A note on this project:

My colleague Annika Werner and I are doing a book project about radical right populist parties at EU level. As part of this, we seek to understand why they form the groups they do in the European Parliament. We'll have three separate chapters in the book on the ENF group (the subject of this paper), the EFDD and the ECR. For the benefit of the reader, I've included some material in the early sections of this paper that will be in an earlier chapter of the book (e.g. existing theoretical explanations of why groups form in the European Parliament). This is obviously 'work in progress' so we really welcome any comments you might have about content, style, structure etc.

Best wishes

Duncan

An International and Transnational Populist Radical Right:
The Europe of Nations and Freedom Group

Parties elected to the European Parliament (EP) tend to sit in long-standing groups with those parties from other countries, which most closely resemble them ideologically. Hence, the German Christian Democrats are in the European People's Party (EPP) group alongside other centre-right parties such as the Spanish People's Party and the French Republicans. Likewise, we find UK Labour and the German Social Democrats together with centre-left parties from across Europe in the Party of European Socialists (PES), while those parties further to the Left such as Syriza from Greece and Sinn Féin from Ireland are instead together in the European United Left group. This alliance logic of 'policy congruence' (McElroy and Benoit 2010, 2011), has applied to all ideological party types in the European parliament except one: radical right populists. Unlike any other type, these parties have long been seen as 'unlikely bedfellows' (Fieschi 2000; Startin 2010). They have usually either been dispersed into small, short-lived ideologically heterogeneous EP groups that are 'marriages of convenience' to secure EP funding or they have been consigned to isolation among the Non-Inscrits (non-aligned). Of the few EP groups that have had radical right populists among their leading founding members, none have survived intact beyond a single legislature (and others have survived much less). Minkenberg and Perrineau (2007: 51) thus concluded a decade ago about radical right populists in the EP that 'there is nothing more difficult to establish than an international group of nationalists'.

This has changed in the current parliament. While disunity among radical right populist (RRP) parties does persist, more of them than ever before are now allied in the new group Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF).[1] Created in June 2015, the ENF has brought the French Front National (FN), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the Italian Lega Nord (LN), the Flemish Vlaams Belang (VB) and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) together in a single EP group for the first time.[2] Moreover, unlike previous groups containing some of these

---

parties, or the current heterogeneous European of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group which includes radical right populists of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Sweden Democrats, the ENF alliance appears to be much more than a 'marriage of convenience' (McDonnell and Werner 2017). Instead, it extends beyond the confines of the Brussels and Strasbourg parliaments: for example, leaders of the main five parties have spoken at each other's national congresses and held high-profile meetings around Europe at which they have discussed lasting co-operation and shared key issues such as opposition to immigration and the European Union (EU).

The creation of the ENF raises several inter-related questions: Firstly, why have these parties come together now? Does this signal their increased closeness on key issues, in line with policy congruence theory? Or are there other relevant strategic factors? Secondly, how have these parties squared Minkenberg and Perrineau's 'international group of nationalists' circle? In other words, how do they reconcile the strong defence and exaltation of their national interests and identities with their new international co-operation both inside and outside the European Parliament? Thirdly, given that radical right populist parties have generally been reluctant to publicly identify with one another and several of those now in the ENF have found prior attempts at European level co-operation impossible, what does their new alliance mean for radical right populism in Europe?

This paper seeks to answer those questions. Having outlined the history of radical right populist attempts at European Parliament co-operation and how such co-operation has been treated in the literature, we discuss the main existing explanations of group formation in the EP, notably policy congruence. Based on an analysis of Chapel Hill expert survey data on the ENF parties' positions over time and our interviews with their national and European-level elites, we then examine the drivers of this group's formation. We find that the parties have long held broadly compatible positions on immigration, European integration, and social and economic left-right issues. In other words, while the creation of the ENF fits the 'policy congruence' theory, according to that theory the same parties should have been together in the past too. Rather, what the expert survey data does show is that the salience of these parties' opposition to European integration has increased considerably between 2009 and 2014, thus making it more urgent (and justifiable) for them to band together at European

---

possibility of having co-operated or not in the past with the ENF parties, we do not discuss them either here.

level. Our interview data builds on this. Firstly, we find that the ENF represents a 'coming of age' for these parties. It reflects the desire (long-held among some) to create a lasting radical right populist group made up of parties unashamed of their commonalities and unafraid of adverse domestic media reactions to their European partners. Secondly, our interviews point to the importance of specific party leaders and leadership change in facilitating the creation of the ENF, in particular Marine Le Pen replacing her father as FN leader. Finally, and linking back to the greater salience of European integration shown by the expert survey data, we find that the ENF parties see themselves now not only as defenders of their own nations, but also of a wider 'European' people against the threats posed by elites and 'others'. The ENF, we argue, thus bridges what Moffitt (2017: 2) terms *international populism*, in which there are 'international ties between populist actors who are concerned with representing firmly nation-based conceptions of "the people"', and *transnational populism*, in which the people that populists appeal to and claim to speak for goes 'beyond the borders of the nation-state'.

RADICAL RIGHT POPULISTS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Radical right populist parties are said to share key positions on nativism and authoritarianism (Art 2011; Mudde 2007). In other words, they claim that non-natives are threatening the values, identities, and rights of the 'real' people and they call for tougher law and order measures. As right-wing *populist* parties, they present a Manichean view of society in which a virtuous and homogeneous 'people' is under siege from above by corrupt and distant elites (political, financial, media etc.) and, from below, by a series of 'others' whose identities, beliefs or behaviours place them outside 'the people' (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015: 5-6). Having established their 'people' and its enemies, populists cast themselves as being on a mission to return the sovereignty usurped by elites to its true owner, the people. As Kriesi (2014: 363) puts it: 'the central populist message is that politics has escaped popular control and that popular control has to be restored'. It is therefore not surprising that RRP parties in Western Europe all espouse Eurosceptic positions, with the EU offering an easily constructed set of 'anti-democratic elites' to rail against.

Despite this apparently ample common ground, co-operation between RRP parties in the EP has been far more limited than that among other party families (Mudde 2007: 177–81). This has been for reasons of sheer lack of numbers (especially in earlier years), conflicting national interests, and fears about being tainted by association (Fieschi 2000; Minkenberg

and Perrineau, 2007; Startin 2010). As Fieschi (2000: 518) observed: 'the difficulties encountered in attempts to form parliamentary groups are indicative of the primacy of nationalisms which undermine any potential for ideological alliances'. Similarly, when discussing the potential for radical right collaboration at European level in the aftermath of the 2004 EP elections, Minkenberg and Perrineau (2007: 50) concluded that: 'the divergent nationalistic agendas (characteristic of the radical right) make it very difficult, if not impossible, for a unified nationalist and euro-skeptic pole to emerge in the European Parliament'.

