

Multidimensional Representation in the EU Multilevel Polity: The Role of Congruence in Vote-Switching

Roula Nezi  and Zoe Lefkofridi 

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Surrey, UK
Department of Political Science, University of Salzburg, Austria

Correspondence: Roula Nezi (s.nezi@surrey.ac.uk)

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Abstract

Though many Europeans change party choice between national and European Parliament elections, the representational logic underlying this behaviour remains poorly understood. While second-order election theory attributes cross-arena volatility to institutional asymmetries, it cannot explain why switching follows systematic ideological and EU issue-based patterns, or why it increasingly favours Eurosceptic parties. We argue that cross-arena vote switching operates as a mechanism of representational adjustment in multilevel polities. When parties politicize Europe, they make latent disagreements between citizens and their national parties visible, enabling voters to recalibrate representation across electoral arenas. Using harmonized data from the 2024 European Election Study and Chapel Hill Expert Survey covering 25 democracies, we identify three key findings: First, left-right incongruence remains the dominant driver of switching overall, confirming core second-order predictions. Second, EU incongruence becomes influential when parties emphasize Europe in their agendas. Third, this conditional EU effect systematically benefits Eurosceptic parties: when Europe becomes salient, EU-incongruent voters defect toward anti-integration alternatives. These findings reveal that European elections have become arenas of representational choice where citizens strategically adjust alignment across levels of governance and issue dimensions. Vote switching is a corrective response to party-voter incongruence, activated when politicisation makes this mismatch salient with significant implications for democratic legitimacy and the future of European integration.

Keywords

European Parliament elections; Euroscepticism; issue salience; multilevel representation; party competition; politicisation; representational alignment; second-order elections; vote switching

1. Introduction

In the EU's split-level democracy, where representation operates through multiple levels (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2014; Lord, 2004; Schmidt, 2009), many Europeans change party allegiance across electoral arenas. Against the backdrop of increasing electoral volatility across Europe (Cohen et al., 2024; Dassonneville, 2023), the magnitude of cross-arena switching in the EU (Bakker et al., 2018; Carrubba & Timpone, 2005) raises questions about the meaning of representation in the multilevel polity: Why do EU citizens support different parties in national and European parliamentary elections, and why does this electoral behaviour systematically favour Eurosceptic parties?

The second-order election (SOE) model (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) remains the dominant explanation for differences between national and European Parliament (EP) elections (i.e., lower turnout, incumbent party losses, and gains by smaller and opposition parties). The theory attributes differences between national and EP elections to institutional asymmetries, lower stakes, and the absence of government formation, but it struggles to account for why switching follows systematic ideological and EU issue-based patterns (Hobolt & Spoon, 2012). While the SOE model captures aggregate cross-arena volatility, it overlooks how voters in multilevel settings respond when their policy preferences diverge from their parties' positions across multiple issue dimensions—a situation that often produces cross-pressures that pull voters in opposing directions.

We address this gap by focusing on the role of policy congruence—the alignment between voters' preferences and their parties' positions as a mechanism linking individual-level attitudes to cross-arena electoral behaviour. Given that EP elections remain nationally organized (Lefkofridi, 2020; Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2014), we examine EU voters' congruence with national parties on two major dimensions of politics in EP: the left-right spectrum and the pro-anti-EU integration dimension (e.g., Hix & Lord, 1997; McElroy & Benoit, 2007). These dimensions capture distinct but intersecting dimensions of political conflict: while the left-right axis structures socioeconomic preferences, the European integration is part of a cultural-transnational divide (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2008) that can reinforce or contradict them. This multidimensional structure allows us to examine: (a) how ideological and European incongruence shape the likelihood of switching across electoral arenas; (b) how cross-pressured voters—those aligned with their party on one dimension but misaligned on the other—resolve these competing alignments when choosing between national and European elections; and (c) which parties ultimately benefit from vote switching. Our study addresses two central questions: First, under what conditions does incongruence on the EU dimension drive cross-arena switching? Second, which parties benefit from EU-based switching, and why?

