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# The French Socialist Party in the 2019 European elections

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## 1. Introduction

France has paradoxically been heralded variously as one of the motors of Europe, alongside parties of left and right inexorably opposed to the European project (Evans, 2000); and a system where Europe has traditionally ceded place to domestic issues in its first-order elections (Kriesi, 2007). With few, but prominent, exceptions, governing parties of the left and the right have promoted strongly pro-European programmes whilst simultaneously underlining the benefits to France from so doing. Since the mid-1990s, mainstream parties across both sides of the spectrum have undergone a process of Europeanization, often at the cost of internal dissent and splits from radical Eurosceptic factions (Haegel, 2002; Bergounioux & Grunberg, 2005), however until recently maintaining their dominant position in both the domestic and European electoral arenas.

Yet, in 2020, the French *Parti Socialiste* (PS) finds itself virtually erased from the European Parliament, after its poorest performance ever in the May 2019 election, having been similarly crushed in the presidential and legislative elections two years earlier. The party which had led the government and executive under François Hollande a decade earlier is now increasingly at risk of becoming irrelevant to French politics. During the five years of Hollande's presidency, the PS lost over three-quarters of its electoral support to the radical left and right, and ultimately to Emmanuel Macron's newly founded centrist *La République en Marche!* (LREM). In the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election, French Socialists were forced to ally with a tiny party, *Place publique*, formed one year earlier, to which they awarded the list leadership. Meanwhile, the PS's former minority Green allies, *Europe Ecologie Les Verts* (EELV), won back many of the leftist and former PS voters who had turned to LREM in 2017 and were increasingly disenchanted by the rightist turn under Emmanuel Macron's presidency.

This collapse of François Mitterrand's former party of government cannot be directly ascribed to, or exclusively interpreted through the Euro-ballot. The political crisis of Socialism in France is largely accounted for by Hollande's failure to deliver his 2012 election promises. It is also deeply rooted in the social-liberal pro-market orientation taken by the PS since the mid-1980s, and the tension this has produced with the party's ideological tradition of political radicalism (Cole, 2011). However, the inability of the party to make any headway against the forces responsible for 2017's rout provides evidence of the PS's incapacity to sell its European credentials any more than it could its domestic agenda.

This chapter will argue that, similarly to the failure of right-wing conservative *Les Républicains* (LR) in the same cycle of elections, the PS as a party of government from the 1980s to 2017 has precisely been unable to gain electoral purchase from Europe because of its established position as a supporter of one version of the European project – 'social Europe' – which has historically failed to offer a credible alternative vision to compete with the unburdened, radical Eurosceptic proposals of *La France Insoumise* (LFI) and the *Rassemblement National* (RN, formerly the *Front National*), and even with LREM's assumed centrist federalism. Inheriting the executive position of Mitterrand, Jospin and Hollande with regard to Europe, the PS found that the EP elections – which offer

challenger parties a competition where the affective positioning of voters can align without first-order constraints – offer nothing to parties struggling with exactly those constraints: domestic irrelevance, organisational decline, and leadership failure, in particular.

Before addressing this fundamental, and pessimistic, message of the 2019 European elections to the French PS, the chapter provides the background to the Socialists' relationship with and internal divisions over Europe, and to its domestic electoral woes. It then turns to the European election itself, looking at how the party set out its stall for the election, in terms of vision and policy, and how an attempt to claim a stronger reformist line from previous Socialist policy in Europe failed to convince left-wing voters, which was reflected in the party's performance in comparison to other parties of the left, and to its presidential / legislative nemesis of 2017, LREM. The chapter concludes by looking at the position of these voters on European issues, finding little specificity, and certainly no issue set to which at least one of the Socialists' competitors, on both the left (Mélenchon's populist left) and right (Macron's Renaissance list), didn't align.

### 1.1. The French Socialist Party and Europe

Europe is at the heart of the PS's political identity, and it is deeply rooted in the party's ideological tradition of internationalism. In the 1980s, the Mitterrand presidency showed renewed support for the process of European integration, as revealed for instance in the decision to keep France in the European Monetary System (EMS) in 1983, at a time when the Socialists in government were decisively reorienting their economic policies towards austerity (Clift, 2013).

In 1992, François Mitterrand's ruling Socialists were the main architects behind France's ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. Under the auspices of Jospin's 'plural left' Government with the Communists and the Greens, the PS parliamentary party voted massively in favour of both the Amsterdam (85.2 per cent) and Nice Treaties (91.3 per cent) in 1999 and 2001. But by December 2004, as we will examine below, only 58.8 per cent of the party's grassroots voted in favour of the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT) in the membership vote. Two months later, in February 2005, PS parliamentary support for the constitutional revision prior to the ratification of the European charter fell to 60.4 per cent, reflecting increasing dissent over the EU within the party.

During the Mitterrand years, the French socialists would also build the basis for their vision of a 'social Europe'. The latter was seen as a vehicle to promote economic growth and employment, which could ultimately protect the French from the threats of globalization and neoliberalism. During the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, Socialist Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy would for instance describe European integration as a driving force behind 'social progress', 'an advanced social model' and "a space for the protection of workers' social rights and the insertion of those excluded from economic growth" (Speech in the National Assembly, 5 May 1992).

Such Socialist discursive repertoire of a 'social Europe' formed part of an alternative utopian project which primarily rested on two main types of argument. First, there was a positive prospective anticipation of the benefits of European integration and the idea that further integration into the EU would foster job creation in France, therefore helping solve the country's intractable problem of mass unemployment (Ivaldi, 2006). Second was the claim that such a 'social Europe' would be achieved through the projection of France's national values and interests, and transposition of its social-welfare model to the European level (Manigand & Dulphy, 2006). The promotion of France's cultural exceptionalism and universal values was clearly one of the key elements driving the Socialist government's action aimed at securing the inclusion of a social chapter in the Maastricht Treaty.

Such commitment to European integration and to promoting the French model of social welfare has been central to the prescriptive policy agenda of French Socialists ever since, making paramount the fight against globalization and against rampant neoliberalism within EU institutions. Basic principles such as economic intervention in industrial policies and infrastructure, the fight against further liberalisation, the prevention of social dumping and relocations, social policy harmonization and the protection of public services have pervaded all PS electoral manifestos since the Mitterrand years, as revealed for instance in Jospin's Plural Left's commitment to defending a social treaty in the 1990s.