These difficulties have been compounded by the perceived domestic reputational risks of European level cooperation for radical right populists, especially those seeking to moderate their image at national level and/or to enter national governments via coalitions. For example, Fieschi (2000) and Startin (2010) note how the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) avoided allying with other radical right parties such as the French Front National (FN) in the late 1990s, due to the FPÖ's goal of being accepted as a potential coalition partner by the centre-right after the 1999 general election. We can see the same dynamics at work, particularly vis-à-vis FN for other radical right populist parties, which have either been in government, or were seeking co-operation, with mainstream parties. For example, the founder-leader of the Italian Lega Nord, Umberto Bossi (at the time a minister in the Berlusconi-led centre-right coalition), declared in 2002: 'We are the opposite of Le Pen and anyone who compares us is a lowlife' (*Corriere della Sera* 2002). Similarly, Geert Wilders, whose party would subsequently prop up a minority centre-right government from 2010 to 2012 in exchange for policy concessions, stated in 2008: 'My allies are not Le Pen or Haider' (*The Guardian* 2008) Discussing why some European radical right populists shunned others, Almeida (2010: 246-47) concluded that radical right cooperation at the European level is

> 'a strategy [that] implies a public disclosure of affinities with other radical right parties. While membership in a radical right political group opens the possibility to frame policy preferences in a European context and to maximize resources and visibility in the EP, it represents a costly strategy in terms of domestic legitimacy'.

The pessimism among scholars surrounding the feasibility and durability of radical right EP groups appeared confirmed by the experience of the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty EP Group in the 2004-2009 Parliament. Containing the Front National, Vlaams Belang, and Austrian Freedom Party (by now out of government and not seeking mainstream partners), along with a mixed collection of far-right MEPs, this group lasted only from January to

November 2007 before splitting (Almeida, 2010; Startin, 2010). Moreover, in the subsequent 2009-14 legislature, the FN, VB, FPÖ and PVV each remained on their own in the Non-Inscrits group for the full five years. In the run-up to the 2014 EP elections, however, the prospect of a group containing many of the major Western European radical right populist parties appeared achievable for the first time. In the 18 months beforehand, the Front National, the Dutch Party of Freedom, the Lega Nord, the Vlaams Belang and the Austrian Freedom Party all committed to forming a common group in the next legislature. After the election, these parties easily had the required 25 MEPs to create a group (see Table 1 below). But, since EP groups must also include MEPs from at least seven different member states, they were short of two country delegations. Of the four other radical right populist parties with MEPs – Danish People's Party, Sweden Democrats, Finns Party and UKIP – only the Sweden Democrats were willing to conduct preliminary talks about joining (Bolin 2015: 70–2). The SD decided not to pursue this option due to the perceived domestic costs and, after not being accepted into the ECR, joined the EFDD group being put together by UKIP (McDonnell and Werner 2017). The putative ENF group thus failed to achieve the seven-country requirement in 2014 but eventually managed to do so in June 2015, creating the ENF.[3]

Table 1: The Five Core Members of the ENF

Party	Country	% Vote in 2014	MEPs*
Front National	France	25	23
Lega Nord	Italy	6.2	5
Freedom Party	Austria	20	4
Party for Freedom	Netherlands	13.3	3
Vlaams Belang	Belgium	4.3	1

Note: The figures for MEPs refer to the number each party had at the beginning of the legislature in June 2014. Since then, some of these have changed slightly (for example, the FN's number of MEPs had declined to 17 by October 2017). There are a number of other MEPs (not listed above) in the ENF group, giving it a total of 9 country delegations. These include two from the Polish Congress of the New Right (which no longer exists in any meaningful form outside the EP), 1 from the German AfD, and 2 Independents from the UK and Romania.

Source: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html

---

[3] In order to make up the 7-country requirement for EP groups, the ENF in June 2015 also included the former UKIP MEP, Janice Atkinson and two MEPs from the Polish Congress of the New Right. The following month, it added an MEP from Romania. In July 2016, Marcus Pretzell of the AFD left the ECR and joined the ENF. Since then, the AFD has hosted the main party leaders of the ENF in Koblenz in January 2017, indicating that – like the five parties we focus on – it too views the relationship with the ENF parties as extending beyond the EP.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT GROUP FORMATION

How can we explain the EP alliance behaviour of radical right populist parties? Scholars examining why parties (of all ideological types) form groups in the EP have looked in particular at 'policy' and 'office' motivations. Most notably, McElroy and Benoit (2010, 2011) show that groups are cohesive in their policy positions and distinct from each other. They therefore conclude that 'policy congruence is far and away the single most important driving factor guiding national parties in their decisions to join transnational party groups' (McElroy and Benoit 2010: 397). Bressanelli (2012) and Whitaker and Lynch (2014), who use different data and analysis methods, come to similar conclusions for the group alliances adopted by Western European parties after the 2009 EP elections. Likewise, Maurer et al. (2008: 251–2) find that, in most cases, 'parties will choose to join the largest group that broadly shares its socioeconomic preferences'.

While the above studies agree that policy congruence is the key driver of alliances, research on EP groups has also considered office-type motivations. Although parties cannot win governmental participation at EU level, the most influential positions within the EP (chairs and rapporteurs) are allocated through the parliamentary groups. These are among a range of advantages that group membership brings, along with speaking time in the Parliament and financial resources (Settembri 2004). Bressanelli (2012) concludes that such spoils can also influence a party's decision to join a particular EP group, while Whitaker and Lynch (2014: 258) discuss how UKIPs decision to form the EFD in 2009 was mainly based on securing these resources and publicity. Fitzgibbon and Leruth (2017: 167) concur, arguing that what co-operation there has been between right-wing Eurosceptic parties in the EP has generally been based 'on purely strategic and utilitarian concerns. Right-wingers wanted the resources that forming an EP group provided'.

However, while office can help explain why the ENF parties might have been attracted to the idea of forming a group in general, it cannot account for why they would so publicly promote it beyond the EP. This is not to say that institutional incentives did not play a role in the aim of forming a group, rather that this factor does not explain the timing of the formation. The rules of distributing EP resources have not changed in any way that would increase the incentive to form a group in comparison to previous legislatures. In other words, the ENF is unlikely to be purely a 'marriage of convenience' to secure the spoils of group membership in

the way that the UKIP-led EFDD (McDonnell and Werner, 2017; Whitaker and Lynch, 2014). The spoils of group formation are unchanged and can, thus, not explain the change of behaviour of the ENF parties.