In pursuit of these questions, we contribute to the literature in important ways: Theoretically, we integrate insights from SOE theory, politicization research, and issue-voting scholarship. Our approach incorporates the essential insights of SOE theory—institutional context shapes voter incentives and left-right incongruence remains the primary driver of switching—but acknowledges the increasing EU politicisation in domestic and European arenas (Braun & Grande, 2021; Costa Lobo, 2023) and evidence of cross-pressures across issue dimensions (Bakker et al., 2018; Hong, 2015). Our core argument is that cross-arena switching operates as a mechanism of representational adjustment in multilevel polities. When parties politicise Europe, they make latent disagreements between citizens and their national parties visible, providing

informational cues that enable voters to reassess how well they are represented. Voters, who are misaligned with their party on the integration dimension, use EP elections to recalibrate their representation by supporting Eurosceptic parties. Rather than treating the left-right and the European integration dimensions as competing, we demonstrate how they operate hierarchically: the primary dimension (left-right spectrum) dominates overall switching, but the secondary dimension (European integration) becomes equally influential under specific conditions. By strengthening the link between SOE, politicisation research (Hutter et al., 2016), and issue-voting theory (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; de Vries, 2007), we conceptualise cross-arena switching as the behavioural mechanism connecting elite strategies to voter realignment.

Methodologically, we link individual-level incongruence to party-level EU politicisation, measured as salience and polarization, using harmonised data from the 2024 European Election Study (IIES; Popa et al., 2024) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Rovny et al., 2024), covering 25 European democracies.

Empirically, we demonstrate three key patterns: First, left-right incongruence remains the dominant driver of switching overall, confirming core SOE predictions. Second, European integration (EU) incongruence becomes influential when parties emphasize Europe in their agendas. Third, this conditional EU effect systematically benefits Eurosceptic parties: when Europe becomes salient in party competition, EU-incongruent voters are significantly more likely to defect toward anti-integration options, while left-right incongruence continues to explain switching among non-Eurosceptic voters. Notably, system-level polarisation has no comparable effect. It is party-level EU salience, not their positional dispersion on the EU dimension, that matters for EU-driven vote-switching. Taken together, these findings reveal that European elections have become arenas of representational choice in multilevel polities. Cross-arena switching functions as a mechanism through which citizens adjust representation across levels of governance and issue dimensions, reflecting adaptation to a politicised multilevel polity. This article reconceptualises cross-arena vote switching as a systematic response to gaps in political representation, rather than as protest behaviour or electoral noise. It shows that disagreement over Europe affects vote choice only when parties themselves make Europe salient, thereby explaining when EU preferences translate into switching between national and European elections. By linking party-level issue emphasis to individual vote switching, the study explains why EU-based switching is directional—benefiting Eurosceptic parties—and clarifies how accountability operates across levels in the EU's multilevel democracy.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the theoretical argument that left-right incongruence remains the primary driver of switching, but also that politicisation transforms cross-arena switching into an asymmetric process of representational adjustment that favours Eurosceptic parties. The subsequent sections describe the data and empirical strategy, present the main results, and discuss their implications for representation in multilevel democracy.

2. Multidimensional Representation in Multilevel Polities

The SOE model, developed by Reif and Schmitt (1980), remains the dominant theoretical framework for understanding electoral behaviour in EP elections. This theory posits that EP elections are perceived as less important than—and even subordinate to—national contests because they do not result in government formation. Put simply, there is “less at stake” in EP elections, which leads to lower voter turnout and voters’ switching allegiances between national and EP elections from government towards small opposition parties.

As Marsh (2007) explains, the SOE model views electoral change and stability as primarily driven by first-order concerns, such as left-right ideological preferences, to which we now turn.

