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ARTICLE

The Strategic Logic of Islamophobic Populism

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Abstract
In Europe, the rise of populism is coupled with the rise of Islamophobia, vividly evident with exponential increases in votes for anti-Islam political parties in national elections. These parties portray Islam and Muslims as threats and maintain a position that Islam (as a religion and culture) is a threatening contrast to European values. By analysing Islamophobic discourses of the French National Front, Alternative for Germany and the Dutch Freedom Party, this article argues that Islamophobic populism targets not only Muslims, but also the incumbent leaders. By looking at the current dynamics of public opinion, this article explains how Islamophobic populism functions as an electoral strategy.

Keywords: Islamophobic populism; anti-Islam political parties; electoral strategy; voters; Europe

In today's world, even the most advanced democracies suffer from the weakening of partisan ties, the decline of ideological cleavages, the absence of a democratic political public sphere, and citizens' growing distrust of the political elites and the political system. These factors are not only the symptoms of dysfunctioning democratic systems, but also the triggers of populism (Mény and Surel 2002; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Papadopoulos 2013; Spruyt et al. 2016). Especially after the 1960s, the media's growing role in politics, through the disclosure of corruption scandals and other troubling sides to politicians, contributed to the strengthening of anti-establishment sentiments among citizens (Mudde 2004).

In addition to the shady side of political elites, the growing problems regarding their accountability have contributed to ordinary citizens' distrust of politicians and mainstream politics. This has consequently provided conditions that permit the rise of a populism which takes the form of the 'politics of anti-politics' (Panizza 2005: 12). In Europe, the rise of anti-establishment sentiments is discernible with the electoral successes of radical right-wing populist parties. In national elections in 2017, the Freedom Party in the Netherlands and the National Front in France entered their parliaments through receiving 13% of the votes, winning 20 and 8 seats respectively

(BBC News 2017a; *Telegraph* 2017). Four years after being founded, Alternative for Germany secured 94 seats in the Bundestag, receiving 12.6% of the votes in the 2017 national elections (Clarke 2017).

The electoral successes of these parties can be attributed to the incumbent parties' inability to produce effective policies (Mouffe 2005a, 2005b) and the increasing number of voters who consider themselves harmed by globalization, immigration and multiculturalism (Papadopoulos 2013). Furthermore, the European Union's (EU) democracy deficit and mass flows of immigrants and asylum seekers after the Syrian civil war (especially in 2015) can be singled out as idiosyncratic factors which led to the electoral successes of the right-wing populist parties across Europe.

In addition to their hostility to the EU, globalization and immigration, what most characterizes radical right-wing parties in Europe is their anti-Islam attitude. The growing perception of Muslims as a threat, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, has provided conditions permitting the rise of Islamophobic populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). While before the events of 9/11 radical right-wing parties targeted non-European immigrants, after 9/11 their attention became specifically focused on Muslims, resulting in the shift from ethnonational-based threat perception to ethnoreligious-based threat perception (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013).[1]

Anti-Islam parties portray Islam as being incompatible with European values and a threat to European societies. For example, a few days following 9/11, Mogens Camre, then the MEP of the Danish People's Party, depicted the immigration of Muslims into Denmark as an invasion and stated that ordinary Muslims are no different from terrorists (Betz and Meret 2009). In 2005, Filip Dewinter, a Belgian politician and one of the leading members of the populist political party Vlaams Belang, stated that Islam is 'the Trojan horse of Islamic fundamentalism' (quoted in Betz and Meret 2009: 319).

Anti-Islam parties in Europe also rally the citizens around the messages of abolishing mosques and banning the hijab (the headscarf) once they assume power. For example, in 2007 Switzerland's largest political party, the Swiss People's Party, initiated a campaign against the building of mosque minarets, presenting them as symbols of Muslim conquests (Betz and Meret 2009). In 2010, the Northern League party proposed legislation to outlaw the burqa in Italy (Testa and Armstrong 2012). The party also opposes the opening of mosques by depicting them as the antithesis of Judaeo-Christian culture (Testa and Armstrong 2012).

The nascent literature treats Islamophobic populism as a strategy employed by right-wing parties to disguise their anti-Semitic past (Hafez 2014) and to appeal to the rising numbers of voters who hold anti-Islam views (Williams 2010). Hans-Georg Betz and Susi Meret (2009) take a different approach by analysing it in the context of identity politics. While the literature has examined Islamophobic populism from strategic and ideational perspectives, so far no scholarly attention has been given to how Islamophobic populism functions as an electoral strategy based on vote-maximization through weakening the incumbent leaders.

In this article, we show that Islamophobic populism is an electoral strategy that targets not only Muslims and Islam in general, but also the incumbent leaders (or anti-Islam parties' main competitors). To this end, we analyse the discourses of three populist right-wing political parties in Europe: the National Front in France, Alternative for Germany and the Dutch Freedom Party. We reveal that

in addition to portraying Muslims in inimical terms, these parties provide simple and sharp solutions to the so-called 'problem of Islam' and Islamization. By presenting practical solutions to these issues, anti-Islam politicians imply that the incumbent leaders (or their main competitors) are uninterested in ordinary citizens' problems. By linking ideological positions to cost–benefit voting strategies, this article suggests an original approach to the analysis of Islamophobia.

