

Strategic Isolation: The Cordon Sanitaire's Influence on Coalition Dynamics and Electoral Outcomes in Europe

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of the Cordon Sanitaire (political ostracism) on coalition dynamics and electoral outcomes in European parliamentary democracies. Despite its widespread adoption since the 1980s, scholarly debate persists about its effectiveness. We develop a spatial voting model differentiating parliamentary and governing coalition medians, analyzing repercussions of Cordon Sanitaire strategies across six European countries from 1945 to 2025. Using ParlGov data, we test two hypotheses: first, implementing a Cordon Sanitaire shifts governing coalition medians away from ostracized parties; second, greater divergence between governing and parliamentary medians increases electoral support for opposing parties. Results robustly confirm both hypotheses, showing a significant shift (13.1%) in governing coalitions away from ostracized parties, and increased opposition support (1.3% per 1% divergence). These findings highlight distinct short-term versus long-term effects: initially successful in marginalizing extremist parties, Cordon Sanitaires eventually strengthen opposition forces. We advise policymakers to reconsider reliance on political ostracism, favoring coalition formation closer to parliamentary medians for enhanced governmental stability and electoral predictability.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, far-right parties have gained electoral success across Europe, challenging the traditional political structures in these democracies. One prominent response to these extremist threats is the Cordon Sanitaire (also sometimes referred to as “political firewalls”). A Cordon Sanitaire is a form of political ostracism that excludes targeted parties from formal cooperation (W. M. Downs, 1998). While this strategy has been applied in various national contexts, its effects on coalition formation and voter behavior remain contested. While van Spanje & de Graaf (2018) argue that the implementation of a Cordon Sanitaire is effective in reducing votes when mainstream parties adopt some positions of the extremist party, Krause et al. (2022) find no empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of a Cordon Sanitaire.

Our study intends to fill that gap empirically and with a spatial voting model that distinguishes between the median of the parliament and the median of the governing coalition. The model is used to evaluate the effects of a Cordon Sanitaire arrangement on the composition of government and the subsequent redistribution of votes. We apply this spatial Model empirically across all six European countries, which experimented in at least one election with an Cordon Sanitaire (Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden) from 1945 to 2025. Employing data from the ParlGov database (Döring & Manow, 2024), we rigorously test two hypotheses: that implementing a Cordon Sanitaire shifts the median position of governing coalitions away from ostracized parties, and that increased ideological divergence between the governing coalition median and the parliamentary median boosts electoral support for opposition parties on the opposite spectrum.

Following this introduction, Section 2 reviews the literature on the Median Voter Theorem, which forms the basis for our model and the application of the Cordon Sanitaire in European party systems. Section 3 introduces the extended spatial voting model. Section 4 describes the dataset and defines the empirical strategy. Section 5 presents the results. Section 6 discusses the findings considering existing work and presents their implications for policymakers. Section 7 indicates limitations. Section 8 concludes.

2. Literature Review

Median Voter Theorem

The Median Voter Theorem is a central concept in political science today. It posits that in a majority-rule system with single-peaked preferences, the outcome of an election will reflect the preferences of the median voter. The model is based on Hotelling's (1929) analysis of spatial competition and was later extended by Black (1948). The concept was finally popularized by A. Downs (1957) in his model of two-party competition. In the spatial voting models, voter preferences are distributed along a unidimensional space. On this scale, voters have single-peaked preferences. Each voter supports the candidate whose platform lies closest to their preference. In A. Downs (1957) model, a two-party competition is assumed. The candidates rationally position themselves to maximize their vote, and a simple majority rule decides the outcomes. Since voters are distributed along a single policy line and will vote for the closest party, both parties are incentivized to adopt centrist positions to capture the decisive median voter. In the Median Voter Theorem, voters have perfect information and are deterministic. Furthermore, there is a full turnout. Candidates maximize expected vote share and are assumed to know the distribution of voter ideal points.

Empirical research has applied the Median Voter Theorem across a wide range of policy domains. Poole & Rosenthal (1984) estimate a spatial model of U.S. presidential elections and find that electoral outcomes align closely with candidate proximity to the median voter. Meltzer & Richard (1981) propose a model in which the level of redistribution is determined by the income of the median voter, with greater inequality predicting higher taxes. Borge & Rattsø (2004) confirm the Meltzer-Richard hypothesis of increased taxes using Norwegian municipal data. At the local level, Holcombe (1980) provides evidence that budget allocation in Michigan school districts corresponds to the preference of the median voter. In the context of trade policy, Mayer (1984) models tariff setting as the outcome of majority rule, where the decisive agent is the median voter. These studies suggest that the Median Voter Theorem provides a flexible framework for understanding distributive outcomes across electoral and institutional settings.