2.1. The Enduring Relevance of the Left-Right Dimension

The left-right dimension, rooted in class conflict and economic redistribution, has structured European politics for over a century (Kitschelt, 1994; Lipset, 1960) and continues to serve as the most deeply rooted dimension of political conflict in Western Europe, organising party competition and voter choice across most national contexts. The “less at stake” logic suggests that EP elections provide voters with an opportunity to express their left-right preferences more freely than in national elections. In national elections, strategic constraints such as “wasted votes” vis-à-vis government formation may compel voters to prioritise pragmatic considerations (“voting with the head”). In contrast, EP elections allow voters to “vote with the heart” on the left-right dimension, supporting parties that better match their ideological preferences without fear of undermining government stability or wasting their vote on parties with no chance of government formation. Indeed, evidence of “correct” voting in European elections concerns mainly the left-right dimension (Rosema & de Vries, 2011). We thus hypothesise:

H1. Left-right incongruence between voters and their national party choice is the primary driver of cross-arena vote-switching.

Voters, including switchers, can meaningfully express left-right preferences in EP elections. Given that EP routinely legislates on traditional left-right issues, including economic governance, social policy, migration, and budgetary matters (Hix et al., 2007; McElroy & Benoit, 2007), the prevalence of left-right dimension does not come at the expense of voters’ representation in the EP.

Though the left-right dimension constitutes the long-standing and stable axis of political competition, contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes European politics as organised around a two-dimensional space defined by socio-economic (left-right) and cultural-transnational, including EU integration divides (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2008). The emergence of this dimension and the increasing contestation of European integration have introduced new complexities into voter decision-making. However, these dimensions do not operate symmetrically. The EU integration dimension, while increasingly salient over the past two decades, remains more variable across countries and time periods, and is sometimes subsumed under broader cultural conflicts over immigration and national sovereignty (Bornschier, 2010).

2.2. Cross-Pressures Between Dimensions of Representation

In a multidimensional space, many voters are only partially represented by any single party. When voters in national elections are “cross-pressured” between parties that can express their preferences on different issue dimensions (Lefkofridi et al., 2014), they resolve this dilemma by choosing the party that is most congruent on the dimension that matters most to them. In the EU, when voters fail to achieve multidimensional congruence through a single party, they can engage in vote-switching across arenas (Bakker et al., 2018) and resolve tensions by expressing different preferences in different arenas (Carrubba & Timpone, 2005).

Multilevel polities enable cross-pressure resolution through strategic switching. Voters can optimise their overall representation by supporting different parties across electoral arenas, prioritising different issue dimensions at different levels. For example, consider a voter who supports economic redistribution (left-wing on the left-right dimension) and national sovereignty (Eurosceptic on the EU integration dimension). In a single-arena system, this voter faces a constrained choice between supporting a pro-EU mainstream left-wing party with coalition potential and a fringe anti-EU left-wing party. However, in the multilevel EU system, the voter can support the social democratic party nationally (securing left-wing representation and influencing government formation) while voting for a Eurosceptic party in EP elections. Vote-switching thus becomes a mechanism for resolving cross-pressures across levels of governance. This mechanism transforms cross-arena switching from a sign of instability into a sophisticated form of representational adjustment. We thus hypothesise:

H2. Voters experiencing cross-pressures—incongruent with their national party on one dimension but not the other—will exhibit higher switching probabilities than fully congruent voters.

The relevance of the European integration dimension varies across countries and time periods. Recent scholarship has documented the growing importance of EU attitudes in structuring political competition, particularly following the Maastricht Treaty and subsequent integration crises (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Hutter et al., 2016; Kriesi et al., 2012). However, the key to understanding when EU attitudes influence electoral behaviour lies in van der Eijk and Franklin's (2004) concept of the "sleeping giant" of European public opinion. They argue that voters' orientations toward the EU and its policies represent a powerful but largely dormant force in European politics. As they note: "the European issue is now 'ripe for politicization,'" and it is "only a matter of time before policy entrepreneurs...seize the opportunity...to differentiate themselves from other parties in EU terms" (van der Eijk & Franklin, 2004, p. 33).

