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Learning from Precedent: How Brexit Counteracts Nationalist Pressures in other Countries

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Abstract

The liberal international order has recently come under increasing nationalist pressures, evidenced for example by a rise in nationalist demands to withdraw from international institutions. A growing literature examines the domestic economic, social, and political origins of the nationalist backlash against international institutions. However, less is known about the extent to which precedents of withdrawals *of one country* affect nationalist pressures for future withdrawals *elsewhere*. In this paper, we argue that initial withdrawal episodes provide new information about both the feasibility and desirability of withdrawals to nationalist elites in other countries. As a consequence, we expect nationalists abroad to be either encouraged or deterred to follow a similar path – depending on the success of these precedents. We explore this argument in the context of the British withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit), which arguably marks the most significant withdrawal from an international institution to date. Based on a quantitative text analyses of media reports in selected European countries, we show that nationalists in Europe significantly moderate their demands to leave the EU as the Brexit-drama unfolds, suggesting that new information generated by the Brexit process systematically affects nationalist pressures in other countries. Our results suggest that precedents of nationalist withdrawals may thus shape national politics well beyond the concerned countries themselves.

Keywords: Nationalism, international institutions, disintegration, Brexit, elite learning, elite discourse, political parties

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¹ Including the title page, tables, and figures; excluding footnotes, references, and the appendix.

1 Introduction

In the past decades, Western democracies have witnessed a marked rise in the electoral success of nationalist, radical right parties. This trend has gone hand in hand with increased demands by these parties for a re-nationalization of economic and political activity and for regaining greater national sovereignty. These parties hence demand a reversal the globalization and international integration processes, which has characterized the second half the previous century. Nationalist politicians that have moved from opposition into government have implemented substantial reversals of international institutions, such as the US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement under Donald Trump, the Philippine’s withdrawal from the International Criminal Court under Rodrigo Duterte, or the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union under an increasingly nationalist Conservative government. Globally, international cooperation levels have stagnated in recent years (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Walter 2021).

There is concern that the rise of nationalist parties to power could have potentially severe repercussions for international cooperation and the post-war liberal international order more broadly (Ikenberry 2018, Pepinsky and Walter 2019, Rodrik 2017, Lake et al. 2021). To assess the dangers arising from recent shifts toward nationalism, it is necessary to understand the transnational dynamics of nationalist pressures. Is there a diffusion of nationalist policies? Do nationalist policy precedents breed more nationalist pressure elsewhere, or do such precedents deter nationalist parties abroad from pursuing similar policies? Our paper contributes to improving our understanding of these feedback effects and of how nationalist pressures may spread between countries by focusing on partisan discourse. For this purpose, we explore how the implementation of nationalist policies directed against international institutions in one country affect nationalist discourse in other countries.

We argue that observing the implementation of nationalist policy precedents triggers a learning mechanism among nationalist party elites. These precedents transmit new information about the feasibility and desirability of such nationalist policy decisions, because they provide previously unavailable evidence on a central claim of the new nationalist movement – namely, that countries in the twenty-first century can do better on their own than deeply integrated into a multilateral setting. This observation-based learning process plays a particularly important role in the context of modern nationalism because only a handful of nationalist leaders and parties have so far held government office in Western democracies. As a consequence, although nationalist parties speak about many ways to regain sovereignty and withdraw from multilateral arrangements, few such disintegration policies have so far been implemented. This means that empirical information about the viability and desirability of nationalist disintegration policies is generally scarce – and that, therefore, the informational value of new pieces of evidence is high. By observing the implementation successes and failures of nationalist policies, nationalist party leaders abroad thus update their priors about the consequences of such policies: successful policies will encourage nationalists abroad to pursue similar strategies, while policies that fail to live up to their promises or are politically detrimental will deter nationalists abroad from promoting a similar path. We expect that this learning process will manifest itself in partisan discourse about similar nationalist projects.

Empirically, we investigate this argument in the context of Brexit, the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the EU. The European context is particularly interesting for our purposes because nationalist radical-right and Eurosceptic parties have gained momentum across the continent over the last three decades (Colantone and Stanig 2019). While these parties have been vocal in their opposition to European integration and have often rooted for an exit from European institutions, actual evidence on the basis of which to evaluate the merits of “less Europe” or even EU exit has been difficult to come by (de Vries 2018). This changed dramatically with the UK’s decision to leave the European Union and the implementation of this decision by a government with increasingly nationalist-leaning. The Brexit referendum and the UK’s withdrawal from the EU in January 2020 proved that leaving the EU is a real possibility. At the same time, the Brexit process gradually revealed dramatic discrepancies between the promises of Brexit proponents and the realities of the actual negotiations and the withdrawal process. Thus, Brexit provides a highly-visible precedent to learn from in a context where many potential learners, that is, nationalists and euroskeptics across the EU, have policy goals similar to those of the Brexiteers.

Drawing on a quantitative text analyses of media reports in Austria, Germany, and Ireland,² we demonstrate that the UK’s Brexit experience significantly affected domestic discourses about Europe in these countries. In particular, directly after the ‘Leave’ campaign won the Brexit referendum, we document an initial encouragement effect on nationalist party discourse across all three of countries right. The referendum outcome was immediately interpreted as evidence that nationalist, anti-EU referendums can be won in the EU and encouraged euroskeptical party leaders to push for similar paths in their own countries. However, as the subsequent Brexit-drama unfolded in less positive ways than Brexiteers had predicted, we observe a strong deterrent effect as nationalist parties and politicians throughout our sample significantly moderate their anti-EU rhetoric, in line with evidence that finds similar trends in party manifestos (van Kessel et al. 2020). Consistent with our argument about elite learning, our analysis furthermore suggests that these learning effects occur over and above swings in public opinion. This implies that nationalist party elites do not simply follow voters’ views on EU integration, but take up information about the feasibility and desirability of disintegration processes from direct observation. Overall, our results suggest that nationalist policy decisions in one country can have systemic reverberations as it allows political elites abroad to learn about the fate of nationalist projects abroad. Such episodes can thus influence domestic nationalist discourses and may both limit or encourage nationalist campaigns favoring a withdrawal from international institutions.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 lays out our argument and theoretical reasoning. Section 3 introduces the empirical case of Brexit as a testing ground for our theory. Section 4 describes our data and measurement approach. Section 5 provides empirical evidence that shows how well the Brexit process is going for the UK at different points in time – the key source of information underlying our postulated learning process. Section 6 then presents the results of our analysis. Section 7 concludes.

² This set of countries will be expanded in future iterations of this paper. See below for the rationale underlying our case selection strategy.

2 Theoretical Framework

In the past decades, nationalist and isolationist political parties, candidates, and policies have become increasingly successful in the national electoral arena (Colantone & Stanig 2019; De Vries et al. 2021; Trubowitz & Burgoon 2020). A large and growing literature shows that a variety of causes underlie these successes (for reviews, see for example: Bornschier 2018, Guriev and Papaioannou 2020, Rodrik 2020, or Walter 2021), including strategic incentives of these parties to mobilize opposition to international cooperation in order to gain electoral advantage from driving a wedge between mainstream elites and their supporters (De Vries and Hobolt 2015, 2020).

Nationalist parties, both from the populist and the radical right, tend to blame their voters' and their country's problems predominantly on developments originating abroad, such as migration, international trade, or international institutions that limit national sovereignty (Posner 2017, Vasilopoulou et al. 2014). As a solution, these parties tend to propose policies that limit their country's and their voters' exposure to these developments, such as less migration, stronger borders, or fewer internationally binding agreements (Börzel and Risse 2018, Hooghe and Marks 2018, Kriesi et al. 2008, Zürn and De Wilde 2016, Voeten 2019). International institutions therefore constitute attractive targets for nationalist blame attribution (Copelovitch & Pevehouse 2019), especially when they strongly constrain a country's national sovereignty. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that the European Union is a particularly frequent target of nationalists in Europe (Rooduijn & van Kessel 2019).

Nationalist politicians also increasingly demand that their country withdraw from international institutions. For example, several right-wing politicians in EU member states have pushed for their countries' exit from the EU (with campaign slogans such as "Nexit" (in the Netherlands), "Auxit" (in Austria), or "Fixit" (in Finland)), and both French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen and the Italian right-wing politician Matteo Salvini proposed to leave the Euro and to reintroduce a national currency during election campaigns. Of course, sweeping policies such as withdrawals from international institutions are easier proposed than implemented, and withdrawals from international institutions do not necessarily provide viable solutions to the problems and grievances of right-wing voters in the first place (e.g., Heinisch 2010, Nadler 2019). But as long as these strategies are not put to the test, these implementation and feasibility concerns are of no particular relevance for nationalist parties.

In recent years, however, nationalist parties and politicians have increasingly moved into government, and nationalist policy proposals have won majority support in referendums. As a result, withdrawals from international institutions have increased (Choi 2021): For example, under president Donald Trump the US withdrew from seven international institutions, including the Iran nuclear deal, the Paris Climate Agreement, and UNESCO (Cooley & Nexon 2020), Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte withdrew his country from the International Criminal Court, and Great Britain has left the EU.

One side-effect of this trend is that it creates opportunities to observe and evaluate the success and feasibility of the policies these governments put into place, including far-reaching policies such

as withdrawals from international institutions (Walter 2021). This ‘observability’ of nationalist policies allows for learning and emulation by outside observers to occur and, therefore, for feedback processes to arise (Dobbin et al. 2007; Gilardi 2012). The ability to actually observe the consequences of nationalist policy implementation – and to contrast the policies proposed by nationalist parties with those actually delivered when in government – generates previously unavailable information about the viability of nationalist promises. This may include information on the benefits of leaving an international institution, information about the political fate of nationalist parties that implement such policies, and information about the normative appeal and desirability of such policies. This allows political parties, voters, and political observers in other countries to learn from these experiences. Such learning is particularly likely to occur based on the experiences of early adopters of policies (Shipan and Volden 2008), because first pieces of new evidence provide the greatest information value. By extension, the first attempts to withdraw from an international institution (and implement other new nationalist policies) are therefore likely to be particularly influential in providing new information.

