet, 2003d). She explained that European governments want to carry out neo-liberal policies which the PCF opposes, and that the Constitutional Treaty will make them irreversible, but she does not have particularly harsh words towards the current functioning of the EU. She even encourages participation in EU affairs, and says that it is possible to carry out better policies. In the end, the PCF’s discourse in 2002-2003 is an example of very soft Euroscepticism, although they call for the renegotiation of European treaties, as they do not criticize the character of the EU but the direction some national governments want to take it in. They then encourage participation to try and implement more social policies, which we see by their frequent mention of “social Europe” and “democratic Europe” as goals yet to be attained.

In the case of LO and the LCR with Arlette Laguiller and Olivier Besancenot, Europe is almost completely absent from their discourses in 2002-2003. With the exception of a short declaration on the introduction of the euro in 2002, Laguiller largely ignored the issue of the EU in the meetings she held for her presidential campaign. About the euro, she states that she does not see how this would change the conditions of the workers, but that she was in favour of anything that would bring unity to the continent, and does not stand in opposition with the EU at any point (Laguiller, 2002a). The only thing that shows her Eurosceptic views is her strong opposition to

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<sup>6</sup> All quotes are the author’s translations.



capitalism and globalization, and her criticism that the Union does not even include all the countries on the continent (Laguiller, 2002b). Even when she announced the common LO-LCR list for the European Parliament elections in 2003, her speeches revolved around domestic issues and opposition to large companies and the government. She clearly wants to make the 2004 European Parliament elections a “second-order” national election,<sup>7</sup> as she emphasizes domestic political struggles as reasons to participate in the elections (Laguiller, 2003b). Besancenot also barely ever refers to the EU as a political actor, and instead puts the blame for the liberal policies coming out of the European Parliament on the French national politicians who voted in favour of them (Besancenot, 2002b). He strives to distance himself from other political parties such as the PS, who vote in favour of the “liberalization of public services” in the European Parliament (Besancenot, 2003). In the end, the discourse of the LCR and LO in 2002-2003 largely ignores Europe and the EU, and their Euroscepticism can only be guessed by their very slight criticisms of the EU, and their strong opposition to the capitalist system. They focus largely on national political struggles, and in some instances link them with European issues, but they rarely talk about the EU as a separate matter.

The year 2004 was somewhat special, as it saw both a European Parliament election and the beginning of the campaign for the 2005 referendum. Logically then Europe was way more present in the parties’ discourse than in the two previous years. In the case of Marie-George Buffet, we can observe that in 2004 her discourse gets way harsher with the EU, especially with regards to the Constitutional Treaty and its institutionalization of liberalism. She even stresses the serious situation Europe is in, and that they should fight back on those trying to impose liberal policies on them (Buffet, 2004a). Her discourse and the PCF’s also shift from hopeful to alarmist. While in 2002-2003 they would call for action to guide Europe in the right direction, they now call on their supporters to oppose the market forces and what the EU has become. Instead of their previous stance of wanting to reorient the EU, they stand in clear opposition with the whole organization for the first time, saying “Europe yes, but not this one” (Buffet, 2004b). Buffet then delivers a more Eurosceptic discourse since she criticizes the current nature of the EU. The same thing happened for LO and Arlette

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<sup>7</sup> This term was coined by Reif and Schmitt (1980), and refers to the fact that national, rather than European political struggles are put to the centre-stage by political parties in European elections campaigns, and take precedence over debates on European affairs. This trend was very visible up until the 2019 elections, during which European affairs finally managed to be at the centre of the campaigns.

Laguiller, who talked a lot more about Europe in the context of the European elections. She reaffirms that the party is in favour of everything that would unite the whole continent, but says that the EU is not it, since it is at the hands of capitalist forces and excludes some parts of Europe (Laguiller, 2004a). However, national concerns are still very much present in her discourse (even in speeches organized specifically for the European elections), and she insists that European elections are actually just a way for national political parties to see who is ahead in the polls (Laguiller, 2004b). It is however important to note that this is the first time LO clearly formulates its Eurosceptic opinions and criticize the EU and its policies. The same is true for the LCR and Besancenot, who explicitly mention the capitalist character of the EU for the first time when talking about the referendum. He finally articulates his position on the Constitutional treaty clearly, and criticizes the liberal character of the EU, although he still makes a link with the French political elites who “have been building this Europe for twenty years” (Besancenot, 2004a).