This insight connects to broader theories of issue activation and political information. Research on issue voting has consistently shown that voters need both attitudes and information to translate preferences into electoral behaviour (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Zaller, 1992). In the EU context, while many voters hold attitudes toward European integration, these attitudes may not influence vote choice unless voters receive sufficient information about party positions and the relevance of EU issues to electoral decisions (de Vries, 2007; de Vries et al., 2011). As Mair (2007) argued, the "sleeping giant" of EU attitudes was not dormant by nature but rather "sedated" through the purposeful depoliticization of EU issues by mainstream parties. This strategic depoliticization, aimed at minimising electoral risks, involved limiting public discourse on EU issues to avoid potential electoral costs or coalition instability (Lefkofridi, 2008). However, this depoliticization strategy has become increasingly difficult to sustain, particularly during crises such as the Eurozone crisis, when EU decisions have had direct and visible consequences for national politics (Grande et al., 2019; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019).

2.3. The Politicization of European Integration

EU politicization encompasses two key components: issue salience and polarisation (Grande et al., 2019; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Salience refers to the degree of attention and communication devoted to EU issues, reflecting the availability of information about party positions and the relevance of these issues to voters. Polarisation, on the other hand, measures the degree of positional distance between parties on the EU dimension, reflecting the clarity of choices available to voters.

de Vries (2007, p. 365) highlights the importance of these components, arguing that “the level of EU issue voting is conditional on the degree of EU issue salience among voters and the extent of partisan conflict over Europe.” Further research demonstrates that “EU issue voting in EP elections is more extensive in contexts that provide higher levels of political information on European matters” (de Vries et al., 2011, p. 16). When parties emphasise EU issues in their agendas, voters gain the information necessary to recognize incongruence between their EU preferences and their national party choice. The conditional nature of EU issue voting also helps explain why traditional SOE theory has remained largely valid despite the growing importance of EU attitudes. In most contexts, EU issues remain insufficiently salient to activate widespread EU-based switching, leaving left-right ideological expression as the dominant mechanism. Indeed, EU voters face difficulties in locating their national parties accurately on the EU dimension (Kritzinger & McElroy, 2012). However, when EU salience increases, a secondary layer of issue-based switching emerges that operates alongside but does not replace the primary left-right mechanism. Under conditions of high EU salience, the “sleeping giant” of EU attitudes (van der Eijk & Franklin, 2004) can be awakened, enabling voters to assess their degree of agreement with party positions on the EU dimension. Carrieri et al. (2025) demonstrate that when parties emphasize EU issues, voters are mobilised on EU positions, and EU proximity to parties significantly predicts party support. Crucially, this positional effect is strengthened when parties themselves assign high salience to EU issues, suggesting that party-level EU emphasis activates voter responsiveness to EU congruence. We understand party-level EU salience as providing voters with information about their representational gaps on the EU dimension, activating dormant EU attitudes. Hence, we hypothesise:

H3a: EU incongruence drives cross-arena switching when EU issues are salient in the agendas of the parties’ voters supported in national elections.

Furthermore, classical spatial voting theory predicts that voters can more easily identify their preferred party when parties offer clearly differentiated positions (Downs, 1957; Enelow & Hinich, 1984). Applied to the EU dimension, this logic suggests that EU incongruence should have a stronger effect on vote-switching when parties are more polarised on EU issues, as greater positional distance provides voters with clearer representational alternatives. When the party system offers sharply differentiated EU positions, voters should find it easier to identify alternatives that better match their preferences. The presence of hard Eurosceptic parties in the party system appears to activate EU issue voting more broadly. Torcal and Rodon (2021) find that EU positional distance matters in contexts where hard Eurosceptic parties are available as clear alternatives. This suggests that supply-side factors condition the translation of EU incongruence into directional switching: when parties are polarised and credible Eurosceptic options exist, voters can more easily act on their EU preferences. Hence:

H3b: EU polarisation moderates the effect of EU incongruence on switching.