These feedback processes can go in either positive or negative directions. On the one hand, they may encourage support for further exits by either informing political actors abroad about that such exits are desirable and feasible, or by legitimizing withdrawals from international institutions. On the other hand, observing other countries’ withdrawal experiences can deter political actors abroad by demonstrating the negative consequences of such policies and/or delegitimizing them. One country’s withdrawal from an international institution can thus create both positive (encouraging) and negative (detering) imitation incentives to political parties and politicians abroad.

We particularly focus on the effect of information flows from the experiences of nationalist governments in one country on the stated goals of nationalist challenger parties in other countries. In doing so, we apply findings from the policy diffusion literature on government-to-government learning (Gilardi 2016, Graham et al. 2013, Karch 2007) to party-to-party learning. This research has shown that transnational learning tends to be particularly strong among ideologically similar governments (e.g., Grossback et al. 2004). We therefore expect nationalist parties in one country to be particularly receptive to information generated by the policy experiences of their nationalist counterparts elsewhere, especially because ideology and prior beliefs play an important role in how likely parties are to update these beliefs (Gilardi 2010; van Kessel et al. 2020). Observing the outcomes of implemented policy promises by nationalist parties in one country along with their political consequences allows nationalist challenger parties elsewhere to update their beliefs about the feasibility and the desirability of promoting similar policies for their own country. This suggests that an exit from an international organization in one country should have significant diffusion effects with regard to partisan discourse, issue framing and support for similar nationalist policy proposals among nationalist parties in other countries (Gilardi et al. 2021). Observing a positive policy experience by a foreign nationalist party is thus likely to encourage nationalist parties abroad to push for similar policies themselves and to increase the salience of the issue in their own rhetoric. On the other hand, observing that the hopes attached to promised policies cannot be met or

that the implementation of the policies has adverse political, electoral, or organizational consequences for governing nationalists abroad is likely to deter nationalist parties in other countries from promoting similar policy proposals at home.

Paradoxically, the electoral successes that push nationalists into government roles can potentially create problems for nationalist policymakers, not only for the newly-elected office holders, but also for future nationalist aspirants and contemporary nationalists abroad. Because nationalist challenger parties often have no detailed professionally-crafted policy program or first-hand policy expertise, the likelihood that their policies fail tends to be higher than among established parties (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005, Heinisch 2010, and Zaslove 2012). Heinisch (2003, p. 124, for instance, notes that nationalist challenger parties often “succeed in cobbling together a disparate coalition of disaffected voters that transcends traditional political and socio-economic cleavage structures” but that once such a party enters “government in an age in which technical expertise is key to achieving optimal policy outcomes, it finds it difficult to deliver”. This general difficulty is possibly aggravated by the tendency to recruit personnel on the basis of ideology or loyalty rather than subject matter expertise or experience (Zaslove 2012). Finally, nationalist governments, who seek to quickly reverse a long-standing trend toward international integration, swim against the tide in the sense that they work against the status quo, and thus a system that has grown and evolved over several decades, is based on a complex interconnectedness between countries, and has many proponents who are prepared to defend it. Any effort to depart from this status quo is likely going to be a huge experiment with many uncertainties. Taken together, in this context it is quite possible that nationalist governments fail to deliver on the promises they made during the election campaign.

There are two mechanisms by which such party-to-party learning can occur. The first is a *direct* channel based on elite observations of other elites’ policy implementation and performance abroad. Political elites are professionally engaged in information gathering and feasibility assessments of policies, so that they invest time and resources in processing such experiences and adjusting their policy frames and policy platforms accordingly. The second mechanism works *indirectly* through diffusion effects on domestic public opinion. Research has shown that the public adjusts its policy preferences in response to the successes of nationalist politicians and policies abroad (De Vries 2017; Delis et al. 2018; Malet 2019; Minkus et al. 2018; Walter 2020, 2021). If such ‘grassroots learning’ leads to shifts in public opinion with regard to nationalist policies, domestic nationalist elites might wish to adapt their programs accordingly. It is straightforward to imagine that nationalist parties orientate their statements and demands based on the mood of their voters at home in addition to direct policy learning.

Overall, therefore, we expect initial policy *successes* of nationalist challenger parties in one country to provide particular *encouragement* to other nationalist parties abroad. This is because observing such initial successes underlines the growing electoral potential of nationalist parties and provide incentives for these parties to follow strategies that have already proved successful elsewhere. At the same time, we expect new information on the policy performance and general government experience of nationalist parties accumulates. When this performance or experience is negative,

this information is likely to discourage nationalist parties abroad from imitation (Gilardi 2010). As a result of this deterrence effect, we expect nationalist parties in other countries become both less vocal (quantity of statements) and more moderate (quality of statements) about nationalist policies that visibly do not succeed elsewhere.

3 Brexit as an Empirical Case

We investigate our theoretical predictions by empirically examining how nationalist parties in the EU's 27 remaining member states responded to Brexit – the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. Such a national withdrawal from the EU is a policy goal that strongly resonates with many nationalist parties in Europe. The case of Brexit is particularly suitable to test our argument because it provides a clear precedent in the sense that leaving the EU has featured prominently in the rhetoric and discourse of nationalist parties across the EU, but has never actually been implemented. In contrast, the Brexit negotiations gradually revealed evidence about the opportunities and challenges associated with reclaiming 'national sovereignty' by withdrawing from a deeply integrated international institution as the EU. Given that the predominant trend over the past decades has always pointed toward deeper international cooperation and integration the prospects of a move toward de-globalization in the early twenty-first century have been uncertain, and this lack of evidence has made it comparatively easy for nationalist challenger parties to simply claim that the unseen re-nationalized counterfactual world is the better alternative. In combination with the high visibility of Brexit and the relatively large number of nationalist and eurosceptic parties throughout the Continent, this provides an environment that should be particularly conducive to cross-party learning and emulation, as Brexit now provides a precedent that can be expected to inform the nationalist disintegration discourse across Europe.³

The Brexit case is also useful because the Brexit process has been characterized by considerable ups and downs that have generated considerable variation in how encouraging or deterring the information about the feasibility and desirability of EU exit. For a long time, the idea that a member state would actually leave the EU had been almost unthinkable. Even as the option was increasingly raised by nationalists inside and outside the UK, it seemed unlikely to ever materialize. The Brexit referendum thus was a pivotal moment, because it proved that leaving the EU was a policy goal that could achieve majority support. Insofar, the UK's Leave vote and the subsequent momentum of the Brexit movement had the potential to energize nationalist movements across the EU.

The Brexit process itself, however, has developed less smoothly than Brexiteers had predicted at the eve of the referendum. The negotiations about the terms of withdrawal and the new UK-EU relationship have been rocky at times, and the fortunes of the British government in securing a favorable outcome have waxed and waned. On the one hand, the fact that the UK managed to

³ We focus on EU member states because insights gained from the UK's Brexit experience travel most easily to other potential cases within the same institution. From a statistical inference perspective, this choice also allows us to hold many potentially relevant confounders constant by design.

leave the EU just three and a half years after the referendum, demonstrated the feasibility of EU exit. Moreover, Boris Johnson's hard negotiation stance and success at renegotiating the withdrawal agreement – despite the fact that it can be debated how much concessions the EU actually made in these renegotiations – was widely touted as a success by both Brexiteers and euroskeptics abroad. At the same time, the Brexit negotiations have demonstrated how hard it is to really 'take back control' – as the Brexiteers' initial slogan went – in a deeply integrated and interdependent world.

While it remains to be seen whether the UK will reap long-term net benefits or continued economic costs from leaving the EU, the period have made it blatantly clear that leaving the EU and its dense legal, financial, and political network is a painful and difficult process at best. For example, two key promises of the Brexiteers' campaign were, a) to invest the money saved by no longer contributing to the EU budget into the National Health Service (NHS), and b) to use the newly gained independence from EU procedures to negotiate trade agreements tailored to best suit Britain's interests. By now, however, the estimated economic costs of Brexit thus far have already reached the level of the UK's total contributions to the EU budget over the entire period since its accession in 1973 (McCarthy 2020). Likewise, the UK government has not come far in establishing its bold vision of a 'global Britain' were the UK would be able to freely pick and choose trade partners and agreements as it sees fit and in Britain's best interest. Rather, the difficult negotiations with the EU over the post-Brexit trade agreement have shown that the UK's sovereignty outside the EU is still very much limited by the EU's interests and bargaining power (Sampson 2016). Similar experiences are likely occur with other major UK trade partners such as the U.S. or China (Politi and Payne 2016, Wintour 2020, Mitter 2020). On top of this, Brexit has posed threats to UK's internal peace and territorial integrity by raising the Irish-Irish border question (which was solved as British Premier Johnson accepted an internal maritime border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain) and by reinvigorating the Scottish independence movement (Kellner 2021, Peabody 2021). This has generated considerable new information that allows observers to update their initial assessments about the feasibility and desirability of EU exit.

Our theory predicts that this variation in the UK's Brexit experience should entail a learning process across the EU. In particular, we expect European nationalist challenger parties to adjust their framing of EU exit – and the aggressiveness of demands toward this goals – in response to how Brexit is going for the UK and British Brexiteers.

4 Data and Empirical Strategy

We examine these hypotheses by analyzing how the discourse of euroskeptic parties in the EU's 27 remaining member states responded to Brexit. For this purpose, we have compiled a novel dataset of media-reported integration and disintegration statements and actions by political elites across European countries. This data allows us to track how the positions and demands of nationalist politicians and parties vary over time and to analyze how this variation is related to the ups and downs off UK's Brexit experience, which we proxy in two different ways.