### *1.1.2. 2005-2008*

There is a significant shift in the parties’ discourse in the period between 2005 and 2008. Even excluding the referendum campaign, the victory of the “no”, which all the parties studied here promoted, has made Europe a way more central topic in the French political scene, and seems to have empowered far-left parties to use more Eurosceptic discourse. Marie-George Buffet references the “29 May” almost as a symbol of a great popular victory against liberal forces, and to show that such victories are possible and that they should happen nationally as well (Buffet, 2005b and 2006b). In her manifesto for the 2007 presidential elections, radically changing Europe is one of three keys for the transformation of the society, and has a much more crucial place than in Hue’s 2002 manifesto. She and the PCF list four strong initiatives to “radically change” Europe, which include renegotiating all European treaties and getting rid of all official EU texts that institutionalize liberalism (Buffet, 2007). This marks a stark difference with their previous hopes of “reorienting Europe” through legislation in the European Parliament. Buffet also uses the EU to differentiate between the PCF and the French *Parti Socialiste* (PS), saying that the left needs to be clear about its position on the direction of European integration (Buffet, 2007b). In 2008, Buffet heavily criticizes the Lisbon treaty as a sign that the elites are ignoring the wishes of the people, since it is essentially the same text

as the Constitutional treaty of 2005. We then see Buffet's and the PCF's discourse use Europe way more than in the period 2002-2004 after the 2005 referendum. Their position on the EU also follows the same trends we saw emerging in 2004, as it is harsher and clearer than before. They now clearly oppose the direction of European integration, instead of just being uncomfortable with it, and offer strong and clear propositions on how to implement their platform at the European level (Buffet, 2007a). They also criticize "liberal Europe", and try and position themselves as the representatives of the "anti-liberal vote" which took place on the 29 May 2005 (Buffet, 2006a).

Laguiller also uses the victory of the "no" vote as a symbol for popular discontent with the current policy orientation of the government (Laguiller, 2005b). In the period 2005-2008 she has harsher words than before when talking about Europe, as she finally clearly states her opposition with the direction the EU is taking. She explicitly criticizes the fact that the EU is controlled by capitalist groups, and that it does not do anything to protect workers, and that a "social Europe" should be built. She also criticizes the European institutions, as embodiments of the capitalist nature of the EU (Laguiller, 2008a). However, the EU is still a very minor priority in LO's 2007 platform, and is only brought up to oppose the government and other parties. Their main enemies remain big companies and the capitalist system in general, and they reaffirm their internationalism several times but without mentioning the EU. In the case of the LCR, they included Europe in their 2007 manifesto by making it the focus of one of their many proposals, and formulate clear oppositions with the current direction of European integration (Besancenot, 2007). The manifesto even uses an alarmist discourse when talking about a "capitalist crisis" in Europe, and talks for the first time about their idea of establishing a socialist, completely united Europe, unlike what the EU is right now. Although this still does not constitute the main message of their platform, it shows that the importance of Europe as an issue has increased since 2002. On top of this, they largely reaffirm their anti-capitalism, which can be interpreted as hidden Eurosceptic statements. The LO and LCR then do not change their discourse radically, as they kept their focus on criticizing the government and capitalist elites even after 2005. However, we observe that the victory in the 2005 referendum empowers them, as they now have something to show to their supporters that they can win some of their fights. They then use this event as a symbol, all the while keeping the same underlying critiques of the EU when they oppose the capitalist system.

### *1.1.3. Conclusions*

From this analysis, we then see that our first hypothesis (H1) is in large part verified in France. Indeed, far-left parties have certainly made the EU and European integration a more central part of their discourse in the period 2005-2008 than in 2002-2004. Also, the campaigns for the European elections and for the referendum forced them to clarify their previously blurry opinions on the EU, and their positions have tended to become more firm towards the EU. In this regard, the year 2004 was almost a turning point, as Europe became a central topic in national politics with these two EU-related campaigns. However, European elections were turned into second-order national elections by some political parties such as LO, which suggests that the referendum campaign, which did focus more on European issues, had more of a role in increasing the salience of European affairs on the French political scene. However, we do see in the case of LO and LCR in particular that their platforms are still focused on big capital, and while their Eurosceptic discourse is strengthened after 2005, they have not made the EU a major point of their 2007 campaign.

Concerning the second hypothesis (H2), it is also partly verified. Indeed, there are a few instances where Marie-George Buffet in particular brings Europe into a conversation when she was not asked about it. For instance, in a question about a new French immigration law in 2005, where she links a government initiative to the upcoming referendum (Buffet, 2005a). The new importance given to Europe in the parties' manifesto for the presidential elections is also an example that their shift in discourse is a conscious effort by the far-left leaders to try and appeal to this new portion of voters who built their position on Europe during the 2005 referendum campaign. This is an attempt by these parties to match the public opinion, where Europe has become more salient as an issue after the campaign and the result of the referendum. Also, they strive to capitalize on the victory of the "no" and make it their own. They seem to have seen this victory as an opportunity to shift the public opinion away from the two main parties (the PS and the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*, UMP), who both campaigned for the "yes", and towards more marginal parties like the PCF, LO or the LCR.

## 1.2. In the Netherlands

We will now turn to the Netherlands, and to a study of the SP and two of its leaders : Jan Marijnissen and Harry van Bommel. In the period studied, the Netherlands saw three general elections (2002, 2003 and 2006), two provincial elections (2003 and 2007), on top of the referendum campaign and the European elections of 2004. The period between 2002 and 2008 is then a dense one in Dutch politics. To analyse the far-left's discourse in this time, we will follow the same method as for France, first analysing the period 2002-2004, then 2005-2008, and trying to identify the similarities and differences between them.