While the Median Voter Theorem provides a benchmark for two-party competition, it relies on assumptions that are rarely met in empirical settings. Real-world elections span multiple policy dimensions (Hinich & Ordeshook, 1970). Voter turnout is probabilistic rather than universal (Cox, 1987). Candidates are perceived with noise and engage in strategic signaling rather than pure policy accommodation (Groseclose & McCarty, 2001). Empirical studies also document

significant costs associated with abrupt changes in policy stance (Debacker, 2015) and a tendency among parties to preserve party identity rather than converge to the median (Kollman et al., 1992). Moreover, multiparty competition violates the two-party structure of the Median Voter Theorem (Palfrey, 1984). The following section introduces a model that relaxes these assumptions to accommodate coalition bargaining and positioning under proportional representation.

Cordon Sanitaire

A Cordon Sanitaire refers to a strategic decision by mainstream parties to exclude cooperation, coalition formation, or lending any other support to extremist parties (Biard, 2021). The term was first formalized in Belgium in 1989, when mainstream Flemish parties agreed not to collaborate with the far-right Vlaams Blok (later Vlaams Belang) following its electoral breakthrough in the 1988 municipal elections (Damen, 2001). Since then, similar exclusion strategies have been adopted and dismantled in various European democracies.

Mainstream parties adopt a Cordon Sanitaire for a mix of historic, strategic, and normative reasons. After World War II, concepts such as "defensive democracy" (Capoccia, 2001) or "well-fortified democracy" (Jaschke, 2004) legitimized the implementation of a Cordon Sanitaire. Beyond the historic rationale, electoral incentives also shape party behavior. By ruling out cooperation with extremist competitors, established parties try to turn voters away from these parties (van Spanje & de Graaf, 2018). When extremist parties enter the parliament, excluding parties that are politically distant leads to more effective policymaking (van Spanje, 2010). Finally, Axelsen (2023) reconceptualized the Cordon Sanitaire as a social-meta norm. The Cordon Sanitaire is used as a prescriptive rule, which results in an expected behavior of all mainstream parties against the extreme party.

The Cordon Sanitaire varies substantially in form and intensity across democratic systems. Originally, the term refers to a formal pact among parties to exclude the ostracized party from any police cooperation (Pauwels, 2011). However, the Cordon Sanitaire is often informal. In these cases, party leaders issue public statements against the party, refuse joint voting initiatives, and avoid legislative negotiations (W. M. Downs, 2002; van Heerden & van der Brug, 2017). The Cordon Sanitaire can be applied in different stages of the political process. It may serve as a pre-electoral strategy or as a post-electoral barrier within the legislative arena (W. M. Downs, 2002). Moreover, the scope may differ across governance levels. Parties may enforce exclusion nationally while tolerating cooperation at regional or municipal levels (Axelsen, 2023).

Empirical findings on the consequences of the Cordon Sanitaire are mixed. van Spanje & van der Brug (2009) finds that ostracism alone has no consistent effect across cases. Later, research by van Spanje & de Graaf (2018) shows that electoral support for ostracized parties declines only when established parties simultaneously adopt their core policy positions. This combined approach was also identified by Pauwels (2011) as a decisive factor in explaining the electoral decline of the Vlaams Belang. However, these findings are contradicted by Krause et al. (2022), who do not find evidence of the effectiveness of a Cordon Sanitaire.

Several studies have examined the effect of the Cordon Sanitaire through the lens of A. Downs (1957) model of spatial competition. According to Akkerman & Rooduijn (2015), inclusion in the electoral arena should incentivize extremist parties to appeal to the median voter. In contrast, Bale (2003) argues that, in a Downsian logic, centre-right parties may adopt selected policy positions of far-right competitors to broaden their appeal. Despite the works by Akkerman & Rooduijn (2015) and Bale (2003) no formal spatial voting model has been used to test the effects of party ostracism on cabinet composition and voting outcomes. This paper addresses the gap by proposing an adapted spatial model. We then empirically test the resulting hypotheses using electoral data from proportional representation systems in Europe, while considering exclusion rules.

3. Voter choice function

To analyze the impact of a Cordon Sanitaire on voter behavior, we propose an extended spatial voting model. Building on the Median Voter Theorem, our model relaxes several restrictions while maintaining the core logic of the model. We assume that party positions and voter preferences are distributed on a unidimensional scale from left (0) to right (1). These positions and preferences represent aggregated political stances across multiple policy issues condensed into a single dimension. We extend the median voter model by proposing two types of voters. The voter type A adheres to the classical Downsian model. The voter is indexed as i and possesses an ideal policy position v_i . Each party j continuously adopts a policy position p_j . Voters maximize their utility $U_i^{(A)}(p_j)$ by selecting the party whose policy position is closest to their preference:

$$U_i^{(A)}(p_j) = -|v_i - p_j|$$

The second type of voter is concerned with the policy position of the median of the governing coalition (M_{gov}). Within this group, voters have side preferences for either left-wing or right-wing governments. These preferences depend on their position on the unidimensional scale. We thus differentiate two voter subgroups: B_L preferring left-leaning governments, and B_R , and preferring right-wing governments. The utility function of these voters increases with proximity to M_{gov} if the M_{gov} is on the voter's side of the political spectrum. Formally, the utility for voter type B is expressed as:

$$U_i^{(B)}(p_{M_{gov}}) = -|v_i - p_{M_{gov}}| + \sigma_i \cdot \text{sgn}(p_{M_{gov}} - 0.5)$$

