

Rhetorical Consensus About the EU? Comparing Established and New Parties in Europe

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Abstract

In recent decades, researchers have approached the topic of new parties, often explaining how they emerge, adapt to political systems, and gain supporters. However, little research has looked at how discourses differ between new and old parties. This article aims to cover this gap by looking at parties’ manifestos and their discourses in relation to the European Union to establish whether there are differences in their views. The study includes the manifestos of political parties that have received over 1% of votes in the latest national elections in 12 EU countries. The qualitative content analysis focuses on 101 electoral manifestos that were published between 2019 and 2024. Therefore, this article contributes to the literature that focuses on new political parties.

Keywords

comparative study; discourses; established parties; European Union; new parties

1. Introduction

The emergence of new political parties has gained traction since the early 2000s. Scholars have sought to explain the main factors that lead to the formation of new parties (Brack & Startin, 2015; Mudde, 2007; Sikk, 2011). The literature identifies that political parties emerge in certain conditions: when an issue is highly politicized but ignored by the established parties, when the cleavages in society are no longer satisfied by the existing parties, or when the main parties have distanced themselves from highly important policies for large segments of voters (Gherghina, 2014; Laver, 2005; Tavits, 2008; Vandamme & Lucardie, 2025).

The literature that discusses the connection between political parties and EU attitudes shows that the most impactful aspect is ideology. It is considered that radical right and radical left parties tend to be highly critical of the EU on topics of sovereignty and identity (H. Kitschelt, 1995; van Elsas & van der Brug, 2015; S. Wagner, 2022). However, little research has explored how the new parties' discourses differ from those of established parties regarding the EU. Understanding these differences is important for three reasons: (a) we can identify whether the EU is a contested issue on the political agenda, which is increasingly salient in the context of several discussions about potential EU exits in previous years (Gherghina & Tap, 2023); (b) we can make a holistic assessment of Euroscepticism by accounting for the new political parties; and (c) we can observe the extent to which new parties have a convergent discourse with the mainstream ones, or remain at the fringes, as was the case roughly a decade ago with many newcomers to the political arena (Gherghina & Fagan, 2021).

To address the identified gap in the literature, this article aims to show how the discourses of new and established political parties differ (supply side). In order to reach this goal, the study relies on electoral manifestos drafted by political parties for national/legislative elections between 2019 and 2024. We have selected 12 EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden) based on geographical positioning, age of democracy, and country size. We analyze a total of 101 party manifestos using deductive thematic analysis.

The next section, which is split into two main sub-sections, presents the theoretical framework. The first sub-section sets out a literature review which outlines the main elements that could influence the rhetoric of new political parties in relation to the EU, before the second sub-section explains the analytical framework used for the study, as well as introducing the main frames used by political parties when referring to the EU. In the third section we present the research design, including the case selection, the data collected for the study and an explanation of how the data was analyzed. The fourth section is the analysis, followed by the conclusions section that discusses the key findings and outlines some future avenues for research.

2. Political Parties, Discourse, and the European Union: An Overview

Ideology is a key predictor of parties' discourse in contemporary times, including their rhetoric on the EU. Radical left parties (e.g., SYRIZA, Die Linke, and La France Insoumise) consider the EU to be a neoliberal construction that undermines the state's capacity to redistribute and regulate resources (March, 2011). Radical right parties usually resort to the identitarian register in which "Brussels" stands for uncontrolled migration, the erosion of traditional values, and the dissolution of national sovereignty (Mudde, 2007). Rassemblement National and Fidesz consistently portray the EU as an ideologically hostile actor seeking to impose "foreign values" on sovereign nations (Brack & Startin, 2015). Center-left and center-right parties, unlike radicals, tend to adopt a pragmatic and institutionalist discourse on the EU. They avoid polarization and emphasize stability, cooperation, and effectiveness—presenting the EU as a guarantor of economic order and legal norms (Schmidt, 2020). However, there are significant differences between them: liberal parties talk about the EU as a driver of competitiveness and innovation, while social democratic parties highlight its redistributive and social cohesion potential (Schmidt, 2020). It could be argued that the discourse about the EU could potentially be influenced by membership of European parties. In our view, the membership is very well gauged by ideology, which is a more fine-grained concept to work with.