In order to explain the strategic logic of Islamophobic populism, we look at the 2017 public opinion surveys on Islamophobia conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018) in Western European countries. The surveys reveal that in many European countries, less than 20% of the population has anti-Islam feelings. Furthermore – considering the possibility that there are people who hold anti-Islam feelings but are undecided on the issue who might vote for the incumbent – in order to maximize their votes, anti-Islam political parties should expand their support base to include the voters of the incumbent party. As such, by providing simple and sharp solutions such as promising to abolish mosques and Qu'ran schools, to ban the hijab and pork-free meals, the leaders of anti-Islam parties aim to win over the voters of the incumbent party (or their main competitors) by implying that if their main competitors are (re)elected, political and social problems associated with Muslims (presented as the problems of ordinary citizens) will continue.

This article is organized as follows. The first section reviews the literature on populism and Islamophobic populism respectively. The second part presents political speeches and campaign statements of the leaders of the French National Front, Alternative for Germany and the Dutch Freedom Party and reveals patterns of how we/other distinctions (threat perceptions) are defined and justified, and which solutions are proposed to deal with the so-called problems of Islam and Islamization. The third section presents the public opinion surveys on Islamophobia conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018) in Western European countries in 2017. The fourth section explains how Islamophobic populism functions as a vote-maximization strategy by discussing the results of public opinion surveys and statements of anti-Islam leaders. The final part summarizes the argument and gives direction for future research.

Islamophobic populism

Populism is a style of politics which challenges established power structures and political and intellectual elites by prioritizing the needs of the ordinary people (Canovan 1999). Even though populism does not take the form of a fully fledged, codified doctrine, it has a number of distinguishing characteristics (Muller 2016). It is anti-pluralist, as it creates an us/them distinction by pitting ordinary people against the elites, refugees, immigrants and (ethnic and religious) minorities (Canovan 2002; Mudde 2004; Muller 2016; Taggart 1996). Most populist policies are pragmatic, as they offer simple solutions to complex problems (Canovan 1999).

Even though populist leaders evoke the notion of popular sovereignty which is the cornerstone of democratic politics by claiming to represent 'the people' versus self-interested elites, the rise of populism is a symptom of the malaise of liberal democracies. As Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens (2016) note, populism opposes

the idea of an open and pluralistic society on which democracy is built by supporting a closed identity. Paradoxically, the same conditions that breed populism – especially the lack of discussion and politicians' lack of interest regarding the problems of ordinary citizens – contribute to the increasing popularity of the right-wing populist leaders who appeal to people by appearing to produce alternatives through unrealistic promises and by reflecting and stimulating xenophobic feelings (Mouffe 2005b). Currently, especially in European countries, the most popular form of xenophobic populism is Islamophobic populism.

Islamophobia is the construction of Muslims as the 'other' by attributing negative meanings to Islam, also using discursive practices which justify exclusionary practices against Muslims (Allen 2010). Another way of putting it refers to a number of views and psychological processes that are based on the assumption that Islamic culture, considered incompatible with Western culture, should be regulated and disciplined (Sayyid 2018). Islamophobia does not always become visible through physical attacks on Muslims, mosques and other Islamic symbols. It is also not limited to xenophobic statements made by politicians and negative media portrayals of Muslims and Islam. It can also be visible (clearly or subtly) in daily life in schools, public offices and the like (Allen 2010).

Analysing Islamophobia in Eastern Central Europe, Salman Sayyid (2018) notes that Islamophobia is more than just hostile public attitudes, discriminatory state practices against Muslims and misrepresentations of Muslims in the media. Contrary to common sense, he argues that Islamophobia is not a consequence of practices of Muslim people; neither does it have a direct relationship to Islam (Sayyid 2018). He argues rather that Islamophobia is the result of the crisis of 'Europeanness' which is wrongly attributed to Muslims.[2] Islamophobia refers to the perception that the visibility of Islamic practices in the public sphere is considered to have a disruptive impact on Western states' modernity and prosperity (Sayyid 2018). All in all, rather than the mere number of Muslims, Islamophobia is related to national anxieties regarding the protection of national identities which are considered to be endangered in the globalizing world (Sayyid 2018).

In his study of Islamophobia in the US, Edward Curtis (2013: 76) notes that Islamophobia is more than the reflection of social anxiety, by defining it as 'the product of the state's legal and extralegal attempts to control, discipline, and punish Muslim American individuals and organizations'. Andrew Shryock (2013) approaches Islamophobia from a historical perspective by linking it to the historical animosity between Muslims and Christians. He further notes that Islamophobia extends beyond hate or fear of Muslims with its 'essentializing and universalizing quality, which casts both Islam itself and all Muslims as real or potential enemies in a way that, if similarly applied to Jews or Christians, would seem delusional at best, vile at worst' (Shryock 2010: 9).

The rise and successes of populist parties which hold and disseminate Islamophobic views go hand in hand with increased scholarly interest in Islamophobic populism. Farid Hafez (2014) notes that Islamophobia enables populist parties that have historical links to Nazism or fascism (such as the Freedom Party in Austria, the Sweden Democrats or the French National Front) to increase their electoral base by disguising their past anti-Semitic attitudes through their reflection of more popular racist sentiments among their societies (Hafez 2014).