With:

$$\sigma_i = \begin{cases} -1 & \text{for a } B_L \text{ voter} \\ +1 & \text{for a } B_R \text{ voter} \end{cases}$$

The sign function $\text{sgn}(x)$ is defined as follows:

$$\text{sgn}(x) = \begin{cases} -1 & \text{if } x < 0 \\ 0 & \text{if } x = 0 \\ +1 & \text{if } x > 0 \end{cases}$$

The introduction of $\text{sgn}(p_{M_{gov}} - 0.5)$ clearly distinguishes whether the government median position is left or right of the political center. Multiplying this by the voters' directional preference (σ_i) and the weighted parameter β integrates voters' directional government preferences directly into their utility function.

Consistent with the logic of the median voter (A. Downs, 1957), we identify the parliamentary median (M_{par}) as the position where cumulative legislative seat shares reach the 50% threshold. Furthermore, we calculate the median position of the governing coalition ($p_{M_{gov}}$) defined as the midpoint between the most left-wing and right-wing positions within the government coalition:

$$p_{M_{gov}} = \frac{Gov_{left} + (Gov_{left} + Gov_{cumulated\ seats})}{2}$$

To validate our subsequent findings, we replace the unweighted $p_{M_{gov}}$ position with a weighted version ($p_{M_{gov}}^w$) that accounts for the seat shares (s_j) of governing parties. We calculate the $p_{M_{gov}}^w$ utilizing the median party position (p_j) of the governing parties and multiply each p_j by the number of seats the receptive party holds in parliament. Lastly, we divide by the total seats

of government parties. This approach reflects power asymmetries and is consistent with established methodologies in spatial analysis (Martin & Vanberg, 2014, 2020).

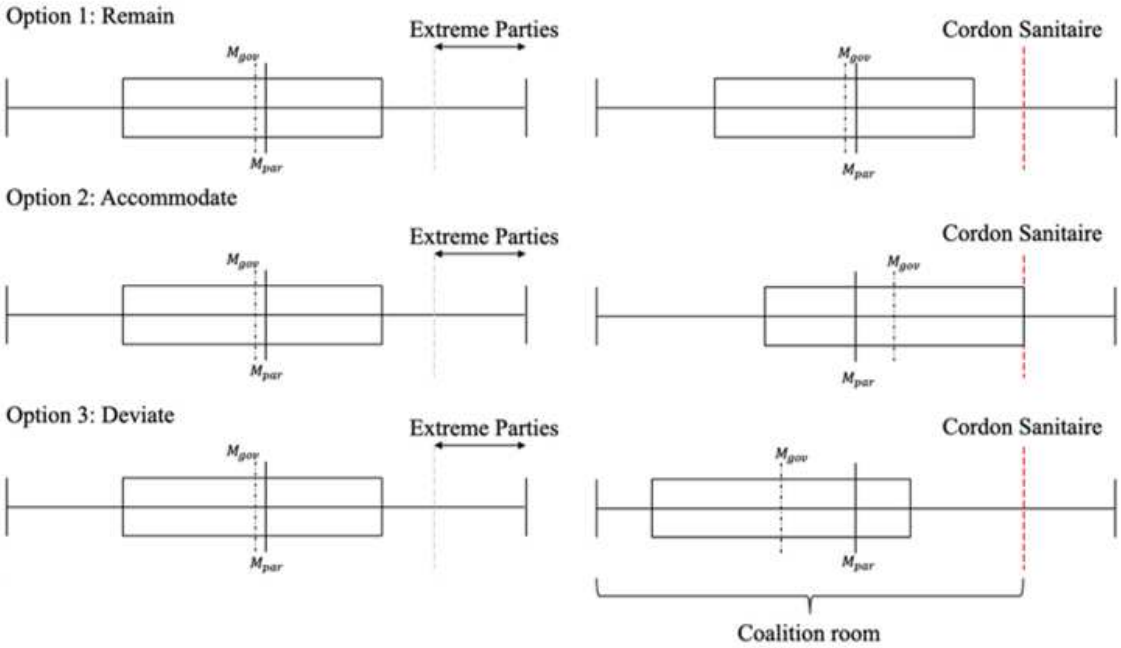
$$p_{M_{gov}^w} = \frac{\sum S_j p_j}{\sum S_j}$$

We assume government policies align with the $p_{M_{gov}}$. Thus, when parties form coalition governments, their initial positions p_i shift towards the coalition median $p_{M_{gov}}$ due to inter-party compromises.