In order to test whether policy congruence theory can explain why the FN, FPÖ, PVV, LN and VB formed the ENF in 2015 and/or why they did not previously ally, we use party position data from the 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 waves of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015).[4] Specifically, we compare the parties' positions on two key RRP policy areas, immigration and Euroscepticism, in addition to the social and economic left–right dimensions, which structure the space of European party competition in general (Marks et al. 2006). We also consider the salience that parties attribute to these issues.[5] Thereafter, we consider the logics and processes leading to EP alliances that emerge from our elite interview data. We conducted a first round of interviews in June–July 2014 in the immediate aftermath of the EP elections and a second round when the ENF group was created in June 2015. In total, we did 12 semi-structured interviews with current and former MEPs from the five core ENF parties, in addition to national level MPs and key party officials whom we knew (either from media reports or other interviewees) would be able to shed light on the logics underpinning their parties' EP alliance strategies.[6] As part of our wider study of right-wing populist alliances in the EP, we also spoke to similar figures from RRP parties that did not join the ENF: namely, UKIP, the Sweden Democrats, the Danish People's Party and the Finns Party. Interviewees were asked to discuss the evolution of their parties' positions on the EU and European integration, the alliances their parties had formed (in the past and present), the processes that led to these, and their views on the desirability of other radical right populist parties as partners.

---

[4] CHES provides a data set with expert evaluations of party positions and saliences regarding multiple policy issues and dimensions, including towards the EU, immigration and left-right. Multiple experts evaluate each party at particular points in time and the final positions are the average evaluations (Bakker et al. 2015).
[5] We cross-checked the results based on the CHES data for Euroscepticism and immigration with the data from the Euromanifesto project (EES 2015; Braun et al. 2015). We do not cross-check the left-right positions as their composition is not comparable to the CHES positions. The respective figures and tables in the Appendix show that while the Euromanifesto data finds substantially more variation between the eventual ENF parties, there is no general trend towards more coherence over time.
[6] Our interviews with the ENF parties were divided as follows. FN (3): 2 MEPs and one senior advisor/official; VB (2): 1 MEP and the party leader; LN (3): 1 current MEP and two former MEPs; FPÖ (3): 1 former MEP, 1 MP and 1 senior European-level advisor. The PVV does not speak to academics, however we were able to conduct an extensive interview with the former PVV MEP (2009-14), Lucas Hartong, in 2015. ENF interviews were conducted in Brussels, Strasbourg, Vienna and Milan.

RADICAL RIGHT POPULIST BIRDS OF A FEATHER?

According to the standard policy congruence theory of EP group formation discussed earlier, the main driver of parties cooperating is their positional fit. Therefore, this section focuses on two questions: First, how well do the parties of the ENF fit together? Second, can we find any reasons in the five parties' positions over time that would explain why they did not align earlier? With the exception of the PVV, which was only founded in 2006, we analyse the five main ENF parties over the four sets of EP elections from 1999 up to 2014. This long time frame allows us to investigate both the congruence in 2014 and whether there were any obvious positional reasons not to cooperate earlier.

Figure 1 shows the party positions and saliences regarding European integration, with higher values denoting more supportive positions and higher saliences. We find that the five ENF parties are spread between negative positions around 3 to a very negative position of 1, with a tendency towards the very negative end of the scale. At the extreme, PVV and FN are located constantly around the most negative position of 1. The Lega Nord has moved gradually from a less extreme negative position in 1999 to the extreme end in 2014. The FPÖ made a jump to the negative extreme between 1999 and 2004 but has stayed stable since then. Only the VB remained between positions 2 and 3, which is understandable given that this party is located in the country hosting the European Union and where the EU is a strong economic driver.

Figure 1: Development of the parties in ENF over time, European integration
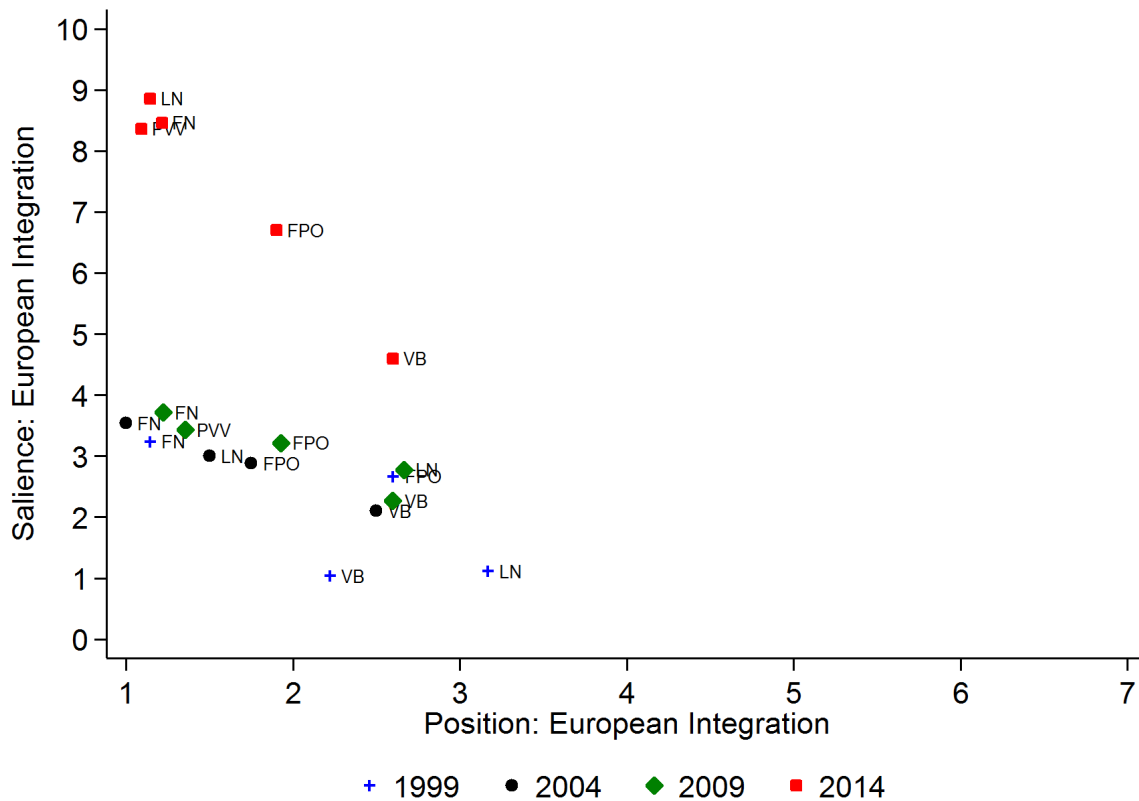
While the salience of European integration was low or moderate for all five parties up to 2009, we find a strong increase in 2014. The average salience was 7.4 in 2014, while it ranged between 2.0 and 3.2 in the four previous elections. The following table shows the standard deviations of European integration positions and saliences for all four EP elections. The standard deviation is a simple measure for how diverse the positions and saliences are within the group.

