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Political Ideology, Policy Attitudes, and Public Support for European Integration

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Abstract

This article maps in a comprehensive way the relationships between support for European integration, left–right ideological positions, and policy attitudes towards redistribution, immigration, and gay rights. I introduce the use of flexible non-parametric methods (generalized additive models) and more appropriate measures of dependence (the distance correlation coefficient) to explore and measure the strength and forms of these relationships across time (2004–2023), countries, and indicators of European integration support. The link between European integration attitudes and left–right ideology is weak. The exact form of the relationship depends on the operationalization of EU attitudes, country, and time period, but it rarely resembles the classic inverted-U curve suggested by existing literature and studies of party positions. In fact, average EU support is typically highest at the moderate left rather than at the center. The relationship of European integration attitudes with immigration positions is much stronger, stable, consistent, and almost linear; with support for gay rights it is also linear but considerably weaker; with support for redistribution there is practically no relationship at all. While public opinion is much less structured and less extreme than party positions, there is some evidence that—across countries—the strength of the links between EU attitudes, left–right ideology, and policy positions at the party level is associated with the strength of these links at the level of the public. Furthermore, over time the strength of the link between European integration attitudes and different policy attitudes covaries systematically with the salience (media presence) of the policy issue at the EU level.

Keywords

European integration; ideology; left–right; party positions; political attitudes; public opinion

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1. Introduction

How does public support for European integration relate to the broader political views of European citizens? The standard answer to this question evokes two ideas. First, EU attitudes are linked in an inverted U-curve (or "horseshoe") pattern to the master dimension of politics—left–right—so that support for European integration and the EU is highest at the center and declines as one moves both towards the extreme left and extreme right ends of the scale (Hix & Høyland, 2022, p. 139; Krouwel & Abts, 2007; Kutiyski et al., 2021; van Elsas & van der Brug, 2014). Second, EU attitudes cluster with opinions on immigration, Islam, globalization, nationalism, and other related issues in a separate dimension, which has different labels (cultural, post-materialism, conservative/progressive, conservative/liberal, authoritarian/liberal, GAL/TAN [green-alternative-libertarian/traditional-authoritarian-nationalist]) and has been growing in importance over the past decades (De Vries & Marks, 2012; Jackson & Jolly, 2021; König et al., 2017; Kriesi et al., 2006; Wheatley & Mendez, 2021; Whitefield & Rohrschneider, 2019).

Much of this received wisdom has been derived from studies of the positions of political parties and political elites (Bakker et al., 2012; Gabel & Hix, 2002; König et al., 2017; Reiljan et al., 2019). The attitudes of citizens, however, show more complexity (i.a., Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009). Some studies suggest that we need to separate preferences for European integration in a third dimension (Bakker et al., 2012; Kitschelt, 2013; Wheatley & Mendez, 2021) and that *some* aspects of attitudes towards the EU are clustered with issues related to nativism and nationalism, but *others* cluster with substantive policy preferences towards the environment or the economy (Toshkov & Krouwel, 2022). There is also some evidence that EU attitudes do *not* follow an inverted U-curve relationship with left–right in all countries in Europe and that there are significant *interactions* between left–right and liberal/conservative positions in shaping the levels of EU support (Toshkov & Krouwel, 2022).

These recent studies suggest that we should revisit the relationship between EU attitudes and broader political views. A closer look at the structure of public opinion might uncover important qualifications to the stylized expectation of a "horseshoe" link between EU support and left–right positions. Therefore, we need to map in a more comprehensive way and with more appropriate methods than done in existing scholarship the heterogeneity of the strength and shape of this link across countries, over time, and across different indicators of EU support and political attitudes. This is the first, descriptive, goal of this article. The second goal is to explore two possible explanations of the variations in how EU support, left–right positions, and policy attitudes relate to each other across time and space: the structure of political party positions and the salience of different policy issues at the EU level.

To address these goals, the article analyzes data from the European Social Survey (ESS) from 2004 to 2023. This data source provides high-quality nationally-representative samples for almost all EU member states and features measures of several aspects of EU attitudes (support for further integration, trust in the European Parliament, attachment to Europe), political ideology (self-placement on the general left–right scale), and policy attitudes (towards immigration, redistribution, and gay rights). The public opinion data are complemented by data on the positions of political parties based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Bakker et al., 2019; Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al., 2024) and on the salience of different policy issues at the EU level based on media analysis. Some of the analyses are replicated with data from Eurobarometer (for the years 2008, 2014, 2018, 2023), which covers all EU member states and has different measures of EU attitudes, e.g., the desired speed of integration. The results are reported in the Supplementary Material.

The descriptive analyses rely on non-parametric generalized additive models (GAMs; Beck & Jackman, 1998; Wood, 2017) that do not impose linear or quadratic forms on the relationships of interest and on visual methods for data exploration. We also apply a new summary measure of the dependence between EU attitudes and other variables—the distance correlation coefficient, or dCor (Székely et al., 2007)—that is more appropriate for the complex, non-linear forms of dependence that we find in the data. This measure is zero only if the variables are truly independent, in contrast to the often-used Pearson's correlation coefficient, which fails to detect non-linear relationships.

Using these methods, the analyses uncover a complex set of results that challenge some of the received wisdom in the literature. First, support for further EU integration does not vary in an inverted U-curve way with left–right self-placement. In the aggregate EU-wide ESS sample from 2023, EU support is at its peak for moderate left-wingers, and it is lower for the extreme right than for the extreme left. Only in France (out of 22 countries) does the link faintly resemble an inverted U-curve, with other forms of dependence (flat, or linearly increasing from left to right, or from right to left) being just as common. Support for government redistribution has practically no relationship with EU attitudes. Attitudes towards immigration, however, have a very strong, consistent, and linear relationship with support for further integration. Support for gay rights has a similarly linear, but more heterogeneous (across countries) and weaker in terms of strength, link with EU attitudes.

Across countries, the way EU public support is linked to the left–right positions and policy attitudes of citizens is significantly, if imperfectly, correlated with the way *party positions* on the EU are linked with party positions on the left–right and on particular policies. Over time, the strength of dependence between public EU support, on the one hand, and attitudes towards immigration and gay rights, on the other hand, is strongly correlated with the fluctuating attention to these policy issues at the EU level. Overall, EU attitudes are increasingly associated with non-economic issues, while the link with left–right is contingent on how this label is interpreted in different countries and over time (Dassonneville et al., 2023; cf. De Vries et al., 2013).

These results are important for predictive purposes (for example, when we want to know which political or policy attitude is most useful for predicting someone's level of EU support), for explanatory model building (for example, with what functional form to enter a specific policy attitude as a covariate), and in their own right in order to understand how EU support fits into the political outlook of contemporary Europeans.

2. Existing Research and Theoretical Expectations

The literature on public opinion towards European integration is voluminous (2018; for recent overviews, see Hobolt & De Vries, 2016; De Vries, 2018). Within this literature, the question of how EU attitudes relate to more general political orientations, ideologies, and policy attitudes has received attention as well. To be clear, a wide variety of factors have been suggested as determinants of EU support, including retrospective policy evaluations (Gherghina et al., 2025), experiences with real-world developments such as free movement (Toshkov, 2024), etc. But it is a common starting point of explanatory accounts of EU public opinion to pose that support and opposition to European integration are rooted in people's political values (e.g., Hix & Høyland, 2022, p. 134), among which left–right ideology plays a major role. Before we zoom in on the links between EU attitudes, political values, and policy preferences, however, we need to consider the connections between public opinion and cues from political elites.