Establishing a Cordon Sanitaire reduces available coalition options. This has certain implications for our model. As shown in Figure 1, parties are faced with three options. They can remain in their position if it does not include the cordoned party (Option 1). Secondly, they can follow the strategy of accommodation. The strategy is to cooperate with a party close to the Cordon Sanitaire (Option 2). Thirdly, they can rely on a wider range of coalition options, which shifts the $p_{M_{gov}}$ away from the center of the spectrum (Option 2). We assume that most parties will choose Option 3 due to the increased number of coalition constellations. Consequently, our first hypothesis posits that implementing a Cordon Sanitaire shifts the distance of $p_{M_{gov}}$ away from the ostracized party.

Figure 1

Coalition options with and without the Cordon Sanitaire



Note. Own work

Drawing upon insights from Fortunato (2017), we additionally posit that voters sanction parties whose enacted policy positions deviate substantially from their pre-electoral stances. Specifically, voters assess the governmental median position $p_{M_{gov}}$ against the parliamentary median M_{par} . If a party's original policy stance is positioned left of M_{par} , voters anticipate governmental decisions to reflect this preference. When government policy ($p_{M_{gov}}$) fails to align with voter expectations based on the parliamentary median, voters shift support toward opposition parties whose positions remain unchanged.

We assume that voters migrate from governing coalition parties towards opposition parties, depending on the relationship between $p_{M_{gov}}$ to M_{par} . If $p_{M_{gov}}$ is situated to the right of M_{par} , voters migrate from the coalition party towards left-wing opposition parties, and vice versa. Therefore, our second hypothesis is that voters switch towards the opposition, which is on the opposite side of the $p_{M_{gov}}$, proportional to the distance $|p_{M_{gov}} - M_{par}|$.

4. Methodology

Data

We use several sources to compile a country-level panel dataset that spans 133 country-election observations from 1945 until 2025. The sample includes six European parliamentary democracies with proportional or mixed electoral systems. Our choice of countries is limited to European democracies that implemented a Cordon Sanitaire against at least one party and that are located either in central or northern Europe or the Benelux. Furthermore, we exclude post-Soviet states. The final six countries are Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. For each election, the dataset records legislative composition, government formation, and information on excluded parties.

We obtain election data, cabinet compositions, and party positions from the ParlGov database (Döring & Manow, 2024). The analysis included all general elections within the sample period. Where necessary, updates for elections occurring after the last ParlGov release were manually added. To account for varying parliamentary sizes across election cycles, we calculate seat share as a proportion of total seats per election. Observations involving parties with no clearly defined positions or negligible influence (e.g., single-member splinter groups) were excluded.

The dataset is based on mid-period changes in parliamentary or cabinet composition. For these cases, we generate a separate observation reflecting the updated constellation. We rely on the final cabinet and legislative constellation prior to the next election, as this reflects the government context voters respond to at the ballot box. An exception is Austria’s technocratic cabinet in 2019, which is excluded; instead, we use the preceding cabinet. We dropped the 2023 Dutch election due to an unclear fit with the existing data, taking into consideration new party constellations and alliances.

Parties are ranked on a left–right scale, based on expert survey results in the ParlGov database. The ranked positions are treated as time-invariant. To approximate the party’s position for each election cycle, we use the spatial seat share in parliament and determine the party’s media (v_i). Based on these results, we are also able to determine the $p_{M_{gov}}$ and $p_{M_{gov}^w}$.

In addition to the ParlGov database, we rely on literature to identify the implementation and evaluation of Cordon Sanitaires (see Appendix Table A3 for detailed cases). A Cordon Sanitaire is recognized as present if the following conditions are met: (1) the targeted party is systematically excluded from any governing coalition or meaningful parliamentary cooperation; (2) the party holds a position deemed extreme by mainstream actors and major media outlet; and (3) other parties publicly and consistently rule out cooperation. In the case of the Netherlands, we excluded the Centrumpartij (CP), as the party only had one seat. We also did not include the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF), as the main party leader was killed and the party lost relevance quickly afterwards

Empirical Strategy

To empirically test our model, we employ a time and country fixed-effects regression to evaluate the influence of political Cordon Sanitaires on ideological shifts within governments and their subsequent impact on electoral outcomes. Drawing on panel data from six European parliamentary democracies covering election periods from 1945 until 2025, our empirical approach captures both temporal and spatial heterogeneity. The empirical strategy is structured around two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Cordon Sanitaires shift the position of the $p_{M_{gov}}$

Hypothesis 2: A larger distance between $p_{M_{gov}}$ and M_{par} increases seats for the opposition parties, lying on the opposite of the $p_{M_{gov}}$, in the subsequent election

To test our first hypothesis, we apply a regression model with country and year fixed effects, capturing both time-invariant country-specific characteristics and yearly shocks across countries. Our baseline specification is represented by:

$$\text{MedianGov}_{i,t} = \beta_1 \cdot \text{Cordon_Sanitaire}_{i,t} + \mu_i + \eta_t + \varepsilon_{i,t}$$