Table 1 shows that the five parties are in consensus about their positions on European integration. This used to be true for the salience of European integration as well; however, we find a strong increase in the standard deviation and, thus, in heterogeneity in 2014. This can be explained in Figure 1, where we see that the salience increased a lot for all ENF parties. This finding is, however, not specific to the ENF. Comparing the mean salience of all parties included in the CHES data set for 2009 and 2014, we find a general increase of salience from 2.82 (2009, N = 137) to 5.9 (2013, N = 122). This increased salience, likely caused by the EU crisis, might have been a facilitator for the formation of the ENF group as it makes a strong unified Eurosceptic group a timelier project. We will come back to this point below.

Table 1: Group agreement in each year on European integration, standard deviations

Year	EU position	EU salience	N
2014	0.65	1.76	5
2009	0.67	0.57	5
2004	0.63	0.59	4
1999	0.85	1.11	4

Error! Reference source not found. 2 shows the five parties on their position regarding immigration policy. Higher values in the position scores mean that the parties prefer a more restrictive immigration policy, with 10 as the maximum. We find little change among the positions regarding immigration, with the parties consistently favouring very restrictive immigration policies. Table 2 also shows that the standard deviations between the party positions are consistently very low, indicating little disagreement. Furthermore, CHES experts were asked to either evaluate the salience of immigration or name the three most important policies for each party. In both measurements, immigration was ranked as very salient and the most important issue for all five main ENF parties. Thus, we find general strong agreement on this issue among these parties.

Table 2: Party positions on immigration policy

Year	VB	LN	FPÖ	FN	PVV	Standard deviation
2014	9.6	8.4	9.5	9.8	9.8	0.62
2009	9.7	9.9	9.3	9.7	9.9	0.23
2004	10	8.9	9.8	*		0.56

Note: While Front National is part of the 2005 Chapel Hill data set, there is no immigration position available.

Thus, on Euroscepticism and immigration, the five ENF parties fit well together, confirming the general theory of policy congruence. While we do see some convergence of the Eurosceptic positions over time, the data presented here indicates that the change is from high congruence to even higher congruence. In other words, there is no obvious outlier or heterogeneity that would explain why the group did not form earlier.

Figure 2: Development of the parties in ENF over time, left-right positions.
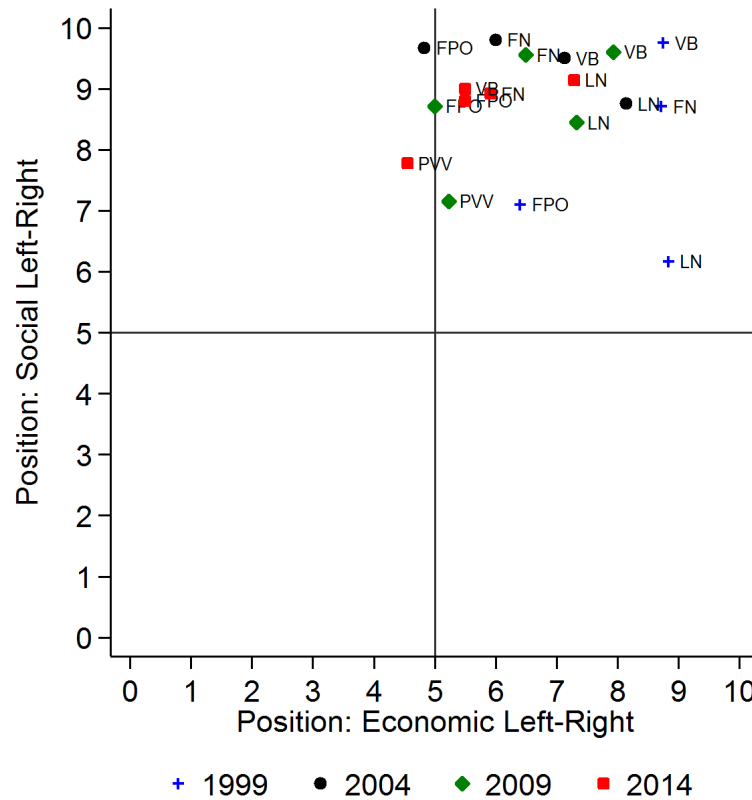
The picture with regard to the party positions on the generic economic and social left-right dimensions is slightly more mixed. Figure 2 shows that all five parties constantly occupied the upper-right corner of both economic and social right positions but with more intra-group variation than on European integration or immigration. On the social dimension, all parties are located clearly in the conservative camp. While there was clear distance between LN and VB in 1999, the parties have converged on the upper end of the scale over time. On the economic dimension, we also find some heterogeneity and a general move to the left, as the 2014 positions indicate. In particular, both the PVV and the FPÖ crossed into the left space of the economic left-right dimension. These two parties as well as Front National generally took positions close to the centre of the scale in multiple years. Vlaams Belang and Lega Nord, on the other hand, are more consistently economically right wing but have still moved slightly to the left over time. These findings are in line with recent work showing how radical right populist parties increasingly adopt socio-economic positions to the left of mainstream right-wing competitors (Roth et al 2017).

Table 3: Group agreement (standard deviations) in each year on two left-right dimensions

Year	Economic left-right	Social left-right	N
2014	1.00	0.55	5
2009	1.28	1.00	5
2004	1.43	0.47	4
1999	1.18	1.60	4

With regard to the heterogeneity of positions that the five parties take, Table 3 shows a certain degree of convergence on each dimension with both standard deviations smallest in 2014. While the four or five parties spread over about three scale points in 1999 and 2004, the dispersion decreased dramatically, especially on the social left-right dimension. With the exception of social policies in 2014, these standard deviations are two to three times larger than those for European integration and immigration above. However, given that both scales have an 11-point range this is still not a large spread. The parties that now form the ENF have always held positions that are very close to at least some of the other member parties.

The five main ENF parties confirm the part of the congruence hypothesis that parties with similar policy profiles form EP parliamentary groups. They are consistent in their positions and saliences on European integration and immigration, which are defining policies of radical right parties. While there is slightly more incongruence regarding the positions on the economic and social left-right dimensions, there is no obvious misfit on these aggregate positions either. However, the longitudinal data examined here does not provide an explanation for why the ENF has only formed now. It does, however, point to the possibility of a shared increased salience of European integration as an issue in 2014 providing a platform for greater co-operation to combat this.