Our analysis at this point is based on a selection of three countries – Austria, Ireland, and Germany. The goal is to include a sample of countries that vary along the most important dimensions that may affect the degree to which our theory holds, such as the EU-friendliness of a country’s government, a country’s size and creditor/debtor status within the EU as a proxy for bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU, geography (including proximity to and trade dependence on the UK), the strength of nationalist challenger parties within a country, or a country’s EU membership duration (accession waves). Austria, Ireland and Germany exhibit some, but certainly not all, of this variation, but we are currently working on extending the sample.⁴ The ultimate goal is to arrive at a country sample that allows us to achieve a high degree of generalizability in testing our theory, we would like to maximize variation in our country

Mapping political trends: A media-based dataset of integration-disintegration statements and reported actions

We compiled an original dataset based on an extensive processing of national print media reporting that contains detailed calendar-day-specific information on the discourse, actions, interactions, and stated intentions of politicians from both nationalist challenger parties and established political parties concerning questions of international and European integration. To compile this data, we proceed in several steps (Martini 2020a, 2020b; also see: Coe & Schmidt 2012, Sjøvaag and Stavelin 2012, and Zimmermann et al. 2020).

First, we select a set of up to four major *newspapers* for each of country, drawing on the most widely circulated nation-wide appearing dailies. Daily newspapers are useful for our purpose because they have a high reporting throughput and tend to focus primarily on shorter factual reporting of events (“breaking news”). This is in contrast to more infrequently appearing outlets such as weekly and monthly publications, which naturally publish fewer stories and rather tend to focus more selectively on a smaller set of stories, including in-depth opinion and analyses). These qualities line up best with our objective to compile a political events dataset, because this allows us to precisely pinpoint the dates of events while simultaneously maximizing the frequency of relevant factual reports. We aim for a relatively balanced distribution in terms of the papers’ political leaning and include both quality newspapers and tabloids.⁵ Based on these criteria, our analyses is based on the following newspapers: *Der Standard*, *die Presse*, and *Kurier* for Austria, *BILD*, *Die Welt*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Handelsblatt* for Germany, and *Irish Daily Mail*, *the Irish Independent*, and *The Irish Times* for Ireland (see Table A1 in the appendix for more details).

Second, for all newspapers in our selection we identify *articles* which cover (dis-)integration related statements and activities. To this end, we run a full text search on the entire news content of each outlet published between 1 January 2012 and 1 February 2020. Our dataset thus spans the period before Brexit became a salient issue until the UK’s exit from the European Union. Our text search employs a range of Boolean search term combinations with the aim of identifying articles

⁴ We are going to significantly extend this case selection in the next iterations of the paper. We are currently planning to add data for France, Italy, Spain (or Portugal), the Netherlands, Poland, and Denmark (or Sweden).

⁵ We also exclude outlets that appear only regionally. Our selection also reflects some availability constraints. For instance, we have no access to the German FAZ archives

related to 1) Brexit and the UK’s withdrawal from the EU including reporting of what national politicians say and do in this context, 2) the target country’s own domestic integration-disintegration discourse including statements by nationalist challenger parties toward reform of or withdrawal from the EU and established party reactions to such statements, and 3) nationalist and anti-EU sentiment and discourse in the target country more generally. Table A2 in the appendix contains the English language search terms used in our procedure.⁶ Overall, this search produced a news corpus consisting of 39,460 articles (Austria = 7525, Germany = 10476, Ireland = 21459).⁷

Third, we then zoom in further and identify relevant *passages* within our set of selected news articles. Because we are seeking to compile data based on statements and reported actions of political elites, our primary interest is in finding passages that quote or paraphrase statements by these elites or describe their activities. To do this, we use a regular expressions-based search algorithm to identify the names of political leaders and parties in our articles and annotate any sentence that contains a reference to at least one of these actors. Our main focus for the purpose of this paper lies on the following sets of actors: First, *national politicians* in Austria, Germany, and Ireland that have a role in government, are members of parliament, or function as spokespeople for national parties, and second, *national parties* in Austria, Germany, and Ireland that are represented in parliament at any time between 2012 and 2020. We rely on data from the ‘EveryPolitician’ project (mySociety 2020) and complement these data with data from the CIA “Chiefs of State and Cabinet Members” directory (CIA 2020). Because the ‘EveryPolitician’ data also lists parliamentarians’ party affiliations, we can identify all national parties represented in parliament throughout the 2012-2020 period from these data as well. Our procedure is based on search terms that are based on party abbreviations and party names and includes common synonyms for parties to avoid missing relevant references.⁸ This approach allows us to zoom in on those sections in our news articles that contain integration-disintegration related statements and actions by national political elites in the most widely-read national outlets.

Our primary goal is to extract the verbal information contained in our selected text passages (what did our politicians or parties talk about or how were they talked about by others?) and transform it into structured quantitative data. To this end, we next switch from automated text processing to human-based coding. This choice is motivated by several considerations. First, we aim to extract detailed, sentence-level information along multiple dimensions of interest. This is a challenging task to perform computationally because it cannot rely on word or phrase distributions that are typically employed in document-level natural language processing (NLP) showing applications, but instead requires actual interpretation of textual information (see: Zimmermann et al. 2020 for a very similar approach on automated preselection of articles and article-passages in combination with subsequent hand-coding; also see: Coe and Schmidt 2012 as well as Sjøvaag and Stavelin 2012). Second, we are interested in extracting information that is oftentimes not explicitly

⁶ In the actual implementation all search terms are translated in the respective national language.

⁷ It is interesting to note the high correlation of .97 between a country’s trade exposure to the UK and the number of Brexit-related articles per country in our corpus. This suggests that trade exposure strongly affects the *quantity* of discourse about Brexit in a country. On the content of this discourse, see the analysis below.

⁸ We also use both common abbreviations of party names as well as conventional long forms.

stated – though easily recognizable by humans – such as actors’ implied intentions or the warmth of their relations. Third, in news text the reader often needs some context to identify whether a sentence contains the statement of a politician or an interpretation of the journalist. That is, identifying the primary actor – one of our core objectives – is not easily automated and does very often not coincide with the noun phrase of a sentence that is often used in NLP tasks to identify the subject. Fourth, we are interested in the political context in which a statement is made, which requires taking the information of surrounding sentences or article headings into account. Lastly, our preselection procedure oftentimes selects more than one sentence from an article and it is thus necessary to choose the key information of interest from this preselection. In this context, our human-based coding procedure acts as an additional quality check and thus complements the efficiency of our automated preselection algorithm.

Table 1: Coding Scheme – Overview

| Variable | Explanation | Example 1 | Example 2 | Example 3 |
|-----------------|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Subject</i> | The speaker or actor – the person or entity making a statement or being reported to perform an action. | <i>Nationalist party</i> | <i>Established party</i> | <i>Media</i> |
| <i>Object</i> | The object of statement or action – the person or entity that is spoken about or the target of the action. | <i>EU</i> | <i>UK</i> | <i>EU</i> |
| <i>Context</i> | The policy context in which the speaker’s statement or action takes place. | <i>Brexit</i> | <i>Brexit</i> | <i>Nationalist party</i> |
| <i>Warmth</i> | The (explicit or implicit) friendliness of the subject’s relation to the object. | <i>Cold</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Warm</i> |
| <i>Action</i> | Speaker’s (cited) action or type of statement. | <i>Demand</i> | <i>Offer</i> | <i>Worry</i> |
| <i>Goal</i> | Speaker’s (explicit or implicit) policy goal. | <i>Leave</i> | <i>Delay</i> | <i>EU unity</i> |

Notes: See Table A4 for a more detailed description of the coding scheme and an overview of variable values and their frequencies.

Our coding scheme contains six categorical variables, each of which captures a different dimension of a reported statement, action, or event (see Table 1). For each reported event (i.e., a statement or an action by some party or politician that is reported in the news), we code who the actor (subject) is and who this actor targets in her speech or actions (object), using the categories established national parties,¹¹ nationalist parties, UK parties or politicians, the EU along with EU officials and institutions, and the media (i.e., journalists). We then code in which context (context) this interaction takes place. This context variable is intended to capture the policy background in which the event takes place (examples are Brexit, EU integration, or national election campaigns). In our data, the primary context is Brexit, which is unsurprising given our article selection procedure, yet

¹¹ Note that we do not distinguish between individual parties in our coding but include all established national parties in the ‘established party’ category. This choice is made primarily for two reasons. First, there is a clear focus on government leaders (cabinet members) in the media reports, while members of the opposition are cited much less frequently so that there is little to be gained by recording the specific party affiliation of the occasional opposition speaker. Second, and reinforcing the previous point, there is very little disagreement among established party politicians in the countries we analyze concerning their positions towards either Brexit or the EU more generally.

contexts such as immigration/refugees, the Euro-crisis, EU reform more generally, or elections are also referenced. Next, with regard to the explicit or implicit relationship between actor and target, we code a warmth measure (warmth) that takes the values warm, neutral, and cold. The coding of this measure is based on the explicit or implicit friendliness of relations between subject and object (for instance, a critical or antagonistic statement would be coded as cold, while a statement of support or alliance would be coded as warm). Finally, we code the action the actor performs (action), i.e. a demand or an expression of concern, and the actor's explicit or implicit intention (goal).¹²

Overall, our preliminary dataset contains information on 1,272 detailed, multi-dimensional statement and event relationships between various subjects and objects. Our primary interest for the purpose of this paper lies in the discourse of nationalist challenger parties. For this reason, our analysis focuses on the subset our data that encodes a total of 83 statements that these nationalist parties made about the EU (that is, we slice our data to the subset *Subject = Nationalist party, Object = EU*). We define nationalist parties as anti-globalist, eurosceptic parties, for which re-nationalization and/or EU-reform are key programmatic objectives. Specifically, we focus on the following parties in our current sample: Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany; Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in Austria; and People before Profit (BPB) and Independents for Change (I4C) in Ireland.