### *1.2.1. 2002-2004*

Europe was quite absent from the SP's discourse in the period before the referendum, despite being covered in their 2002-2006 manifesto. In it, Europe is mentioned in their point about peace, security and development, and is seen almost exclusively as a foreign policy concern (Socialistische Partij, 2002). Also, they try and show their opinions on the EU, and we understand easily that they oppose the idea of the creation of a European "superstate", and that the EU is undemocratic and should implement more social policies. However, they are not that harsh with their Euroscepticism, and thus their discourse in this manifesto qualifies as a soft Eurosceptic one. A notable example of the fact that Europe is not one of the main topics of their program : the EU is not mentioned at all in their part about democracy, while its undemocratic character is one of their main complaints (Socialistische Partij, 2002). This hints to the fact that they only consider the EU to be a foreign policy issue, and not a component of everyday democracy in the Netherlands. The issue of Europe does become slightly more important in the 2003-2007 manifesto, most likely due to the European elections in 2004, but it still has quite a minor place compared to national considerations, even on issues which could be related to the EU such as democracy or migration (Socialistische Partij, 2003).

This trend is visible in both Marijnissen's and van Bommel's discourses. In his New Year's speech in 2003, Marijnissen brought up the issue of the euro and the fact that the Dutch government gave away its monetary sovereignty to an "undemocratic and

opaque” organization like the European Central Bank (ECB), but does not mention the EU more than that (Marijnissen, 2003a). His central point is the dilemma facing the Netherlands between a more social or a more liberal (selfish) policy, which can sound like the same kind of underlying Euroscepticism at play in the LCR’s and LO’s discourses. Van Bommel has a special legitimacy to speak on this issue, as he was the foreign spokesperson for the SP, and in this respect he talked primarily on foreign and European affairs. However, we can see that his interventions before 2004 are very much focused on other world affairs, and that he barely ever writes opinion pieces about the EU before the elections and referendum campaigns. His main focus is on other foreign policy issue areas, such as instability in the Middle East, global summits, the developing world, etc. (Weblog Harry van Bommel, n.d.).

Just like in France, the year 2004 seems to be different in the SP’s discourse than the years before that. Indeed, both Marijnissen and van Bommel talk about the EU and European affairs far more than previously, whether it is in the context of the European elections or related to the upcoming referendum. The SP even organized a Europe Conference specifically for the European elections, where Jan Marjinissen explained that the EU “is a problem rather than a solution” (Marijnissen, 2004a). He positioned himself and the SP strictly against a European “superstate”, saying that the transfer of sovereignty from national governments and parliaments to the EU should stop. While this echoes the mention of a “European superstate” in the party’s 2002-2006 manifesto, it is more categorical, as it completely opposes it rather than simply deploring that it is hurtful to democracy (Socialistische Partij, 2002). We can then see that the same position is expressed with harsher words. On top of this, the term “superstate” starts being used systematically when talking about the EU, and becomes a central part of the SP’s rhetoric in the referendum campaign. Van Bommel also started talking about the EU way more in 2004, mainly in opinion pieces about the European Constitution (Weblog Harry van Bommel, n.d.), and is quite categorical about it, calling Europe “soulless”, and stating that it is impossible to create a “European feeling” among the population. He also associates the EU with “waste, fraud, boyfriends and bathroom politics” (van Bommel, 2004b). While he barely ever wrote about the EU between 2002 and 2003, starting in 2004 it becomes his main topic of interest. This is a flagrant example of how the referendum campaign increased the salience of European affairs and forced the party to take a clear position on European integration.

*1.2.2. 2005-2008*

In the period 2005-2008, the SP's discourse follows the same trends as in 2004, and Europe becomes an even more important topic in their rhetoric. While in general they still focus largely on national concerns, the 2004 European elections and the 2005 referendum did force the party to formulate a clear position on more aspects of the EU than it had before. Europe clearly has a more important place in the party's manifesto for 2006-2010, the opinions of the party on the EU are expressed on different topics than just foreign policy, such as democracy and economic issues (Socialistische Partij, 2006). While their positions essentially stayed the same, they are expressed more clearly and in a harsher way, suggesting that their discourse did get more Eurosceptic after 2005. They use the "no" vote in the referendum as a symbol of the people's discontent with the direction of the EU, and focus their opposition more on the neoliberal character of the EU and the creation of a "European superstate".