Party discourse is also shaped by strategic reasoning based on the electoral context, patterns of political competition, and audience receptiveness. De Vries and Hobolt (2020) argue that parties articulate clearer or more visible EU-related messages when integration becomes a salient issue for voters. When the EU is perceived as a marginal or technocratic issue, parties may prefer ambiguity or strategic silence, avoiding clear positions in order to avoid alienating segments of their electorate (Brug et al., 2007).

Populist parties tend to hyper-politicize EU discourse, using the EU as a negative symbol of globalized elites. Populist discourse often frames the EU as part of a dichotomy between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite,” with Brussels functioning as a synecdoche for externally imposed order (Zulianello, 2020). In such cases, the EU is not primarily criticized in policy or technical terms; rather, it is demonized through emotionally-charged rhetoric around betrayal, decline, and loss of control (Mudde, 2004; Zulianello, 2020). Institutional and national contexts also influence party discourse about the EU. Parties in net contributor states (e.g., Germany and the Netherlands) often frame the EU in terms of fiscal responsibility and budgetary discipline (Serricchio et al., 2013). In contrast, parties in net recipient states (e.g., Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania) tend to frame the EU as a developmental actor and a source of funding (D. Braun & Tausendpfund, 2014; Serricchio et al., 2013).

The “age” of the party can influence its discourse towards the EU. New parties (e.g., Podemos; M5S) often adopt more confrontational, polarizing, or experimental discourses on the EU. Their communication is marked by volatility, ideological hybridity, and greater responsiveness to public moods (Borriello & Brack, 2021; Zappettini & Maccaferri, 2021). These parties tend to disrupt established pro/anti-EU categories. Instead, they articulate cross-cutting messages. For instance, Podemos combines EU-level social justice demands with an anti-austerity critique, while M5S shifted from Euroscepticism to soft reformism as it entered government (Borriello & Brack, 2021). In contrast, older, long-established parties (e.g., Germany’s CDU and France’s Socialist Party) tend to operate within more institutionalized and historically-rooted frames. Their EU discourse is often more stable, routinized, and shaped by legacy narratives of European integration, such as peace, economic prosperity, and continental unity (Caiani & Guerra, 2017). These parties are more likely to use the EU as a reference point for legitimacy and institutional continuity (Caiani & Guerra, 2017). This distinction also points to different communicative logics. New parties frequently adopt a “disruptive framing” strategy, aiming to contest the dominant narrative about the EU; in contrast, old parties often practice “discursive normalization,” seeking to stabilize public expectations around European governance (Caiani & Guerra, 2017). Apart from these general points, the next section introduces the major discursive frames that political parties use to talk about the EU: the economic frame, the sovereignty and identity frame, the democracy and normativity frame, and the geopolitical frame.

2.1. Four Discursive Frames

2.1.1. The Economic Frame

Parties across the political spectrum interpret and mobilize economic arguments to achieve their specific strategic goals (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). The economic frame portrays the EU either as a guarantor of prosperity, free markets, and competitiveness, or as a vehicle for neoliberal constraints and austerity (Schmidt, 2020; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Center-right and liberal parties refer to the EU as a driver of market integration, innovation, and fiscal discipline (e.g., Germany’s Christian Democratic Union, the Dutch

People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, or Finland's National Coalition Party). They frame the EU as a bulwark against protectionism and inefficiency (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Schmidt, 2020).

Liberal parties often advance an economic narrative centered on entrepreneurship, digitization, and competitiveness. They celebrate the EU as a market regulator and enabler of transnational economic cooperation (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Center-left parties refer to the EU as an entity that emphasizes social protection, cohesion, and the mitigation of market externalities. Social democratic parties such as the German SPD and Portugal's Socialist Party often present the EU as a potential facilitator of redistributive policies and social investment (Crespy & Menz, 2015). These actors promote narratives in which the EU can (or should) balance market liberalization with solidarity-based mechanisms such as cohesion funds, youth employment initiatives, and minimum wage coordination (Crespy & Menz, 2015).