In a similar vein, Michele Hale Williams (2010) notes that Islamophobic populism is the result of the strategic adjustment of populist parties to maximize their votes in the light of rising Islamophobia. Examining the Islamophobic discourses of the Italian Northern League, Alberto Testa and Gary Armstrong (2012) come to the conclusion that Islamophobia is used as a political strategy by the party to legitimize the independence of the northern regions of Italy.

Differing from these strategic arguments, Betz and Meret (2009) present a cultural argument by viewing Islamophobic populism as a form of identity politics. Specifically, the authors note that Islamophobic populism is not primarily related to the strategic calculations of populist parties, but rather derives from their worldviews and identity. In this respect, the anti-Islam attitudes of populist parties are analysed in the context of a 'programmatic combination of immigration, Islamization and identity' (Betz and Meret 2009: 334).

In sum, while Islamophobic populism has been examined from cultural and strategic perspectives, studies that focused on the strategic logic of Islamophobic populism analysed anti-Islam parties' calculations to hide their anti-Semitic past (Hafez 2014) and to appeal to anti-Islam voters (Williams 2010), and their more specific calculations such as the Northern League's aspiration for the independence of the northern region of Italy (Testa and Armstrong 2012). This article makes a novel contribution to the burgeoning literature on Islamophobic populism by showing how it functions as an electoral strategy that targets the incumbent leaders (or anti-Islam parties' main opponents).

Anti-Islam parties and Islamophobic discourse

Our study focuses on the National Front in France, Alternative for Germany and the Dutch Freedom Party as illustrations of anti-Islam political parties in Europe. With their anti-Muslim comments and policy proposals, these parties provide relevant cases for the study of how an anti-Muslim schematic is instrumentalized by political parties as an electoral strategy to weaken incumbent leaders across Europe. In addition to their anti-Islam attitude, all three parties converge in their contempt for the EU and suspicion towards all newcomers (Arzheimer 2015; Goodliffe 2015; Vossen 2011).

Another similarity of these parties is that even though they are not in power in their respective countries, they significantly increased their votes in the 2017 elections. The leader of the National Front, Marine Le Pen, received 18% of the votes in the first round of the 2012 presidential election (Willsher 2012). Even though she was defeated by Emmanuel Macron in the second round of the 2017 presidential election, she successfully expanded her voter base and received 22% of the votes in the first round of that election (BBC News 2017b).

Founded in 2013, Alternative for Germany received 4.7% of the votes in the 2013 parliamentary elections (Federal Returning Officer 2013). In 2017, it became the first far-right party to enter the Bundestag in almost 60 years (Huggler 2017). The Dutch Freedom Party, established by Geert Wilders in 2006, received 6% of the vote in the 2006 elections for the House of Representatives. In the 2010 elections, the party more than doubled its votes. Although its vote percentage decreased to 10% in the 2012 elections, in 2017 it received 13% of the vote (BBC News 2017a).

Interestingly, the National Front, Alternative for Germany and the Dutch Freedom Party gained electoral successes despite the relatively low level of Islamophobic sentiments in their respective countries (less than 20%) (Pew Research Center 2018). While contextual factors such as the European financial crisis and the European refugee crisis arguably played a role in the rise of these parties,[3] their electoral successes in countries where the degree of Islamophobia is relatively low (especially when compared with Eastern European countries) raise important questions regarding whether and how these parties use Islamophobia to attract more votes.[4]

In this section, we present anti-Islam messages in statements of party leaders as well as in party manifestos. Islamophobic discourses are analysed under the categories of self/other representations and policy proposals. In describing how we/other distinctions play out in anti-Islam statements, we look at how Muslims are defined and at religious and cultural justifications for exclusionary attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. We then examine what exclusionary practices are proposed for Islamic practices and Muslims in general.[5]

The National Front

Since its establishment by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972, the National Front, France's right-wing populist party, adopted an unequivocally hostile attitude towards immigrants. Given that in France there are a significant number of Muslim immigrants (both legal and unauthorized), the party focused its attention on Muslims. In 2010, before becoming the leader of the National Front, Marine Le Pen made her anti-Islam attitude explicit by comparing Muslim prayers in the streets to Nazi occupying forces (Buchanan 2015). Especially after the rise of ISIS, Le Pen (leader of the National Front since 2011) intensified her attacks against Muslims. Le Pen also focused on the incompatibility of Islam with French culture. She defined Islamic fundamentalism as the 'new totalitarianism of the 21st century' and noted that there were terrorists hiding among immigrants (Staff 2016).

Le Pen proposed a number of solutions to solve the so-called problem of Islam and Islamization. For example, in 2014, Le Pen showed her opposition to pork-free school meals provided for Muslim students and to the wearing of veils in public (*Telegraph* 2014). The day after the Bataclan attack in Paris (which killed 129 people in 2015), Le Pen stated that France and the French people were not safe and that a crackdown on Islamists was necessary. She proposed that foreigners who made hate speeches should be expelled from France and that binational Islamists should be stripped of their French citizenship (Nossiter 2015). She went on to propose the monitoring of mosques and sermons (Sharkov 2015).

Before the presidential elections in 2017, Le Pen promised to close places of Islamic preaching and expel the propagators of hate if she was elected (Farand 2017). She even implied that Muslims could be a national security threat for France by considering the possibility that mosques could be used for spying purposes (Viscusi 2017). She criticized former French President Nicholas Sarkozy for establishing the French Council of the Muslim Faith and noted that if she came to power, she would ban the council (Viscusi 2017). After receiving 21.5% of the votes in the first round of the presidential election in April 2017, Le Pen,

on the campaign trail in Paris, spoke in favour of stopping immigration from Muslim countries and for introducing a prohibition on public praying, wearing Islamic symbols and 'halal slaughter' (Jewish Telegraphic Agency 2017).