Marijnissen himself also gave more importance to the EU in his rhetoric after 2005, and published several opinion pieces on the EU. In them, he criticizes especially the undemocratic character of the European institutions, and the fact that the EU wants to try and pass the Constitution again without a referendum, even though the people in France and the Netherlands already rejected it (Marijnissen, 2007a). He also mentions the EU in his wishes to the press in the end of 2007, saying that there should be cooperation in Europe on areas of taxation, which would make the EU more democratic. He mentioned this in a relatively short speech and puts it as a priority for 2008, along with other national concerns (Marijnissen, 2007b). This is in stark contrast with his discourse pre-2005, where Europe was barely an issue he would cover. This shows that Europe had really gained importance in the party's rhetoric. But the biggest shift is in Harry van Bommel's rhetoric, as he talks about European affairs a lot more after 2005. Indeed, while he reported primarily on other foreign policy concerns in previous years, his opinions pieces post-2005 are mostly about the EU, the Constitutional or Lisbon treaties and other EU policies. His discourse also becomes very harsh, as he strongly opposes the Constitutional and Lisbon treaties, and warns against "blackmail" coming from the Commission president Barroso (van Bommel, 2006b). He also releases an official SP document titled "A better Europe starts now", which explains the position and the proposals of the SP concerning the EU and European integration. In it, the party clearly states its wish to keep talking about the European issue, unlike what the other

parties would rather do since their defeat in the 2005 referendum. They also call for a more democratic, lenient, and affordable Europe which would encourage cooperation but not integration (van Bommel and de Heij, n.d.). We can see that the EU becomes the main element of his rhetoric as the foreign spokesperson for the SP, and also becomes a bigger priority for the party as a whole. He also becomes more Eurosceptic, as he starts criticizing the EU over its involvement in criminal and environmental policies, while in the party's 2002-2006 manifesto it is clearly stated that the SP encourages increased cooperation in areas such as environmental protection, criminality and migration, among others (Socialistische Partij, 2002). This shows just how strict the party's position has become that they will use any topic to advance their opinions on the EU.

### *1.2.3. Conclusions*

We then observe that there has been a shift in the SP's discourse between the period 2002-2004 and 2005-2008, which verifies our first hypothesis (H1) in the Netherlands as well. Indeed, the party has given a more important place to the EU as an issue in their platform after 2005, and their opinions have been way harsher as well, since they seem to be changing their minds on topics where they previously promoted more European cooperation. Both Marijnissen and van Bommel are good examples of this trend, as their rhetoric saw the same shift.

The second hypothesis (H2) is also verified, as there are several examples of Marijnissen and van Bommel bringing up the EU without being asked about it, especially on their own blogs and in personal opinion posts. This is particularly visible with van Bommel, since he shifted his focus from other world affairs to mainly European affairs after the 2005 referendum. Of course, this is part of his role as the foreign spokesperson for the SP, but it shows a considerable evolution compared to the 2002-2003 period in particular, where he barely ever published opinion pieces about the EU, suggesting that the issue was not high on his list of priorities.



### 1.3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis has shown that there has been a shift in the far-left's discourse in both France and the Netherlands post-2005. As our two first hypotheses (H1 and H2) were verified in both countries, we can see the importance of the 2005 referendum and the campaign that went with it for the salience of European affairs in national politics. This also seems to confirm Startin and Krouwel's (2013) claim that far-left Euroscepticism was also "re-galvanized" following the 2005 referendum.

What is also interesting to note here is the importance of the year 2004 in this shift, as both the European elections and the referendum campaign have served to increase the salience of European affairs in national politics in both France and the Netherlands. However, it still seems like the referendum had more of an impact in the following years, as the European elections were largely turned into "second-order" national elections by the parties. Also, we see that the victory in the referendum was widely used as a symbol in the discourse of French far-left. Dutch parties then capitalized on the victory of the "no" vote a lot less, despite using more Eurosceptic discourse after the referendum. The referendum campaign, and in part the European elections, served to increase the salience of European affairs in national politics and forced the political parties and the populations to position themselves on the EU and issues such as enlargement, which was a major debate in the campaign. In turn, this empowered far-left parties to give a more important place to Europe as an issue in their discourse, and be more critical about it.

Now that we have established that the shift in discourse exists, we will try and find out what impact it had on the electoral success of far-left parties.

## **2. The impact of the change in discourse on electoral results**

Clues in the literature hint to the fact that the change towards a more Eurosceptic discourse for far-left parties should have had an impact on their electoral success. Indeed, Startin and Krouwel (2013) established this was the case for far-right parties, and mentioned the same phenomena happening for the other end of spectrum after the 2005 referendum. March and Rommerskirchen (2015) also identify Euroscepticism as having a positive relation with the success of far-left parties. By studying the parties'

scores in elections between 2002 and 2008, we hope to determine whether this assumption was true, and thus verify or not our third hypothesis (H3). If electoral success is not present or it shows great variations, this section will try and investigate the reasons for this as well. Thus, did the new discourse embraced by far-left parties after the 2005 referendum lead to electoral success? If not, what factors can account for the variations in electoral favours between these parties?

It is important to note that while it would be hard to substantially prove the relation between the rise of far-left parties and their change in discourse, this section will attempt to observe a correlation between them. Meanwhile, we will here examine the alternative reasons why far-left parties might have scored big electoral victories or not after the 2005 referendum, so as to get a complete view of the situation.