In the 2012 presidential election, similar principles were key to the European platform advanced by the Socialist candidate, François Hollande. In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, amidst a context of rising unemployment and continuing turmoil in the Eurozone, Hollande clearly shifted his campaign to the left, promising in particular that he would wage a war on international finance. His agenda included a number of measures such as the pledge to ban stock options, a possible tax on financial transactions and the somewhat unrealistic promise to renegotiate the Fiscal Compact, whereby the Socialist candidate stressed the need for growth policies to be included in the battle to save the European currency and in the commitment to fiscal rectitude (Evans and Ivaldi 2013). Hollande's policy shift away from austerity was mostly tactical, however, and reflected the need for the PS to secure support from Eurosceptic voters of the Left, and to avoid intra-party division such as had occurred in the 2005 ECT referendum campaign.

## 1.2. Internal divisions over Europe

Since the mid-1990s, the French Socialists have failed to present a completely united front, and the party has been deeply divided over European integration. To a large extent, party elite views of the EU overlap with the tension that has historically existed between radical maximalist party positions espoused by leftist elements of the PS, on the one hand, and the pragmatic and realistic approach endorsed by the more centrist sector of the party, on the other (Bergounioux & Grunberg, 2005). Such opposition between 'two lefts' had been a constant feature of the PS since its foundation in the early 1970s and an important factor in party factionalism and internal dissent throughout the history of the party.

In 1992, the campaign over the Maastricht Treaty led to the dissidence of Jacobin Eurosceptic Jean-Pierre Chevènement who left the PS to form his Mouvement des Citoyens (MDC). In 2005, the PS entered a phase of increased intra-party discord during the campaign over the ECT referendum. The campaign saw leading figures of the PS such as Laurent Fabius, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Henri Emmanuelli fiercely oppose the Treaty against the official position taken by the party's leadership, its grassroots and leaders such as Robert Badinter, Jacques Delors, François Hollande, Martine Aubry and Dominique Strauss-Kahn, thus eventually contributing to the victory of the 'No' camp in the May referendum. The fracture within the PS attested to the persistence of diverging views about the liberal orientation of the EU as much as about the social-liberal approach inspired by Michel Rocard's reformist 'second left' and espoused by the PS during most of the post-Mitterrand era. Such tension had re-emerged in the 2003 Dijon congress where the party mainstream that had tactically rallied behind Hollande had been challenged by the more leftist radical factions within the PS, such as Emmanuelli and Mélenchon's Nouveau Monde, and Vincent Peillon, Arnaud Montebourg, Benoît Hamon and Julien Dray's Nouveau Parti Socialist (NPS).

### 1.3. The PS in the 2017 presidential and legislative elections

The French Socialists went into a long period of opposition during Chirac and Sarkozy's right-wing presidencies between 2002 and 2012. In 2012, Hollande's victory in the presidential election took place in a context of growing unpopularity with the austerity policies pushed forward by Sarkozy. Soon after Hollande's election, however, internal dissent and party factionalism resurfaced in the PS, reflecting the persistent tension between radical maximalist leftist factions and pragmatic social-liberal elites within the party.

Ideologically, Hollande retreated from his left-wing presidential campaign and pledge to fight financial powers, radically shifting towards business-friendly economic measures. Formerly core tenets of the PS programme and of Hollande's commitments in his speech at Le Bourget launching his presidential programme in January 2012 – public investment; corporatist work-time directives involving union approval; support of workers in a market favouring employment change – were abandoned in the face of public deficits, poor growth, and required spending cuts to prioritise business growth above employee conditions.

The social-liberal turn of the Hollande presidency was accentuated by the appointment of Manuel Valls as Prime Minister and the arrival of Emmanuel Macron as Minister of the Economy, and would be symbolized further by the El-Khomri employment law. The latter was considered by many on the left to be a frontal attack on the Socialist tradition of defending workers' rights.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the strong law-and-order agenda adopted by the Socialist government in the wake of the Islamic terrorist attacks of 2015 would alienate the cultural left and the Greens, thus increasing polarization further. The dogged pursuit of the El-Khomri Law, beginning with the rebellion of some 40 Socialist deputies against the budget voted in 2014, led to a shifting division between supporters and opponents of government policy. What was ideologically a division between *frondeurs* (rebels) and the rest of the Parliamentary group saw a shift towards the Centre with even Socialist stalwarts such as Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, First Secretary of the party, opposing the El Khomri law by 2016 – this on the basis of the deep unpopularity of the law, not just within the party, but also amongst trade unionists and public opinion more broadly.

In the 2017 elections, much of the PS's difficulty in staking out a clear competitive space was due to Hollande's policy reversals in the area of social welfare, business support and law-and-order during his presidency, which had alienated a large proportion of Socialist voters as well as party activists amongst the leftist groups of the PS. In the end, Hollande's decision to stand aside from the 2017 presidential election attested to his failure to maintain party unity and assemble rival factions within the Socialist left. In January 2017, the unanticipated election of Benoît Hamon in the Socialist primary against former Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, confirmed that the PS was shifting further to the left, thus opening the field to Emmanuel Macron at the centre-left of the political spectrum.

In 2017, all presidential candidates identified distinct European positions, based upon the dynamics of integration, areas of competence, and economic harmonisation. EU positions were primarily structured around the two polar opposites of Macron's quasi-federalist position and Marine Le Pen's Frexit strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2016 El Khomri law revised French labour law by strengthening companies' ability to lay off employees, and weakening employee rights and benefits. The Hollande government presented the law as a necessary adjustment to increase competitiveness and indirectly reduce unemployment.

Figure 1 about here

The rise in salience of European issues had a significant impact on mainstream parties, increasing factionalism, most notably in the PS where European issues intersected with internal conflicts over both economic and cultural policies. Among the governing sections of both the Socialists and the Republicans, de facto alignment with the European agenda during periods in office had reduced their capacity to challenge Europe in the way that newer parties – or, more accurately, parties with no governing baggage – were able to do. Figure 1, using the Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2019) expert survey of party policy positions shows the relatively lower saliency of federalism and inter-governmentalism as a political issue over time for the parties of government relative to the radical left LFI, Macron's LREM and the populist radical right RN.

Figure 2 about here

In 2017, Hamon took the PS further to the left by adopting a domestic agenda of redistribution – including for instance a basic income – and ambitious environmental policies, while espousing soft criticism of EU austerity policies. As Figure 2 shows, the relative shift towards a market orientation between 2008 and Hollande's presidency in 2013 has reversed, and is still visible in 2019, two years after Hamon's departure. During the presidential campaign, Hamon urged a moratorium on the stability pact and advocated mutualising national debts, while suggesting a new treaty on the 'democratization' of Eurozone governance and calling for a pan-European minimum wage. Meanwhile, faced with the intensification of Euroscepticism in Mélenchon's LFI, Hamon took an economic protectionist turn and pledged to pull out of international trade agreements such as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA).