2.1. Public Opinion and Party Cues

Public attitudes, policy preferences, and positions on political issues are not formed in a vacuum, but in a process where political parties and elites play a major role by focusing attention, presenting arguments, advocating solutions, and challenging and defending the status quo (Broockman & Butler, 2017; Leeper & Slothuus, 2014; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021). Politicians' messages can also improve the consistency of citizens' values, attitudes, and opinions (Levendusky, 2010; Petersen et al., 2010). Such processes have been shown to be relevant for EU-related attitudes as well (Hellström, 2008; Pannico, 2017; Stoeckel & Kuhn, 2018; Vössing, 2020), especially for less knowledgeable citizens and harder issues (Pannico, 2017), even when the political elites are divided (Stoeckel & Kuhn, 2018).

At the same time, politicians are not free to mold public attitudes anyway they wish. They are constrained by pre-existing political orientations among citizens and by the structures of political competition. In short, the links between political elites and the public are reciprocal (Steenbergen et al., 2007). Cues by politicians are important (Hooghe & Marks, 2005), but they need a fertile soil to land on in order to be really influential. The implications for our analyses are that we can expect that the structure of positions at the party level will be related to the structure of citizens' attitudes, but we should not assume that the party positions structure is exactly replicated at the level of the public. In addition, the match between the two might fluctuate across issues, time, and space.

2.2. Public EU Support and Left–Right Positions

In theoretical terms, it is difficult to form an expectation about how the strength of the relationship between left–right and EU attitudes has changed over time at the level of the public. In the past decades, the meaning of left–right to citizens has become more diffuse (for a study showing how the more peripheral ideas of the left-range concept change, see Jankowski et al., 2022), less related to socio-economic issues and more related to other, "cultural" ones (De Vries et al., 2013). Still, issues related to socio-economic inequality and redistribution remain relevant for how citizens interpret the terms "left" and "right," based on an analysis of open-ended survey responses (Lindqvist & Dornschneider-Elkinlk, 2024).

The process of European integration itself has reached more and more policy areas beyond market integration. In the earlier days of European integration, the European Communities were not as politicized as has been the case more recently (De Vries, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In the past, European integration was contested to a smaller degree by political actors, especially in the context of specific policy issues, such as redistribution or immigration. As a result, people's preferences on Europe were to a larger extent "second-order" or derivative from their general political orientations, and mostly in line with the preferences of the parties they supported (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Hooghe et al., 2002). Since at the party level EU support varies in an inverted U-shape with left–right, if the salience of EU issues for citizens was not very high, the pattern should have been reproduced at that level as well. However, as the salience of the EU rises, as it has over the past decades, and as particular EU issues get politicized in their own terms, it could be expected that support for the EU will be increasingly disassociated from general left–right positions.

Moreover, the meaning of left–right itself changes over time (De Vries et al., 2013): For example, younger people tend to associate it more with immigration and environmental protection rather than redistribution

(Steiner, 2024). Such shifts in meaning can change the link between left–right and EU support as well, and the change can make the link either stronger or weaker, depending on how the meaning of left–right shifts. There is evidence that when people express ideologically inconsistent preferences, they do so at least to some extent knowingly (Groenendyk et al., 2023).

2.3. Public EU Support and Policy Attitudes

If we expect a strong but perhaps declining dependence of EU support on left–right positions, the opposite is true when we consider concrete policy attitudes rather than general left–right orientations. The extent to which people's attitudes towards particular policy issues are connected to their levels of EU support should depend on the extent to which these issues are considered to be influenced by the EU, and how (to what effect). If citizens believe that the EU is very important in the area of income inequality and is not doing much to achieve the goal, their support for the EU should be strongly dependent on their level of support for more redistribution and related policies to reduce inequality (similarly for immigration, minority rights, the environment, security, and so forth).

There are many policy issues that could be relevant, and citizen attitudes across these issues are not entirely independent (Caughey et al., 2019). Therefore, it is sometimes useful to consider bundles of issues as they load on broader "dimensions" or scales. In fact, left–right *may* be interpreted as such a bundle of issues, traditionally assumed to center around redistribution and the role of the state in the economy. The conservative–liberal or conservative–progressive dimension is another example, which is supposed to bundle a diverse set of non-economic issues. A "cultural" dimension has also been proposed (i.a., Malka et al., 2019), with a focus on issues related to the rights of sexual and other minorities, the environment, privacy and other human rights, etc.

How should the dependence between European integration support and some issues representative of more general dimensions look like? When it comes to support for government redistribution, we can expect a variation of the inverted U-curve pattern to hold, with extreme supporters and extreme opponents being both unsatisfied with the EU for doing too little or too much (re)distribution. Similarly, for immigration an inverted U-curve dependence with EU support can be hypothesized. Champions of migrants and refugees accuse the EU of doing too little and being too restrictive, while opponents of migration conceive of EU policies as too permissive and its approach too soft. With regard to support for gay rights, it is plausible that the relationship is linear, with support for the EU increasing with more favorable attitudes on this issue, as the EU has arguably done quite a lot to promote and protect such rights, in its legal documents and in its policy programs. Furthermore, we know that conservative positions on social issues, including gay rights, correlate with support for exit from the EU (Gherghina & Tap, 2023).

2.4. Public EU Support and Policy Attitudes Over Time

Since there are many potentially relevant policy issues and their salience changes over time, we can also expect that the connections between these attitudes and EU support will become stronger in times of higher salience of the issues on the EU agenda (Alexandrova et al., 2016). Focusing attention on an issue clarifies the EU's role in its management and provides information on the EU's actions in this field. Salience can also lead to politicization of the issue, which further helps establish links with EU positions. For example, we can

hypothesize that the relationship between support for redistribution and EU support could have strengthened shortly after 2008 in the aftermath of the financial crisis and the EU response to it. Note that we do not expect either a stronger positive or negative relationship—this depends on the actual redistribution preferences and the perception of what the EU does—but only that the relationship becomes more pronounced.

We can further hypothesize that the connection between immigration preferences and EU attitudes has increased over time, driven by the increasing salience of immigration issues with an explicit connection to the EU, such as internal labor migration in the follow-up of the EU enlargement to the East (2004, 2007, 2013) and the influx of asylum-seekers to EU countries that peaked in 2015/2016. Considering policy issues of moral permissiveness (gay rights, abortion, soft drugs liberalization, etc.), we can expect that the link with EU attitudes varies depending on the salience of these issues on the EU political and policy agendas, as manifested in new legislative proposals, political speeches, and policy initiatives in member-states, candidates for membership, and neighbors.

2.5. EU Support, Left–Right, and Policy Attitudes Across Countries

With respect to heterogeneity across countries, existing studies suggest that EU attitudes relate more strongly to the "cultural" dimension issues in Northern and Western Europe and to economic issues (redistribution) in Southern Europe (Otjes & Katsanidou, 2017). In Eastern Europe, the EU has been strongly associated with immigration (e.g., refugee protection) and moral permissiveness (e.g., gay rights) issues, so we can expect that positions on these will be more strongly related to EU attitudes than in the South. Furthermore, Garry and Tilley (2014) suggest that people on the left will support European integration when they live in countries with high income inequality and little state ownership because the EU project moves policies closer to their ideal points.