That said, for dormant dimensions like EU integration, information availability (salience) may matter more than choice clarity (polarisation). Voters must first recognise where parties stand and whether the issue matters to them before positional distance becomes meaningful for vote choice. When voters’ own party makes EU issues salient, it provides direct information about representational gaps that voters can then act upon in EP elections. Without sufficient EU salience, voters may lack the information needed to appreciate positional differences between parties, rendering polarization effects muted or non-existent.

The literature on politicisation and party competition highlights that European integration has long been characterised by asymmetric contestation. Mainstream parties, both centre-left and centre-right, have historically pursued strategies of strategic depoliticisation to avoid electoral costs associated with intra-party divisions over Europe (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Kriesi et al., 2012; Lefkofridi, 2008; Mair, 2007). Because these parties have typically supported further integration, this has created systematic representational gaps for voters with more Eurosceptic preferences. As Beaudonnet and Gomez (2024) argue, politicisation transforms these gaps into opportunities for Eurosceptic parties, which can present their positions on equal footing with other parties and claim the role of issue opposition to the pro-EU mainstream. The institutional setting of EP elections further amplifies this asymmetry. As Lefkofridi (2020) notes, where voters remain territorially bound to national parties and transnational organisations face high barriers, the scope for left-right competition on transnational policy is limited, prompting parties to frame contestation along the pro-anti-EU dimension instead. In this context, Eurosceptic parties are structurally advantaged, particularly under conditions of politicisation at the national level that makes Europe more visible in the EP electoral arena.

Building on this logic, we examine the directional implications of EU incongruence for party choice—that is, which types of parties benefit from EU-based cross-arena switching. Evidence from Carrieri et al. (2025) and Petrúšek et al. (2025) supports this expectation: EU positional proximity predicts support for Eurosceptic parties, and this relationship strengthens when individual or party-level salience of Europe is high. By contrast, for switchers moving toward non-Eurosceptic alternatives, left-right incongruence should be more decisive, as these voters seek improved ideological representation within the pro-EU mainstream. In sum, the EU dimension primarily structures movement toward Eurosceptic parties, whereas the left-right axis continues to organise competition among other pro-integration parties (Kriesi et al., 2012; de Vries & Hobolt, 2020):

H4a: EU incongruence should be a strong predictor of switching toward Eurosceptic parties.

H4b: This directional advantage should be particularly pronounced when EU salience increases in the agendas of the parties' voters supported nationally, making representational gaps more visible and actionable.

3. Case Selection, Methodology, and Data

The mechanism we theorise should operate most strongly where EU issues are salient and party systems include viable Eurosceptic alternatives offering clear representational choices. The 2024 EP election provides such a context: years of EU politicisation driven by Brexit, migration, the Covid-19 pandemic, and debates over fiscal integration have kept Europe at the forefront of political contestation (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2018). The war in Ukraine has further heightened attention to EU foreign, defence, and energy policy, while migration and border security remain divisive. This ongoing crisis environment sustains high levels of EU salience and provides the informational context necessary to activate previously dormant attitudes. At the same time, it has deepened party polarisation over Europe, creating fertile conditions for the activation of these attitudes. The consolidation of Eurosceptic parties across Europe, and their growing credibility as governing and opposition forces, adds to these supply-side conditions that make EU-based switching increasingly likely.

For our analysis, we combine individual-level behavioural data from the EES with party-level contextual indicators from the CHES, which provides information on party positions and issue salience across dimensions of competition to estimate a multilevel model of vote switching across arenas. Our dataset includes roughly 24,000 voters who supported around 180 political parties in the EP elections and the preceding national elections across 23 EU member states. The analysis includes Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. Luxembourg is excluded due to insufficient expert responses in the latest CHES wave, and Malta is excluded because only two parties were coded, making the measurement of vote switching unrepresentative of the country's party system. We define vote switching as a change in vote choice from party k in the preceding national election to a different party in the subsequent European election. Consequently, our sample includes all respondents who cast a valid vote in both national and European elections.