THE 'COMING OF AGE' OF THE ENF

This leaves us with the question: Other than the increased salience of European integration in 2014, if there were no policy positions impeding their forming an alliance previously, why did the five ENF parties decide to form a group now? A first obvious explanation is that they

have had the numbers to do so in the current legislature. Nonetheless, we know that previous attempts of the FN and VB to form groups with like-minded parties even when the required numbers might have been available either failed or did not last very long (Startin and Brack 2017: 30-37). We also know that the LN, the PVV and the FPÖ had – on specific occasions or consistently – shunned alliances with some or all of their ENF partners (especially FN) due to their feat of domestic audience costs (Fieschi 2000). So, if it is not a newfound policy convergence that has caused change or simply a question of numbers, how do we explain the ENF? From our interviews with MEPs, MPs and senior advisors from the ENF parties, we identify three main explanatory factors: (1) Party leadership, especially leadership change; (2) the desire to move beyond the fear of domestic audience costs (especially media criticism) deriving from each other's reputations and instead finally create a lasting international radical right populist group that is unashamed of its commonalities; (3) the squaring of Minkenberg and Perrineau's 'international group of nationalists' circle by focusing on the common *transnational* mission of defending Europe and its peoples against elites and dangerous 'others'.

Party Leadership

This explanation has two strands: (1) leadership change, especially in the Front National with Marine Le Pen, but also Matteo Salvini in the Lega Nord; (2) the capacity of leaders such as Geert Wilders (but, again, also Salvini) to decide and impose party strategy. Let us take the three leaders in turn.

As we found in our earlier study of the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party, UKIP and the Sweden Democrats, being associated in any way with Jean-Marie Le Pen and, in particular, his anti-Semitism, was still a strong deterrent for some radical right populist parties in 2014 (McDonnell and Werner 2017). This held true despite Marine Le Pen having taken over as FN leader in 2011. As a senior UKIP official told us: 'The problem is not Marine Le Pen. The problem is not Marine Le Pen's policies. The problem is when you say "Front National", people immediately think of Jean-Marie Le Pen and all that associated history and his comments over the years'. Marine Le Pen's main European-level advisor, Ludovic de Danne acknowledged as much when discussing with us why the Sweden Democrats did not join the ENF, saying: 'I think the reality is that they don't want to mix with Jean-Marie Le Pen'. For the other ENF parties however, the FN leadership change and Marine Le Pen's

dédiabolisation ('detoxifying') of the party's image, appears more significant. For example, Gerolf Annemans (current MEP and former leader of the Vlaams Belang) told us 'I join Marine Le Pen, not the father, to show you exactly what I mean'. Similarly, Johannes Hubner, responsible for European and Foreign Policy of the Austrian Freedom Party, said: 'I don't think that it's in any way justified to call the Front National an anti-Semitic party, it's not true, it's definitely not true. That's not their program, it's not Marine's program'.

The FN leadership change also helps explain why the strongly pro-Israel leader of the PVV, Geert Wilders, who – as we noted earlier – had previously repeatedly refuted any association with Jean-Marie Le Pen, could now consider pursuing an alliance with them. Wilders' control of his party and its strategy is also relevant to understanding how the ENF came about. As the former PVV MEP from 2009-2014, Lucas Hartong, explained, the PVV MEPs in that legislature had largely favoured allying with the UKIP-led EFD group, which they had been invited to join in 2011 before Wilders vetoed the move. According to Hartong, the leader's decision then in late 2013 to pursue an alliance with Front National came as an unwelcome surprise due to the FN's reputation among the PVV's MEPS and within the Netherlands.[7] However, given Wilder's domination of the PVV (de Lange and Art 2011), he did not have to consult about the new alliance and had no difficulty implementing it.

Leadership change and the role of the leader are also important in explaining the Lega Nord's move to the ENF. Firstly, from the moment the new leader Matteo Salvini took office in 2013, he openly pursued contacts with the ENF parties, inviting Annemans (VB), de Danne (FN), Wilders (PVV) and the FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache to speak at the LN party conference in December that year.[8] This was despite the fact that the LN at the time was still formally allied with the EFD group in the European Parliament. From a policy perspective, Salvini's toning down of the LN's regionalist, anti-centralist stance also made it easier to ally with the strongly centralist and nationalist FN. Like Wilders and the PVV delegation, Salvini did not discuss the new alliance with most of the 2009-2014 LN EP delegation. As the LN

---

[7] Hartong resigned from the PVV in 2014 because of the new alliance and the anti-Semitic reputation of some of the ENF parties. In our interview, he explained: 'Marine Le Pen is not a bad woman I think. She is different from her father, but her father is a very anti-Semitic person. That for me was a red flag and also the FPÖ from Austria was founded by some former Nazis and still there's a very strong undercurrent in - within the party that is very focused against Israel, against Jewish people'.
[8] See, for example, the speech by Geert Wilders at the conference:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arCuDYdEU_8&ab_channel=LegaNordPadania

delegation leader in the EP at the time, Francesco Speroni, explained to us: 'No, we were not consulted…I was just presented with it as a decision, that's how it happened'. In sum, the flexibility enjoyed by radical right populist leaders to change party strategy swiftly appears important to understanding how and why the ENF alliance came about when it did.

An International Populist Radical Right

While party leadership changes and dynamics are part of the short-term explanations for why the alliance happened when it did, our interview data also shows how the ENF's creation reflects the culmination of a desire (long-held among some) to create a lasting international radical right populist group made up of parties unashamed of their commonalities and unafraid of domestic media reactions to their European partners. Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Gollnisch within the FN had been prominent advocates of greater links between radical right populist parties in the 2000s, but they were not the only ones. In particular, we found that the former MEPs Andreas Molzer of the Austrian Freedom Party and Fiorello Provera of the Lega Nord had been working for many years behind the scenes to counter what Molzer described to us as the 'reciprocal marginalization of the marginalized' and to lay the groundwork for future co-operation. As Molzer explained:

> 'These parties are isolated and labelled as "extreme right" and, if they have contacts at European level, they [the establishment and media] try to hinder that by saying that the other parties of the democratic European Right are 'extremist' or 'antidemocratic'. This strategy worked for a long time. Interrupting this vicious cycle has always been a particularly important objective for me.'

Provera expressed similar views, saying that his aim in quietly nurturing relations with similar parties over the past decade was 'to finally bring out of isolation the various parties – Lega Nord, Front National, FPÖ, etc. – that get each labelled as xenophobic and racist parties'. Their failure to co-operate on shared themes had been, in his view, due to their 'falling into the trap of left-wing political correctness', avoiding one another and therefore not speaking with one voice on issues such as immigration. By contrast, he added, 'the Left has been doing this forever. Think of the Socialist International, to name but one'.

As Startin and Brack (2017: 41) discuss, and as we have also found (McDonnell and Werner 2017), many RRP parties have been wary of the domestic consequences of frequenting

similar parties from other countries. This is especially true for those RRPs aspiring to some form of national government participation when they consider potential collaboration at European level with radical right parties that have extreme right pasts. In other words, RRPs like the Danish People's Party and Finns Party fear how both national publics and elites (the media and potential mainstream coalition partners) will view the company they kept in the EP. To differing extents, this has also been true of the LN, PVV and FPÖ in the past. Moreover, all three of these ENF parties have either been in government or propped up governments and all remain open to doing so again (for example, the FPÖ could well be in national coalition government after the October 2017 general election). As noted earlier, when this possibility was on the table at the end of the 1990s, the FPÖ kept its distance from other RRPs in the European Parliament, especially the FN (Fieschi 2000; Almeida 2010).