Overall, we can say that the relationships of interest between public EU support, left–right ideology, and policy attitudes depend on national patterns of politicization of European integration and on context-specific understandings about what the major dimension of political competition (referenced by the left–right) is about. The broad theoretical expectation is that the multi-dimensional structure of political party positions will resemble the structure of political attitudes of citizens. But we cannot claim that party positions *determine* citizen attitudes, as the links are likely reciprocal. Similarly, when it comes to the varying salience of different policy issues over time, we expect that attention to a policy issue at the EU level should be related to the strength of the link with attitudes on this issue and EU support (on the effects of salient EU decisions on the public, see Mikulaschek, 2023). But the fluctuations in salience are not completely exogenous to public opinion: When the public is more concerned about an issue, the chance that the EU will discuss and address the issue is higher, even if the responsiveness to public opinion is not perfect (Alexandrova et al., 2016).

3. Research Approach and Data Collection

3.1. Data Source and Measures

The empirical analyses reported in this article are based on data from the ESS and Eurobarometer (reported in the Supplementary Material). The ESS data provide measures from nationally-representative samples for

many countries in Europe since 2002 (at the time of writing, the latest available data were from Wave 11, 2023). Not every country participates in all waves. The items used in the current analyses are part of the core ESS questionnaire, so they are included in (almost) all waves with identical formulations and answer categories. The advantage of the ESS data is that, in addition to several items related to European integration support, they contain measures of policy attitudes related to redistribution, immigration, and gay rights; hence, capturing citizens' attitudes on the major dimensions of political ideology. For the most part, the empirical analysis focuses on the latest 2023 edition of ESS (Wave 11).

The following items from the ESS relate to different aspects of support for European integration: trust in the European Parliament (0–10 scale), emotional attachment to Europe (0–10 scale), and whether European unification *has gone too far* (0) or *should go further* (10). The correlations between these three variables in the 2023 dataset are between 0.29 and 0.38. We take support for European integration to be broader than support for the EU itself or trust in any of its institutions. It is important to examine more than one measure, since the concept of European integration is complex and multi-faceted, especially in light of the differentiated nature of the integration process across policy areas and member states (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2020).

Left–right self-placement is measured with the question: "In politics, people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right.' Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?" Support for redistribution is measured with a question about agreement with the statement: "The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels." with 1 (*agree strongly*) to 5 (*disagree strongly*) answer categories. We invert the coding so that higher values mean agreement with the statement. Several items measure support for immigration. The one with the most variation—"Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?"—is the one we use (0–10 answer scale). Support for gay rights is measured with a question about agreement with the statement: "Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish." with 1 (*agree strongly*) to 5 (*disagree strongly*) answer categories. We invert the coding so that higher values mean agreement with the statement.

To measure party positions, we rely on the 2024 wave of the CHES (Rovny et al., 2024), which provides estimates from experts of the party positions on European integration, ideology, and policy issues of all major national parties in most European countries. We use the party position estimates of EU support (overall orientation of the party leadership towards European integration), general left–right (to match the way the public opinion item is formulated), immigration, redistribution (of wealth from rich to poor), and support for LGBTQ+ rights, including marriage equality, adoption, and transgender rights. We rescale these estimates to match the polarity and scale length of the public opinion data.

EU-level salience is measured by the number of news items related to the three topics of interest—immigration, redistribution, and gay rights—published by Agence Europe in a year. Agence Europe is a politically independent European news agency and reports mostly on the EU institutional, political, and policy activities. It issues the famous *Europe Daily Bulletin* and is considered the authoritative source of information on EU-related developments. Relying on this news source is a convenient way to filter publications related only to the EU, which would be very difficult if national news sources were used instead. The relevant Agence Europe news items were retrieved from the Factiva Global News Monitoring & Search Engine using keyword searches related to each of the three policy areas of interest.

3.2. Method of Analysis

To analyze the relationship between support for European integration and other political attitudes of interest, we use GAMs (Wood, 2017). These models do not impose linear or quadratic forms on the relationships of interest, but allow for the link to be estimated non-parametrically from the data in a flexible way. For an introduction to GAMs in the context of political science, see Beck and Jackman (1998). The models are implemented in R using the *gam* function from the *mgcv* package (Wood, 2015). According to the documentation, by default the model "specifies a penalized cubic regression spline which has had its penalty modified to shrink towards zero at high enough smoothing parameters (as the smoothing parameter goes to infinity a normal cubic spline tends to a straight line)." We check the influence of using different smooth terms in the Supplementary Material: The choice appears inconsequential.

When the relationships of interest are non-linear, we need a different estimator that summarizes the strength of the relationship than the often-used Pearson's correlation coefficient or the coefficient of the predictor from a linear regression. We consider using the maximal information coefficient and the dCor (Székely et al., 2007). Comparisons of the performance of these estimators are presented in the Supplementary Material. dCor works better for our purposes and type of data, which is why we rely on it for most of the analyses. dCor is an example of the so-called energy statistics, which are functions of distances between statistical observations, and ranges between 0 and 1.

Since one of the research goals of this article is to map in a comprehensive way the relationships between different attitudes across time and countries, the text and graphs presented here are accompanied by an interactive data visualization that lets the user explore any comparison of interest: https://anonyms.shinyapps. io/EUattitudes

4. Empirical Analyses

4.1. EU Attitudes and Left–Right in 2023

We begin the empirical analyses with a plot of the dependence of EU attitudes on left–right self-placement in the ESS 2023 (Wave 11) sample of 22 countries (19 EU member states, plus Switzerland, Norway, and the UK), for a total of 37,751 respondents. Figure 1 shows the mean of support for further integration on the y-axis as a function of left–right, as estimated by a GAM with a smooth term based on a shrinkage version of cubic regression splines. The pattern for 2023 is compared with the one for 2008 (ESS Wave 4). Using the interactive application mentioned in the previous section, we can trace in even more detail when the transition occurs for different countries and indicators.