Vote switching is measured using two survey questions asking respondents which party they voted for in the most recent national and European elections, respectively. The dependent variable distinguishes between voters who maintained the same partisan choice across arenas and those who shifted their support between the national and European contests. It is coded as one (1) if a respondent voted for different parties in the two elections, indicating a switch, and zero (0) if the same party was chosen in both contests. Accordingly, voters are classified as *switchers* or *non-switchers*. A detailed overview of vote-switching rates by country is provided in the Supplementary File. Across countries, there is substantial variation in the proportion of switchers. On average, around 40% of respondents in our sample changed their vote between the two elections. For instance, in France, approximately 66% of voters who participated in both elections split their vote, while in Belgium, only 16.5% did so.

To test our final hypothesis—the determinants of switching towards Eurosceptic parties—we use the same dependent variable, recoded to distinguish between voters who switched to a Eurosceptic party and those who either remained loyal or switched to a non-Eurosceptic alternative. The classification of parties as Eurosceptic or not follows expert sources such as the latest wave of the PopuList expert survey published in 2023 (Zaslove et al., 2025).

We construct indicators of representational distance to capture how far respondents' self-placement diverges from their party's position on each issue dimension. We include two variables capturing the ideological distance between a voter's self-placement and the position of the party they supported in the most recent national election. Specifically, we calculate the absolute distance between the respondent's placement and their party's mean expert placement on the left-right and European integration dimensions—the two most salient axes of political competition in European party systems (Reiljan et al., 2019). Both measures are based on 11-point scales. Following the approach of Hobolt and Spoon (2012), Golder and Stramski (2010), and related proximity-voting research, we use absolute distances to capture the degree of (in)congruence between voters and parties, while recognising the well-documented limitations of expert surveys for studying voter-party congruence (Golder & Stramski, 2010). This allows us to evaluate how far voters perceive themselves to be from their party, and to test whether greater perceptual gaps increase the likelihood of switching in subsequent European elections. Smaller distances indicate higher voter-party congruence. Our individual-level models estimate the effect of congruence on vote switching.

To assess how the politicisation of Europe affects vote switching, we include a variable derived from CHES measuring the importance of the EU issue for the party each respondent supported in the most recent national election. This variable captures the extent to which parties emphasised European integration in their national campaigns, allowing us to test whether voters of parties with high *EU salience* differ in their propensity to switch vote. The second variable, *EU polarisation*, measures the perceived structure of party competition on European integration at the country level. For each country, we compute the standard deviation of respondents' placements of parties on the EU integration scale, following Hobolt and Spoon (2012) and de Vries and Hobolt (2020). This measure captures the degree of perceived dispersion in party positions. Higher values indicate greater dispersion of party positions—signalling more conflictual debate over Europe—while lower values denote limited contestation. This measure allows us to evaluate whether higher levels of polarisation increase the likelihood of reconsidering vote choice between arenas.