### 2.1. The electoral success of far-left parties after 2005

We observe a variation in success between the French far-left parties and the Dutch SP. Indeed, as can be seen in Table 1, the PCF, LO and the LCR have not seen the rise in electoral favours that we expected after the 2005 referendum. Instead, they stagnated like in the legislative elections, or declined in the presidential run. It is striking that while they all together gathered 13.34% of the votes in the 2002 presidential elections, this number went down to 7.34% in 2007. While these elections are to some extent based on personality, this factor alone is not enough to explain its results, and since it is the most important election for the public, these results do say a lot about the overall popularity of the parties at that time. They also do quite poorly in legislative elections, in which only the PCF manages to get any seats (21 in 2002, and 15 in 2007), despite building joint far-left lists. Even the PCF scores barely allow them to have any influence, as parties need 20 seats to form a parliamentary group in the *Assemblée Nationale*, and they only barely met that threshold in 2002, and not at all in 2007.

On the other hand, leading figures such as Marie George-Buffet, Olivier Besancenot saw their popularity scores rise directly after the referendum. For Buffet, it went up by 6 points between February and July 2005, and in the case of Besancenot, it went up by 11 points over the same period (Kantar, n.d.). They both managed to maintain this rise until the beginning of 2006 at least. This seems to indicate that their popularity increased right after the victory of the “no” in the referendum, most likely due to a rise

in their credibility. However, this only translates into votes for the LCR and Besancenot in the 2007 presidential elections, as he goes from 1.27% in 2002 to 4.08% in 2007. Meanwhile, Buffet and the PCF lost 2.89 points between 2002 and 2007.

**Table 1** The electoral scores of the far-left in France 2002-2008 (figures in %)

	2002 <i>Presidential</i>	2002 <i>Legislative</i>	2004 <i>European</i>	2004 <i>Senator</i>	2007 <i>Presidential</i>	2007 <i>Legislative</i>
PCF	3.37	4.82	5.25	6.95	1.93	4.29
LO	5.72	1.19	2.56*		1.33	3.41*
LCR	4.25	1.27			4.08	

\*Joint far-left lists

Source : Ministère de l'Intérieur (<https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/fr/Elections>)

The SP show an entirely different evolution. Indeed, we can see in Table 2 that the party had an impressive rise in the 2006 general elections, where they achieved a staggering score of 16.6%, 10 points higher than in the last general elections of 2003. This score allowed them to send 25 new representatives in the *Tweede Kamer*, versus only 9 in 2003, and to become the third biggest party in the country. They also managed to keep this up in the 2007 provincial elections, where they gathered almost 15% of the votes. This period is a true breakthrough moment for the SP, and still remains the best scores they have achieved in elections.

**Table 2** The electoral scores of the SP in the Netherlands 2002-2008 (figures in %)

	2002 <i>General</i>	2002 <i>Municipal</i>	2003 <i>General</i>	2003 <i>Provincial</i>	2004 <i>European</i>	2006 <i>Municipal</i>	2006 <i>General</i>	2007 <i>Provincial</i>
SP	5.9	2.9	6.3	5.58	6.97	5.7	16.6	14.82

Source : Dutch Electoral Council (<https://www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl/>)

We then see the considerable divergence in success between the French and the Dutch far-left, despite both of them altering their discourse in almost the same way. Seeing that the French parties were struggling to get a few seats in the *Assemblée Nationale*, all the while the SP was winning the biggest electoral victories in its history, it becomes clear that factors other than the intensification of their Eurosceptic discourse are at play here. What then are the elements that can explain such divergence in success?

## 2.2. Explaining divergences in success

The basis for this analysis will be March and Rommerskirchen (2015), as well as March (2011). The authors identify five major factors which can determine the success or failure of far-left parties : the economic situation of the country in which they operate ; the levels of public Euroscepticism ; the permissiveness of the electoral system ; competition from the social democrats, the far-right, and the Greens ; and past success. We will then try and investigate each of these elements in France and the Netherlands, mainly between 2002 and 2008, and see what else can explain the success or failure of their far-left parties. On top of this, we will look at country-specific factors or events that could have had an impact on public opinion.

### 2.2.1. *In France*

Some of these five factors can help us understand the lack of success of far-left parties in France, even after their victory in the 2005 referendum. First, people regularly complained about the economic situation, and in particular about the fact that taxes rose every year until 2007, but this benefitted the official opposition (the PS) more than the marginal far-left parties. Also, the country was not in serious economic distress, and unemployment was effectively being tackled by the government, at least until the crisis hit in 2008. The introduction of the euro did not see any big economic boom, but no big shock or inflation either. Following the idea that far-left parties do better in times of economic distress (March and Rommerskirchen, 2015 ; March, 2011), this situation could serve to explain their lack of success, as the country's economic situation, while not being the best it ever had, was not the worst either. However, it could also have helped them, as there was growing discontent about the rising taxes and government deficit. It would then seem that on the topic of economy, the far-left parties failed to effectively capitalize on popular sentiment and anger.