Meanwhile, radical parties use the economic frame in confrontational and negative ways (Zulianello, 2020). Radical left parties such as SYRIZA, La France Insoumise, and Die Linke have developed an overtly critical discourse portraying the EU as an agent of neoliberalism and austerity that undermines democratic sovereignty and social rights (Keith, 2017). This antagonistic narrative constructs the EU as a coercive technocracy that prioritizes fiscal orthodoxy over social justice (Bickerton, 2015). In contrast, right-wing populist parties such as the Alternative für Deutschland, the Freedom Party of Austria, and Italy's Lega deploy a critical economic frame, but with a nationalist inflection. Their discourse focuses on the EU as a source of unfair financial transfers, fiscal burdens, and/or threats to national taxpayers (D. Braun & Tausendpfund, 2014). For instance, Lega's rhetoric during debates over the Stability and Growth Pact centered on defending Italian sovereignty against Brussels' technocrats, seen as constraining national spending flexibility (Zulianello, 2020).

Party discourse is not consistent over time regarding this frame, because parties respond to changing political incentives or institutional roles. For example, M5S initially adopted a radical economic critique of the EU centered on debt and sovereignty, but softened its tone when in government, adopting more pragmatic and reformist language (Salvati, 2021). A similar approach was used by the Romanian Social Democratic Party, that praised the EU in the aftermath of Romania's accession for modernizing infrastructure and funding education, especially in rural and underdeveloped regions, before criticizing the EU in 2012–2013 and 2017–2018 for interference in state affairs when the party made attempts to control power using questionable means (Bankov & Gherghina, 2020).

Moreover, discourses also vary by national context. For example, in Eastern and Southern Europe, where EU structural funds constitute a major source of public investment, mainstream parties often frame the EU as a developmental actor (Serricchio et al., 2013).

2.1.2. Sovereignty and Identity Frame

When political parties talk about the EU through the sovereignty and identity frame, the EU is treated as a signifier of broader struggles over who "we" are and who should decide "our" future (Capati, 2024; Grande et al., 2016). The discourse of sovereignty is particularly central to right-wing and populist parties, who tend to portray the EU as an external force that undermines national autonomy and imposes illegitimate authority. Rassemblement National, Fidesz, and the Law and Justice Party repeatedly use the idea of "taking back

control” or resisting the “diktats of Brussels” (Vachudova, 2021). In their speeches, manifestos, and media performances, they articulate the EU as a threat to the nation-state’s right to self-determination (Brack & Startin, 2015; Vachudova, 2021). This discourse frequently associates the EU with elites who are detached from national communities, and with values that erode national tradition (e.g., multiculturalism or LGBTQ+ rights; Mudde, 2007; Pirro & van Kessel, 2017).

These parties use the EU as a rhetorical device to dramatize a perceived erosion of national identity. Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz frequently constructs the EU as an ideologically biased institution that seeks to suppress Hungarian “Christian values.” This discourse frames the defense of national sovereignty as a moral imperative, resisting what it calls the “liberal imperialism” of the West (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). Similarly, left-wing populist parties such as La France Insoumise and SYRIZA also invoke sovereignty in their discourse, although they link it to popular rather than national identity. Their rhetoric often centers around popular sovereignty—the idea that EU governance structures disempower citizens by insulating decision-making processes from democratic accountability (Borriello & Brack, 2021).

Mainstream parties typically attempt to reframe the EU as a complement to national identity. Centre-right parties such as Germany’s CDU and Austria’s ÖVP often present the EU as a “community of values” rooted in shared cultural traditions. In these perspectives, the EU is an extension of national identity, representing a historical and civilizational project (Schmidt, 2020). Such a discourse allows mainstream parties to bridge national pride with European belonging, especially in contexts where EU support remains high (Lefkofridi & Schmitter, 2015). On the center-left, parties like the SPD in Germany and the Socialist Party in Portugal often invoke a civic rather than ethnic identity in their European discourse. The EU is presented by them as a space of inclusive citizenship where national and European identities can coexist (Lefkofridi & Schmitter, 2015).

These discursive choices are not random but are shaped by domestic political competition and broader cultural anxieties. Parties strategically deploy the sovereignty and identity frame when they seek to politicize European integration, mobilize affective narratives, and/or reconfigure in-group/out-group boundaries. As De Wilde et al. (2016) argue, such framing processes are central to the politicization of Europe since they transform abstract institutional debates into emotionally resonant struggles over belonging and legitimacy.