Now, however, neither the FPÖ nor the LN and PVV seem to believe that co-operating with other radical right populist parties at European level will cause excessive costs at national level. We see this as a 'coming of age' for the ENF parties. In other words, rather than hiding their similarities to other RRP parties and avoiding alliances for fear of media reactions, as the Sweden Democrats and the Finns Party do, the ENF members are proudly part of a European radical right. As Lorenzo Fontana – the Lega Nord MEP who claims to have introduced Salvini to Marine Le Pen – told us, the ENF alliance was 'important for us, also as regards the media, to show that there are people in Europe who think like us'. The overall impression we got from interviewees across the ENF parties was that they believed the media in their respective countries will criticize them whatever they do and that this was not a reason therefore to avoid policy congruent alliances. One reason why they have come to this conclusion now may be to do with party lifespan. Other than the PVV, which is a rather sui generis personal party and utterly dominated by its founder-leader Geert Wilders, the remaining four ENF parties have been around for at least a decade longer than those radical right populist parties that refuse to ally with the ENF (UKIP, FP, DPP and SD). In other words, they have been around for long enough to 'come of age' at European level as radical right populist parties that do not fear their domestic media's reactions. We can see this, for example, in the comment by a leading FPÖ advisor to us regarding the Sweden Democrats decision not to join the ENF:

> 'they think that if they are aligned to us it may cause a problem for them for the
> upcoming elections for example… We know that this is not the case. I mean we know

that if they're aligned they will be attacked. If they are not aligned they are also attacked, so we try to explain them whatever you do they will not be different... They are a young party. They have young people'

The willingness to bear audience costs (at least in the short-term) is also because the ENF alliance is seen as a long-term commitment. Most interviewees stressed that – unlike the radical right parties in the ECR and EFDD – they do not view the ENF as primarily designed to achieve specific objectives in the current legislature such as funding or domestic respectability (McDonnell and Werner 2017). Of course, the office benefits such as increased funding and speaking time are welcome bonuses, but – unlike our interviews with UKIP regarding what they themselves termed the EFDD 'marriage of convenience' – the ENF was discussed by interviewees as an alliance that goes beyond the 2014-19 parliament, both in terms of length and scope. As the leader of the Vlaams Belang, Tom van Grieken, told us: 'I'm not personally interested in alliances for a short term, I only want a long-term alliance'. The strong overall impression from our interviews was that the ENF aims to be the first radical right EP group built to last beyond a single legislature. The depth of ties is also reflected both in the creation of the extra-parliamentary Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF) and by the high-profile events that the ENF parties have organised outside the EP, such as their leaders' meeting in Milan in January 2016 and in Koblenz in January 2017.[9]

A Transnational Populist Radical Right

The ENF thus seems set up to be the first international populist radical right group to last beyond a single EP term. Another reason, we believe, why it has been possible and why it is likely to endure is that it squares the 'international group of nationalists' circle by combining *international* populism (i.e. international ties between populists all solely focused on their own national 'people') and *transnational* populism. In other words, the ENF parties overcome the possibility of nationalist co-operation being impeded by competing national interests by emphasising their share need to defend Europe and Europeans against elites and dangerous 'others', especially Islam. Differently than UKIP for example, having a European identity does not pose a problem for these parties and the (Christian) European one can

---

[9] Parties can also secure EU funding by creating 'foundations' which exist outside the parliament and include EU member state parties that do not have MEPs alongside those that do. The MENF is made up of the VB, FN, LN, FPÖ and the Civic Conservative Party (not represented in the EP), which is from the Czech Republic.

happily co-exist with national ones. Hence, Aymeric Chauprade, at the time one of the main FN MEPs responsible for the party's international co-operation, told us: 'Our position is clearly critical towards Europe and institutions. Not towards the European identity. We believe in the European identity'. Similarly, Lorenzo Fontana said 'we consider ourselves fully European. We believe that collaboration between European peoples is fundamental for the future. But we don't like the EU institutions, how they have developed and the impositions they make'.

The ENF in this sense recalls the efforts by Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Gollnisch of the FN in the previous decade to achieve among far-right parties what Fieschi (2000: 521) termed 'the reconciliation of attitudes through the concept of a Europe of the Fatherlands'. We can see that sentiment explicitly for example in the following statement on the webpage of the (failed) 'Euronationalist' initiative launched by FN in 2005: 'The Nationalist phenomenon cannot be and will not be restricted to an island, cooperation is essential to achieve freedom and our common goals' (cited in Startin, 2010: 437). We can also see these principles underpinning the creation of the short-lived 'Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty' EP group in 2007. As Startin (2010: 438) noted, the idea a shared Christian European identity and values system being under threat, acted 'as a motivating factor with regard to the rationale behind the group's formation, certainly among the main protagonists from Austria, Belgium and France' (i.e. the FPO, VB and FN). Hence, while the creation of the ENF has been facilitated by the removal of Jean-Marie Le Pen (and, with him, Gollnisch) from the FN, the new group and its transnational populism also represent a fulfillment of his vision for a strong Euronationalist group.[10] The ENF parties cast their alliance as not only protecting the sovereignty, identity and security of their own peoples, but those of all Europeans against their internal and external enemies, especially Muslims. As a senior FPÖ European-level advisor told us: 'We are against the Islamisation of Europe…we want to defend the identity, the cultures, the different languages, the different peoples of Europe'.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the long-standing groups containing other party families, no European Parliament group created by radical right populist parties has ever lasted beyond a single legislative term.

---

[10] On a similar point, since their respective parties did not select them as candidates in 2014, Molzer and Provera are not part of the ENF group, which they helped create the conditions for.

After being announced as a post-2014 elections goal by Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders in November 2013, the Europe of Nations and Freedom group was established in June 2015. Bringing together the Front National, Vlaams Belang, Austrian Freedom Party, Lega Nord and the Dutch PVV in a group for the first time, the ENF has not only established a presence in the EP, but its core parties have undertaken an series of initiatives outside the Parliament which indicate a long-term commitment. In this paper, we have examined the drivers of this alliance and asked why it has happened now, especially given the difficulties radical right populist parties have faced in the past in collaborating at the European level.