In this specification, the dependent variable $\text{MedianGov}_{i,t}$ denotes the median position of the governing coalition ($p_{M_{gov}}$) in the country i at a given time t . The primary independent variable, $\text{Cordon Sanitaire}_{i,t}$, is a binary indicator set to one when a Cordon Sanitaire actively excludes a particular party from government collaboration, and zero otherwise. The coefficient β_1 shows the mean shift of the $p_{M_{gov}}$, if a Cordon Sanitaire is implemented. The coefficient μ_i captures time-invariant country-specific level differences. The coefficient η_t captures yearly shocks affecting all countries at the same time. While $\varepsilon_{i,t}$ is the idiosyncratic error term.

Our second hypothesis is examined by modeling the impact of the gap between the $p_{M_{gov}}$ and M_{par} on opposition success in subsequent elections. The basic specification is as follows:

$$\text{OppShare}_{i,t+1} = \beta_1 \cdot \text{Diff_med}_{i,t} + \mu_i + \eta_t + \varepsilon_{i,t}$$

Here, $\text{OppShare}_{i,t+1}$ measures the seat share of opposition parties positioned opposite to the $p_{M_{gov}}$ in the subsequent election. The independent variable $\text{Diff_med}_{i,t}$ quantifies the distance between the $p_{M_{gov}}$ and M_{par} positions. The coefficient β_1 shows the increase in the opposite opposition seats in percentage points when the Diff_med increases. A key assumption of our empirical specification is to focus on voters, which are willing to cast their vote in accordance to their expectations belief of the new government. Ideological voters, who are constantly over time and across countries, are omitted due to the fixed effects model. We cluster our standard errors at the country level.

5. Results

Table 1 presents the estimated effects of implementing a political Cordon Sanitaire on government positioning and subsequent electoral outcomes. Column 1 (Model 1) examines our first hypothesis, assessing whether the presence of a Cordon Sanitaire shifts the median government position. Results indicate that implementing a Cordon Sanitaire significantly shifts

the median government position to the left by 13.1%, significant at the 5% level. This finding robustly supports Hypothesis 1.

Turning to our second hypothesis, columns 2 to 4 (Models 2–4) display the estimated effects of the difference between the $p_{M_{gov}}$ and M_{par} on opposition seat shares in subsequent elections. The coefficient of Diff_med is consistently positive and significant across all specifications, confirming Hypothesis 2. Specifically, in Model 2, we observe that a 1% increase in the distance leads to a 1.6% increase in opposition seat shares, significant at the 1% level without fixed effects. In Model 3, year-fixed effects are introduced to control for temporal dynamics across countries. The effect of distance becomes slightly weaker, showing a 1.36% increase in opposition shares for a 1% increase in difference, significant at the 1% level. Model 4 further adds country-fixed effects to capture country-specific characteristics. Here, the coefficient stays almost the same at 1.3% for a 1% increase in difference, remaining significant at the 1% level. This illustrates the robustness of our findings. Model fit improves significantly when fixed effects are included, with adjusted R-squared values rising from 0.543 in Model 2 to 0.838 in Model 4.

Table 1: Effects of Cordon Sanitaire and Subsequent Electoral Outcomes

Dependent Variable:	Model 1 (MedianGov)	Model 2 (OppShare _{t+1})	Model 3 (OppShare _{t+1})	Model 4 (OppShare _{t+1})
Cordon_Sanitaire	-0.131** (0.0516)	-	-	-
Diff_med	-	1.602*** (0.0986)	1.361*** (0.166)	1.301*** (0.278)
Constant	-	0.141*** (0.0296)	-	-
Observations	133	133	133	133
Countries	6	6	6	6
Country FE	Yes	No	No	Yes
Year FE	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Adj. R-squared	0.502	0.543	0.814	0.838

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

To validate the findings reported in Table 1, we replace the unweighted $p_{M_{gov}}$ position with $p_{M_{gov}^w}$. Table 2 presents the results of this robustness test and confirms Hypothesis 1. The coefficient on the Diff_med remains positive and statistically significant at the 5% level, with

an effect of 11.3%. This represents a modest decrease compared to the unweighted baseline estimate. Models 2 to 4 confirm the core specifications for Hypothesis 2. All three coefficients are statistically significant at the 1 % level, with marginal effects of 1.5%, 1.3%, and 1.81%, respectively. These estimates are lower than the corresponding values in Table 1. Since $p_{M_{gov}}$ is calculated by adding the government seats onto the leftmost position of the first government party without accounting for opposition parties lying in between the governing parties, there is a slight leftwards bias. Therefore, the effects of the Cordon Sanitaire and the change in opposite opposition seats are more pronounced in Table 1.