The 2017 presidential election delivered a severe blow to the PS, nevertheless, giving Hamon a disastrous 6.4 per cent of the vote, compared with 28.6 per cent for Hollande in 2012, at its lowest since the late 1960s. Meanwhile, the election showed a rise in support for Mélenchon's populist left at 19.6 per cent of the vote share, marking substantial gains on his performance of five years earlier at 11.1 per cent. The electoral debacle of the PS continued in the legislative elections where Socialist candidates polled just about 7 per cent of the vote and secured a mere 30 seats as opposed to 280 in 2012.

Immediately after the elections, the PS was confronted by another wave of secessions, as leading figures such as Valls and Hamon left the party. By 2018, the departure of radical elements of the party – including Marie-Noëlle Lienemann, leader of the *l'Union et l'Espoir* faction; Charles Fiterman, former Parti communiste français (PCF) Minister, and Emmanuel Maurel, a high-profile member of Lienemann's faction, and supporter of cooperation with Jean-Luc Mélenchon's LFI – left only a pragmatic left-centrist core along with an increasingly anachronistic old guard – including Jean-Yves Le Drian, Macron's Minister of Defence, who would himself leave as a result of acting First Secretary Rachid Temal's statement that 'there are no Socialists in the [Philippe] government'.<sup>2</sup> In March 2018, Olivier Faure was elected as party leader with 48.4 per cent of the membership vote. Meanwhile,

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<sup>22</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/03/08/jean-yves-le-drian-quitte-le-parti-socialiste\\_5267463\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/03/08/jean-yves-le-drian-quitte-le-parti-socialiste_5267463_823448.html)

fragmentation continued to the left of the political spectrum with the emergence of new parties and movements, such as Hamon's Génération.s and essayist Raphaël Glucksmann's Place Publique, the future list partner for the 2019 European election.

## 2. The French PS in the 2019 EP elections

The 2017 presidential election proved a turning-point for the French party system, first in the variegation of political positions on Europe among the candidates; and second, on the salience the issue had in the run-off, between the most Eurosceptic Marine Le Pen, and Europhile Emmanuel Macron (Evans and Ivaldi, 2018). Thus, as the next main national poll, the 2019 Euro-elections were largely an extension of the outcome of the 2017 elections, confirming the pro- and anti-European stances of the presidential run-off contenders' parties, and leaving little political space for other party lists to manoeuvre.

To the left, an enfeebled PS entered a tactical agreement with Place Publique, a deal which also included other small parties of the French left such as the Mouvement des Citoyens and Nouvelle Donne, a social-liberal splinter group from the PS since 2013 and led by Pierre Larrouturnou. Five years earlier, in the 2014 EP elections, Nouvelle Donne had run independently, polling a mere 2.9 per cent of the vote. The 2019 coalition did not include however Hamon's Génération.s nor EELV's Greens, which both turned down the PS's offer to join forces in the EP election. Together with the presence of the PCF, LFI's Insoumis and far left Trotskyists, this further increased party fragmentation, with a total six lists competing against one another to the left of the party system.

### 2.1. Europe and the EU in the PS election manifesto

Ideologically, the PS entering the European elections in 2019 was difficult to identify as the heir of the Hollande executive, let alone the Mitterrand era. The PS 2019 European programme was on the other hand very much in line with the social and environmentalist 'new left' reorientation of the party since 2017. Such continuity and alignment with Place Publique's ambitious environmentalist policies were evident in the selection of Europe's role on the environment as its first of seven tenets in *Changeons d'Europe* ("A new kind of Europe").<sup>3</sup> Half a trillion euros over 5 years was hypothecated for renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and a transition to a carbon-free society. To give greater flexibility to national governments in implementing an emergency plan, the programme proposed excluding environmental spending from the 3 per cent budget deficit cap. In combining economic-growth targets with environmental protection, a commitment to trade protection including climate-protection enforcement was made. Similarly, to capitalise on technical know-how across member states, the programme recommended the formation of an "Airbus" of energy companies to work on renewable energy projects.

In keeping with retaining sovereignty over fiscal and economic policy, the second tenet of the programme saw Europe's role as an enforcer for tax collection across its member states. As cross-national organisations such as Amazon and Google exploit their status to lower corporate tax and national insurance contributions in host countries, a concerted effort to address this liberal market

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.parti-socialiste.paris/telechargement/changeons-deurope/>

capitalist loophole across Europe's territories alongside ending tax havens and requiring country-level tax reporting, found the PS in line with many equivalent opposition parties.

Similarly, tenet 3 placed the role of guaranteeing human rights firmly in Europe's purview. Universal rights to abortion, to paid paternity leave, to freedom from violence against women, and to gender equality through a dedicated Commissioner, would enshrine many of the national programme policies traditionally associated with the PS. More broadly, the party's concerns over human rights abuses in member-states, and in potential accession states, were invoked through an explicit call for the protection and free movement of LGBT+ families, and a strengthening of the European Court of Justice's mandate in ruling against states. Tenet 4 focused on migration policy, lobbying for an enhanced role for Europe in asylum applications and humanitarian support. The language mirrored the standard tension mainstream left parties have faced in addressing the migration issue – one the hand, to defend a humanitarian, egalitarian approach to refugees, economic migration and reuniting families, whilst at the same time endorsing an informed, realistic and selective process based upon informed rational principles of national benefit, rather than the kneejerk, 'Build-a-Wall' mentality of the populist right. Consequently, 'scientific' analyses of migration and policy development accompanied redrafts of the Dublin Accords and a proposed development aid threshold (0.7% of GDP).

A similar approach to transnational issues characterised the two other tenets of the programme, covering: 1) a European social fund, particularly for young citizens struggling in the knowledge-economy jobs market; employee-oriented company governance structures, and a European minimum wage at 70% of the median; and 2) further sustainability commitments, this time in health, to eliminate harmful pesticides, such as the bee-killing neonicotinoids, and other contaminant agricultural chemicals. As regards foreign policy, the PS called for a reinforcement of European defence and security. Finally, the programme set out a vision of Europe as the principal defender of identity and sovereignty, through closer integration on budgets and stability; a 'Made in Europe' preference to bolster European economies, as well as greater accountability and a voice for Europe's representative institutions, such as the European Parliament, above the in camera status quo of the European Council and Commission.

Thus, the 2019 electoral manifesto reactivated the old Socialist myth of a 'social Europe' pledging a wide range of social and fiscal policies to fight inequalities. Also central to the manifesto was the continuation of the idea that the EU should ultimately align with France's national model – as revealed for instance by the proposal to create a wealth tax at the European level, similar to France's ISF (Impôt sur la fortune). The programme showed a dramatic move however from the softer reformist tone of the PS during the Jospin and Hollande years as it endorsed a radical critique of the EU and called for a 'radical change' that would more clearly "assume a break with liberal and austerity policies".