According to the established literature on European Parliament group formation, the main drivers are, first and foremost, policy congruence and, secondly, the desire to partake in the EP's spoils for official groups. Using Chapel Hill expert survey data, we showed that while the main parties of the ENF are indeed very congruent in their main policies, we do not see any change in this congruence over time which could explain why the ENF formed when it did and not earlier. Similarly, while the spoils for EP groups were certainly an incentive for these parties to band together (especially given that four of them had previously been without such spoils among the non-aligned), this incentive structure has not changed in a way that could explain the timing of the ENF formation. In order to explore more deeply the reasons underpinning why the group formed, we therefore analysed interviews with key figures from the ENF parties. Three main drivers emerged from these: de-isolation, party leaders and defending Europe's 'people' against its common enemies.

The members of the ENF parties are aware that their alliances might be met with negative national media feedback. But instead of avoiding this risk, they try to break the 'vicious cycle' of reciprocal demonization and self-marginalization. Achieving this has been aided by the removal of one of the most demonized Western European politicians of the last decades, Jean-Marie Le Pen (himself an early champion of pan-European radical right populist co-operation) and his replacement by Marine Le Pen, who has sought to move the party's image away from associations with the extreme right and anti-Semitism. The very fact that parties such as the PVV and the LN are now willing to stand alongside the FN indicates that her *dédiabolisation* strategy has been (at least in part) successful at European level. As we also saw though, regarding the PVV and LN, the leadership of Geert Wilders (PVV) and Matteo Salvini (LN) allowed their respective parties to change their alliance behaviour quickly and decisively. Finally, our interviews revealed that the ENF represents the culmination of a long-

term project on the far Right. Interviewees claim the ENF is an alliance that views itself as a lasting cooperation between defenders of European identity and values. While still emphasising their respective national identities and sovereignty, the parties also make recourse to a broader notion of shared European identity that is under attack by both Brussels bureaucrats and non-natives, especially Muslims. In this sense, we argued that the ENF bridges International and Transnational Populism (Moffitt 2017).

Thus, several aspects have changed in 2014/2015. While some radical right populist parties seek out national legitimacy via EP alliances with mainstream parties (e.g. the Danish People's Party and the Finns Party with the UK Conservatives), not all of these parties do so. Instead, the ENF radical right populist group is made up of parties that are unashamed of their commonalities and are accordingly starting to behave just like other party types in Europe. This normalisation of party behaviour might have been aided by two factors: First, in the aftermath of the European economic and refugee crises, the two core issues of these parties – anti-immigration and Euroscepticism – have increased in importance. This may increase the incentives for these parties to signal to their national audiences that they are not the only parties in Europe with strong negative positions on these issues Second, what distinguishes the parties of the ENF from those parties that seek legitimacy by association with mainstream parties is their age. With the exception of Geert Wilders' personal party PVV, all of the core ENF parties are at least 30 years old and have ample experience with being demonized by their national media. The radical right populist parties that did not join the ENF (especially the DPP, FP and SD) are much younger. Thus, the formation of the ENF can also be seen as a *Coming of Age* story, where at least some radical right populists accept the role they are playing in their respective party systems and privilege cooperation with like-minded European parties rather than attempting to blur their profile.

REFERENCES

Albertazzi, D. and McDonnell, D. (2015). *Populists in Power*, London: Routledge.

Almeida, D. (2010) 'Europeanized Eurosceptics? Radical Right Parties
and European Integration', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 11 (3), 237-253

Art, D. (2011) *Inside the Radical Right: the Development of Anti-immigrant Parties in Western Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bakker, R., et al. (2015) 1999–2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File. Version 2015.1. Available on chesdata.eu. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Bolin, N. (2015) 'A loyal rookie? The Sweden democrats' first year in the European Parliament', *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 11(2): 59–77.

Bressanelli, E. (2012) 'National parties and group membership in the European Parliament: ideology or pragmatism?', *Journal of European Public Policy* 19(5): 737–54.

Corriere della Sera (2002) 'Troppa gente di sinistra, alla Farnesina è ora di cambiare', 24 April.

De Lange, S. and Art, D. (2011) 'Fortuyn versus Wilders: An agency-based approach to radical right party building', *West European Politics* 34(6): 1229-49.

Fieschi, C. (2000) 'European institutions: the far-right and illiberal politics in a liberal context', *Parliamentary Affairs* 53(3): 517–31.

Fitzgibbon, J. and Leruth, B. (2017) 'Conclusion' in Fitzgibbon, J., Leruth, B. and Startin, N. (eds) *Euroscepticism as a Transnational and Pan-European Phenomenon*, London: Routledge.

Kriesi, H. (2014) 'The populist challenge', *West European Politics* 37 (2): 361-378.

Marks, G.W., Hooghe, L., Nelson, M. and Edwards, E.E. (2006) 'Party competition and European integration in the east and west: different structure, same causality', *Comparative Political Studies* 39(2): 155–75.

Maurer, A., Parkes, R. and Wagner, M. (2008) 'Explaining group membership in the European Parliament: the British Conservatives and the movement for European Reform', *Journal of European Public Policy* 15(2): 246–62.

McDonnell, D. and Werner, A. (2017) 'Respectable radicals: why some radical right parties in the European Parliament forsake policy congruence', *Journal of European Public Policy*, published in 'early view online', 31 March 2017.

McElroy, G. and Benoit, K. (2010) 'Party policy and group affiliation in the European Parliament', *British Journal of Political Science* 40(2): 377–98.

McElroy, G. and Benoit, K. (2011) 'Policy positioning in the European Parliament', *European Union Politics* 1(1): 150–67.

Minkenberg, M. and Perrineau, P. (2007) 'The Radical Right in the European Elections 2004', *International Political Science Review* 28(1): 29-55.

Moffitt, B. (2017) 'Transnational Populism? Representative Claims, Media and the Difficulty of Constructing a Transnational "People"', *Javnost - The Public*, DOI: 10.1080/13183222.2017.1330086

Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Reif, K. and Schmitt, H. (1980) 'Nine second-order elections – A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results.' *European Journal of Political Research* 8(1): 3–44.

Roth, L., Afonso, A. and Spies, D. (2017) 'The impact of Populist Radical Right Parties on socio-economic policies', *European Political Science Review*, published in 'early view online', 13 June 2017.

Settembri, P. (2004) 'When is a group not a political group? The dissolution of the TDI group in the European parliament', *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 10(1): 150–74.

Startin, N. (2010) 'Where to for the radical right in the European Parliament? The rise and fall of transnational political cooperation', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 11(4): 429–49.

Startin, N. and Brack, N. (2017) 'To cooperate or not to cooperate? The European Radical Right and pan-European cooperation', in Fitzgibbon, J., Leruth, B. and Startin, N. (eds) *Euroscepticism as a Transnational and Pan-European Phenomenon*, London: Routledge.

The Guardian (2008) '"I don't hate Muslims. I hate Islam" says Holland's rising political star', 16 February.

Whitaker, R. and Lynch, P. (2014) 'Understanding the formation and actions of Eurosceptic groups in the European Parliament: pragmatism, principles and publicity', *Government and Opposition* 49(2): 232–63.