Alternative for Germany

Although it was established as a party against the EU, especially after the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, Alternative for Germany has shifted its attention to immigration and has started to campaign on fears of the influx of Muslims. In 2017, the co-founder of Alternative for Germany and one of the party's top leaders, Alexander Gauland, explicitly stated that his party targets Islam and immigration (BBC News 2017a). In another statement, Gauland described the immigration of Muslim people as an 'Islamic invasion' and argued that Muslims endanger the 'German way of life' (Friedman 2017). Alice Weidel, another leader of Alternative for Germany, claimed that 'Islam is not a religion like Catholic or Protestant Christianity, but rather always associated intellectually with the takeover of a state' (Scally 2016). In another statement, she went on to argue that Germany was being 'Islamified' and that Alternative for Germany was a bulwark for traditional Christian values (Deutsche Welle 2017b).

In Alternative for Germany's election manifesto, a section was devoted to explaining why 'Islam does not belong to Germany'. As a justification, emphasis was placed on Islam's alleged incompatibility with the Judaeo-Christian and humanist values which the party claimed constituted the backbone of German culture (Alternative for Germany 2017). It claimed that the increasing number of Muslim immigrants posed a threat to German society and values. It stressed the view that Islam, which claimed to be the only true religion, was incompatible with the German legal system and German culture (Alternative for Germany 2017). More specifically, Alternative for Germany considers the minaret to be a symbol of the supremacy of Islam. It is argued that both minarets and the ezan (calls to prayers from minarets) stand in conflict with the peaceful coexistence of religions practised by the Christian churches of modernity (Alternative for Germany 2017).

As a solution to the so-called threat of Islam and Islamization, Alternative for Germany supports a ban on the financing of mosques by Muslim countries and foreign financiers. It argues that, through building mosques, Islamic countries want to spread Islam in Germany which, as a consequence, poses a threat to the liberal constitutional order of Germany (Alternative for Germany 2017). It proposes that imams in Germany should obtain authorization from the German government and preach in German and that imams who give sermons against the liberal constitutional principles of Germany should be banned from preaching and deported (Alternative for Germany 2017).

Alternative for Germany also proposed that centres and institutions for Islamic studies and Qu'ran schools should be closed, in addition to suggesting a ban on wearing the burqa in public spaces and the veil on public services (Alternative for Germany 2017). It also held that Muslim students should not be given special rights for their religion. For example, according to the party, Muslim students have to participate in mandatory events such as sports and school trips, like all other

students. The party also believes that Muslim students and their parents are obliged to respect female teachers who are considered to be representatives of German values and state system (Alternative for Germany 2017).

The Dutch Freedom Party

Even though the leader of the Dutch Freedom Party, Geert Wilders, adopts the view that Islam is not a religion but instead an 'ideology of a backward culture' (Traynor 2008), he creates a fear of Muslims by stating that 'not all Muslims are terrorists, but almost all terrorists are Muslims' (Traynor 2008). In a speech in the UK House of Lords in 2010, Wilders stated:

> Islam strives for world domination. The Quran commands Muslims to exercise jihad. The Quran commands Muslims to establish sharia law. The Quran commands Muslims to impose Islam on the entire world … Islam is … a totalitarian ideology. I believe Islam is not compatible with our Western way of life. Islam is a threat to Western values … Islam and freedom, Islam and democracy are not compatible. …
>
> We see Islam taking off in the West at an incredible pace. Europe is Islamizing rapidly. A lot of European cities have enormous Islamic concentrations. Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels and Berlin are just a few examples. In some parts of these cities, Islamic regulations are already being enforced. Women's rights are being destroyed. Burqas, headscarves, polygamy, female genital mutilation, honor-killings … Women have to go to separate swimming classes, don't get a handshake. In many European cities, there is already apartheid. (Wilders 2010)

In a speech in Bonn, he stated, 'Islam is not a religion; Islam is predominantly an intolerant ideology akin to communism and fascism. Islam is an ideology, because it is more politically than religiously informed and it strives for an Islamic state. Islam is totalitarian because it is not based on volition. It commands that people who leave Islam must be killed' (Parlamentaire Monitor 2013). In 2015, he claimed that 'Our Judeo-Christian culture is far superior to the Islamic one' (Frizell 2015).

As a solution to the perceived threat of an Islamized Europe, Wilders proposed a ban on immigration from Muslim countries. He went on to say, 'We must learn to be intolerant with the intolerant, in the street, in the mosque, in court. We must answer hatred and violence by terrorists with exclusion and intolerance and show who the boss in the Netherlands is' (*NRC* 2005). In another statement, he underlined that 'Islam is something we can't afford any more in the Netherlands. I want the fascist Qur'an banned. We need to stop the Islamisation of the Netherlands. That means no more mosques, no more Islamic schools, no more imams' (Traynor 2008). In 2010 he reiterated his support for the ban on Qu'ran and recommended that headscarved women should pay extra fees (BBC News 2010).