Overall, the 2019 EP election manifesto confirmed the PS's shift to a 'new left' agenda combining radical redistributive and economic protectionist policies with libertarian-cosmopolitan values and a strong environmentalist approach. The French PS's policy package clearly resembled that of Hamon's presidential bid of 2017 and would endorse more maximalist policies than those laid out in the Euro manifesto of the Party of European Socialists (PES). During the 2019 campaign, whilst still firmly anchored with the European Socialists within the S&D (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats) group, the PS/Place Publique coalition would not entirely rule out co-operation with Mélenchon's populist left, attesting to the ideological and strategic repositioning of the PS further away from the centre of the political spectrum. Moreover, the party would condemn the traditional grand coalition with the European conservatives of the European People's Party (EPP) and pledge for



a broad alliance of all left-wing – including radical and populist – and ecologist forces in the EP, calling upon them to “lead common struggles together”.

## 2.2. Electoral results

For the PS, which had lost large numbers of senior figures, including its former presidential candidate, as well as thousands of grass-roots activists and, symbolically, its rue Solférino headquarters, which had been the party’s home since the launch of François Mitterrand’s 1981 presidential campaign, the European elections offered nothing beyond the opportunity to confirm its rapid descent from the presidential and governing party it had been in 2012, to an also-ran five years later (Figure 3). The EP elections of 2019 confirmed the continued decline of the PS some two years after its debacle in the presidential election. The 6.2% of the vote share represented a loss of over 10% on the 2014 election, which was a second-order mid-cycle election for the incumbent party – normally, a relative nadir for any governing party in a system predicated upon alternation (Marsh, 1998). The score was almost identical to that of Benoît Hamon in April 2017, yet represented sixth place, with at least two other clearly leftist lists performing as well or better: EELV with 13.5%, and LFI’s new list at 6.3%. This does not take into account the incumbent *Renaissance* list, comprising LREM, *Mouvement Démocrate* (MoDEM) and other government-aligned parties, whose electorate still included a substantial number of former left-wing PS voters.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 3 about here – PS vote in European elections; legislatives.

Figure 4 breaks down the vote share of the leftist lists, and that of Renaissance, the governing party list formed by LREM and MoDEM, by department. The PS list did relatively well in certain old strongholds such as the South West, Brittany and the Massif Central. However, in these areas, the party barely reached double figures. Partly this was due to the minority challenge of the *Génération.s*, splitting an already diminished moderate left vote; but predominantly it was due to the domination of *Renaissance* and of EELV, with stronger scores even in those areas of their own relative weakness – leaving only a tiny core of PS support anywhere in the country.

Figure 4 about here

The 2019 result represents a confirmation of the structural collapse of the Socialist vote. Over time, the decline is clear across the last 15 years, from the party’s strongest performance in 2004, when the opposition PS managed to consolidate gains from minor left-wing and radical-left parties under the logic of *bipartisme* pursued by the two main governing parties (Grunberg and Haegel, 2007). The massive drop observed in 2009 reflected the revival of the right-wing presidential majority under Nicolas Sarkozy as well as the internal fractures of the PS party Congress in Reims a year earlier. Moreover, in 2009, the PS competed against an independent ecologist list led by Daniel Cohn-

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<sup>4</sup> We should acknowledge here that a number of left-wing supporters of Macron and LREM moved to EELV, disenchanted with the rightist turn of the governing party ([https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/apres-les-europeennes-l-aile-gauche-de-lrem-en-quete-d-une-renaissance-28-05-2019-2315654\\_20.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/apres-les-europeennes-l-aile-gauche-de-lrem-en-quete-d-une-renaissance-28-05-2019-2315654_20.php))

Bendit, which by itself won over 16% of the vote. In the 2014 elections, the expected drop mid-term through Hollande's presidency was much steeper than expected, well below the upper 'teens indicated by opinion polls. While the drop was somewhat relativized by the similarly poor results for the Union pour un mouvement populaire (UMP), and the shock victory of the FN in a poll combining anti-government protest with a continued high level of abstention – almost as high as 2009 (2009: 59.36%; 2014: 57.5%) – the 2014 result heralded however the electoral debacle of 2017.

### 2.3. Voters' opinions on Europe and the EU

Since the mid-1990s, European issues have deeply fractured the Socialist electorate along socio-economic lines, notably opposing its pro-European middle-class support to its more Eurosceptic working-class constituency. In 2005, a significant proportion of PS voters in the *couches populaires* had expressed discontent with the liberal orientation of the EU which was seen as a threat to France's social welfare model, and had turned to the 'No' vote in the referendum on the ECT. Europe has remained a divisive and polarizing issue in French politics ever since (Belot et al., 2013).

Despite a clear shift to the left in 2017, the PS has yet failed to reconnect with its former traditional working-class voters who in great proportion have turned to the radical right FN since the late-1980s, or flirted with the UMP under Sarkozy in 2007. Our previous analysis of the 2017 Socialist vote showed that Hamon attracted younger, urban and secular voters, however showing no clear class nor education profile. Compared with Macron's support, this suggested that the Socialist candidate may have been fishing from the same pool of voters within similar social strata. This was corroborated by Hamon's voters' attitudinal proximity to Macron's supporters as regards their views of the EU, which confirmed the lack of independent political space that Hamon was able to occupy in the first round of the presidential election. Overall, our analysis found that the electorate with the least differentiation from Macron's in 2017 was that of Hamon (Evans and Ivaldi, 2018, p.171).

Under the structural pressures highlighted above, the remaining core of Socialist voters in the 2019 EP elections makes possible an interesting study of the ideological profile of what remains of the party's mass support. Because of its size, it constitutes a difficult group to capture using survey data; however the European Election Study and the second wave of the SCoRE survey in France do provide sufficient cases for a simple descriptive analysis of the ideological positioning of the party's supporters compared with those of LREM, LR, LFI and RN.

Figure 5 about here

Looking at the mean position of PS voters in comparison to the four other main political groupings – from left to right, LFI, LREM, LR and RN – some interesting differences are apparent across the different electorates (Figure 5). First, quite clearly the main division in French political space on Europe in its current configuration is between pro- and anti-system forces, broadly separating the radical left LFI and right RN from the erstwhile and current parties of government. The RN is clearly the most antipathetic towards the European project, but LFI's opposition to the neo-liberal elite cartel of the European institutions gives rise to almost as vigorous opposition among the radical left voters. For the PS, its position generally aligns with that of its LR counterpart on the right, more moderate in its pro-European position than Macron's LREM. The one issue where there is greater differentiation is on whether European integration should be rolled back or progressed further.