Cross-check of CHES results with Euromanifesto data

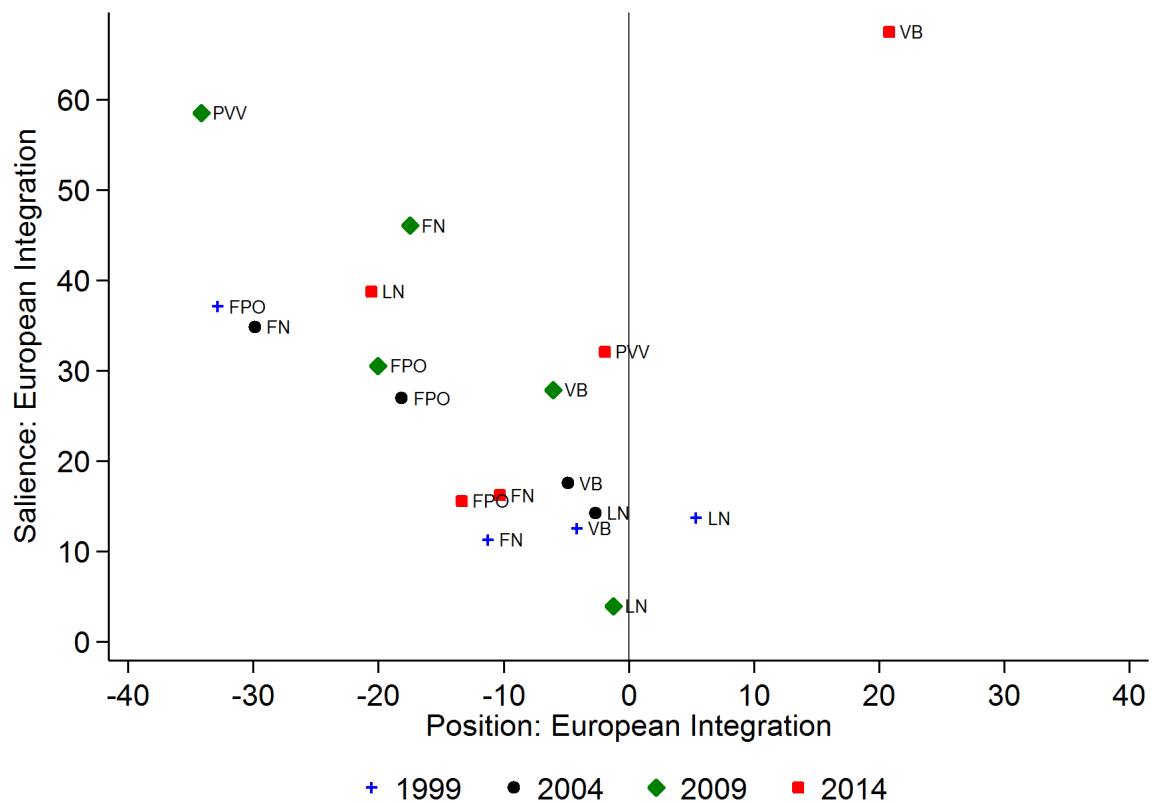**Figure 1a: Development of the parties in ENF over time, European integration**

Table 4a: Group agreement in each year on European integration, standard deviations

Year	EU position	EU salience	N
2014	15.94	21.26	5
2009	12.90	20.62	5
2004	12.67	9.34	4
1999	16.26	12.33	4

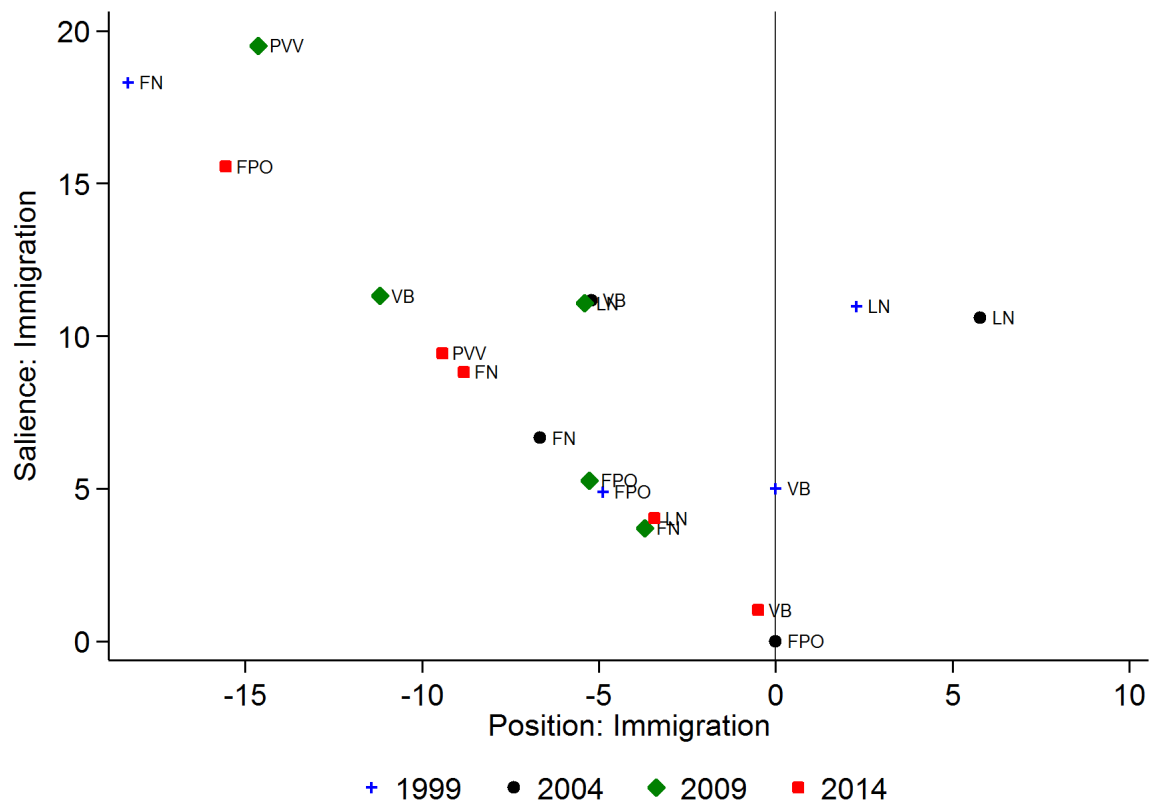**Figure 3a: Development of the parties in ENF over time, immigration policy.**

Table 5a: Group agreement in each year on immigration policy, standard deviations

Year	Immigration position	Immigration salience	N
2014	5.82	5.57	5
2009	4.66	6.23	5
2004	5.64	5.15	4
1999	9.22	6.35	4