The leaders of the three Islamophobic populist parties examined accentuate we/other distinctions regarding Muslims by portraying them as 'invaders' and

elaborating on the incompatibility of Islam with national and Western values. More specifically, the 'us vs. them' distinction is embedded in cultural and religious differences. Furthermore, these leaders propose specific solutions to prevent the so-called 'Islamization' of their countries, such as banning immigration from Muslim countries, the headscarf, the Qu'ran, closing Qu'ran schools, and so on. Generalizations made regarding Islam and Muslims, the proposals of simple solutions to the so-called threat of Islam (such as banning the headscarf, halting immigration from Muslim countries) exhibit core tenets of populism. The following sections explain how Islamophobic populism functions as a vote-maximization strategy as we look at the dynamics of public opinion in European countries.

The dynamics of Islamophobia in Europe

This article treats Islamophobia as a threat perception that is based on xenophobia and not on 'real-world danger'. More specifically, it adopts the view that Islamophobia is not related to the number of Muslim immigrants. The growing anti-Muslim attitudes in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic (where the Muslim population does not exceed 0.2% of the whole population) is a vivid illustration of this point (Pew Research Center 2015). More strikingly, considering the negligible numbers of Muslims in their country, 72% of Hungarian people have negative views on Muslims, making Hungary the country with the highest degree of Islamophobia in Europe (Wike et al. 2016).

On the other hand, while France, Germany and the Netherlands have much larger Muslim populations (8.8%, 6.1% and 7.1% respectively), less than 20% of the population has anti-Muslim views (Pew Research Center 2018). This fact strengthens the argument that there is no direct relationship between an increase in Islamophobia and a large Muslim population within a country. Indeed, the recent Pew Research Center survey (2018) conducted in Western European countries reveals that personally knowing Muslims increases positive feelings towards them.

Even though there is less Islamophobia in Germany, France and the Netherlands, Islamophobic feelings are on the increase, as evident in the 2017 electoral successes of the National Front, Alternative for Germany and the Dutch Freedom Party. The mass flows of Muslim migrants in Europe (particularly in 2015) arguably contributed to the feelings of anxiety at Muslims in European countries (Kalmar 2018). For example, in Germany, Islamophobic attacks increased from 2015 onwards, reaching a peak in 2017 with 100 attacks on mosques and more than 900 attacks on Muslims (Younes 2018).

Although Islamophobia is increasing in Europe, it is not enough to carry the anti-Islam parties to a political victory. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018) in 2017, the majority of the populations in Western European countries stated that they did not have negative feelings towards Muslims (Pew Research Center 2018). Figure 1 shows the percentage of people in 15 European countries who are willing to accept Muslims as neighbours. On average, 83% of the population in Western European countries is keen to accept Muslims as their neighbours. Only 11% of the population does not want to have Muslim neighbours (with 4% of the population being undecided).

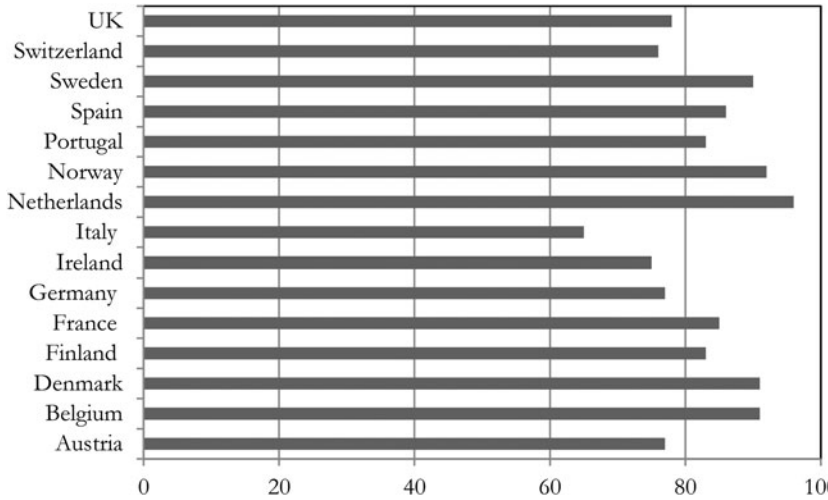

Figure 1. The Percentage of Europeans who Say that They Are Willing to Accept Muslims as Neighbours
Source: Pew Research Center (2018).

Figure 2 shows the percentage of Europeans who are willing to accept Muslims as members of their family. On average, 66% of the population in Western European countries sees no problem in having Muslim family members and 24% of the population does not want to have Muslims as family members (with 10% of the population undecided). Even though the percentage drops from 83% to 66% in terms of having Muslims as neighbours vs. family members, the percentages highlight that more than half of Western Europeans harbour little ill-will towards having Muslims within their spheres.