Again, LREM scores highest on the further integration side, but the PS overlaps considerably in its 95% confidence interval, significantly closer to the integration ideal. This aligns closely with the party's Euro-programme, analysed above, in identifying a number of areas for European competence in addressing policy areas through further harmonisation and, potentially, integration. The PS voter is Euro-positive, somewhat ambivalent about the current institutional context of the EU, and supportive of pushing integration further to rectify these problems by realigning Europe from a liberal-market structure to a social Europe.

Figure 6 about here

The questions asked in the SCoRE survey portray a similar set of attitudes among voters (Figure 6). Quizzing respondents on their fears concerning European integration, reveals that Socialist voters showed the greatest concern over social protection – again mirroring their party's position on shifting Europe from a liberal-market to a socially-proactive vision – and the least on immigration.

However, these graphs demonstrate a worrying reality for the PS in 2019, namely that the party is fishing in a crowded pond. On the European project as a good, the party's moderate position promotes an ambiguity which makes mobilisation of support difficult, where more radical parties such as LFI are able to make easier capital from greater clarity in their opposition. On more specific issue content, the PS is largely indistinguishable from the same radical neighbours – and, on issues outside social protection, from the dominant governing LREM. On a policy area which increasingly crystallises broader ideological positions within the French party landscape, the PS is poorly positioned to identify its own electoral pool, and through the atrophy of the five years of the Hollande presidency, no longer owns any dimension, having slipped behind LFI, EELV and LREM on each of these.

Perhaps the most worrying aspect of this for the PS is the loss of identity amongst the electorate. In the SCoRE survey, when asked to place each of the party leaders on standard policy scales, almost half (43%) of the respondents felt unable to give a position for the PS and its First Secretary, Olivier Faure, on European integration. For an issue which dominated so heavily in the Presidential election of 2017, and which – as Figure 1 reminds us – remains highly salient among the challenger parties which have overtaken the PS electorally, this bodes ill for the future of the former governing party at the ballot box.

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the insuperable political and social challenges which have seen the PS fall from a dominant party of government to an electoral also-ran in the space of five years. A lack of presidential leadership, continued and deepened factional conflict, and ideological separation from much of its electoral base have led to a party able to mobilise only a core electorate reminiscent more of an intellectual club than a mass base. Under the presidential leadership of Hollande, the PS has been haemorrhaging voters. Reflecting the split of the party between its radical and moderate sectors, the PS has lost most of its lower-middle and working-class support to Jean-Luc Mélenchon's populist left and Marine Le Pen's radical right. Meanwhile a significant contingent of moderate

middle-class voters has also abandoned a sinking Socialist ship and eventually turned to Macron's LREM in 2017.

Coming into the 2019 EP elections, with a programme based upon sustainability and European integration to confront the major global challenges increasingly characterising the policy agenda, the PS found itself insufficiently differentiated from EELV's Greens, on the former issue, and from the governing LREM, on the latter, to enable it to mobilise a substantial pool of support. That Martine Aubry, Mayor of Lille and former First Secretary of the party, felt obliged to back a relatively obscure, electorally naïve writer as the head of a party list indicates not just a more general shift in focus towards civil-society candidates and politicians so apparent in Emmanuel Macron's cabinet, as well as in his party, but also the lack of options available within the PS itself.

The PS's political crisis is deeply rooted in its ideological incoherence and internal contradictions. Over time, the so-called 'Epinay party' has not been able fully to resolve the tension between the social-liberal pro-market policy positions espoused while in office – originating in Mitterrand's economic U-turn of the 1980s – on the one hand, and the strong Socialist ideological tradition of political radicalism in France, on the other, which has often been expressed while in opposition (Grunberg, 2011). Such tension was revealed and amplified during Hollande's presidency: significant policy shifts both on the economy and law-and-order took the party further to the right, which alienated vast sectors of the PS's electoral support, paving the way for Hamon's radical, new-left bid in the Socialist primary. Ironically, by delivering a more ideologically extreme PS candidate, the primary ultimately opened wide a political field for Macron at the centre-left of the political spectrum.

The current crisis of the French PS is also organizational. The dismantling of a politbureau once characterised by its wealth of high-profile national politicians, either through these individuals' departure to their regional fiefdoms, or through their replacement by lower-tier, unknown party foot-soldiers, added the issues of recognition and competence. Having returned to the opposition in 2017, the PS has since failed to establish itself as the main opponent to Emmanuel Macron and many voters are uncertain on the party's policy positions: as the December 2019 SCoRE survey showed, between a quarter and a half of the French were simply unable to place the party and its leader, Olivier Faure, in the political space on important issues such as redistribution, immigration and European integration.

Partly the departure of much of the radical left, either towards Mélenchon's LFI or to more direct action social movements, has undoubtedly seen the loss of mobilisation potential for the PS. Equally, institutionalized political parties in France as elsewhere are increasingly challenged organizationally by new social movements and novel forms of political mobilization (della Porta et al, 2017; Evans, 2018; Minkenberg, 2019) In the case of the French PS, the decentralisation of the locus of power among party-affiliated unions to virtual networks of activists in the *gilet jaunes*, has left an anachronistic party organisation unable to exploit either the protests themselves, or apparently the underlying causes of these.

Perversely, a party whose most influential government opposition came from within its own ranks, during the *frondeurs'* attacks on the pension and employment reforms of the Hollande presidency between 2012 and 2017, now finds itself unable to exploit the continuation of this protest during a year long period of street demonstrations, and more recently strikes against Macron's new pension reform. Some held out hope that Macron and LREM's turn to the right in the first two years in power would see a return of prodigal Socialists to the fold in the European elections. Instead, the main destination for disenchanting leftists turned out to be EELV's Greens, with its greater track-record of

uncompromising positions on social, environmental and cultural issues resonating with leftist voters. In that regard, the 2019 Euro elections' main function for the PS was to confirm its apparently inexorable decline as a force within French politics, and the ever decreasing likelihood of its identifying a viable, let alone successful, candidate for the 2022 presidential election.