Looking at Figure 1, we can see that average support for further integration increases as one moves from the extreme left to moderate left (2–3 on the 0–10 scale), after which we see a steeper decline until we reach the moderate right (6 in the 0–10 scale), which is followed by a more gradual decline. The pattern is not exactly an inverted U-curve. There is some evidence for a peak at the moderate left of ideological self-placement, which is however not quite at the center. Support for further integration is lower at the extreme right than it is at the extreme left. This pattern might be specific to the particular aspect of EU support being measured— support for further integration. Even if both the extreme left and the extreme right are dissatisfied with the
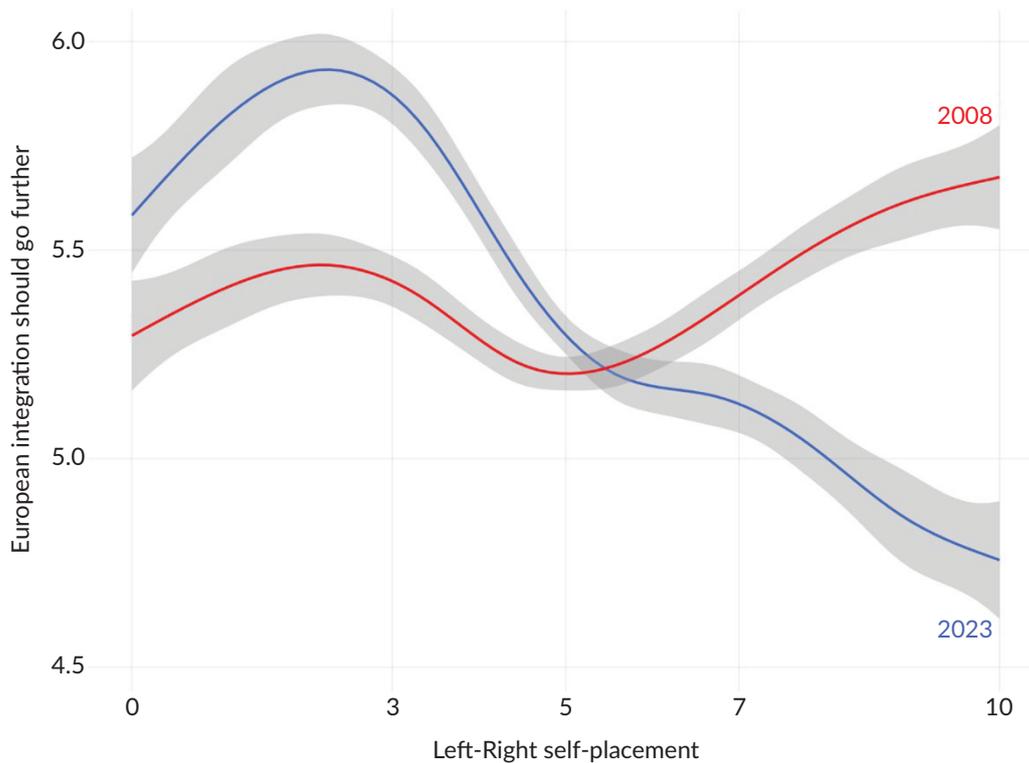
Figure 1. Mean support for further European integration as a function of left–right self-placement, estimated with GAMs with smooth terms based on a shrinkage version of cubic regression splines. The shaded area shows the 95% confidence interval of the estimate of the mean. Data are from ESS Wave 4 (2008) and Wave 11 (2023).

current state of European integration, for the extreme left the response is more likely to be *more* integration than for the extreme right. Comparing the pattern in 2023 with the one from 2008, it is clear that the shape of the relationship has changed significantly, especially for people to the right of the midpoint of the scale. In 2008, average EU support is in fact higher at the right end of the left–right spectrum than it is on the left. In the 15 years between 2008 and 2023, left-wing people have increased their desire for further European integration, while right-wing people have experienced the opposite.

In the Supplementary Material (Figure A2), we show how left–right self-placement covaries with two other aspects of EU attitudes: trust in the European Parliament and attachment to Europe. Putting the evidence from the three indicators of EU support together, respondents on the extreme left (0 to 3) exhibit relatively lower trust in the European Parliament and European attachment than centrists (4 to 7), but higher support for further integration. Respondents on the extreme right (8 to 10) have lower trust in the European Parliament and European identity than centrists, but only slightly lower support for further integration.

The pattern is obscured by the puzzling dips in support for the EU at the midpoint of the left–right scale (Rodon, 2015), which is least pronounced with regard to support for further integration. This pattern is not quite in line with the proposal of van Elsas et al. (2016) that left Euroscepticism is about the current state of the EU but is compatible with a desire for further integration, while right Euroscepticism "categorically" rejects European integration.

It is instructive to check already how the pattern for citizens compares with the pattern for political parties. Figure A3 in the Supplementary Material plots the link between the general left–right positions and positive orientations towards European integration of all European parties included in the 2024 wave of the CHES dataset. The link mostly reproduces the well-known inverted U-curve or "horseshoe" pattern (although there is a slight dip in the middle of the scale). The main insights from comparing the patterns for citizens and parties are that (a) the dependence of EU attitudes on left–right is much stronger for parties than for citizens, with much steeper and more symmetric declines from the center for parties than for citizens, and that (b) on average, the center-left is not more supportive than the center-right when we look at party positions.

4.2. EU Support and Policy Attitudes in 2023

Is the relationship of public EU support with policy attitudes rather than with ideological self-placement stronger? In Figure 2, we examine how public support for further EU integration varies with policy attitudes
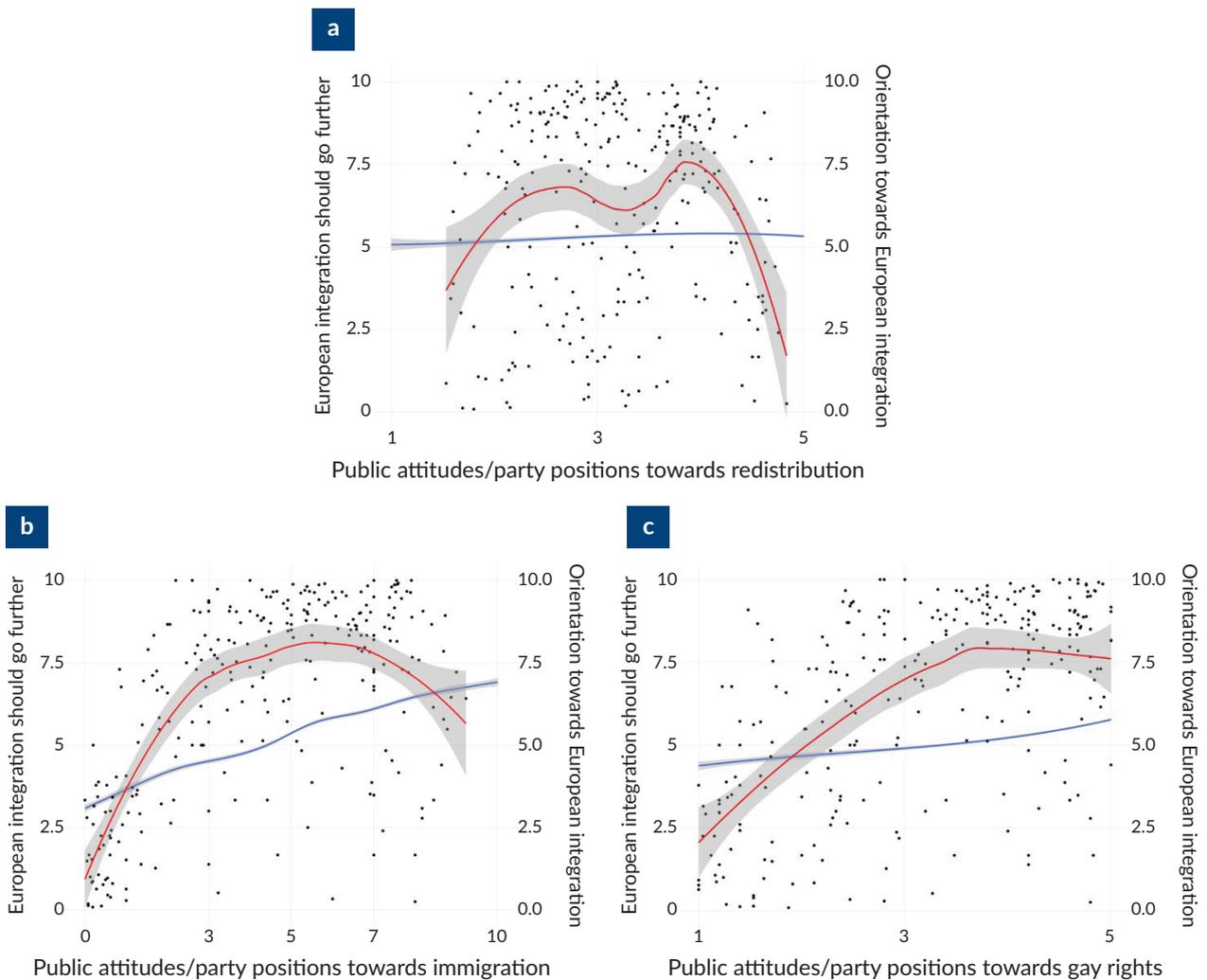
Figure 2. Support for further European integration as a function of support for (a) government redistribution, (b) immigration, and (c) gay rights. Blue lines show the averages for citizens; black dots and red lines (based on local polynomial regression) show the party positions. Party positions on the policy dimensions have been rescaled to match the public opinion data. Data are from ESS Wave 11 (2023) and CHES (2024).