Table 2: Effects of Cordon Sanitaire and Subsequent Electoral Outcomes with Weighted Median Government

Dependent Variable:	Model 1 (MedianGov)	Model 2 (OppShare _{t+1})	Model 3 (OppShare _{t+1})	Model 4 (OppShare _{t+1})
Cordon_Sanitaire	-0.113** (0.0431)	-	-	-
Diff_med	-	1.506*** (0.0657)	1.300*** (0.127)	1.181*** (0.174)
Constant	-	0.161*** (0.0194)	-	-
Observations	133	133	133	133
Countries	6	6	6	6
Country FE	Yes	No	No	Yes
Year FE	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Adj. R-squared	0.517	0.571	0.831	0.854

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

6. Discussion

The results offer new empirical insights into how Cordon Sanitaires shape coalition dynamics in parliamentary systems. Geys et al. (2006) argue that anti-pact rules systematically reduce the number of viable coalitions, thereby increasing the probability that the government forms at the opposition of the excluded party. Our data sample only includes ostracized far-right parties. Therefore, our empirical findings from Hypothesis 1 confirm that the exclusion of extreme parties shifts the $p_{M_{gov}}$ by 13.1% to the left. The subsequent increase in votes for extreme parties

is in line with research by Akkerman & Rooduijn (2015). They argue that extreme parties are incentivized to moderate their position to gain a broader appeal. As the $p_{M_{gov}}$ shifts on side, there is new room for the ostracized party to move towards the center of the spectrum in the next election. On the other hand, our findings contradict the conclusion drawn by Bale et al. (2010). Bale et al. (2010) argue that parties can try to adopt positions of the extreme parties to appeal to their voters. Their findings would indicate, that our previously defined “Option 2: Accommodate” takes place. Given we assume that the $p_{M_{gov}}$ reflects enacted policy, our results indicate that the adoption hypothesis does not hold. Instead, our evidence suggests the opposite dynamic.

Our empirical findings also confirm Hypothesis 2. When the position of the $p_{M_{gov}}$ diverges from that of the M_{par} , opposition parties on the opposite side of the $p_{M_{gov}}$ tend to gain electoral support in the subsequent election. This finding aligns with Paldam & Skott (1995), who explain vote losses of the governing coalition by distance from the chamber, which prompts median centrist voters to switch allegiance. Similarly, Kedar (2005) argues that voters adjust their choices based on anticipated policy moderation in coalitions and vote for extreme parties to pull policy in a desired direction. While most prior studies focus on vote losses for the governing parties (Müller & Louwse, 2020; Nannestad & Paldam, 2005; Paldam & Skott, 1995), our analysis shifts the focus to gains on the opposition side. We find that under our most robust model, an increase in the difference between $p_{M_{gov}}$ and M_{par} of 1% leads to an opposition gain of 1.18%.

Taken together, our two hypotheses yield a clear conclusion: the implementation of a Cordon Sanitaire, which alters the composition of the governing coalition, leads to measurable gains for opposition parties situated opposite of the government. These findings imply that while Cordon Sanitaire strategies may yield short-term containment (Biard, 2021; Pauwels, 2011), they cause the opposite effect in the long run.

Our findings align with Krause et al. (2022), who argue that Cordon Sanitaire strategies are counterproductive, facilitating voter realignment toward far-right parties. Likewise, Riera & Pastor (2022) suggest that the inclusion of ostracized parties into coalition negotiations proves more effective than outright exclusion. Van Spanje & Van der Brug (2009), find that a Cordon Sanitaire has mixed effects, but is particularly effective when combined with adopting key positions of the excluded party (van Spanje & de Graaf, 2018). Our findings show that Cordon Sanitaires shift the $p_{M_{gov}}$ away from the ostracized party, so parties do not follow a strategy of

accommodation. Therefore, empirically, most parties do not choose an accommodative strategy. This approach jeopardizes the assumed effectiveness of Cordon Sanitaires in reducing the seats of the ostracized party and instead boosts the cordoned party.

In terms of policy implications, the results point to two core recommendations. First, governing parties should aim to form coalitions that approximate the position of the parliamentary median as closely as possible. Translating this into practice, party strategies and coalition negotiations should prioritize proximity to the legislative center. This minimizes voter disillusionment and reduces the risk of subsequent electoral gains for the opposition. Second, the effectiveness of Cordon Sanitaire strategies should be reevaluated. While they may serve as symbolic rejections of extremist ideology, their strategic utility in shaping electoral dynamics is limited and can be counterproductive.