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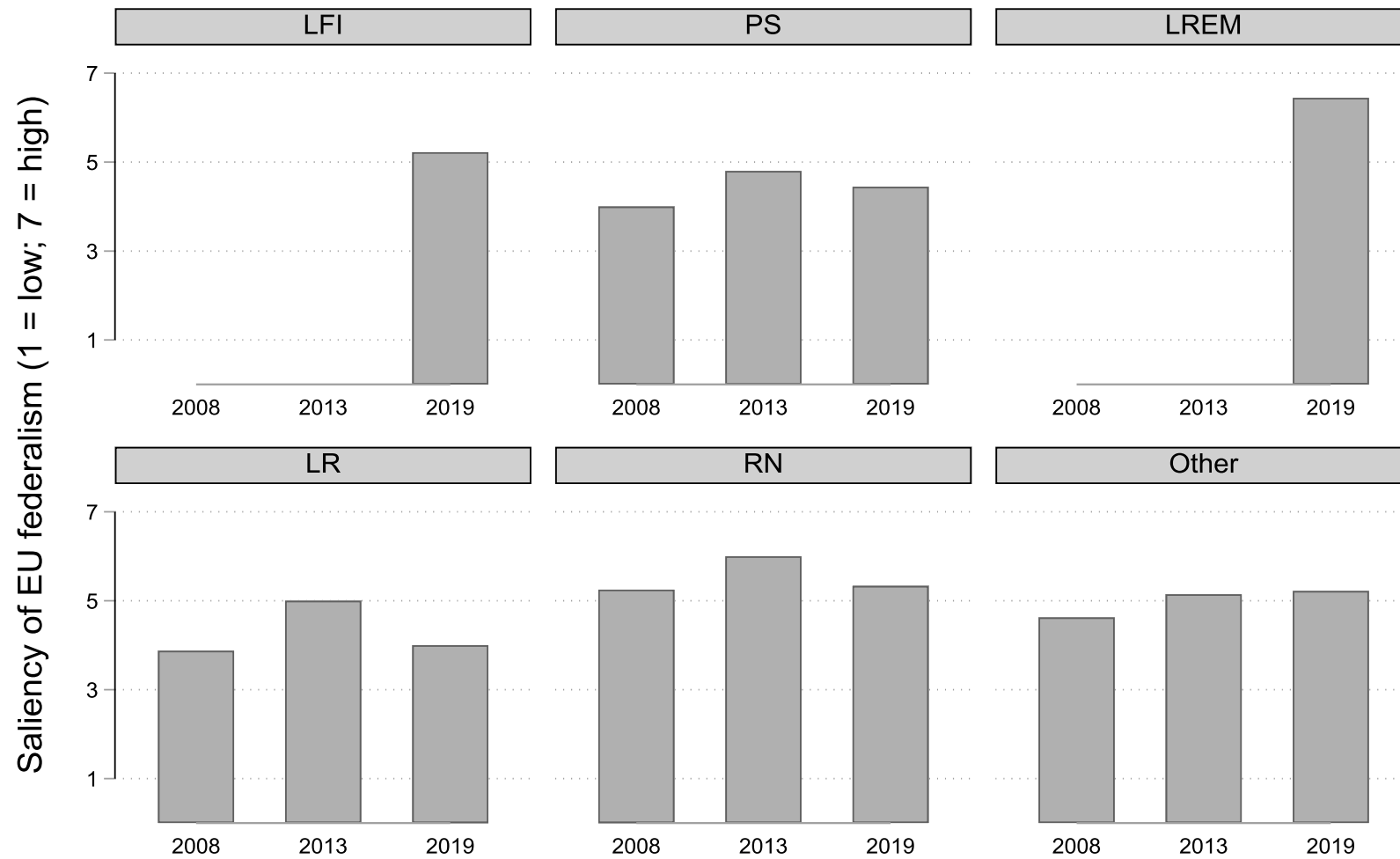
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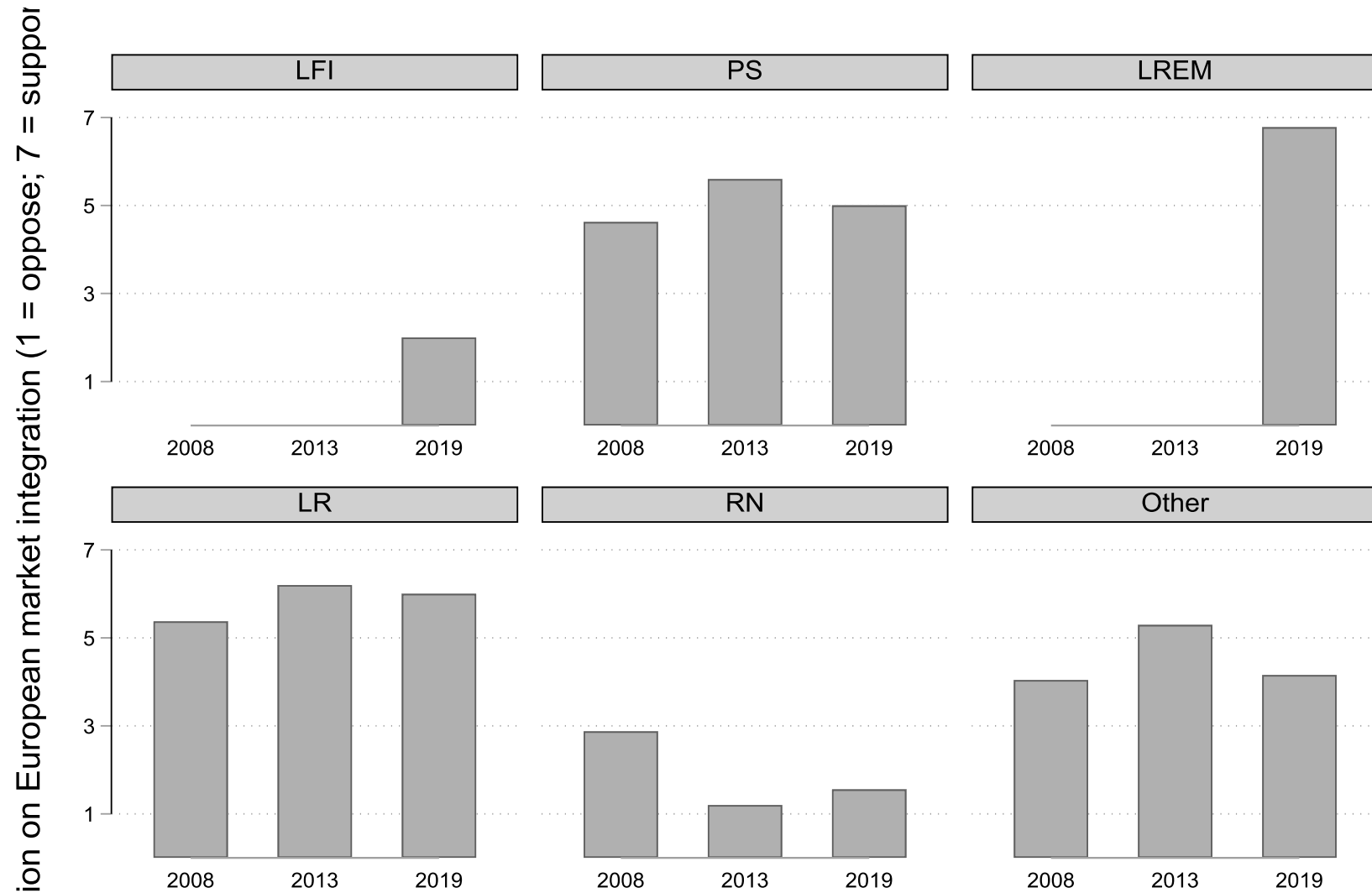
## Figures