The fact that other parties managed to capitalize on the situation more than marginal far-left parties also show how the electoral system and competition from other national parties are important factors here. Indeed, it has been shown that a non-permissive electoral system with a high electoral threshold (above 3%) was detrimental to the success of far-left parties (March and Rommerskirchen, 2015). The Fifth Republic,

which was put into place by Charles de Gaulle in 1958, is very unfavourable to the rise of small and marginal parties, as it uses a system of two rounds for most elections, with only a few areas with proportional voting. This is highly beneficial to mainstream parties who manage to gather many voters, but parties on the far-left rarely get to the second round, and thus do not get many of their candidates elected. Candidates with less than 12.5% of votes are eliminated in the first round for the legislative elections, and far-left parties such as the PCF, despite gathering a strong base of support for a long time, recognized that their chances of winning the presidential elections were slim (Wilson, 2002). This isolated them, and put parties such as the traditional right-wing Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) and the PS at the forefront. This was even exacerbated after 2002, when legislative elections started taking place only a few months after the presidential elections, as the new president's party would usually be given an absolute majority in the *Assemblée Nationale*. This led to a sharp decline in the influence of the far-left, even parties such as the PCF, who used to be the third biggest political force up until the 1950s, to the point where they could barely form their own parliamentary group (Wilson, 2002). The PCF even started to decline in 1958, and this was even accelerated after the collapse of communism. The decline in the far-left in France is not something new.

Competition also prevented the rise of far-left parties. Indeed, the PS started taking over the far-left votes early on, as the PCF did not manage to properly adapt their discourse during the Cold War and did not offer a viable alternative on the left (Wilson, 2002). Mitterrand's "Programme Commun" strategy also allowed the PS to position themselves as the leader of the French left, and relegated the PCF to the status of a marginal party. On top of this, the FN had a spectacular rise in 2001-2002, and managed to get to the second round of the 2002 presidential elections. From this point on, they became a major force in the French political scene, and attracted the anti-establishment voters who traditionally voted on the far-left, at the demise of the PCF and other far-left parties. The Greens also emerged in 2007, and their leader Nicolas Hulot reportedly polled around 11% during the presidential elections campaign, while far-left candidates polled between 1% and 4% of the votes. Despite Hulot withdrawing his name from the run in the end, far-left parties have not managed to attract a significant number of his voters. The emergence of these new political forces, combined with the highly restrictive electoral system, and the fact that far-left parties lost credibility by their lack of voters prevented them from rising as major parties in France. The PCF's past success,

their victory in the 2005 referendum and their efforts to differentiate themselves by adopting a more Eurosceptic discourse could not balance all of this out.

Euroscepticism is also listed as being linked with the success of far-left parties, as they seem to be on the rise in times when public Euroscepticism is high. This is particularly significant in our case, since low levels of public Euroscepticism could explain why the change in discourse did not resonate with the voters. According to the Eurobarometer studies, in the few years before the 2008 financial crisis, French people had mainly a good image of the EU, and about 50% of people saw the EU positively between 2004 and 2006. Also around 55% of people thought that France had benefited from EU membership between 2004 and 2007, although the percentage of people who thought the country had not benefited from membership also rose after the referendum (the “Don’t know” answer declined in turn). All of this is not very different from EU-wide results, and hints to the fact that while more people took position on the EU, and more negatively than positively, the majority of the French society was still Europhile rather than Eurosceptic. On top of this, those who took position during the 2005 referendum campaign and emerged as new Eurosceptic voters were usually attracted by the far-right. Indeed, the issue of ethnic threat and enlargement, to Turkey in particular, was a major issue during the campaign, and far-left parties did not address it as much as the far-right did.

One important element which emerged in French politics at this time had an impact on the far-left : populism. Indeed, with the rise of the FN in the beginning of the 2000s, populism enters French politics with a lot of success. This had a significant impact on the success of far-left parties, as the FN had the potential of attracting many of their categories of voters : anti-establishment, Eurosceptics, lower class, less educated, etc. Traditionally, the French far-left parties do not see populism in a positive light, and thus do not make use of it as an electoral strategy (Marlière, 2019). The FN could then use populism to its fullest, and managed to attract many voters from these parties on a populist platform, and promoting nationalism and Euroscepticism, among other things.

To conclude, many factors can explain why French far-left parties did not win electoral favours, even after their victory in the 2005 referendum and their change in discourse. They did not manage to capitalize on the stagnant economic situation, the electoral system of the Fifth Republic is highly unfavourable to small marginal parties, other parties attracted many of their voters as they were losing credibility, and they

could not compete with the FN's heavy use of populism. On top of all of this, competing parties also managed to attract the new Eurosceptic voters who took position during the 2005 referendum campaign, meaning that the victory did not benefit far-left parties as much as it was expected to. The decline of the far-left in France is not something new though, as the PCF even started to decline in 1958 with the establishment of the Fifth Republic, and then after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Wilson, 2002). In this context, the mediocre results of the PCF, LO and LCR do not come as a surprise, as they were not helped by the French context, but also inscribe themselves in an established trend in French politics.