Our data thus captures the content of EU-related statements and demands from nationalist challenger parties in European countries outside the UK, which we identified and coded as described above. Since we want to explain variation in the aggressiveness of nationalist parties' demands toward the EU, this data serves as the basis for the dependent variable in our analyses. To create an ordinal measure of the aggressiveness of demands, we recode nationalist parties' goals into four categories according to their aggressiveness regarding European integration: 0 = Status quo (these are statements that express explicit or implicit content with the current depth of EU integration and/or oppose further integration beyond the current status quo, but do not demand disintegration), 1 = Reform (i.e., calls for a reform of the EU toward re-nationalization and more national sovereignty, but no reference to leaving the EU), 2 = Reform or leave (explicit leave demands, if no sufficient reform is undertaken), 3 = Leave (demands for leaving irrespective of whether EU reforms are undertaken or not). Thus, higher values indicate more extreme disintegrative demands and policy positions. In our analyses, we focus both on the aggressiveness of EU-related statements, and the frequency with which nationalist parties make such statements,

Explanatory variable: Evaluation of the UK's Brexit success

To investigate whether positive Brexit-experiences encourage and negative experiences deter support for anti-EU policies in other EU member states, we need information of how well Brexit is going for the UK at any point in time. To quantitatively assess the UK's Brexit experience across

¹² Table A4 in the appendix contains a detailed overview of our data including a listing of the most important variable values across our six variables and the frequencies with which these values occur in the data.

time, we rely on two different measurement strategies: an ‘objective’ market-based strategy using the British Pound exchange rate and a more ‘subjective’ strategy based on a human sentiment coding of key events.

Our objective measure is based on the daily spot exchange rate of the British Pound against the Euro. This not only captures general market confidence in the UK’s future but also the market’s assessment of the relative prospects of the UK and the EU.¹³ With this strategy, we exploit the fact that foreign exchange markets constantly process and condense large amounts of information for profit maximization purposes and thus have an inherent incentive for accuracy given available knowledge. The Pound exchange rate thus serves as an aggregate market-based measure of trust into the UK’s current and future prospects by economic actors based on political and economic developments (Bernhard and Leblang 2002). For our second, subjective measure, we rely on a qualitative hand-coded assessment by one of the authors of how well Brexit is going for the UK, with a loess-smoothed trend line of the hand-coded data. In coding individual events, we assign values on a seven point scales from -3 for very negative to +3 for very positive events. Positive events are defined as developments that – from a perspective of the UK government – align with or are helpful for achieving the UK’s stated sovereignty-related policy goals (e.g., EU reform under Cameron, Brexit under May and Johnson). Negative events are developments that hinder or contradict such goals. The coding starts from a neutral sentiment (i.e., a value of 0) in the pre-Brexit phase in 2012. The underlying events descriptions and their associated sentiment coding are listed in the appendix, Table A3.

In addition, we compute a cumulative measure, which we derive from both data series to more closely capture our concept of learning. The underlying rationale is as follows: Both, the exchange rate data and our human-coded data assess the degree to which *individual events* are positive or negative from a UK perspective. However, to approximate an answer to the conceptual question of how well Brexit is going for the UK *overall* (how has the UK fared *to date* with its Brexit course?), we wish to also take the history of past events into account rather than just focusing on a current-day snapshot assessment. Intuitively, we assume outside observers – including nationalist European challenger parties – will not base their evaluations of the UK’s experience merely on the most recent data point. Rather, they will form their assessments on the basis accumulated information from of the history events that is continuously updated as new events unfold and new information thus transpires. We thus want a dynamic cumulative measure that aggregates the history of events (i.e., allows for memory effects) while taking the latest developments into account. To this end, we compute backward-looking moving averages of our raw data for the previous X years for any given date and use these variables in our analyses below.¹⁴ All measures are highly correlated (between .52 and .97).

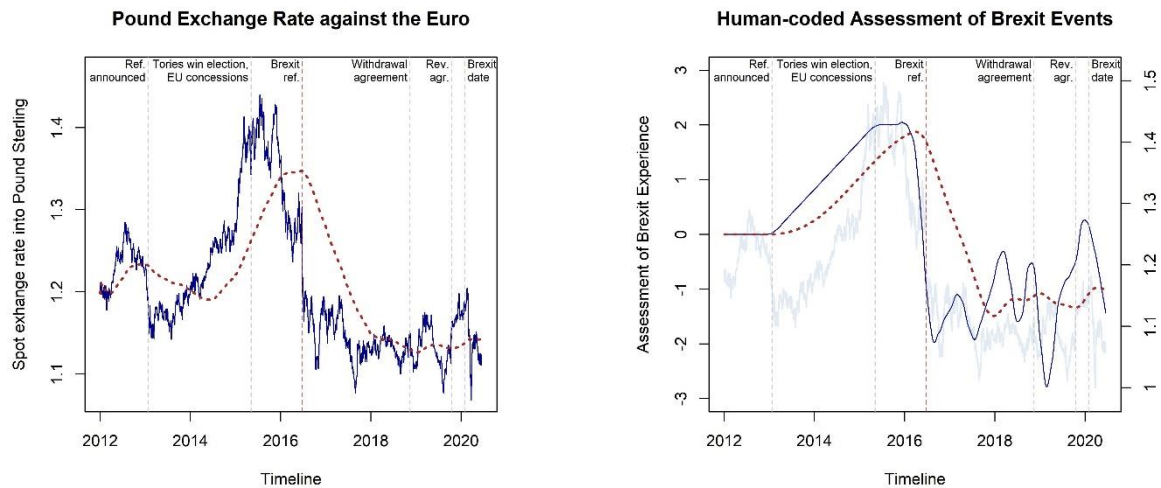
Figure 1 shows how both measures of the UK’s Brexit experience developed over time. The dark blue lines show our primary data, and the red dotted lines captures the moving average. The

¹³ Exchange rate data come from the Bank of England and are available [here](#).

¹⁴ Our default specification reported below uses time windows that look 1,5 years into the past. Our results are insensitive to different choices of window width and weighting schemes for the calculation of the moving average.

left panel shows the development of the Pound exchange rate since January 2012 (blue line). The graph shows that foreign exchange markets grew increasingly optimistic about the UK's prospects between 2012 and 2015. During this period, the Tories included the referendum in their election manifesto and won the 2015 national election in part on that basis and Prime Minister David Cameron managed to secure concessions on immigration concerning the UK's EU membership obligations from the EU following the election in early 2016.

Figure 1: How well is Brexit going? Quantifying the UK's Brexit Experience



Notes: The left panel plots the daily spot exchange rate of the British Pound against the Euro as a market-based measure of trust into the UK's current and future prospects. The right panel shows a (loess-smoothed) hand-coded measure of how well Brexit is going for the UK. The overlaid exchange rate data demonstrates considerable alignment between the two measures (corr = .81). See Table A3 for the underlying events data. Dashed vertical lines indicate relevant events. The red dotted lines capture our backward-looking moving averages of the respective measures to capture memory effects (see text for details).

However, a few months before the Brexit referendum, the Pound began to slip, possibly in response to rising uncertainty as opinion polls showed increasing support for a 'Leave' outcome. The Leave-victory in the June 2016 Brexit referendum then led to a significant fall in the exchange rate. The referendum outcome not only contradicted Cameron's expressly advocated vote recommendation. It also meant that the concessions obtained from the EU for membership reform in the shadow of the referendum became obsolete while plunging the UK into a highly uncertain situation. The referendum thus marks the failure of Cameron's high-risk negotiation strategy and the beginning of the actual Brexit phase. Although market confidence recovered slightly in the first two years after the referendum, the Pound exchange-rate has remained below its pre-referendum value ever since. Moreover, the difficulties of passing the withdrawal agreement are reflected in a volatile and depreciating exchange rate. Britain's actual exit from the EU on 31 January 2020 did not manage to turn around this trend. The right panel shows similar developments in our subjective measure. It starts from a value of 0 in the pre-Brexit phase in 2012 and then initially becomes increasingly positive, before it turns significantly more negative during the Brexit referendum. In the post-referendum period, the measure fluctuates with individual events but generally remains on a low level throughout the post-2016 period. This is because the UK has never managed to

actively shape the negotiation process to its advantage and has instead seen considerable internal divisions and disagreements over the right course of action (e.g. Fisher 2020, Wheatle 2019, Whiteman 2020).

The red dotted lines in Figure 1 show that the moving averages smooth out the short-term volatilities of the data as they aggregate current and past events to form a more informed measure based on a more extensive set of available information. This measure allows for observers to learn with delay. For example, in mid-2016, the ‘Leave’ vote was an outcome that introduced severe uncertainty and was at odds with the UK government’s intentions, which is why the assessments in both our data series fall sharply around that date. However, nationalist party elites are unlikely to have interpreted this as problematic. In fact, at the time it was far from clear that this would result in a painful and largely unsuccessful negotiation marathon from a UK perspective. In 2016, it was still well conceivable that the UK might be able to negotiate an advantageous exit deal – especially against the backdrop of Cameron’s success in obtaining EU concessions with regard to EU membership obligations. It only gradually became clear that this possibility was increasingly unlikely to materialize. Our cumulative learning measures allow for such gradual learning among observers.