Figure 1 – saliency of federalism to mainstream and challenger parties in France (2008 – 2019)



Source: Rohrschneider and Whitefield expert survey trend file (2019)

Figure 2 – party positions on European market integration among governing and challenger parties in France (2008-2019)



Source: Rohrschneider and Whitefield expert survey trend file (2019)

Position on European market integration (1 = oppose; 7 = support)



Figure 3 – European and legislative results for the PS (1979 – 2019)

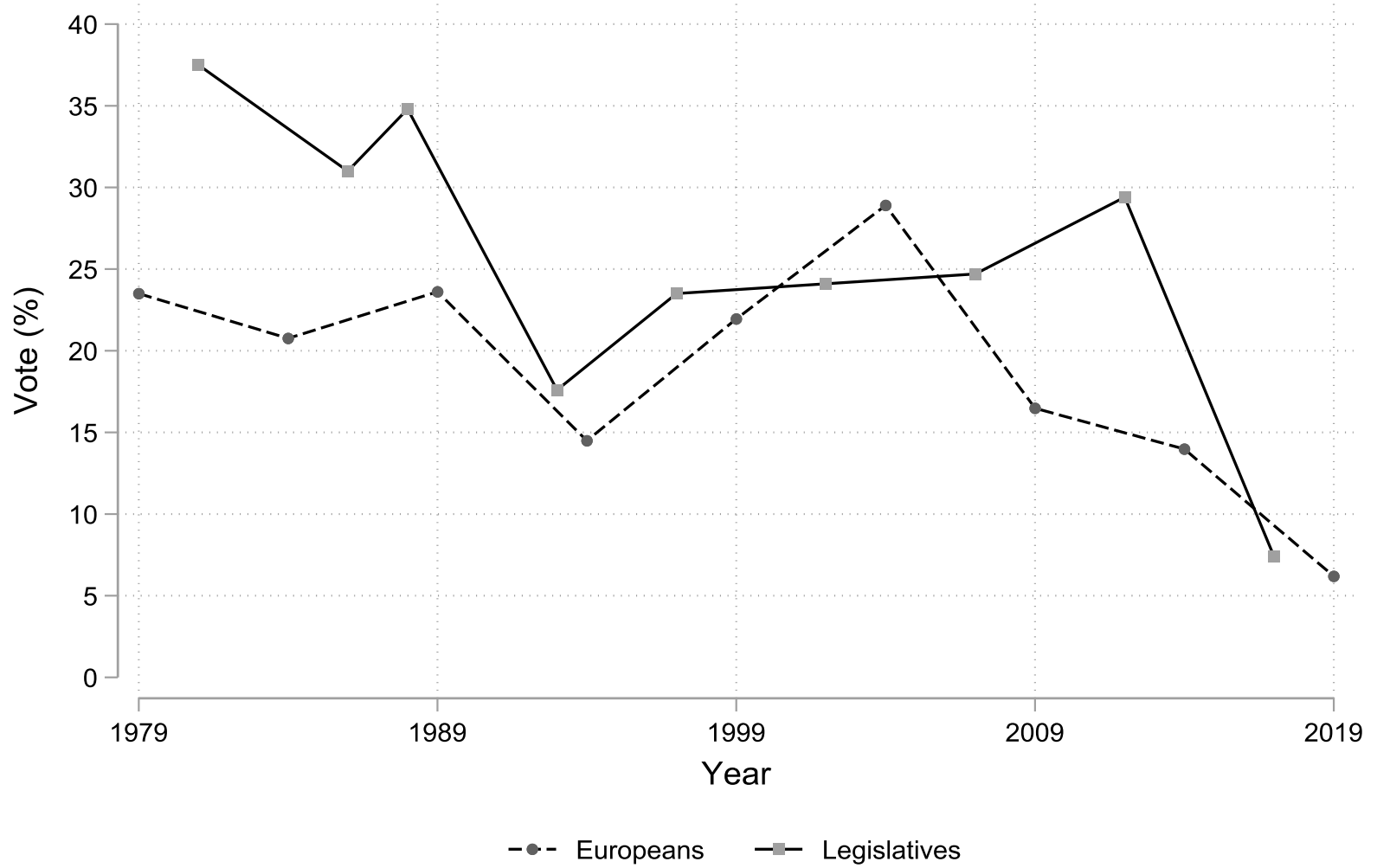


Figure 4 – maps of 2019 Euro election results for leftist lists and the governing *Renaissance* list by department