### 2.2.2. *In the Netherlands*

The Dutch context is quite different from the French one, and thus produced different results for the SP. The country was hit by the 2001 global economic slowdown, and inflation, unemployment, and government debt rose every year between 2002 and 2005. While the overall GDP of the Netherlands also rose during this time, this situation led to a rise of public discontent against the government's policies, and an impression for the public of economic decline. Protests in Amsterdam in 2004 against the government's policy show its lack of popularity. Since the moderate left-wing alternative, the Labour party (PvdA), was part of the governing coalition, they were the object of public discontent, and could not capitalize on the dire economic situation. Thus, the SP managed to benefit from it and gain success.

This leads us to the issue of competition from other national parties, especially from social democrats, the far-right and the Greens (March and Rommerskirchen, 2015). Indeed, in 1994 the government coalition composed of the PvdA and the Christian Democrats (CDA) imposed austerity measures to tackle declining economic conditions (Lucardie and Voerman, 2019), which allowed the SP to get seats in the *Tweede Kamer* for the first time. Once this was established, the party gained in credibility and popularity, and attracted many voters from the PvdA who might have been disappointed in their party's performance in government. As we have seen above, they managed to score considerable victories in 2006 and 2007. On top of this, the far-right party PVV was only created in 2006, although it started strongly with 5.9% in the 2006 general elections. The *GroenLinks* (GL) also are not at their prime between 2002 and 2010, and generally get around 10 seats in the general elections, without seeing much growth. In

the end then, the Labour party, the main competitor for the SP, is losing in popularity because of their participation in government, and the far-right and the Greens, while being noticeable in the Dutch political landscape, do not represent strong enough forces that they could attract a significant portion of the SP's voters. Coupled with perhaps some resentment from some fringes of the society against the Christian Democrats and liberal government, the atmosphere is favourable for the rise of a far-left party such as the SP.

The Dutch electoral system is also one of the most permissive in Europe, as it uses an electoral quotient to assign seats in the *Tweede Kamer*. Each party or candidate needs to gather 1/150 of the votes (about 70 100 votes in the 2017 general elections) to get a seat in the House. Converted in percentage, this represents a threshold of only 0.67%, way less than the 3% that March and Rommerskirchen (2015) identify as being detrimental to the rise of far-left parties, and makes the Dutch system one of the most permissive in Europe. In this system, small and marginal parties have higher chances of being represented in Parliament than in the French system for example, and the SP's and the PVV's successes are prime representations of this. This fully proportional representation system is highly favourable to the success of small parties, and thus allowed the SP to become the third biggest party in 2006.

The factor of past success also seems to play a role in the rise of SP, as their vote share really started increasing after the 1994 general elections, where they made their grand debut in the *Tweede Kamer*. This allowed them to gain credibility and to be seen as a viable party on the Dutch political scene, and thus they were able to better capitalize on the PvdA's failures later on.

Finally, Euroscepticism also plays an important role in the rise of the SP. A study conducted by Lubbers and Jaspers (2010) shows that Euroscepticism has increased in the Netherlands between 1990 and 2008, around the times of the Maastricht treaty and the 2005 referendum on the European Constitution. The authors show that this rise is especially visible among the less-educated people, and that ethnic threat and national identity are the main factors to explain it. This is particularly significant, in particular considering the importance of the question of enlargement and the Turkish membership in the 2005 referendum campaign. The SP is strongly opposed to any further enlargement of the EU, and wants all prospects to be subject to a popular referendum (Hargitai, 2017). With this position, they had the opportunity to attract new Eurosceptic voters who emerged after the 2005 referendum when people were officially asked to



take position on the EU for the first time. Lubbers and Jaspers (2010) also claim that the 2005 referendum campaign contributed to this rise in Euroscepticism. We can then establish a correlation between the SP's victory in the 2005 referendum and their subsequent rise, and the rise of popular Euroscepticism.

In the end, more than one factor can serve to explain the considerable success of the SP in the 2006 elections and in the years following it. The Dutch electoral system is favourable to the rise of marginal parties, their main competitors were weaker than usual, the economy was stagnating, and Euroscepticism was high. All of these factors, combined with their use of a harsher discourse when discussing the EU, allowed them to attract more voters and become the third biggest party in the country by 2006.