To model conflicting preferences across the left-right and European integration dimensions, we construct a cross-pressure variable based on congruence with one's national party on both dimensions. For each respondent, the absolute distance between their self-placement and their party's perceived placement is dichotomised as congruent (1) or incongruent (0), depending on whether it is below or above the country-specific mean incongruence score. Combining these two indicators yields a fourfold typology: (a) incongruent only on the EU dimension ($\text{EU} = 0$, left-right = 1); (b) incongruent only on the left-right dimension ($\text{EU} = 1$, left-right = 0); (c) incongruent on both ($\text{EU} = 0$, left-right = 0); and (d) congruent on both ($\text{EU} = 1$, left-right = 1)—for example, being left-wing but anti-EU. To assess robustness, we replicated the cross-pressure measure using expert evaluations of party positions from the CHES. The results remain substantively unchanged, suggesting that both expert and perception-based indicators capture similar patterns of voter incongruence and switching behaviour. A voter supporting a pro-European left party would be coded as EU-incongruent, while a left-wing and anti-EU voter supporting a Eurosceptic left party would be coded as congruent. This measure captures what Therriault et al. (2011) describes as issue-based cross-pressures situations in which policy preferences across multiple dimensions pull voters in opposing directions. Such voters tend to exhibit weaker partisan attachments and greater attitudinal ambivalence, making them also more likely to switch parties between national and European elections (e.g., de Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Kriesi et al., 2008; van der Eijk & Franklin, 2004). We include several control variables in our models. Starting with partisanship, which is measured dichotomously to distinguish respondents who identify with a political party from those who do not. Following classic theories of party identification (Campbell et al., 1960), we expect partisans to be less likely to switch. We also include a control for political awareness of the European elections, operationalised as an 11-point scale measuring how closely respondents followed the campaign.

Following existing studies, we include the size of the party supported in the last national election, measured as the national vote share of the party supported in the last national election (Hix & Marsh, 2011). In line with the SOE model (van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996), we expect voters to favour larger parties in national elections and smaller ones in European elections. Additionally, we include a dichotomous variable indicating whether respondents approve of the government's record, as well as standard sociodemographic controls for age, gender, and education. Age is treated as continuous; gender is coded 0 for male respondents and 1 for female; and education is a five-category variable based on the age at which respondents completed full-time education. All variables are standardised prior to inclusion in the models. Table A2 of the Supplementary File lists the questions and their exact wording, while Table A3 of the Supplementary File presents summary statistics.

To explain variation in vote switching within and across countries, we estimate multilevel logistic regression models with voters nested within countries. This approach accounts for the hierarchical structure of the data and cross-national variation in voting behaviour.

This specification includes random intercepts at the country level to account for clustering and to capture unobserved heterogeneity in voting behaviour. The random-effects structure allows us to model cross-national differences explicitly while assessing the individual-level determinants of vote switching. The results of these models are presented in the next section.

4. Determinants of Vote Switching Across Electoral Arenas

To test our hypotheses, we estimate a series of models predicting vote switching. The first model examines whether incongruence on the left-right or the European integration dimension drives the likelihood of switching (H1) and assesses the impact of cross-pressures on this behaviour (H2), without yet accounting for any conditional relationships. Table 1 shows the results from our individual-level model of voting behaviour.

Table 1. Issue incongruence and cross-pressures as determinants of vote switching.

	Model 1: Issue incongruence	Model 2: Cross-pressures (perceived)
Intercept	−0.073 (0.184)	−0.491*** (0.126)
Left-right incongruence	0.288*** (0.024)	
EU incongruence	0.099*** (0.024)	
EU-incongruent (vs. consistent)		0.160** (0.056)
Left-right incongruent (vs. consistent)		0.554*** (0.055)
Incongruent on both (vs. consistent)		0.630*** (0.059)
Attention to EU elections	0.017 (0.029)	−0.000 (0.025)
Government disapproval	0.148*** (0.027)	0.056** (0.021)
Partisan identifier (1 = yes)	−0.701*** (0.060)	−0.766*** (0.051)
Election order: national after EP	0.366 (0.386)	0.515* (0.229)
Age	−0.134*** (0.024)	−0.108*** (0.021)
Gender (female)	−0.018 (0.048)	−0.028 (0.042)
Education	0.004 (0.024)	0.039 (0.021)
N (observations)	10,250	11,845
Groups: Parties	135	
Groups: Countries	25	25

Notes: ⁺ $p < 0.1$, ^{*} $p < 0.05$, ^{**} $p < 0.01$, ^{***} $p < 0.001$, standard errors in parentheses, models estimated using multilevel logistic regression with random intercepts for country and party.