Other explanatory variables

Our empirical analysis takes a range of other factors into account. First of all, we account for public opinion toward EU integration, to allow for the possibility that nationalist political elites learn *indirectly* via the general public’s mood in addition to (or even instead of) *direct* observation-based policy learning. In our primary analysis we draw on a recent compilation of longitudinal cross-national data from the Eurobarometer survey (Lang et al. 2020). In particular we focus on answers to the question “Generally speaking, do you think that (your country’s) membership of the EU is a) a good thing, B) a bad thing, or C) neither good nor bad?” This question closely approximates our concept of interest, namely, public opinion toward European (dis)integration. As an alternative measure, we rely on data from the eupinions survey (eupinions 2020). Here, we use the “eupinions trends/EU Referendum” question: “Imagine there is a referendum and you could decide whether your country stays as a member of the European Union. How would you vote, stay or leave?” Because we have this data only as aggregates for the EU28 rather than on a country-by-country basis, our primary analysis uses the Eurobarometer data.

Another variable of interest is a country’s bargaining power relative to the EU measured as the country’s relative economic size compared to EU as a whole. We account for bargaining power because nationalist political elites in more powerful EU member states might think they can achieve a better agreement in exit negotiations with the EU and that they have a higher expected feasibility of “going it alone” (De Vries 2018). Contagion effects are therefore likely to be moderated by a country’s bargaining power (Walter 2020). We operationalize this criterion by computing each EU country’s 2012-2019 average GDP as a percentage of the average EU-27 GDP over the same time period (World Bank 2020).

We also account for the overall state of a country’s economy (GDP growth in percent) since a

sluggish economy may make a country more dependent on the EU. In addition, the state of the economy may also affect public opinion. All GDP data are taken from the World Bank (2020).

5 Analysis and Results

How has the UK’s Brexit experience affected the policy positions and the aggressiveness and frequency of EU-related demands of nationalist and eurosceptic challenger parties in Europe? To answer this question and possible diffusion effects on the party level, we examine whether and how the ups and downs of the Brexit process are correlated with challenger parties’ discourse. We first examine the aggressiveness of EU-related partisan rhetoric, and then the frequency with which they speak about the EU.

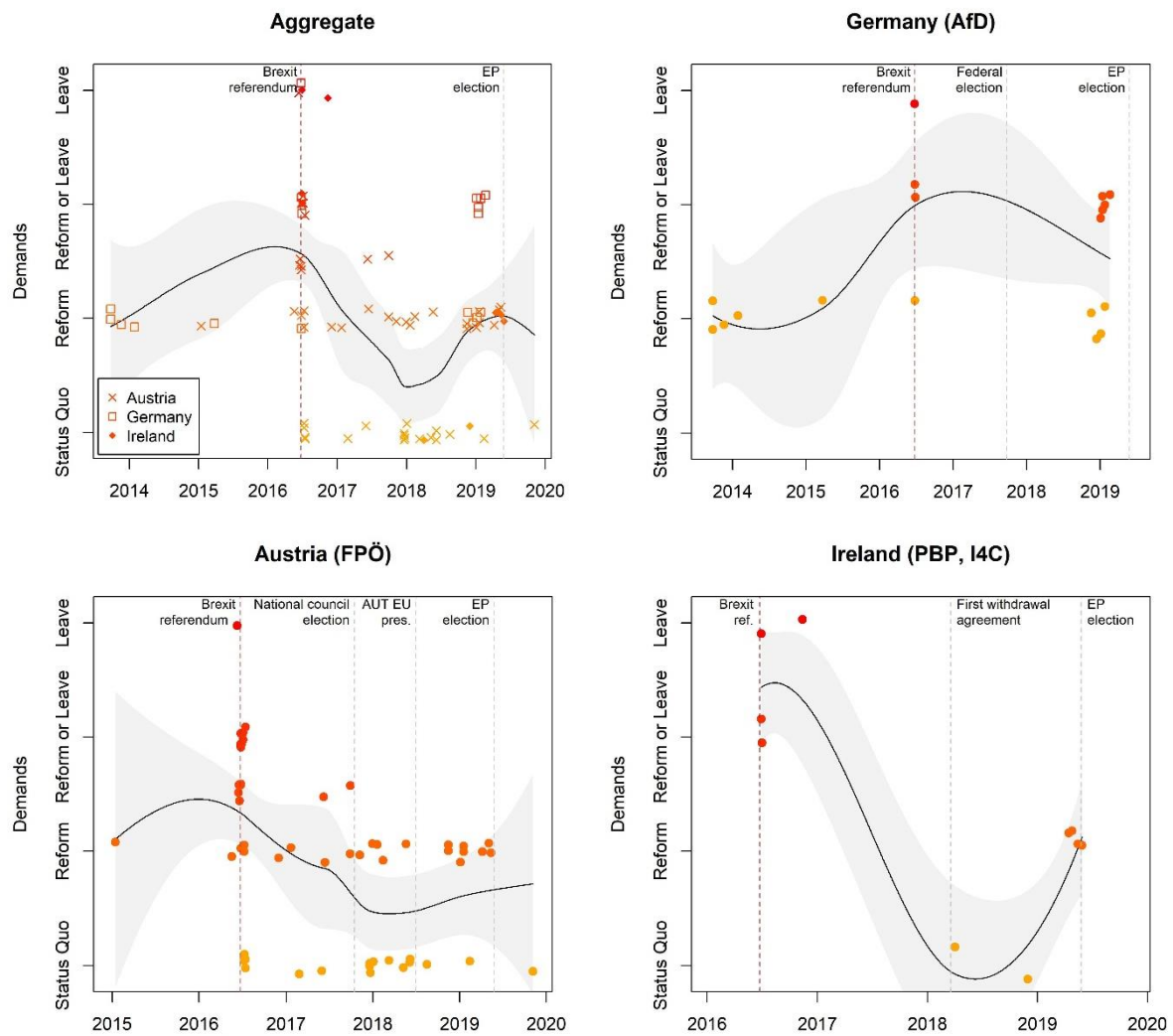
Learning from Brexit: Nationalist challenger party positions toward the EU over time

Did the aggressiveness of Eurosceptic partisan rhetoric in other EU countries change throughout the Brexit process, and if so, how? We begin with a descriptive analysis, then move to the statistical evidence further below. The panels of Figure 2 plot the 83 policy position statements of nationalist challenger parties vis-à-vis the EU we identified in our media analysis. The figure shows the development of challenger parties’ policy positions towards the EU over time both in the aggregate and for our individual countries. Black lines and shaded gray areas are loess estimates with 95% confidence intervals to visualize predominant time trends. The dashed vertical lines indicate relevant context events.

Several trends are apparent from Figure 2. First, we find evidence in line with the argument that observing a country’s positive withdrawal experience is likely to encourage nationalist parties abroad to push for similar policies themselves. The most extreme demands from nationalist European challenger parties toward EU integration were made immediately after the Brexit referendum’s ‘Leave’ outcome was announced. This trend is discernible both in the aggregate data as well as in any of the individual country panels. For example, in Germany, Beatrix von Storch, AfD Representative in the European Parliament, declared that the European Project “has failed” and stated that she “wept with joy” at the news of the British ‘Leave’ vote. Another prominent AfD politician, Björn Höcke, explicitly demanded “a referendum on whether Germany should remain in the EU” (Kamann, 2016). In Austria, the FPÖ’s candidate for 2016 Austrian presidential election, Norbert Hofer, welcomed the Brexit outcome and his party intensified calls for a similar referendum in Austria, if no significant reform of the EU were forthcoming. It also hosted a meeting of European rightwing politicians including France’s Marine Le Pen to discuss potential cooperation among anti-European forces following Brexit (Nowak and Götz 2016). In Ireland, where eurosceptic views are traditionally held among the left rather than the right, the referendum outcome also sparked more aggressive demands. People Before Profit (PBP) MP Richard Boyd Barrett brought up a possible “Irexit”, saying the UK’s ‘Leave’ vote draws into question Ireland’s own role in the EU. The party said that in the event of Brexit, it would campaign for Ireland to leave the EU as well, adding: “We favour the break-up of the current structures of the EU on left-wing

grounds” (Michael, 2016). PBP MP Paul Murphy reiterated this stance by saying that while it was currently not a “foreground” issue, if a referendum were held, PBP would be in support of ‘Leave’ (McGee, 2016). Taken together, this evidence suggests that the Brexit referendum initially had a considerable encouragement effect in the sense that it demonstrated that leaving the European Union really was a viable option. The key issue under discussion, especially in Germany and Austria, is the degree to which Brexit can serve as a direct role model for the respective national strategy. Here we thus see a clear example of an encouragement effect. This suggests that the learning mechanism we propose plays a key role in shaping nationalist strategy and discourse in Europe.

Figure 2: **Nationalist Challenger Parties – Stated Positions toward the EU over Time**



Notes: Points describe stated policy positions (i.e., goals) as reported in national newspapers (*Levels*: 0 = Status quo, 1 = Reform, 2 = Leave unless Reform, 3 = Leave). Positions are jittered for better visibility. Lines and shaded areas are loess estimates with 95% confidence intervals to visualize dominant time trends. Dashed vertical lines indicate relevant events. Party abbreviations: AfD = Alternative für Deutschland; FPÖ = Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs; PBP = People before Profit, I4C = Independents for Change.

Secondly, while there is a clear trend toward more extreme positions following the UK’s ‘Leave’ vote, there is also a clear increase in the variance of nationalist challenger party positions immediately after the Brexit referendum in June 2016. Although this pattern is most pronounced in Austria, where the entire range of positions can be found in mid-2016, the trend is more general: For

all three countries in our data, there is no other point in time in our sample period at which nationalist party positions exhibit a comparable level of dispersion. In Germany, the statements by Höcke and von Storch cited above are complemented by more cautious positions. The AfD candidate for the election to the House of Representatives in Berlin, Georg Pazderski, for example, said with regard to the Brexit referendum “it is a bad day for the cohesion within Europe”. In similar vein, AfD vice-president Alexander Gauland expressly opposed the idea of a referendum on Germany’s EU membership saying he would not want to “to launch a new campaign tomorrow”, and instead supported the idea of an EU organized as a “Europe of Fatherlands” (Kamann 2016). In Austria, too, cautionary voices complement more extreme demands. For instance, regional FPÖ head Manfred Haimbuchner opposed speculations about an exit of Austria from the EU and said that he could even imagine a deeper integration in some areas, such as the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (Die Presse, 2016). The large variance is in part due to the larger quantity of political statements after the referendum. However, it also reflects internal debates and dissent about the way forward and the best course of action in the near future.