2.1.3. Democracy and Normativity Frame

Another frame through which political parties construct meaning around the EU is that of democracy and normativity. Here, the EU is either a community of shared democratic values or a technocratic structure plagued by democratic deficits and normative inconsistency (Schmidt, 2013). Centre-left and liberal parties often characterize the EU as a project of values-based governance and rule-of-law protection. Their discourse positions the EU as a normative anchor in an international system marked by authoritarian drift and democratic erosion (Schmidt, 2020). For example, the German Green Party consistently speaks of the EU as a community bound by legal norms, transparency, and participatory decision-making (Schmidt, 2020).

This narrative has become especially prominent in the context of democratic backsliding within the EU. Parties in Western European countries often speak about the need to defend European values against member states that violate rule-of-law norms (Kelemen, 2020). The discourse of normativity becomes, in this case, a language of intra-European critique: e.g., Dutch and Belgian liberal parties have repeatedly called for the EU to sanction

governments like those in Hungary or Poland for undermining judicial independence and media pluralism (Kelemen, 2020). Accordingly, the EU is not merely regarded as a governing institution, but as a custodian of democracy that must enforce its principles internally.

Other parties use this frame to construct precisely the opposite narrative. They underline that the EU is an elite-driven, opaque, and undemocratic entity. Radical left and right-wing populist parties frequently portray Brussels as a technocratic machine that sidelines national parliaments and imposes its policies through coercion or blackmail (Bickerton & Accetti, 2021). For instance, right-wing populist parties like the Lega and Fidesz deploy a nationalist version of the democracy frame. Their rhetoric constructs national institutions as the authentic expression of democratic sovereignty, while presenting the EU as an alien imposition (Pech & Scheppele, 2017). Viktor Orbán's government frequently frames EU criticisms of Hungary's constitutional changes as attacks on "national democracy" (Pech & Scheppele, 2017).

Centrist and pro-European parties often acknowledge the democratic limitations of the EU. However, rather than outright rejecting the EU on that basis, they use the discourse of democratic reform. Germany's SPD, for example, has repeatedly emphasized the need to strengthen the European Parliament's role, increase transparency in Council negotiations, and promote more citizen involvement in EU policy-making (Fabbrini, 2016). Similarly, the Dutch D66 has advocated for transnational electoral lists as mechanisms to enhance democratic legitimacy (Fabbrini, 2016). Thus, within this frame, the EU is constructed in three broad ways: as a guardian of liberal democratic values, a site of technocratic dominance over national sovereignty, and a polity in need of democratization and participatory renewal.

2.1.4. Geopolitical Frame

Another salient way in which parties talk about the EU is through the geopolitical frame. In this case, the EU is constructed as a strategic actor on the global stage. Parties use this discourse to position the EU in relation to shifting international power dynamics, crises, and security concerns—including Russia's aggression, migration flows, energy dependency, and relations with China and the United States (Helwig & Sinkkonen, 2022). Mainstream center-right and liberal parties are among the most consistent users of this frame. They often describe the EU as a stabilizing power in a volatile global system, which is capable of promoting peace, diplomacy, and multilateral governance (W. Wagner & Anholt, 2016). Germany's CDU has repeatedly framed the EU as a "peace project" whose strategic unity is essential in responding to Russian aggression in Ukraine (W. Wagner & Anholt, 2016). Similarly, France's Renaissance advances a vision of "European sovereignty" in defense, digital regulation, and industrial strategy, reflecting Emmanuel Macron's broader agenda to make the EU a pole of power in a multipolar world (Fiott, 2020).

Parties on the center-left also invoke the geopolitical frame, albeit with a more normative tone. Social democratic actors like the SPD in Germany or the Spanish PSOE often speak about the EU as a promoter of multilateralism, humanitarian diplomacy, and soft power. In this discourse, the EU is not simply a power-balancer but a value-based actor committed to democratic peace, development cooperation, and rule-of-law promotion abroad (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014; Manners, 2002). This framing is especially prominent in parliamentary debates on EU foreign policy, development aid, and crisis response.