towards redistribution, immigration, and gay rights (blue lines). Figure 2a shows that the link between this aspect of public EU support and agreement with the statement that the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels is very weak. The blue line is practically flat, which means that redistribution attitudes are not predictive of the level of EU support of citizens. To the contrary, the dependence between support for further integration and agreement that immigrants make a country better is very strong and linear (Figure 2b). Respondents who strongly disagree with the statement have on average a value of 3 on EU support, while those who strongly agree have on average a value of 7. Agreement with the statement that gay men and lesbian women should be free to live as they wish is also relatively strongly and (almost) linearly related to EU support, but the slope is not as steep as the one of immigration support (Figure 2c).

Overall, EU support—or support for further integration, at the very least—varies very strongly and linearly with assessments of the effects of immigration, to a considerable but smaller extent with support for gay rights, and not at all with support for redistribution. At the level of the public, there is no evidence for inverted U-curve shapes of the dependence for any of the three policy attitudes that we examine. The plots also show the party positions (black dots and red lines), and make it clear that the patterns for parties and citizens are quite different. For parties, redistribution varies with EU support in an inverted U-shape. Positive orientations towards immigration are associated with stronger EU support up to the midpoint, but then average EU support declines for parties with very pro-immigration positions. EU support rises more monotonically with support for gay rights, although the relationship levels off at very high levels of these positions. The fact that the relationship of EU support is much stronger with immigration positions than with support for gay rights implies that EU attitudes are related more tightly to the identity cluster from the GAL/TAN or "cultural" dimension than to the cluster of issues related to moral permissiveness, which includes attitudes towards homosexuality (see also Toshkov & Krouwel, 2022).

4.3. Variations Across Countries

The relationships we plotted and discussed in Figures 1 and 2 were based on the combined sample from all 19 EU member states (and the UK, Norway, and Switzerland) included in the 2023 wave of the ESS (Wave 11). We might see different patterns in individual countries (cf. Toshkov & Krouwel, 2022; Wheatley & Mendez, 2021). Furthermore, country heterogeneity in the dependence relationships, combined with systematically different average levels of EU support, could account for some of the aggregate results reported above. Therefore, the next plot shows the link between left–right self-placement and support for further European integration *per country*.

As we can see from Figure 3, the relationship looks very different in different European countries. In some, such as Croatia, Ireland, Norway, and Portugal, the line is practically flat, implying that there is no relationship. In others, such as Cyprus, Lithuania, and Slovakia, public support for further integration increases linearly as one goes towards the right end of the scale. But in others, such as Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK, support for further integration drops the further to the right we move. An inverted U-curve can only be discerned in France.
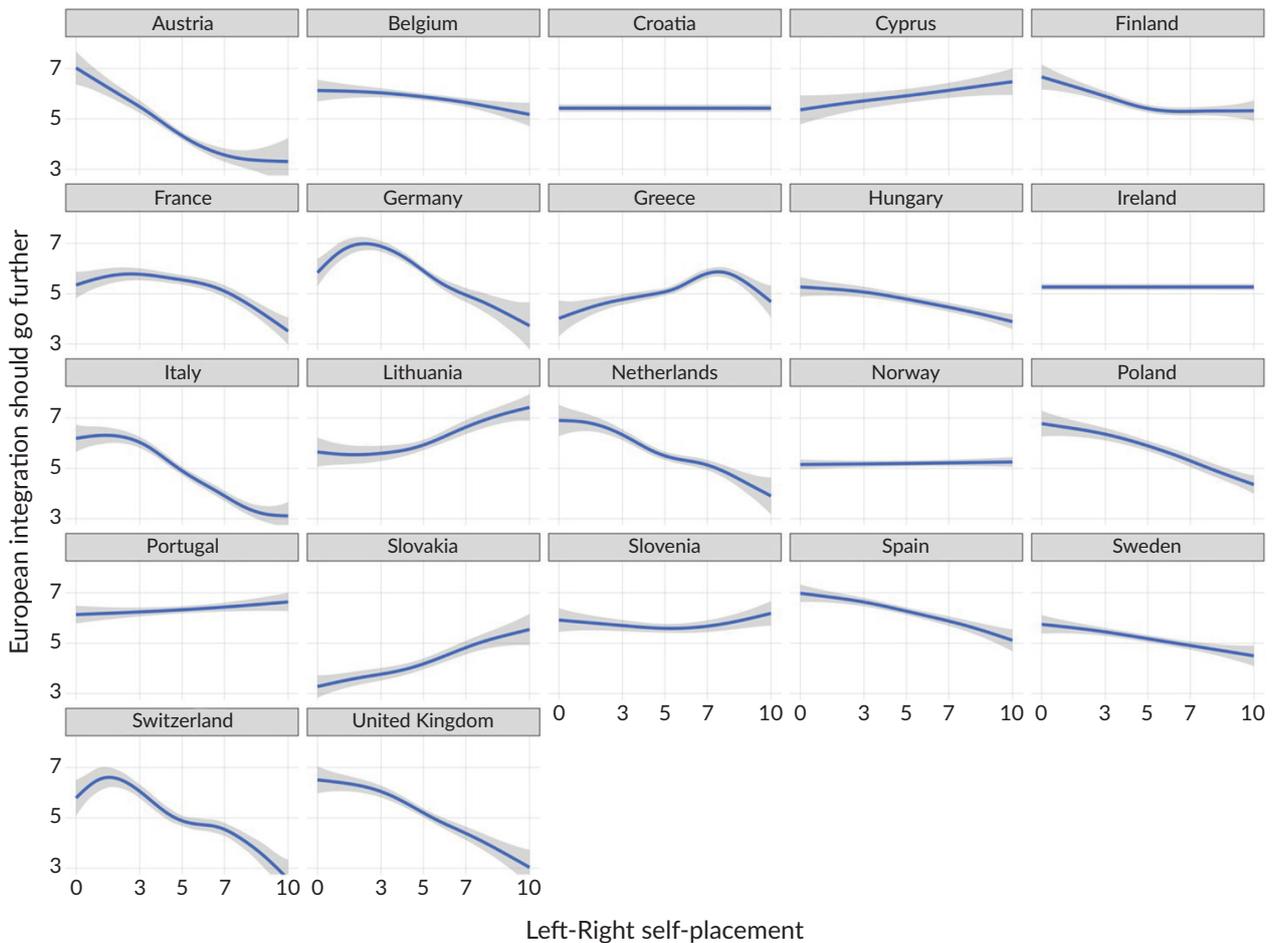
Figure 3. Average support for further European integration of citizens as a function of left–right self-placement of the citizens, per country. Data are from ESS Wave 11 (2023).