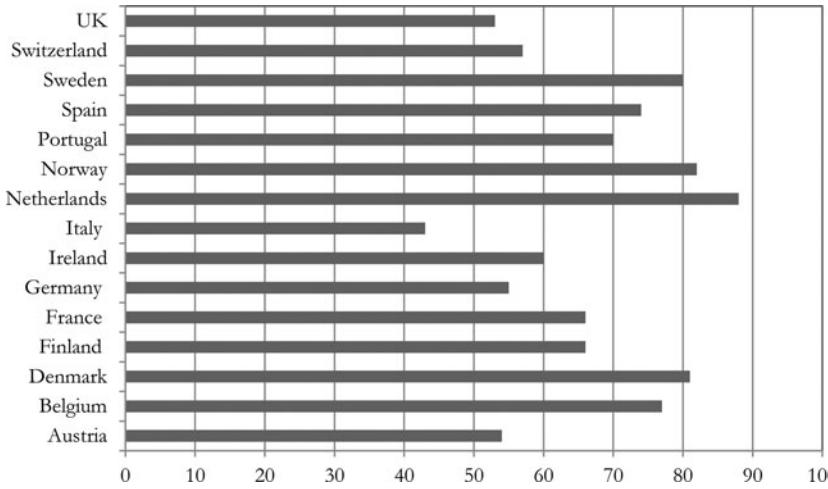

Figure 2. The Percentage of Europeans who Are Willing to Accept Muslims as Family Members
Source: Pew Research Center (2018).

Figure 3 shows the percentage of Europeans who believe Islamic teachings inspire people to become violent. The percentage is slightly higher in Switzerland, Italy and Austria (above 20%). In the rest of the European countries, more than 80% of the population does not see an association between Islamic teachings and violent behaviour.

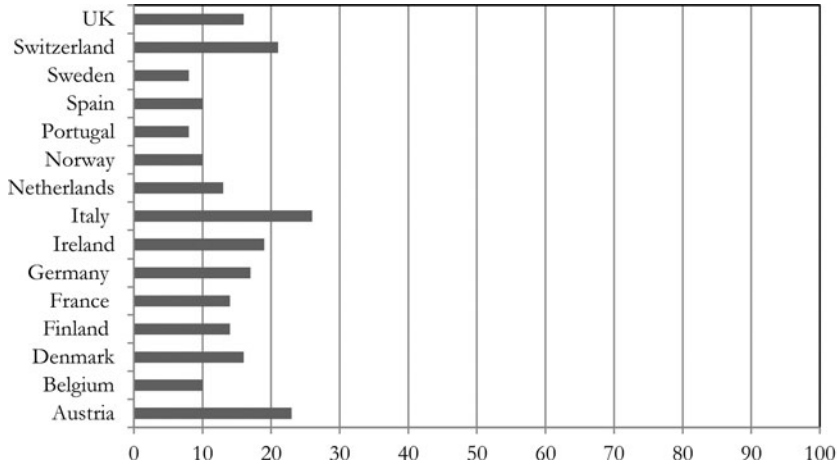

Figure 3. The Percentage of Europeans who Say that Islamic Teachings Promote Violence
Source: Pew Research Center (2018).

To sum up: in 15 European countries examined by the Pew Research Center (2018), Muslims are not viewed in inimical terms by the majority of the population. Except for Switzerland, Italy and Austria, where anti-Islam views are relatively high (above 20%), many Europeans do not carry negative views about Muslims or Islam. Considering the possibility that not all people who carry anti-Islam feelings would vote for anti-Islam parties, fostering anti-Islam feelings by portraying Muslims in inimical terms should not be an effective vote-maximization strategy. The following section explains how anti-Islam political parties' specific solutions regarding Muslims and the visibility of Islam in the public space is used as an electoral strategy that is based on the weakening of their main rivals.

Islamophobia as an electoral strategy

This article hinges on the rational assumption that all parties are interested in maximizing their votes. Nevertheless, political candidates cannot win over all voters as voters will exhibit different characteristics such as religious and ideological affiliations, ethnicity, education and the like (Cwalina et al. 2011). For electoral success, political candidates need vote-maximization strategies that are based on careful assessments of voter preferences and perceptions (Dancycier 2017; Worcester and Mortimore 2005).[6] In this respect, the division of voters into different segments and tailoring political campaigns according to the needs and characteristics of the targeted voters creates a competitive advantage in electoral contests (Baines et al.

2002; Cwalina et al. 2011; Newman 1999). In political campaigns, in addition to specifying voter segments, it is essential for political candidates to identify both their and their opponents' strengths and weaknesses (Cwalina et al. 2011).

In countries with a large Muslim population, it is rational for the leaders of the mainstream political parties which have diverse voter targets not to make blatantly Islamophobic statements in order not to alienate their (potential) Muslim voter base. For example, in response to German Interior Minister Horst Seehofe, who stated, 'Islam does not belong to Germany. Germany is characterized by Christianity', Chancellor Angela Merkel underlined that '[t]hese Muslims are part of Germany and with them, their religion, Islam, is just as much a part of Germany' (quoted in *Local* 2018). French President Emmanuel Macron also refrains from divisive statements and policies. In 2018, in an effort to integrate French Muslims into France, Macron emphasized the necessity of establishing an interlocutor for Muslim immigrants and creating a framework for financing mosques and training imams in France and started the process for the reform of Islamic institutions in France (Alouane 2019).

Unlike mainstream political parties (which have voter segments from a wide array of ideological positioning, ethnicity and the like), Islamophobic populist parties are more likely to target voters clustered more homogeneously (i.e. those with strong anti-Islam and anti-establishment sentiments). As Muslims do not constitute the voter segment of the leaders of anti-Islam political parties, they are not concerned about losing the votes of Muslims. This is well exemplified in Le Pen's statement likening Muslim prayers to Nazi occupying forces (Buchanan 2015), Alternative for Germany's party manifesto that underlined Islam's incompatibility with German values (Alternative for Germany 2017) and Geert Wilders' description of Islam as an intolerant ideology (Parlamentaire Monitor 2013). By portraying Muslims and Islam negatively, anti-Islam political parties reflect an ongoing fear among society and carry the objective of stirring up more fear.