Third, there is a sharp drop in the aggressiveness of demands in the years following the Brexit referendum that coincide with the increasingly difficult Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU. The most extreme positions, such as outright demands to exit the EU or to hold referendums similar to the British one, disappear entirely over this period. Instead, there is a clearly visible trend towards a moderation of demands, which now mostly gravitate toward an acceptance of European integration coupled with calls for ‘reforms from within’. In Austria and Ireland, nationalist party positions even include explicit statements of support for the status quo of European integration, such as statements in support of European security cooperation or general support for European trade integration and the Single Market. In Austria, Norbert Hofer moderated his stance toward a reform position as early as December 2016, saying: “I never welcomed the Brexit vote. I said that I assume that there will be new treaties within the EU because of Brexit. [...] I think it would be necessary to consider how we can better organize the Union. I am convinced that the European project is not yet lost: with a subsidiary Union we can certainly move into a positive future” (Nowak and Götz 2016). FPÖ party head Heinz-Christian Strache stated his call for ‘reforms from within’ in fall 2017 by explicitly referencing the deterrent effect of the Brexit, saying he hoped that the “the right lessons” would be drawn from the “warning signal Brexit” (Die Presse 2017). The Austrian press has been particularly vocal about the FPÖ’s change of course. In June 2017, a year after the Brexit referendum, *Die Presse* writes “Statements concerning a withdrawal from the Euro or the EU have become unpopular. This was one of the reasons why the FPÖ changed its European policy position during the presidential election campaign. Statements on the Öxit were reversed, and proposals for a new EU vote in Austria were no longer pursued. Leaving the EU is more unpopular than it has been for years” (Böhm 2017, also see: Der Standard, 2017). In early 2019, *Der Standard* puts it even more bluntly: “Öxit. This was to be pushed as often as possible. But the FPÖ doesn’t want to talk about it anymore because for years a large majority of Austrians have been in favor of remaining in the Union. Especially since the chaos surrounding Brexit, nobody seriously thinks about the option of an Öxit” (Oswald, 2019).

In Ireland, in 2019, the Irish PBP MP Richard Boyd Barrett, who called for Irexit in 2016 said: “We believe very strongly in Europe and internationalism but we have big criticisms of the European institutions” – a strong shift towards a reform stance (Kelly, 2019). The journalist adds that “The Brexit being pursued by the UK Tory party is not the same as the British withdrawal from the EU which People Before Profit supported three years ago” (Kelly, 2019). *The Irish Independent* similarly writes: “One key point of consensus [since Brexit] has been Ireland’s loyalty to the EU. Even traditionally Eurosceptic parties like Sinn Féin have made it clear that they consider continuing EU membership vital to Ireland’s interests. [...] The hard-left in Ireland has long been anti-EU. From a more right-wing perspective, [party leaders] vocally endorsed the view that Ireland was ‘closer to Boston than Berlin’. [...] Indeed, in late 2016 with the UK in a mess, the Boston option then became even less attractive when Donald Trump took the presidency. [...] In any event, the extent to which the UK and US would ever have been partners for a country as small as Ireland was very questionable.” (McCrea 2018). The descriptive data and the statements of party officials and media commentary supports the argument that the UK’s chaotic Brexit experience in the UK is a primary driver of these trends toward moderation. These statements further point to the existence of a learning process on the side of political elites. Overall, our findings support our theoretical expectations about the moderation of nationalist statements in the face of discouraging or ‘detering’ new information about the feasibility and desirability of EU withdrawal.

In sum, the descriptive data suggests that the ups and downs of the Brexit process is correlated with nationalist challenger parties’ discourse about the EU. To corroborate this finding with a more systematic analysis, Table 2 presents the results of a regression analyses of nationalist challenger parties’ statements about the EU. It examines how the aggressiveness of these statements is related to our two quantitative measures of the UK’s Brexit success and additional covariates. The first three models are based on the objective measure of market sentiment about Brexit (the exchange rate measure), while models 4 through 6 are based on our hand-coded evaluation of Brexit events. Models 1 and 4 present the baseline results in a univariate regression setting. Models 2 and 5 include all variables. Models 3 and 6 represent the most conservative estimates and include a full set of country and newspaper fixed effects to eliminate possible unobserved heterogeneity at the country-level as well as potential bias from the political leaning of newspapers.¹⁵

The analysis reveals a strongly positive and statistically significant relationship between the UK’s Brexit experience and the aggressiveness of demands toward the EU brought forward by nationalist challenger party in our sample that holds across all specifications. The positive coefficient suggests that as long as Brexit appears to go well for the UK, nationalist challenger parties are encouraged to follow the UK’s example and equally advocate for their country’s exit from the EU or significant EU reform – a clear encouragement effect. As Brexit begins to look less and less successful, however, Brexit increasingly has a deterrence effect that leads nationalist parties to tone down their demands and advocate for more moderate positions of the ‘reform from within’ variety. The analysis also suggests that this mechanism is substantively important. The R^2 values of the

¹⁵ Newspaper fixed effect estimates are generally not statistically significant, indicating that reporting on Brexit does not vary strongly across newspapers.

univariate models 1 and 4 show that the Brexit evaluation measures alone explain around 20 percent of the variation in nationalist party positions toward the EU.

Table 2: Nationalist Challenger Parties – Aggressiveness of Demands toward the EU

| | Brexit evaluation (exchange-rate) | | | Brexit evaluation (hand-coded) | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | baseline | full | full + FE | baseline | full | full + FE |
| Brexit experience (X-rate) | 3.57*** (0.848) | 5.027*** (1.157) | 4.808** (1.59) | | | |
| Brexit experience (hand-coded) | | | | 0.275*** (0.059) | 0.328*** (0.084) | 0.374** (0.123) |
| Public Opinion (EU good/bad) | | 2.156** (0.806) | -2.111 (4.719) | 2.006* (0.857) | -5.289 (5.288) | |
| Economy (GPD growth in %) | | -0.165 (0.141) | -0.414 (0.248) | -0.135 (0.15) | -0.387 (0.252) | |
| Bargaining power rel. to EU (% of GDP) | | -0.041 (0.028) | -0.024 (2.86) | -0.043 (0.029) | 0.72 (2.859) | |
| National elections (run up) | | 0.479 (0.328) | 0.357 (0.359) | 0.537 (0.341) | 0.429 (0.36) | |
| Germany | | | 1.135 (52.931) | | | -10.935 (52.783) |
| Ireland | | | 3.081 (2.937) | | | 5.249 (3.234) |
| Intercept | -3.278** (1.041) | -9.48*** (1.622) | 0.233 (12.265) | 1.097*** (0.079) | -3.012 (1.521) | 10.963 (13.473) |
| Country FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| Newspaper FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| <i>N</i> | 83 | 59 | 59 | 83 | 59 | 59 |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.179 | 0.464 | 0.52 | 0.208 | 0.436 | 0.521 |

Notes: The dependent variable is the aggressiveness of nationalist challenger party demands toward the EU (*Levels:* 0 = Status quo, 1 = Reform, 2 = Leave unless Reform, 3 = Leave). Standard errors in parentheses. Newspaper fixed effect estimates not shown. ***, **, and * indicate significance at the .001, .01 and .05 levels, respectively.

Our results provide some evidence suggesting that nationalist party's demands may be systematically related to public opinion (models 3 and 5).¹⁶ However, these results do not hold in the more conservative fixed effects specifications. This suggests that nationalist party elites primarily learn and adapt their disintegration policies from *direct* observation of precedents abroad. In contrast, *indirect* learning through public opinion appears to play less of a role in shaping nationalist parties' policy positions toward the EU. Beyond our direct learning measure and public opinion, other variables appear to play a minor role in shaping the behavior of nationalist parties in our analysis.

Turning from investigating the *quality* of nationalist party statements to the *quantity* of these statements, we next examine how the Brexit process is related to the frequency of nationalist party

¹⁶ Tables A5 and A6 in the appendix show results with our alternative public opinion measure. Tables A7 and A8 show our results with the Eurobarometer data lagged in the same way as out Brexit evaluations measures.

statements on the EU. The descriptive plots in Figure 2 show that in addition to the severity of party's demands, there is also a general tendency among nationalist challenger parties to simply talk less about the question of European integration as Brexit increasingly turns into a quagmire for the UK. This is true especially in Germany and Ireland, while in Austria, this trend is somewhat less pronounced.¹⁷

Table 3: Nationalist Challenger Parties – Frequency of Demands toward the EU

| | Brexit evaluation (exchange-rate) | | | Brexit evaluation (hand-coded) | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| | baseline | full | full + FE | baseline | full | full + FE |
| Brexit evaluation (X-rate) | 62.12*** (5.714) | 79.679*** (9.108) | 78.078*** (11.557) | | | |
| Brexit evaluation (Hand-coded) | | | | 4.339*** (0.421) | 5.253*** (0.699) | 6.123*** (0.889) |
| Public Opinion (EU good/bad) | | -3.266 (6.345) | -65.404 (34.299) | | -5.936 (7.151) | -118.10** (38.085) |
| Economy (GPD growth in %) | | 1.558 (1.108) | -1.407 (1.805) | | 2.09 (1.253) | -0.939 (1.817) |
| Bargaining power rel. to EU (% of GDP) | | 0.12 (0.224) | 17.006 (20.789) | | 0.099 (0.245) | 29.141 (20.59) |
| National elections (run up) | | -2.075 (2.584) | -2.446 (2.609) | | -1.101 (2.841) | -1.266 (2.596) |
| Germany | | | -283.924 (384.737) | | | -480.083 (380.117) |
| Ireland | | | 46.425* (21.345) | | | 82.178*** (23.289) |
| Intercept | -68.24*** (7.013) | -88.018*** (12.767) | 11.352 (89.152) | 7.868*** (0.559) | 14.947 (12.694) | 187.683 (97.027) |
| Country FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| Newspaper FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| <i>N</i> | 83 | 59 | 59 | 83 | 59 | 59 |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.593 | 0.647 | 0.731 | 0.568 | 0.583 | 0.736 |

Notes: The dependent variable is the frequency of nationalist challenger party demands toward the EU within months. Standard errors in parentheses. Newspaper fixed effect estimates not shown. ***, **, and * indicate significance at the .001, .01 and .05 levels, respectively.