Compared to the citizen data, the relationship between positive orientations towards European integration and the general left–right positions of parties is much more likely to have a "horseshoe" pattern in individual countries. In many of these, the lines for the public do not have this shape: Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Spain, and Sweden. Yet, in several cases the party and citizen lines seem related, for example in Italy, Poland, and the UK, where neither left-wing citizens nor left-wing parties are likely to be negative towards the EU, or in Latvia, where right-wing citizens and right-wing parties are, on average, more EU-supportive. We will examine more closely whether the strength of the relationship between left–right and EU support for parties in a country is systematically related to the strength of the same relationship for the public below.

There is also significant heterogeneity across countries when it comes to the relationship of left–right with trust in the European Parliament and European identity (see Figures A4 and A5 in the Supplementary Material). But the heterogeneity with respect to the relationship between support for further European integration and policy attitudes is much smaller (Figures A6–A8 in the Supplementary Material), with the links being similar across countries in terms of form and strength (there are some exceptions, but not too many).

4.4. Variation Over Time

How stable are these patterns over time? To answer this question, Figure 4 shows the relationship between support for further European integration and left–right self-placement for each wave of the ESS in which these questions were included. We can see that the shape of the relationship varies considerably from one data point to another. The levels of support for further integration at the right end of the scale in particular change significantly. In 2016 and 2023, support declines rather steeply as one moves from the center to the right. But the decline is much smaller in 2014 and 2018. And in the remaining years, support actually increases for those on the extreme end of the right scale compared to the center.
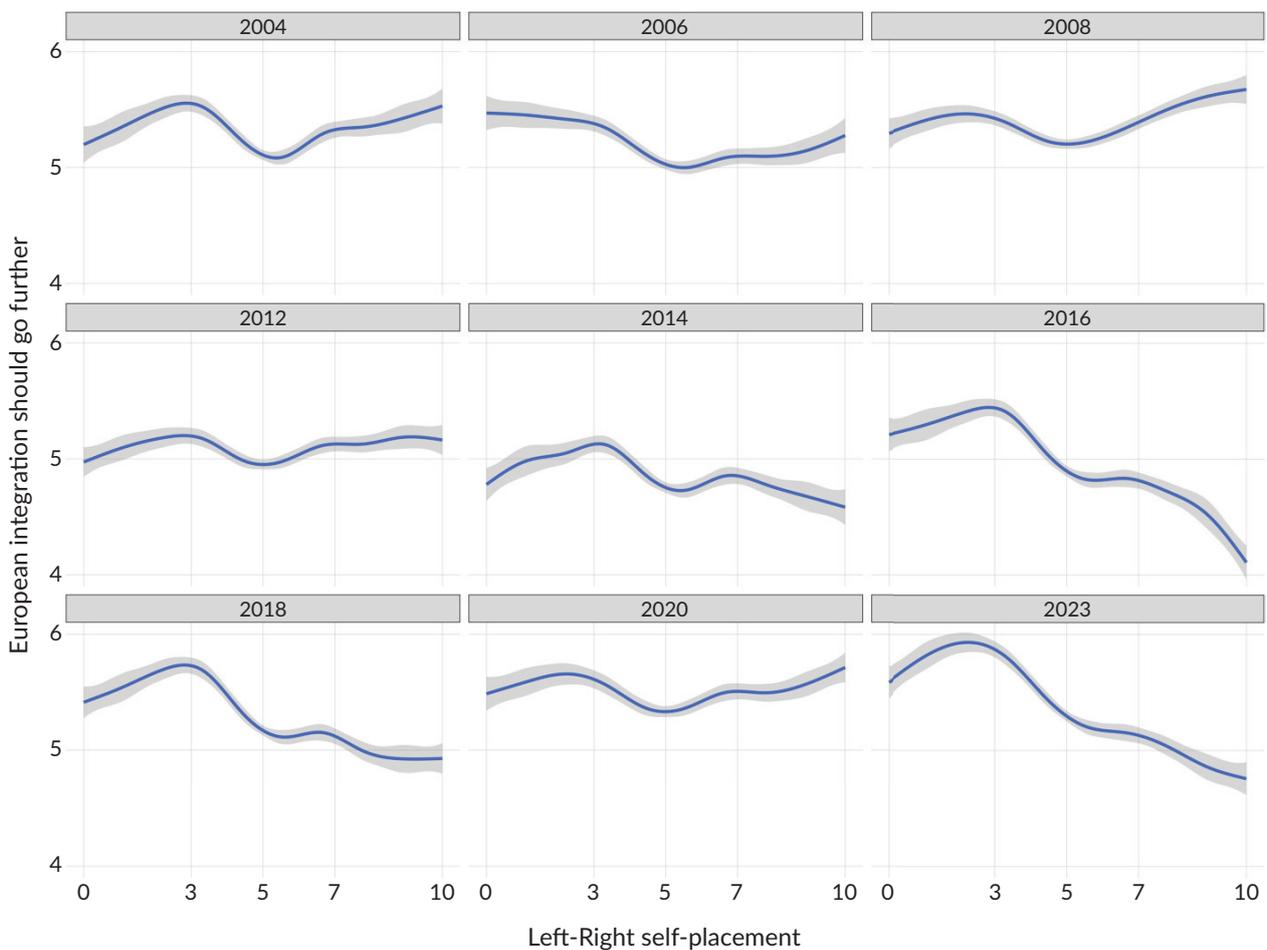

Figure 4. Support for further European integration as a function of left–right self-placement over time. Data are from ESS Wave 2 (2004) to Wave 11 (2023).

It would seem that, over time, people on the right become less likely to support further integration compared to centrists (as proposed by van Elsas & van der Brug, 2014). But in 2020 this trend reverses. The fluctuations in the shape of the dependence over time might reflect genuine changes in the systematic relationship between EU support and left–right positions. But such an interpretation is complicated by the fact that the sample of countries included in the ESS changes in each wave. So a different composition of the total sample could account for some of the apparent differences that we see. In particular, the 2020

sample features many Eastern European states (where support for the EU is typically higher on the right than on the left) and fewer Western European ones, which might be responsible for the pattern reversal.