However, as the public opinion survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018) reveals, in many European countries people who have hostile views towards Muslims and Islam make up less than 20% of the population.[7] Currently, all anti-Islam political parties in Europe (except the Freedom Party, which in 2017 became a junior coalition partner of the Austrian government, where the degree of Islamophobia is the highest) are in opposition. Considering the degree of Islamophobia (below 20% in many European countries) and the possibility that not all people who have anti-Islam feelings would vote for an anti-Islam political party, these parties need to win over potential voters from the incumbent party (or their main competitors) who have anti-Islam feelings and who are undecided on the issue. Even though anti-Islam parties have little chance of sweeping to victory compared with mainstream political parties, such a strategy might allow them to enter parliament and even become junior coalition partners.

In this respect, the incumbent leaders' (or anti-Islam parties' main competitors') ambivalent or even positive stance on Muslims (which has the potential to give them a competitive advantage vis-à-vis anti-Islam parties by winning over Muslim votes) becomes a 'weakness' exploited by anti-Islam parties to win over their anti-Islam and indecisive voter base. As documented in our case studies, through simple and specific policy proposals, anti-Islam politicians imply that

the incumbent leaders (or their main competitors) are not interested in tackling their countries' political and social problems.

For example, Le Pen's promises of closing places of Islamic preaching, stopping immigration of Muslims and of placing a ban on wearing the hijab and public praying if she becomes president stand in stark contrast to the moderate policy proposals currently put forward by President Macron (Alouane 2019). Similarly for Alternative for Germany's support for the ban on the financing of mosques by foreign countries, the closure of Islamic centres, institutions and Qur'an schools as well as the restriction of Islamic clothing: the statement by Alice Weidel (one of the leaders of Alternative for Germany) that accentuates Islam's difference from Christianity with its infusion into the political arena contrasts sharply with Merkel's view that sees Islam as a part of Germany (Local 2018; Scally 2016).

Messages of anti-Islam political parties go beyond vilifying Muslims and Islam. They carry the objective of condemning mainstream political parties for turning a blind eye to the problems of ordinary citizens. Through anti-Islam policy proposals, leaders of anti-Islam parties present themselves as true representatives of the people and convey the idea that if their rival is elected or re-elected, problems of Islam and Islamization will continue.

The strategic logic of Islamophobic populism is as follows: the policy solutions of anti-Islam political parties are presented as a stark contrast to the 'lack of agenda' of the mainstream political parties. As such, through specific proposals, anti-Islam parties aim to stimulate distrust of the mainstream political parties by presenting them as uninterested in or incapable of taking effective measures against Muslims. While leaders of anti-Islam political parties indirectly attack their rivals by presenting them as ineffective decision-makers through their policy proposals, these attacks can also be explicitly seen in their other statements. For example, before the 2017 presidential elections in France, Le Pen noted that Islamic fundamentalism poses a great danger for France and accused her main competitor, Emmanuel Macron, of showing an 'indulgent attitude' towards the issue (Viscusi 2017). In a similar vein, before the 2017 parliamentary elections, Wilders accused Prime Minister Mark Rutte of neglecting the needs of the Dutch and being the prime minister of 'foreigners' (Batchelor 2017).

In addition to their discriminatory attitude towards Islamic practices, the National Front, Alternative for Germany and the Dutch Freedom Party converge in their opposition to Muslim immigration. Their proposal for a ban on Muslim immigration is rationalized by accentuating Islam's harmful effects on society. For instance, Le Pen focused on the inherent incompatibility between French and Muslim cultures and underlined that there were terrorists among immigrants (Staff 2016). Gauland likened Muslim immigration to an 'Islamic invasion' and noted that Muslims threaten the 'German way of life' (Friedman 2017). Similarly, Wilders supported the ban on Muslim immigration by focusing on the necessity of becoming 'intolerant with the intolerant' (*NRC* 2005).[8]

By calling for a Muslim immigration ban, Islamophobic parties imply that mainstream parties adopt an indulgent attitude towards Muslims and as such are responsible for the accelerating process of Islamization. For example, in 2015, Frauke Petry, the co-chair of Alternative for Germany, called for the resignation of Chancellor Merkel due to her handling of the refugee crisis (Deutsche Welle 2015). Before the

2017 parliamentary elections, Wilders accused Dutch Prime Minister Rutte of prioritizing the needs of asylum seekers (Batchelor 2017) and called him 'the man of open borders, the asylum tsunami, mass immigration, Islamization, lies and deception' (quoted in Deutsche Welle 2017c). Before the 2017 presidential elections, Le Pen attacked the presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron by accusing him of being weak on jihadi terror and went on to say: '[Macron] is for total open borders. He says there is no such thing as French culture. There is not one area where he shows one ounce of patriotism' (Henley 2017b).

This article has argued that Islamophobic populism not only targets Islam and the Muslim community, but it is also strategically used to hold incumbent leaders responsible for their inaction in the face of the imminent dangers represented by Islam and the Muslims. In other words, Islamophobic populism functions as a vote-maximization strategy orchestrated by anti-Islam political parties in order to win over the voters of the incumbent leaders (or their main competitors) by presenting them as disregarding ordinary citizens' problems.