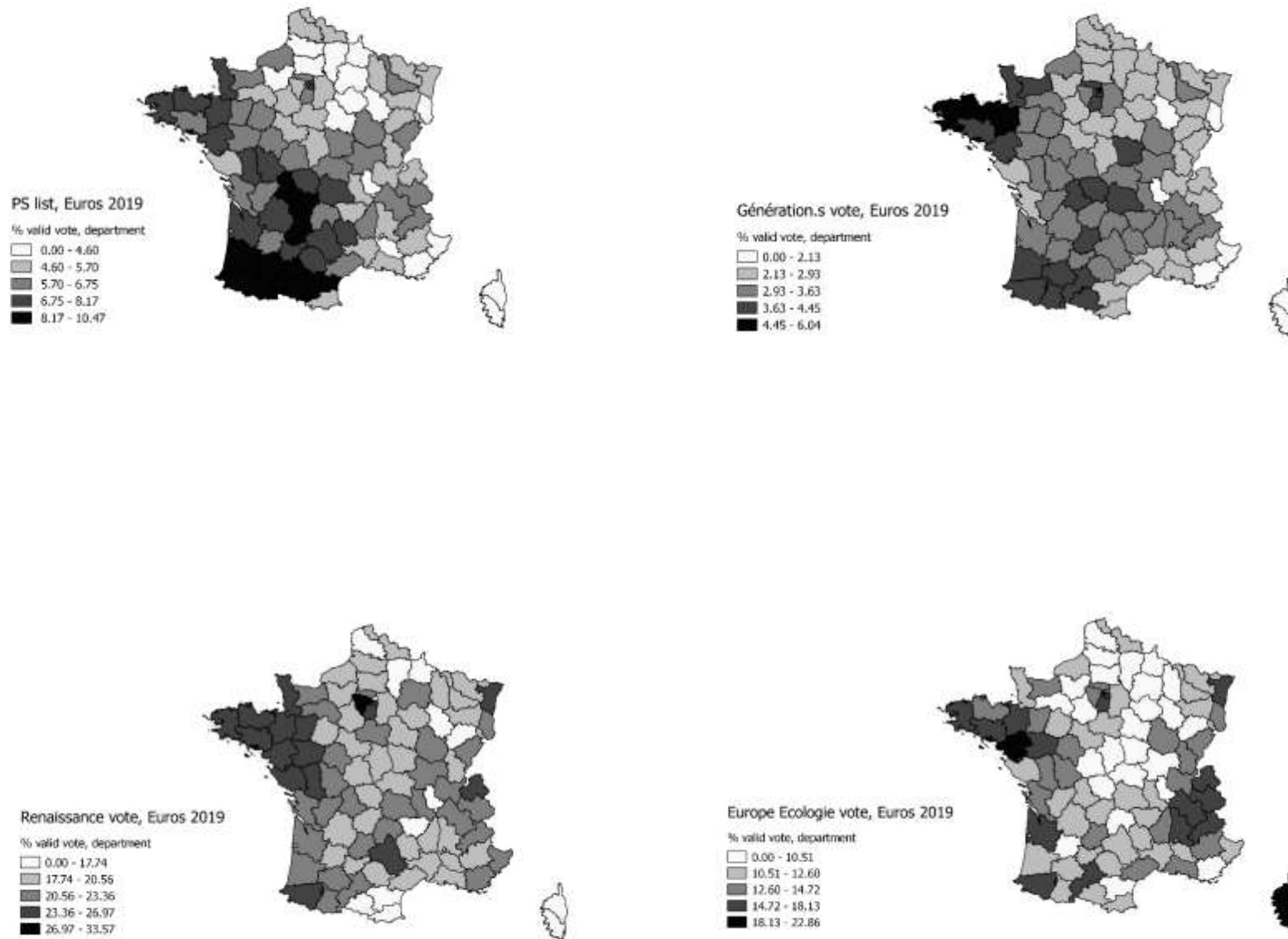


Figure 5 – mean positions of party electorates on Europe (source: ESS 2019)

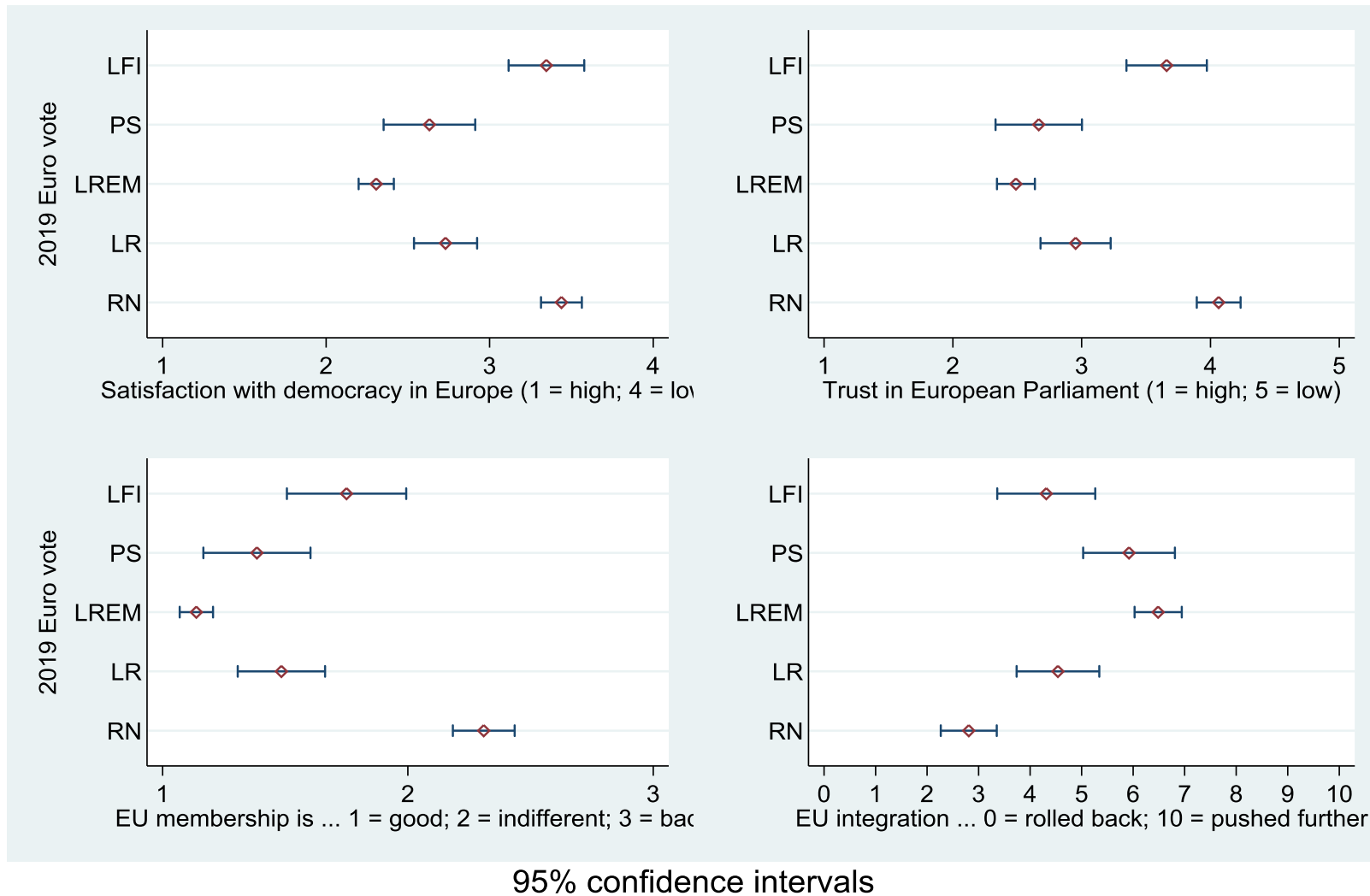


Figure 6 – mean positions on the effects of European integration (source: SCoRE survey, wave 2)