To address this complication, we could examine changes over time for individual countries included in all (or most) waves in the ESS. Doing so reveals that the shape of dependence of EU support and left–right varies over time within countries as well, in a pattern that is hard to interpret as systematic (see Figures A9–A11 in the Supplementary Material). None of these fluctuations over time can be related to the structure of political party positions, which is much more stable, with the "horseshoe" pattern clearly visible in the party data.

4.5. Estimating the Strength of Associations Across Variables, Time, and Space

To continue the analysis, it will be useful to summarize the strength of dependence between the variables of interest with a numerical measure. Pearson's correlation coefficient, which is often used for this purpose, is inadequate because of the non-linear form of the relationships (the same critique applies to the use of a coefficient from a linear regression). As explained in the research approach section, the maximal information coefficient and the dCor provide two alternatives that have desirable theoretical properties. In the Supplementary Material, we show that dCor provides a better match with the strength of the links we can infer from the informal visual inspection (see Figure A12 in the Supplementary Material). Using dCor as a measure of dependence, we can compare the strength of the relationships between EU support, political ideology, and policy attitudes for the different countries in the sample. Table 1 shows the estimates for the 22 EU countries in 2023, as well as the average for the included countries.

As we can see from the table, the dependence is strongest between support for further European integration and the evaluations of immigration (EU-average of 0.32), followed by left–right self-placement (0.18) and support for gay rights (0.15). The dependence is weakest in terms of support for redistribution (0.10). While there are important differences across countries, this relative ranking is reproduced in most of them.

The link of EU support with left–right is strongest in Southern Europe (average of 0.17) and weakest in Northern Europe (average of 0.10); with immigration attitudes is strongest in Norther Europe (0.37) and weakest in Eastern Europe (0.31); with attitudes towards gay rights is strongest in Eastern Europe (0.14) and weakest in Norther Europe (0.10); and with attitudes towards redistribution, there is not much variation across European regions.

Comparing the strength of associations between the attitudes of citizens and the positions of parties, it is evident that the positions of parties on different issues are much more strongly related. The EU-average (across the sample of countries included in Table 1) dCor of EU support with general left–right positions is 0.67, with immigration support is 0.71, with support for gay rights is 0.72, and with support for redistribution is 0.56. These coefficients are estimated by a much smaller number of observations, but even taking this into account, we have to conclude that there is a much stronger structure in the party positions than in the attitudes of citizens. These patterns are somewhat compatible with the theoretical expectation that European integration is associated with "cultural" issues in Northern and Western Europe, but with economic issues in the South (Otjes & Katsanidou, 2017).

Table 1. dCor values of public support for further European integration/positive orientations of parties towards European integration with left–right and three policy attitudes/positions, per country. Data are from ESS Wave 11 (2023) and CHES (2024).

Country	Left–right		Redistribution		Immigration		Gay rights	
	Citizens	Parties	Citizens	Parties	Citizens	Parties	Citizens	Parties
Austria	0.25	0.86	0.06	0.56	0.46	0.92	0.10	0.92
Belgium	0.09	0.51	0.06	0.45	0.27	0.58	0.12	0.75
Croatia	0.08	0.87	0.08	0.61	0.27	0.96	0.21	0.85
Cyprus	0.12	0.75	0.17	0.75	0.18	0.70	0.14	0.72
Finland	0.13	0.56	0.15	0.49	0.42	0.90	0.15	0.81
France	0.17	0.54	0.06	0.38	0.27	0.54	0.09	0.58
Germany	0.22	0.41	0.05	0.37	0.41	0.60	0.22	0.53
Greece	0.18	0.59	0.13	0.44	0.16	0.54	0.13	0.73
Hungary	0.18	0.90	0.10	0.68	0.36	0.89	0.18	0.91
Ireland	0.06	0.54	0.06	0.63	0.36	0.61	0.10	0.53
Italy	0.35	0.71	0.13	0.57	0.58	0.79	0.26	0.74
Lithuania	0.21	0.74	0.11	0.62	0.25	0.94	0.15	0.87
Netherlands	0.24	0.64	0.15	0.42	0.35	0.71	0.13	0.76
Norway	0.07	0.52	0.05	0.54	0.25	0.38	0.11	0.44
Poland	0.26	0.86	0.05	0.62	0.28	0.82	0.22	0.91
Portugal	0.08	0.54	0.08	0.44	0.17	0.36	0.04	0.36
Slovakia	0.20	0.69	0.10	0.46	0.46	0.96	0.18	0.83
Slovenia	0.09	0.53	0.10	0.48	0.17	0.51	0.08	0.52
Spain	0.17	0.63	0.16	0.64	0.31	0.67	0.17	0.61
Sweden	0.16	0.46	0.08	0.52	0.26	0.42	0.09	0.50
Switzerland	0.31	0.87	0.11	0.57	0.35	0.91	0.21	0.92
United Kingdom	0.27	0.97	0.18	0.97	0.37	0.99	0.15	0.94
EU+ average	0.18	0.67	0.10	0.56	0.32	0.71	0.15	0.72
Correlation	0.49		0.49		0.54		0.55	

Despite the very different average strength of associations for citizens and for parties, how strong the association is for parties *is* related to how strong the association is for citizens, across countries. For example, across the 22 countries in the 2023 sample, Pearson's correlation coefficient between the dCor values for parties for the link between left–right and EU support and the dCor values for citizens for the same link is 0.49; for immigration and EU support, it is 0.54; for gay rights and EU support, it is even higher at 0.55; and for redistribution and EU support, it is 0.49. This implies that the structures of EU attitudes, political ideology, and policy attitudes for parties and citizens across the European countries are very much related. But there is a much clearer structure when it comes to parties than for citizens.

Table 2 shows how the strength of the dependence relationships for citizens (summarized by the dCor values) has changed since 2004 by analyzing the data from the all available waves of the ESS (from Wave 2 onwards; Waves 1 and 5 do not include the question on preferences towards further European integration, unfortunately). For three of the four variables we examine, the strength of the link with support for further

European integration has actually increased over time. This is true for the link with left–right. The link with immigration evaluations has peaked in 2018. The link with support for gay rights has been the strongest in the 2020 sample (but note the relatively higher number of Eastern European member states in that survey wave). The link with support for redistribution has remained lower than its peak in 2012. The sample of countries included in the ESS changes to some extent with each wave, which affects the composition of the EU average changes. But looking at trends in individual countries (see Tables A1–A5 in the Supplementary Material), the conclusions remain the same, as the EU-level patterns are reproduced in most countries for which more than one data point over time per variable is available. It is noteworthy, however, that rather big changes within countries between two ESS waves are not uncommon, which raises concerns about overinterpreting small changes in the EU-level averages. In any case, we do not have evidence that the strength of the relationships has decreased over time.

Table 2. dCor values of public support for further European integration with left–right and three policy attitudes over time. "Salience" is the number of articles with keywords related to the policy areas in Agence Europe. Data are from ESS Wave 2 (2004) to Wave 11 (2023), and from Factiva.