Radical left and populist parties frequently contest the idea that the EU should become a global power. Parties like Podemos and La France Insoumise often describe the EU's foreign policy as subordinated to Western imperialism and American geopolitical interests in particular. In their discourse, the EU's security orientation is criticized for militarization, complicity with NATO, and support for authoritarian regimes through migration control agreements (Holesch et al., 2024). Similarly, radical right parties adopt a geopolitical discourse that is critical of the EU's external engagements, but for different reasons. The Alternative für Deutschland, Lega, and Rassemblement National tend to construct the EU as an overextended, illegitimate actor in foreign affairs (Brack & Startin, 2015). These parties often argue that foreign policy should remain a prerogative of nation-states, and they frame the EU's involvement in global governance—in areas including sanctions, migration compacts, and climate diplomacy—as contrary to national interests (Brack & Startin, 2015). In this narrative, Brussels is not a strategic actor but an ideological and bureaucratic body encroaching on sovereign domains.

Party discourse on the EU as a geopolitical actor is varied, strategic, and deeply contextual. It reflects not only ideological orientations but differing conceptions of security, sovereignty, and global order. Through this frame, parties narrate the EU either as a guarantor of collective strength and principled action or as a dysfunctional or illegitimate actor that undermines national control. The geopolitical frame thus plays a key role in politicizing the EU's external role and shaping public views about what Europe represents on the world stage (Rieker & Giske, 2023).

3. Research Design

To explore how new and established political parties talk about the European Union, we selected 12 countries across Europe: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden. The aim was to offer multiple perspectives across Western and Eastern European political parties and a higher variance in the views of newly-formed parties. We also selected these 12 countries to increase the variation based on their experience with representative democracy and party system formats. We focused on political parties that received over 1% of the votes during national/legislative elections held between 2019 and 2024 (see Supplementary File). Since the majority of the nations in the analysis have explicit electoral thresholds significantly greater than 1%, we used this criteria to exclude parties that are irrelevant to the political system and to include extra-parliamentary parties (Sartori, 1976). We considered as “new” those political parties that were formed a maximum of five years before the elections in each country. For data collection, we used the parties' manifestos for the national elections because they provide a deeper understanding of how the politicians from both new and established parties view the EU.

This study includes a high number of political parties that ran in national/legislative elections in 12 EU member countries. However, there is only a small number of political parties considered new relative to the year of the national elections. An implicit or explicit pillar of the majority of research on new parties in Western Europe has been the social cleavage-based model of party system development (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Sikk, 2011). Many people believe or conclude that the need for new parties is a result of social diversity, changes in a nation's values or society, and/or the emergence of new issues that are not well represented by the parties already in power (Harmel & Robertson, 1985; Hauss & Rayside, 1978; Hug, 1996, 2001; H. Kitschelt, 1995; H. P. Kitschelt, 1988).

In selecting the data, we used sentences as the main unit of analysis. These sentences were selected using a dictionary that refers to the EU and includes the following keywords: Europe, European Union, and EU, which were translated into the national languages of each country selected. To ensure that the correct sentences were selected, we asked political science researchers from each country to verify the data and the party manifestos. The data collected was then analyzed using deductive thematic analysis following the four thematic frames identified in the literature (see previous section): economy, sovereignty and identity, democracy and normative approach, and geopolitics. We employed deductive thematic analysis because it allows for a deeper understanding of the discourses of political parties within the electoral manifestos, starting from a general thematic approach identified in the literature (V. Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). After selecting the sentences that contained one of the keywords from the dictionary, we grouped them into the four main themes using codes that fall under those categories.

Table 1. Example for deductive thematic analysis.

Theme	Code	Sentence
<i>Economy</i>	Resources; economic growth	The extraordinary resources made available by the European Union under the Next Generation EU are aimed at enhancing Italy's ability to withstand crises and resume a sustainable economic growth path over time, capable of generating good jobs over five years.