Our statistical analysis in Table 3 supports this visual impression, using the number of statements a party makes within one month as dependent variable. The results show that both of our Brexit-based learning measures are positively associated with the frequency of parties' statements. The pattern is the same as in Table 2, that is, more statements are made when Brexit appears to be going well for the UK, and less statements are made when Brexit is going less well. This finding once again suggests that Brexit has diffusion effects among parties, and that the direction of these

¹⁷ This is largely due to the fact that the FPÖ was in government between late 2017 and mid-2019 (in a coalition with the conservative ÖVP) and was thus present in the news more often as well as forced to publicly position itself on policy issues including EU policy.

effects is related to how well Brexit is going for the UK.

6 Conclusion

On 31 January 2020, the UK left the European Union in one of the most far-reaching instances of international disintegration to date. The exit of the UK from the EU is now a historical fact. Yet it remains to be seen whether Brexit will merely be the beginning of a whole sequence of events in which the liberal world order as we currently know it unravels – or whether the British decision will remain a unique episode. In this paper, we have made the argument that the answer to these questions may depend on what Brexit tells us and – in particular – other nationalist parties and politicians about the feasibility and the associated desirability of “going it alone” as a nation state in the twenty-first century.

The evidence we presented based on the first years of the Brexit saga and data from Austria, Germany, and Ireland suggests that, to date, Brexit appears to have more of a deterring than an encouraging effect on nationalist party elites. Our analysis suggests that Brexit has so far eased rather than fueled nationalist pressures in countries beyond the United Kingdom, as the events on the British Isles have served as a warning especially to those who tend to hold nationalist views and wish for a strong national state. Ironically, the partial disintegration of the EU may thus have had a stabilizing effect on the remainder of the Union – an impression that is reflected not least in the noticeable unity and coherence, with which the EU and its member states have acted throughout the Brexit negotiations.

Of course, it remains to be seen, how long-lasting this effect will be. At least in the medium-term, however, it seems like the Brexit precedent really did counter nationalism elsewhere on the European continent.

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Appendix

Table A1: **Text-Corpus Sources** - Daily Newspapers by Country

| Country | Newspaper | Ideological leaning |
|----------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Austria | <i>Der Standard</i> | liberal |
| Austria | <i>Die Presse</i> | liberal, center-right |
| Austria | <i>Kurier</i> | liberal |
| Germany | <i>BILD</i> | center-right |
| Germany | <i>Die Welt</i> | center-right |
| Germany | <i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i> | center-left |
| Germany | <i>Handelsblatt</i> | liberal |
| Ireland | <i>Irish Daily Mail</i> | center-right |
| Ireland | <i>Irish Independent</i> | center-right |
| Ireland | <i>The Irish Times</i> | liberal |

Notes: Newspaper selection based on largest (highest circulation) nation-wide appearing dailies. Selection also reflects some availability constraints and an effort to achieve somewhat balanced leaning distribution.

Table A2: **Text-Corpus Search Terms** – Selection Criteria for Corpus Documents

| Search terms packages | Package content |
|--|--|
| (Brexit OR (UK OR United Kingdom OR Britain) w/5 (EU OR European Union) w/5 (withdraw* OR leav* OR ((remain* OR continu*) w/5 member*)) OR (UK OR United Kingdom OR Britain) w/5 ((referendum OR renegotiat*) w/5 member* w/5 (EU OR European Union)) OR (UK OR United Kingdom OR Britain) w/5 (relations OR relationship w/1 (with OR to)) w/5 (EU OR European Union OR Europe)) | <i>Brexit and the UK's withdrawal from the EU</i> |
| OR | |
| (XXX w/5 (EU OR European Union) w/5 (withdraw* OR leav* OR ((remain* OR continu*) w/5 member*)) OR YYY w/5 (relations OR relationship OR public opinion OR attitude w/1 (with OR to)) w/5 (EU OR European Union OR Europe)) OR (XXX w/5 (referendum OR renegotiat*) AND member* w/5 (EU OR European Union) OR YYY w/5 ((EU OR Europ*) w/5 integration)) | <i>The target country's (potential) withdrawal from the EU</i> |
| OR | |
| (XXX w/10 ((euro-sceptic* OR anti-euro* OR euro-phil* OR pro-euro*) OR (eurosceptic* OR antieuro* OR euophil* OR proeuro*))) OR ZZZ | <i>Euroscepticism in the target country generally</i> |

Notes: AND = Boolean 'and', OR = Boolean 'or'; * = wildcard; w/5 = 'within 5' (requirement for expressions to the left and right to be found within 5 words of each other); XXX = placeholder for country name wildcard (e.g., Ireland*); YYY = placeholder for country name wildcard of country adjective (e.g., Ireland* OR Irish); ZZZ = placeholder for country 'Brexit' equivalent (e.g., Irexit).

Table A3: *How well is Brexit going? Hand-coded Sentiment of Brexit Events (Figure 1, left panel)*

| Date | Sentiment | Event |
|------------|-----------|---|
| 01/01/2012 | 0 | Pre-Brexit. |
| 23/01/2013 | 0 | Cameron announces referendum; referendum is included in Tory election manifesto. |
| 07/05/2015 | 2 | Tories win elections. |
| 19/02/2016 | 2 | Cameron secures some EU concessions on the UK's EU membership. |
| 23/06/2016 | 0 | Brexit referendum – majority for “Leave” against Cameron’s recommendation. EU concessions now vain. |
| 24/06/2016 | -3 | Cameron resigns. |
| 13/07/2016 | -2 | May becomes PM. |
| 18/04/2017 | -1 | May announces a snap election to ‘strengthen her hand’ in negotiating Brexit. |
| 22/05/2017 | -1 | EU adopts negotiating directives. |
| 08/06/2017 | -3 | Tories lose majority in elections. |
| 26/06/2017 | -2 | May forced to form minority government. |
| 08/12/2017 | -1 | Breakthrough in Phase I reached. UK concessions. |
| 15/12/2017 | -1 | EU agrees to move to Phase II. |
| 19/03/2018 | 0 | First draft Withdrawal Agreement. |
| 08/07/2018 | -2 | Davis resigns in protest. |
| 09/07/2018 | -2 | Johnson resigns in protest. |
| 13/11/2018 | 0 | UK and EU agree on Withdrawal Agreement. |
| 14/11/2018 | 0 | May secures her cabinet’s backing for the deal. |
| 25/11/2018 | 1 | The agreement is endorsed by the leaders of the other EU27 member states but requires ratification. |
| 10/12/2018 | -2 | May postpones the vote in the House of Commons on her Brexit deal, anticipating no support for the Agreement. |
| 13/12/2018 | -1 | May survives a vote of no confidence. |
| 15/01/2019 | -3 | Withdrawal Agreement rejected by Parliament (I). |
| 12/03/2019 | -3 | Withdrawal Agreement rejected by Parliament (II). |
| 20/03/2019 | -3 | May asks for Brexit extension. |
| 29/03/2019 | -3 | Withdrawal Agreement rejected by Parliament (III). |
| 10/04/2019 | -1 | Extension until 31 Oct. 2019 granted. |
| 24/05/2019 | -2 | May announces resignation. |
| 24/07/2019 | 0 | Johnson becomes PM. |
| 28/08/2019 | -1 | Parliament is suspended (Johnson). |
| 03/09/2019 | -2 | 21 Conservative MPs are expelled (Johnson). |
| 09/09/2019 | -1 | Johnson obliged to seek 3rd extension by law (Parliament). |
| 24/09/2019 | -2 | The UK’s Supreme Court rules the suspension of parliament unlawful. |
| 17/10/2019 | 1 | Revised Withdrawal Agreement agreed. UK concession on Irish border. |
| 19/10/2019 | -1 | Parliament temporarily withholds its approval for the revised agreement. Johnson is obliged to seek another Brexit extension. |
| 28/10/2019 | 0 | Third Brexit extension. |
| 31/10/2019 | 0 | Parliament calls a general election. |
| 12/12/2019 | 0 | Tories win election. |
| 23/01/2020 | 1 | Withdrawal Agreement is ratified. |
| 29/01/2020 | 1 | EP ratifies Withdrawal Agreement. |
| 31/01/2020 | 0 | UK leaves the EU. |
| 01/02/2020 | 0 | Transition period begins. |
| 16/04/2020 | -1 | Johnson announces no extension of transition period. Hard Brexit likely. |
| 16/06/2020 | -1 | No extension of transition period confirmed. |

Notes: Subject = speaker, person making the statement. Object = object of speech, person or subject that is spoken about. Context = policy context in which the speaker’s statement is made. Warmth = sentiment, friendliness of the subject’s relation to the object. Action = speaker’s (cited) activity or type of statement. Goal = speaker’s (explicit or implicit) policy goal. Only Variables values that appear 10 or more times are cited above.