Year	Immigration		Redistribution		Gay rights		Left–right
	dCor	Salience	dCor	Salience	dCor	Salience	dCor
2004	0.28	848	0.08	295	0.12	201	0.10
2005	—	828	—	328	—	149	—
2006	0.27	971	0.07	221	0.11	188	0.11
2007	—	846	—	215	—	139	—
2008	0.23	879	0.09	255	0.11	184	0.11
2009	—	721	—	196	—	167	—
2010	—	604	—	310	—	158	—
2011	—	779	—	262	—	165	—
2012	0.29	424	0.11	223	0.10	157	0.12
2013	—	418	—	235	—	177	—
2014	0.30	626	0.10	179	0.13	202	0.12
2015	—	1,155	—	193	—	193	—
2016	0.33	1,489	0.08	161	0.13	156	0.14
2017	—	1,217	—	149	—	142	—
2018	0.33	1,257	0.09	155	0.14	138	0.14
2019	—	845	—	121	—	155	—
2020	0.31	802	0.10	124	0.16	253	0.15
2023	0.32	—	0.10	—	0.15	—	0.18
Correlation	0.42		−0.29		0.45		—

Table 2 also shows the values of the EU-level salience of the three policy issues, as measured by the number of related news items published in a year (2004–2020) by the major EU-focused media outlet. For immigration and gay rights, there are quite high correlations of salience with the strength of the dependence of these issues with citizen support for further European integration: 0.42 and 0.45, respectively. Altogether, for two of the three policy areas, there is some evidence that the fluctuations in the salience of the policy issue at the EU level are systematically related to the strength of the association between the policy attitudes and EU support.

5. Conclusion

This article examined how public support for European integration fits into the broader political outlook of European citizens. To summarize the findings, the descriptive links between left–right self-placement and the different measures of EU attitudes are relatively weak. To put it simply, where European citizens position themselves on the left–right political scale has very little predictive power for their level of support for (further) European integration. To the extent that there is a relationship, it is not quite the inverted U-curve or "horseshoe" pattern we would expect from studies of political parties and existing literature. The peak of support is at the moderate left and not at the center of the left–right scale. This pattern has changed dramatically since 2008, when European integration support was higher for right-wing people than for left-wingers. There is a great degree of heterogeneity in the form and strength of the relationship between countries and over time. Importantly, the average strength of the dependence between left–right and support for further integration has *not* declined over time, and it might have even increased slightly.

The increasing (or, at least not diminishing) strength of the link between left–right and EU support is not easy to account for in theoretical terms. One way to explain this is to consider that the meaning of left–right itself changes over time and differs across countries (Jankowski et al., 2022; Steiner, 2024). As the implicit interpretation people attach to the left–right scale moves from a socio-economic one to one related more to other issues, such as immigration (De Vries et al., 2013; Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009), the connection with EU attitudes could become stronger as these other issues are more tightly connected with EU support.

Indeed, immigration attitudes show the strongest, simplest in form (linear), and most consistent link with EU public support from all the ideological positions and policy attitudes that we examine. The link can be observed in all countries, and it has increased gradually since 2008, peaking in 2018. Support for gay rights is also related to support for further EU integration, but the link is weaker and more variable. Perhaps the most surprising finding is the lack of any relationship, linear or otherwise, between support for government redistribution and European integration support. Overall, the dependence between support for EU integration and policy attitudes is more consistent across countries and stable over time than with left–right self-placement. This could be explained by the fact that the policy attitudes refer to issues that are more concrete and comprehensible to citizens, while the meaning of left–right is abstract, vague, and unanchored.

Compared to the attitudes of citizens, the positions of political parties, at least as estimated by experts, are much more structured and exhibit the inverted U-curve relationship between left–right and EU support visibly and consistently across countries and over time. More interestingly, the strength of this relationship at the level of parties within a country is predictive of the strength of the relationship at the level of the public in that country. While the exact forms of the relationship might differ, apparently the more structured the party-political landscape with respect to EU positions, the stronger the link of public EU support with other political attitudes in the minds of citizens. Future research should propose a theoretical account of why we observe cross-regional and cross-country differences in the way citizen attitudes and party positions are structured.

We also find that the increasing salience of policy issues at the EU level (in the cases of immigration and gay rights) is associated with stronger links between the attitudes of the public on these issues and support for further EU integration. EU political discussions and policy initiatives on societal problems help clarify what

the EU does and what it stands for in these areas, which is reflected in more consistent links between citizens' policy attitudes and EU support.

These results have several important implications. They suggest that the idea of the inverted U-curved relationship between left–right and EU support needs to be retired. The focus on left–right positions (measured via self-placement) is not very helpful altogether. Different ways of measuring the left–right positions of individuals might lead to different results. But self-placements have weak and variable links with actual policy preferences, so their utility for making sense of the political views of citizens is quite limited, especially when it comes to figuring out what citizens actually want in terms of public policy, rather than what political identities they want to express. At the very least, a measure of left–right should not be entered as a linear term when used as a predictor/explanatory variable in models of EU attitudes (as done, for example, in Curtis & Nielsen, 2018; De Blok & De Vries, 2023; Nielsen, 2016) and should always be interacted with country.

Placing the results from this article in the context of the literature on the EU positions of political parties, there are several important observations to make. First, the structure of citizens' political and policy positions is more complex and variable across space and time than the structure of positions of parties and elites. Second, political parties and elites play an important role in structuring citizens' political attitudes. Part of the variation across space and time in how citizens' views on the EU are connected to other political attitudes and policy preferences comes from the way national politicians frame European integration, the issues they emphasize (e.g., immigration or fiscal transfers), and the problems they make central in the process of electoral competition. Further study is needed to document these links in detail and establish the causal nature of these relationships. Third, the fact that citizens who position themselves on the extreme left and right do not necessarily want to roll back or slow down European integration (in any case, not much more than centrists do), even if they tend to trust the EU less, is a reminder that hard Euroscepticism at the party level is rarely about an outright rejection of European integration these days. Both on the left and on the right, the argument is often that a different kind of Europe is needed, which sometimes means more and faster integration than an end to the EU. The disconnect felt between party elites and citizens on issues of European integration might be due to the fact that parties hold *consistently* pro- or anti-EU positions, while citizens have mixed attitudes, depending on which policy area they consider.

In terms of improving our understanding of EU attitudes, this article showed that people's assessments of European integration are much more related to "cultural" (for a lack of a better umbrella term) than to socio-economic preferences. EU attitudes are much more strongly related to policies part of the GAL/TAN dimension. Indirectly, this suggests that people associate the European integration project to a larger extent with cultural rather than socio-economic transformations around the continent, even at the height of the economic crisis in the late 2000s. This creates opportunities for political actors to exploit these associations in a way that can reinforce the associations in the long term.

This research is subject to a number of limitations. First, the available measures of EU attitudes leave important gaps, for example with respect to the EU as it is (rather than for further or faster integration). Second, neither the ESS nor Eurobarometer includes a measure of self-placement on progressive or liberal vs. conservative ideological scales. That would be beneficial in order to see how policy preferences and EU support relate to this second ideological dimension, abstractly defined. If such measures were available, one could also explore how

EU support varies in a complex ideological space defined by two dimensions simultaneously (cf. Toshkov & Krouwel, 2022). Third, if more policy preferences were measured, one could extract inductively dimensions of policy support that would be more stable and representative of people's views than the single items we study here. Finally, panel data could be used to examine the causal links between public opinion and party positions.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The article is based on public data sources distributed by the European Social Survey, Eurobarometer, and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey. Analysis scripts in R are available upon request.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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