4. Discourses About the EU

The political parties selected for the analysis are scattered on the left-right spectrum, with substantial variance of ideologies among the new and established parties, from green parties (Groen in Belgium) to radical right parties (Alliance for the Union of Romanians in Romania), as shown in the Supplementary File. In general, the political parties discuss economic issues in relation to the EU in several ways. For example, some refer to the ways in which each member state can contribute to the EU, while others point out how the EU could help each country based on its needs. The newer political parties present a dual point of view on the economics of the EU. Some of them criticize the EU for not keeping up with the budgetary plans made at the supranational level: "As a committed and confident global player, the EU must honor its financial commitments to the EU budget" (Volt Portugal, 2022) or for not allocating sufficient funds to all member states: "The relaxation of state aid rules should not ensure that small member states such as Belgium are trumped in the European Union by large member states with larger portfolios" (Vooruit, 2024). Meanwhile, other parties praise the efforts of the EU in helping each country using various financial tools: "The extraordinary resources made available by the European Union under the Next Generation EU are aimed at enhancing Italy's ability to withstand crises and resume a sustainable economic growth path over time capable of generating good jobs over five years" (+Europa, 2022).

The more established the political parties selected for the study view are, the more they see the economic aspects of the EU in a more negative way, arguing that there is still a need for improvement regarding budgets and financial aid: "The EU's long-term budget (the Multiannual Financial Framework or MFF) needs to be fundamentally rethought" (CD&V, 2024), and: "We advocate an 'EU budget' that focuses on the major challenges of our time, such as our dependence on autocratic superpowers, climate change, new technologies and the changing demographics on our continent" (D66, 2023). Some parties have proposed ideas in their manifestos on how to improve the EU budget: "In the long term, it could be envisaged to finance the European Union budget by means of a European corporation tax, which would also make it

possible to move towards a harmonization of the tax systems of the various Member States” (Ecolo, 2024), and: “The prosperity of the EU depends on the proper functioning of the internal market” (CD&V, 2024). Similarly, some parties appreciate the efforts made by the EU as a supranational institution to provide tools for its member states: “The European Union has responded appropriately and with solidarity to the coronavirus crisis with the ‘Next Generation EU’ recovery instrument in conjunction with the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021 to 2027” (CDU & CSU, 2021).

Most of the political parties analyzed here do not promote the idea that their respective countries would function better outside the EU in their electoral manifestos. However, some point out that the EU is at risk of diverging from its initial path as a supranational institution that functions based on its countries’ needs. Out of the newer political parties, only one expressed clear ideas about the impact that the EU was having on the country, mentioning that the institution represents the future and the interconnectivity between nations:

We see the European Union as part of our identity and future, and recognizing the interdependence of the world in which we live, we look to the deepening of the European project and the construction of a European federation as the way to solve the great challenges that we face. (Volt Portugal, 2022)

Among the more established parties, the discussion follows the lines of the EU as providing a common identity across member states. However, extremist parties still follow anti-EU discourses, mentioning that the supranational institution affects their countries on multiple levels, for example: “The European Union is derailing into a technocratic EU superstate that subjugates member states” (Vlaams Belang, 2024), and: “The creeping transformation of the European Union into an EU central state, which has been going on for 30 years, has never been wanted or democratically legitimized by the European people” (AfD, 2021). On the other hand, multiple parties perceive the EU as an institution designed to strengthen their country’s position in worldwide politics and to create a sense of belonging among European citizens: “The European Union (EU) has shaped the lives of millions of people, opened up new opportunities and freedoms and made the immeasurable value of cultural diversity for our societies tangible for many” (SPD, 2021). This is well summarized by MR (2024):

For the MR, the European Union is not a project disconnected from its citizens, or an international structure focused on economic and commercial development, but a real project for society, born of the unprecedented will of countries which, after tearing each other apart for centuries, have decided to work together and open up their borders.

Overall, the positive remarks made by political parties in their electoral manifestos outnumber the negative examples provided by the extremist parties within the EU.

In terms of democratic aspects, the newly formed political parties and established parties discuss the EU in different terms. The new parties often call for improvements at the EU level when it comes to democracy and transparency, but they rarely specify how these improvements should be implemented: “The aim of our European policy is a European Union that is close to its citizens, democratic and transparent for everyone” (DieBasis, 2021), and: “Volt wants the EU to become more transparent and clearer for everyone, and not just for large multinationals” (Volt Netherlands, 2023). On the other hand, the established parties included in the study call not only for a democratic EU, but also for a union that applies democratic processes and involves

its citizens in direct decision-making: “In order to strengthen proximity to the citizens in Europe, we also want to expand democracy within the EU institutions and are in favor of the direct election of the EU Commission President” (Die Volkspartei, 2019), and: “Within the European Union, the decision-making power must lie with the citizens and workers must be protected from social dumping” (PVDA, 2024).