Conclusion

Nationalistic sentiments triggered by a strong reaction against globalization, immigration and the democracy deficit in the EU have created conditions conducive to the rise of Islamophobic populism in Europe. While Islamophobic populism has an ideational dimension by providing a stark contrast between Western and Islamic values, it is not limited to a distinctive cluster of cultural codes. Islamophobic populism is not only a mobilization strategy aimed at excluding the visibility and even the practice of Islam in European societies. Neither is it an electoral strategy that only appeals to people who have hostile feelings towards Islam. In this article, we have shown that Islamophobic populism also functions as an electoral strategy manipulated by anti-Islam parties to gain a competitive advantage vis-à-vis the incumbent leaders (or their main competitors) in electoral contests. In other words, an irrational hostility towards Muslims at the societal level can be manipulated as a rational electoral strategy.

Islamophobic populism not only has negative repercussions at the societal level by encouraging exclusion and discrimination against Muslims; it also poses a threat to mainstream politics. By presenting Muslims and Islam as threats that should be tackled urgently, leaders of anti-Islam political parties force their opponents into a reactive mode. Electoral successes of anti-Islam political parties further compel mainstream parties to choose between winning over either anti-Muslim or Muslim voters.

Incumbent leaders respond differently to the rising Islamophobia in their societies. For example, while Chancellor Merkel and President Macron do not adopt divisive language regarding Islam and Muslims, the Dutch Prime Minister Rutte adopted an anti-Islam rhetoric in a bid to win over anti-Muslim voters. Before the 2017 parliamentary elections, he published an open letter in several newspapers, indicating that '[p]eople who refuse to adapt, and criticize our values should behave normally or go away … We must actively defend our values' (quoted in Henley 2017a). He also made a more provocative statement by drawing an analogy between the ezan and whiny music (*Express* 2017). Nonetheless, despite displaying a certain degree of Islamophobic sentiment, Rutte did not go so far as to suggest extreme

solutions. He evaluated Wilders' suggestion of banning Muslim immigration and the Qu'ran and closing mosques as fake solutions (Batchelor 2017).

Future studies can examine in more detail to what extent public attitudes against Islam and the electoral success of anti-Islam politics influence incumbent leaders' reactions and electoral strategies. The rise of Islamophobic populism also raises important questions regarding the position of Muslims in European societies. Researchers can examine how Islamophobic populism affects Muslims' voting behaviour, the processes of their integration into European societies and their advancement within the political sphere. Lobbying activities of Muslim-run civil society organizations in Europe against the rising Islamophobia constitute another interesting avenue for future research.

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Notes

1 The rise in anti-Islam sentiments also provided permissive conditions for the emergence of anti-Islam social movements. For example, Pegida, an anti-Islam social movement in Germany, was founded in Dresden in 2014. Since then, it has organized marches and protests across the country against what it calls 'Islamization of the West' (Deutsche Welle 2017a). Inspired by Pegida in Germany, Pegida Austria emerged in 2015 (Hafez 2016). Pegida-inspired marches were also organized by far right groups in France, the Netherlands, Ireland and Sweden. Interestingly, despite the relatively high level of Islamophobia in Austrian society, Pegida Austria was less successful as a social movement as compared with Pegida in Germany. Hafez (2016) ascribes this to the dominant role the Freedom Party plays in Austrian politics.

2 It should be specified that Islamophobia is not idiosyncratic to European countries. In 1997, anti-Islam issues were centre-stage in the campaign trail of India's nationalist party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). See Halliday (1999). A certain degree of Islamophobia also exists in China and some African countries (Shryock 2010).

3 In addition, national-, district- and individual-level factors have an impact on support for anti-Islam parties. According to the Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2016, men, the less educated and Catholics were more likely to support the National Front (Wike 2017). According to a study conducted by Giebler and Reger (2018), women and the highly educated are more likely to support Alternative for Germany. In addition, district-level factors (such as high unemployment and a lower number of foreign nationals in districts) are found to have a positive impact on the support for the party. Interestingly, a study by Damstra et al. (2019) finds a positive relationship between immigration news and support for the Dutch Freedom Party.

4 Similarities in anti-Islam discourses between our selected cases and other anti-Islam political parties in Europe (such as the Danish People's Party, Swiss People's Party, Austria's Freedom Party, the Northern League) allow us to generalize our argument to the larger population.

5 The aim of this article is not to identify the causal factors that led to the electoral successes of anti-Islam political parties in Europe or the rise of Islamophobia in general. Rather, our aim is to explain the contextual dimension of Islamophobic populism. More specifically, Islamophobic discourses employed by populist right-wing parties are analysed in order to provide an insight into how Islamophobia functions as a vote-maximization strategy.

6 In her analysis of political parties in Austria, Belgium, Britain and Germany, Dancycier (2017) shows that political parties might deviate from their traditional standpoints when they assess significant vote losses.

7 We underline that this percentage is determined by the responses of survey participants to a particular set of questions. Discriminatory practices in workplaces, schools and negative coverage of Muslims in media point to a much deeper anti-Muslim prejudice in European countries. See, for instance, Bayraklı and Hafez (2019).

8 Importantly, these statements reveal the porosity of anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and hyper-nationalist arguments.

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