7. Limitations

Despite providing robust insights, our study faces several limitations. First, the employed spatial voting model simplifies voter preferences by condensing multidimensional political issues onto a single left–right ideological continuum as its original model the median voter theorem. Consequentially, it potentially overlooks critical nuances stemming from multidimensional voter preferences or issue-specific preferences. Second, party positions in this study are assumed to static over time in regard to other parties, drawing on expert assessments from the ParlGov database. However, in reality, party ideologies often evolve in response to electoral incentives and shifting political contexts. Ignoring temporal variation in party positions might underestimate strategic adaptations made by parties facing ostracism. Due to the limited countries, which implemented the Cordon Sanitaire, the analysis is constrained geographically to six European democracies: Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, limiting the studies generalizability. Including broader comparative contexts, such as post-Soviet democracies in the future, could uncover varying impacts of the Cordon Sanitaire across different political environments. Lastly, while focusing explicitly on parliamentary and governing coalition medians provides clarity, it overlooks intra-party dynamics, such as factionalism or leadership-driven strategies, which could significantly affect electoral outcomes and bargaining.

8. Conclusion

In many European countries, far-right parties are on the rise. We explain the success of cordoned parties by a new spatial voting model. First, we find that the implantation of a Cordon

Sanitaire significantly shifts the average $p_{M_{gov}}$ by 13.1% away from the mean $p_{M_{gov}}$ without an implemented Cordon Sanitaire. The shift takes place towards the contrary political spectrum, where the Cordon Sanitaire is located. Secondly, our panel regression results confirm that voters penalize parties in governments that deviate from the M_{par} . A 1% increase in divergence is associated with opposition gains across the $p_{M_{gov}}$ between 1.18% and 1.6%.

To conclude, our findings show that the Cordon Sanitaire constrains coalition formation in a way that pushes government policy towards the opposite side of the ostracized party. While this might be an effective short-term strategy for parties to shift the politics toward their position. The strategy is harmful in the long run. As our second finding is that voters react to this distortion $p_{M_{gov}}$ and M_{par} by reallocating support toward opposition parties on the opposite side of the political spectrum. The implications are two-fold. While the Cordon Sanitaire can achieve short-term goals, it also indirectly strengthens the forces it aims to suppress. Long term, a Cordon Sanitaire boosts extremist parties and destabilizes the democratic parliamentary processes. This means, while a political Cordon Sanitaire may serve as a normatively justified mechanism of boundary enforcement, its utility in politics is limited and counterproductive. Future research could explore how voters respond to the exclusion of far-right parties through legal bans. While we have shown that the Cordon Sanitaire is counterproductive, party bans might be an effective instrument for mitigating the influence of extremist forces in democratic parliaments.

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Appendix:

Table A1: Summary Statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std.dev.	Min	Max
Government Share	133	.5517718	.1451138	.1117479	.9515152
Median Government	133	.4774083	.1744058	.2454545	.786533
Difference Median Gov.	133	.158932	.0740332	.0031746	.286533
Opposition Share	133	.4482282	.1451138	.0484848	.8882521
Opposition Share across Median Gov.	133	.3787571	.1350431	.03	.7306591
Cordon Sanitaire	133	.2706767	.4459892	0	1
Countries	Austria; Belgium; Germany; Netherlands; Norway; Sweden				

Notes: The values in this table summarize the statistical characteristics of each variable used in this study..

Table A2: Summary Statistics Robustness Check

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std.dev.	Min	Max
Government Share	133	.5517718	.1451138	.1117479	.9515152
Median Government	133	.4942693	.1736335	.2454545	.786533
Difference Median Gov.	133	.1533645	.080516	.0007899	.286533
Opposition Share	133	.4482282	.1451138	.0484848	.8882521
Opposition Share across Median Gov.	133	.3809073	.1368144	.0363636	.7306591
Cordon Sanitaire	133	.2706767	.4459892	0	1
Countries	Austria; Belgium; Germany; Netherlands; Norway; Sweden				

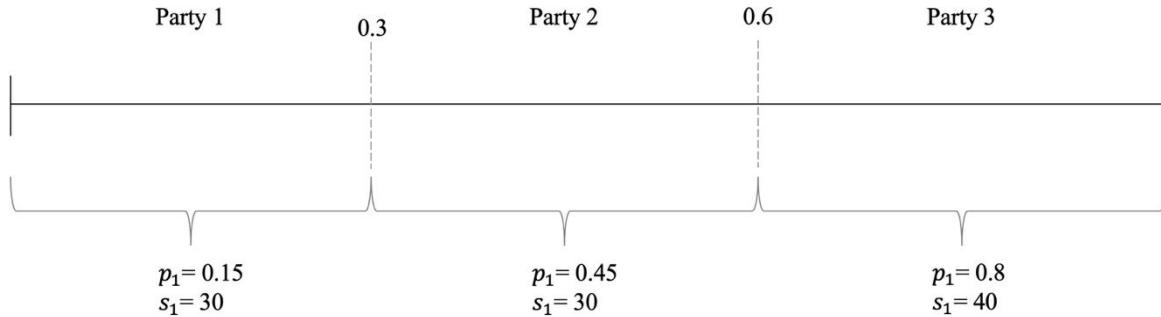
Notes: The values in this table summarize the statistical characteristics of each variable used in this study.