There is a consensus in terms of normative framing across the new and established parties alike. Most of the discussions revolve around foreign policy, agricultural policies, migration and asylum seekers, and climate; for example: “The EU should strengthen its legal migration channels through visa programs, scholarships and work permits to avoid repatriation agreements, which will only be fulfilled if the EU provides additional funding for development in the countries of origin” (Volt Portugal, 2022), and: “To defend our interests and promote our values worldwide, Belgium is obviously stronger if it is supported by the European Union. The European Union therefore remains the main lever of our foreign policy” (CD&V, 2024).

Another topic that is discussed in the electoral manifestos is security, not only as a policy but also as a purpose for the EU in general, and for each member state in particular: “The EU and its member states must take on more foreign and security policy responsibility themselves” (Die Grunen, 2021), and: “In addition, our country—and by extension the entire European Union—has counted too long on China for cheap production, on Russia for cheap energy and on the United States for our security” (Vooruit, 2024). This observation about the salience of security in the party manifestos confirms earlier findings on how relevant the element of security, mainly along personal lines, is in people’s decisions to support or oppose the EU (Gherghina et al., 2025).

The idea of geopolitics is not touched upon by a high number of parties or to a great extent, but in the few instances in which it is present, the political parties tend to present a general understanding. For example, a new coalition formed in Poland discusses the idea that the EU has helped in bridging the gap between Central and Eastern and Western Europe: “Membership in the EU has created new political, economic and social opportunities for our country, which we use to reduce the distance separating us from the most developed countries of the West” (Koalicja, 2022), and: “The European Union supports Eastern Partnership countries in making their governance more democratic, fighting corruption and human rights violations, and respecting civil rights” (D66, 2023).

5. Conclusions

This article has aimed to outline the variations in discourses about the EU of new and established political parties. The analysis relied on 101 party manifestos from 12 EU countries. Our analysis shows that in the recent national legislative elections, the discourse shifted from anti-EU to a less critical position among many new and established parties. The only frame in which ideology has a clear impact, especially on anti-EU arguments, is that of sovereignty and identity. We noticed that parties positioned on the radical right spectrum are inclined to criticize the EU for its expansionist ideals and for promoting the following of rules.

The literature showed how new radical right political parties express higher dissatisfaction with the EU, not only at the discourse level, but also within their electoral manifestos. However, our results show that there is not much difference between new and established political parties, each group having a similar share of parties that talk about the EU in critical moments, such as before national/legislative elections. The discourses among

new and established political parties in general are highly convergent both in terms of positive and negative remarks. Returning to the research question, there are small differences between the new and established parties on topics such as economics and democracy. These findings confirm those of previous studies showing little difference between the established and new parties on issues related to alternative models of democracy (Gherghina & Mitru, 2025).

We find that the new political parties do not particularly rely on anti-EU sentiments, but they tend to adopt a neutral or complex rhetoric. Even the populist ones are closer to a pluralist approach (Yates, 2024) than to narrow rhetoric about the EU. Also, we have noticed that the differences reported by earlier research between the discourses of new and established political parties have softened. The most often approached themes by new political parties are economics and normativity. Often, these political parties either praise what has already been done or call in general terms for a greater involvement at the EU level. At the same time, established political parties have more complex discourses which fall under three main categories: economic, identity, and normative. In most cases, these parties are more critical regarding avenues of improvement compared to the new parties. Apart from calling for greater involvement, these parties also propose solutions and certain tools that could lead to a better-functioning EU. We have noticed further that the main difference between the two types of political parties is the depth of their discussions about the EU, showing that the age of the party contributes to how ideas are expressed within electoral manifestos.

The main limitations of this study relate to the limited number of countries included. In the EU, there are many other political parties that were not included in this study, which are more vocal when they discuss issues regarding the EU. Another limitation refers to the number of elections included. In this article, we analyzed a single set of national elections, which offers a complex perspective for the year in which the election took place in each country. However, a more in-depth study could be done to show the variation of EU attitudes within each political party, starting closer to its formation up until the most recent elections.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings are available from the corresponding author on request.

Supplementary Material

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

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