Table A4: **Coding Scheme** – Variables, Variables Values, and Value Frequencies

| Subject | Object | Context | Warmth | Action | Goal |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| National established party (454) | EU (491) | Brexit (843) | Cold; negative (521) | Express worry (209) | EU unity; coherence (281) |
| Media; commentary (334) | UK leadership (388) | EU generally (164) | Neutral (503) | Diplomacy (206) | Manage Brexit (136) |
| EU politician (196) | National challenger Party (134) | National challenger party (124) | Warm; positive (248) | Statement (197) | No hard Brexit (88) |
| UK established party (145) | National established party (103) | Refugees and immigration (105) | | Critique (161) | EU reform (85) |
| National challenger party (100) | Brexit process (88) | Elections (58) | | Demand (147) | Concessions (63) |
| Economy; business (19) | Economy; business (28) | Euro crisis (38) | | Express optimism (62) | Refugee and immigration policies (41) |
| UK challenger party (13) | Political system (15) | | | Deny (54) | Political system stability (33) |
| Scotland (10) | | | | Be in dissent (54) | Peace (Irish-Irish border) (31) |
| | | | | Report dissent (media) (48) | Leave the EU (34) |
| | | | | Make offer (25) | (No) hard Brexit (dissent) (24) |
| | | | | Express warning (22) | Brexit delay (24) |
| | | | | Cite poll (media) (21) | Established party not being driven by challenger party (23) |
| | | | | Concede (21) | No higher payments (EU budget) (21) |
| | | | | | Healthy economy; business (17) |
| | | | | | No cherry picking (17) |
| | | | | | No re-negotiation (17) |
| | | | | | Keep close relations to UK (16) |
| | | | | | No deeper EU integration (15) |
| | | | | | Win UK finance sector (11) |
| | | | | | EU reform or leave (challenger party) (16) |

Notes: Subject = speaker, person making the statement. Object = object of speech, person or subject that is spoken about. Context = policy context in which the speaker's statement is made. Warmth = sentiment, friendliness of the subject's relation to the object. Action = speaker's (cited) activity or type of statement. Goal = speaker's (explicit or implicit) policy goal. Only Variables values that appear 10 or more times are cited above.

Table A5: Nationalist Challenger Parties – **Aggressiveness** of Demands toward the EU

| | Brexit evaluation (exchange-rate) | | | Brexit evaluation (hand-coded) | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| | baseline | full | full + FE | baseline | full | full + FE |
| Brexit evaluation (X-rate) | 3.57*** (0.848) | 6.216* (2.438) | 4.114 (2.755) | | | |
| Brexit evaluation (Hand-coded) | | | | 0.275*** (0.059) | 0.398* (0.152) | 0.28 (0.164) |
| Public Opinion (Stay in EU - eupinions) | | 0.034 (0.148) | 0.036 (0.143) | | 0.008 (0.136) | 0.037 (0.132) |
| Economy (GPD growth in %) | | 0.112 (0.118) | -0.303 (0.305) | | 0.109 (0.117) | -0.258 (0.304) |
| Bargaining power rel. to EU (% of GDP) | | 0.03 (0.019) | -3.699 (6.661) | | 0.027 (0.02) | -4.74 (6.351) |
| National elections (run up) | | 0.368 (0.388) | 0.292 (0.383) | | 0.443 (0.398) | 0.352 (0.387) |
| Germany | | -0.918 (1.004) | 0.962 (1.413) | | -1.077 (1.007) | 0.867 (1.408) |
| Ireland | | | 69.188 (123.541) | | | 88.475 (117.788) |
| Intercept | -3.278** (1.041) | -9.513 (13.061) | 2.823 (20.955) | 1.097*** (0.079) | 0.01 (9.495) | 10.247 (16.103) |
| Country FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| Newspaper FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| <i>N</i> | 83 | 57 | 57 | 83 | 57 | 57 |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.179 | 0.384 | 0.513 | 0.208 | 0.388 | 0.52 |

Notes: The dependent variable is the aggressiveness of challenger party demands toward the EU within each month. Standard errors in parentheses. Newspaper fixed effect estimates not shown. ***, **, and * indicate significance at the .001, .01 and .05 levels, respectively.

Table A6: Nationalist Challenger Parties – **Frequency** of Demands toward the EU

| | Brexit evaluation (exchange-rate) | | | Brexit evaluation (hand-coded) | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| | baseline | full | full + FE | baseline | full | full + FE |
| Brexit evaluation (X-rate) | 62.12*** (5.714) | 120.535*** (14.514) | 112.05*** (16.562) | | | |
| Brexit evaluation (Hand-coded) | | | | 4.339*** (0.421) | 7.219*** (0.962) | 6.44*** (1.038) |
| Public Opinion (Stay in EU - eupinions) | | 3.553*** (0.879) | 3.704*** (0.86) | | 2.659** (0.859) | 3.015*** (0.836) |
| Economy (GPD growth in %) | | 0.506 (0.7) | 0.227 (1.834) | | 0.407 (0.739) | 1.238 (1.922) |
| Bargaining power rel. to EU (% of GDP) | | 0.205 (0.116) | -42.941 (40.047) | | 0.168 (0.123) | -81.88* (40.123) |
| National elections (run up) | | 0.406 (2.312) | -0.077 (2.302) | | 1.255 (2.513) | 0.617 (2.447) |
| Germany | | -3.124 (5.977) | -0.592 (8.496) | | -5.755 (6.362) | -0.754 (8.893) |
| Ireland | | | 798.925 (742.771) | | | 1520.69* (744.172) |
| Intercept | -68.24*** (7.013) | -390.725*** (77.755) | -285.186* (125.989) | 7.868*** (0.559) | -178.98** (59.966) | -7.41 (101.735) |
| Country FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| Newspaper FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| <i>N</i> | 83 | 57 | 57 | 83 | 57 | 57 |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.593 | 0.669 | 0.714 | 0.568 | 0.718 | 0.779 |

Notes: The dependent variable is the frequency of challenger party demands toward the EU within each month. Standard errors in parentheses. Newspaper fixed effect estimates not shown. ***, **, and * indicate significance at the .001, .01 and .05 levels, respectively.

Table A7: Nationalist Challenger Parties – **Aggressiveness** of Demands toward the EU

| | Brexit evaluation (exchange-rate) | | | Brexit evaluation (hand-coded) | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| | baseline | full | full + FE | baseline | full | full + FE |
| Brexit evaluation (X-rate) | 3.57*** (0.848) | 4.771*** (1.193) | 4.457* (2.063) | | | |
| Brexit evaluation (Hand-coded) | | | | 0.275*** (0.059) | 0.31*** (0.086) | 0.33^ (0.167) |
| Public Opinion (EU good/bad - lagged) | | 2.414** (0.885) | 0.054 (5.693) | | 2.306* (0.941) | -1.59 (6.649) |
| Economy (GPD growth in %) | | -0.171 (0.141) | -0.433 (0.257) | | -0.148 (0.15) | -0.428 (0.266) |
| Bargaining power rel. to EU (% of GDP) | | -0.044 (0.029) | 0.227 (2.929) | | -0.047 (0.03) | 0.949 (2.915) |
| National elections (run up) | | 0.476 (0.327) | 0.359 (0.36) | | 0.532 (0.339) | 0.423 (0.365) |
| Germany | | | -4.606 (54.545) | | | -17.134 (54.107) |
| Ireland | | | 2.061 (2.977) | | | 3.325 (3.472) |
| Intercept | -3.278** (1.041) | -9.737*** (1.661) | -4.416 (13.774) | 1.097*** (0.079) | -3.653* (1.712) | 2.821 (16.47) |
| Country FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| Newspaper FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| <i>N</i> | 83 | 59 | 59 | 83 | 59 | 59 |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.179 | 0.466 | 0.518 | 0.208 | 0.441 | 0.511 |

Notes: The dependent variable is the aggressiveness of challenger party demands toward the EU within each month. Standard errors in parentheses. Newspaper fixed effect estimates not shown. ***, **, * and ^ indicate significance at the .001, .01, .05, and .1 levels, respectively.

Table A8: Nationalist Challenger Parties – **Frequency** of Demands toward the EU

| | Brexit evaluation (exchange-rate) | | | Brexit evaluation (hand-coded) | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| | baseline | full | full + FE | baseline | full | full + FE |
| Brexit evaluation (X-rate) | 62.12*** (5.714) | 80.236*** (9.405) | 86.867*** (15.055) | | | |
| Brexit evaluation (Hand-coded) | | | | 4.339*** (0.421) | 5.273*** (0.724) | 6.728*** (1.24) |
| Public Opinion (EU good/bad - lagged) | | -3.921 (6.98) | -72.332 (41.545) | | -6.14 (7.892) | -113.65* (49.379) |
| Economy (GPD growth in %) | | 1.597 (1.109) | -1.017 (1.875) | | 2.046 (1.258) | -0.68 (1.974) |
| Bargaining power rel. to EU (% of GDP) | | 0.132 (0.229) | 14.213 (21.378) | | 0.093 (0.251) | 27.999 (21.652) |
| National elections (run up) | | -2.078 (2.581) | -2.387 (2.625) | | -1.077 (2.843) | -1.073 (2.711) |
| Germany | | | -230.358 (398.077) | | | -464.249 (401.86) |
| Ireland | | | 44.481* (21.728) | | | 73.196** (25.786) |
| Intercept | -68.24*** (7.013) | -87.362*** (13.092) | 22.173 (100.525) | 7.868*** (0.559) | 15.617 (14.361) | 182.821 (122.325) |
| Country FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| Newspaper FE | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |
| <i>N</i> | 83 | 59 | 59 | 83 | 59 | 59 |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.593 | 0.647 | 0.727 | 0.568 | 0.582 | 0.713 |

Notes: The dependent variable is the frequency of challenger party demands toward the EU within each month. Standard errors in parentheses. Newspaper fixed effect estimates not shown. ***, **, and * indicate significance at the .001, .01 and .05 levels, respectively.