### 2.3. Conclusions

To conclude, we have clearly seen that the French and Dutch context have major differences that can serve to explain the divergences in the electoral success of far-left parties after the 2005 referendum and their discourse change. We have analysed the environmental factors listed by March and Rommerskirchen (2015) and March (2011), and can now see more clearly why the SP saw a very significant growth in their influence, while the French far-left parties stagnated or declined. We now have a more complete vision of the context in both countries and have reviewed alternative explanations for the rise (or not) of the far-left in both France and the Netherlands. We can see a correlation between the parties' change in discourse, their electoral success and the rise of public Euroscepticism, especially in the Netherlands, suggesting that the harsher Eurosceptic discourse of the SP resonated with the public and contributed at least in part to their rise. In the case of France, the far-left had been in decline for decades already before 2005, and institutional factors such as the electoral system did not favour the rise of marginal parties such as LO or LCR. Despite the fact that they tried to differentiate themselves and resonate with the popular opinion by holding a harsher Eurosceptic discourse after 2005, it seemed to have been too little too late, and they still did not manage to offer a viable alternative to the PS, the FN, or even the Greens.

## **Final conclusions**

In the end, several things come out of this thesis. We have first made use of the literature and identified gaps in it, especially related to scholars' focus on the far-right instead of the far-left. The literature review helped us classify the parties studied as soft, far-left Eurosceptic, but also revealed three important elements : far-left parties tend to criticize the EU on its neoliberal policies and its promotion of globalization ; there is a gap between the mainstream and the population which marginal parties strive to fill, because the public is more Eurosceptic than the elites ; and referendums increase the salience of European affairs in national politics and force political actors and the public to take position on EU-related issues. All of these elements were useful to try and answer our initial research question : to what extent did the 2005 referendum influence the rise of Euroscepticism in far-left parties in France and the Netherlands?

By carrying out a discourse analysis of six leading figures of the far-left in the two countries, we found out that their discourse did change. While their positions remained mainly consistent before and after the referendum, they talked about the EU as an issue more post-2005, in line with De Vries' (2009) statement that referendums tend to increase the salience of European affairs on national political scenes. In this sense, 2004 seems to have been a turning point in both France and the Netherlands, as the issues of the EU was more present than ever in national political debates, due to the European elections and the beginning of the referendum campaign. Their discourse also changed to be harsher than before towards the EU. For example, while the PCF would talk about "reorienting" Europe before the referendum, with a hopeful rhetoric about being able to put the EU back on track, its discourse was quite alarmist after 2005, and they claimed to want to "radically change" Europe. We have also observed that both French and Dutch elites bring up the EU more in their personal declaration and opinion pieces than before, and so we concluded that both H1 and H2 were verified.

We then moved on to H3, and to analysing if this change had had an impact on the parties' electoral success. We found that while the SP in the Netherlands managed to become the country's third biggest party and scored impressive victories in 2006-2007, this was not the case for the French far-left parties, who either stagnated or declined. To explain such divergences, we relied on March and Rommerskichen (2015) and March (2011), and their five predictors of far-left success. It was then clear that the

French political and social environment was not favourable for the rise of far-left parties, and although some of their leading figures saw a rise in popularity directly after the referendum, thus suggesting it did have some effect, their victory in 2005 was not enough to balance out their disadvantages. On the other hand, the Dutch environment was particularly favourable for the rise of a marginal far-left party at that time, and the victory in the referendum and the use of Eurosceptic rhetoric at a time when public Euroscepticism was on the rise in the country seems to also have served the SP and allowed it to become a major party in Dutch politics. However, it was not the only factor that led to this result, and it was important for us to get a complete view of the environment in both countries to explain the differing electoral results.

In the end, we can see that the 2005 referendum campaign and its results had an influence on the rise of Euroscepticism in far-left parties in France and the Netherlands. Directly after the rejection of the referendum, they adopted a more Eurosceptic discourse, in a conscious effort to attract more voters and capitalize on their victory in the referendum. While it led to diverging electoral success, this finding is significant since rising popularity scores in France suggest that such a change in discourse did resonate with the population at the time. Still today, far-left parties such as the SP and the LFI in France are using soft Eurosceptic discourse to appeal to voters, with more or less success. These results are significant today as well, as Euroscepticism is dangerously high in many corners of the EU, and the gap between the public and the mainstream on the topic of the EU is still present. It has culminated with events such as Brexit in 2016 and the European elections of 2014, but even though Eurosceptic parties lost ground in the European Parliament in 2019, they remain strong in Member States, both on the left and the right. Mainstream parties should recognize the gap that exists between their Europhile positions and the public opinion on the EU, so as to bridge it as much as possible and not give more possibilities for Eurosceptic parties to insert themselves and capitalize on it.

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### Discourse analysis

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## **Appendix A : Lexicon of far-left Eurosceptic discourse**

*Note : the terms presented here have been translated, and can thus be found in the original documents in French or Dutch, although they may differ slightly in the texts.*

Another Europe

Capitalist Europe

Capitalist globalization

Capitalist policies

Change Europe

Democratic Europe

European bourgeoisie

European superstate

Europe of capital

Europe of nations

Europe of peoples

Europe of regions

Financial dictatorship

Liberal Europe

Liberal globalization

Liberal policies

Merciless competition

Reconquer Europe

Renegotiation

Reorient Europe

Social Europe

Transform Europe

Ultra-liberal