Table A3: Cordon Sanitaire Overview

Country	Party	Year	Cordon Sanitaire	Source
Austria	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)	1986-1999	Yes	(Falkner, 2001; Hafez et al., 2019)
		1999-2006	No	(Hafez et al., 2019)
		2006-2017	Yes	(Jacoby, 2017)
		2017-2019	No	(Ammer & Kirchmair, 2022)
		2019-2024	Yes	(Karner, 2021; Villamor, 2025)
Belgium	Vlaams Belang (VB; Vlaams Blok until 2004)	1989-2025	Yes	(Biard, 2021; Camatarri et al., 2025)
	Front National	1991-2007	Yes	(de Jonge, 2020)
Germany	Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	2017-2025	Yes	(Schroeder et al., 2025)
Netherlands	Centrum Democraten (CD)	1889 - 1994	Yes	(van Spanje & van der Brug, 2009)
		2006 - 2010	Yes	(van Heerden & van der Brug, 2017)
	2010 - 2012	No		
	2012 - 2023	Yes	(Jacobs, 2024)	
	Forum voor Democrati (FvD)	2021-2023	Yes	(de Jonge & Gaufman, 2022)
Norway	Fremskrittspartiet (FrP)	1973 – 1997	Yes	(Bangstad, 2015; Stavenes & Strøm, 2021)
Sweden	Sverigedemokraterna (SD)	2010-2022	Yes	(Jungar, 2022)

A4: Simplified Example

To illustrate the calculation of the median positions in our spatial voting model, we develop a simplified parliament composed of three parties.



In our initial model, the median government position (M_{gov}) is determined by identifying the left and right positions of parties forming a governing coalition on the left-right spectrum (scaled 0 to 1). The median is calculated at the midpoint between the left-most and right-most positions in the coalition.

For instance, suppose Party 1 (left-wing position at 0.0) and Party 2 (right-wing position at 0.6) form a coalition. Party 1 holds 30% and Party 2 holds 30% of parliamentary seats, totaling 60% of the seats. The government median (M_{gov}) is thus calculated as the midpoint of these coalition position $(0.0+0.6)/2 = 0.3$. We assume voters compare the (M_{gov}) to the M_{par} (0.5). Given this configuration, voters who initially supported Party 2 but find themselves ideologically right the M_{gov} might shift their support to party 3 in subsequent elections, as Party 3 is situated closer to their ideological preferences: Thus, as the spatial difference between M_{gov} increases, we expect the vote share of the opposition parties on the opposite side the spectrum to rise accordingly.

$$M_{gov} = \frac{Gov_{left} + (Gov_{left} + Gov_{cumulated\ seats})}{2}$$

Government Constellation	Gov_{left}	Gov_{right}	$Gov_{left+right}$	M_{gov}
Party 1 + Party 2	0	0.6	0.6	0.3
Party 1 + Party 3	0	0.7	0.7	0.35
Party 2 + Party 3	0.3	1	1.3	0.65

A5: Simplified Example Robustness

We conduct a robustness check using weighted median government M_{gov}^w , which contains the number of parliamentary seats of each governing party. This approach differs from the M_{gov} by accounting for the relative size and position of parties in government.

To illustrate, we first calculate the weighted position of the reach governing party by multiplying their political position by their parliamentary seats. We rely on the data from the table A4. Suppose Party 1 ($p_1 = 0.15$; $s_1 = 30$) and Party 2 ($p_2 = 0.45$; $s_2 = 30$) form a coalition:

- $s_1 p_1 = 0.9 * 30 = 4.5$
- $s_2 p_2 = 0.45 * 30 = 13.5$

Summing these gives a total weighted position of 18, which is then divided by the coalition's total parliamentary seats (60), resulting in M_{gov}^w of 0.3. These results coincide with the earlier calculation since no opposition lies between these two calculation partners.

However, consider Part 1 and Party 3 forming a government:

- $s_1 p_1 = 0.9 * 30 = 4.5$
- $s_3 p_3 = 0.8 * 30 = 32$

The M_{gov}^w is equal to 0.52. This differs significantly from the M_{gov} because the formula accounts explicitly for the disparity between the coalition partners' parliamentary strength. Based on this model, we can see that there is a slight leftward bias in the way we calculate the M_{gov} . We decided to use both models, as recent findings by Albarello (2024) show that coalition partners' influence on policy is equal, rather than based on their weighted seats.

$$M_{gov}^w = \frac{\sum s_j p_j}{\sum s_j}$$

Government Constellation	$s_1 p_1$	$s_2 p_2$	$s_3 p_3$	$\sum s_j p_j$	$\sum s_j$	M_{gov}^w
Party 1 + Party 2	4.5	13.5	0	18	60	0.3
Party 1 + Party 3	4.5	0	32	36.5	70	0.52
Party 2 + Party 3	0	13.5	32	45.5	70	0.65