The analysis shows that vote switching between arenas is strongly associated with ideological and European incongruence between voters and their parties. We find strong support for our hypotheses: vote switching between national and European elections is strongly driven by incongruence and further amplified by cross-pressures between voters' ideological and European orientations relative to their party's positions.

Cross-pressures signifying representational tensions between the two arenas emerge when voters are aligned with their party on one issue dimension but misaligned on the other, facing conflicting cues about which concerns—ideological or European—to prioritise. The greater the distance between voters and their party on the left-right and European integration dimensions, the higher their likelihood of switching. This effect is particularly pronounced for ideological incongruence with the party voters supported at the national elections, while disagreement on the EU dimension exerts a smaller yet significant influence. These findings confirm that when voters perceive competing alignments with their party across issue dimensions, they are more likely to reconsider their partisan choice in the subsequent European contest.

However, the effect of incongruence is not uniform across voters. Consistent with H2, individuals experiencing cross-pressures in their relationship with the party they supported at the national elections—those who are congruent with their party on one issue dimension but incongruent on the other—are significantly more likely to switch their vote. As expected, the probability of switching is highest among voters incongruent on both dimensions, followed by those misaligned on the left-right axis alone, and only marginally higher among those misaligned solely on the EU dimension. This pattern demonstrates that while issue incongruence drives switching, it is the presence of multidimensional cross-pressures—reflecting competing alignments across ideological and European orientations—that acts as a corrective mechanism in multilevel representation.

Figure 1 illustrates how patterns of voter–party alignment shapes the probability of switching between national and European elections. Voters who are closely aligned with their party on both the left-right and European integration dimensions are the least likely to switch, with an estimated probability of around 25%. In contrast, those who diverge from their party on both dimensions—experiencing sustained tension across ideological and European issues—exhibit the highest probability of switching, exceeding 40%. Voters who are cross-pressured, meaning they agree with their party on one dimension but not the other or in both dimensions, fall between these two extremes. More precisely, those incongruent only on the EU dimension behave similarly to consistent voters, suggesting that disagreement over European integration alone exerts a limited effect. By contrast, incongruence on the left-right dimension (i.e., LR-incongruent) substantially increases switching, and when combined with EU incongruence, the effect becomes pronounced. Together,

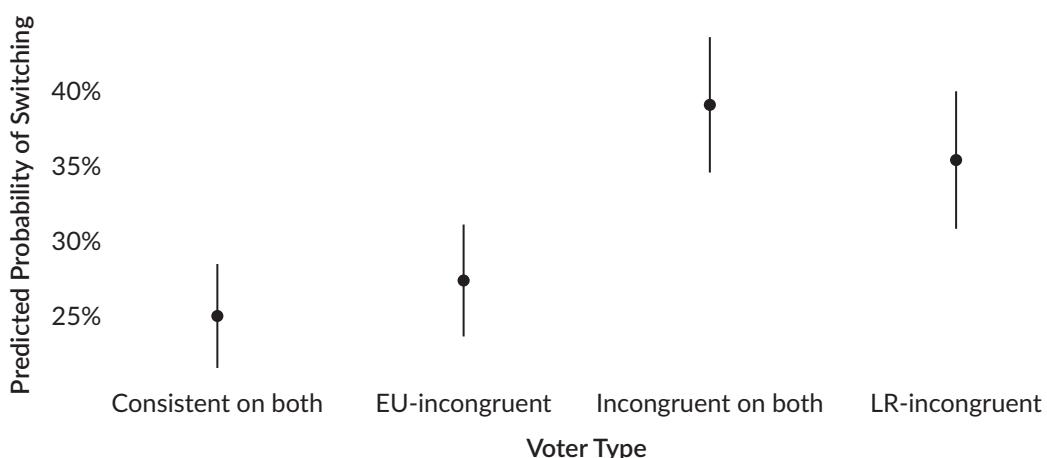


Figure 1. Predicted probability of vote switching by cross-pressure type. Notes: Predicted probabilities are derived from Model 2 (cross-pressures) with 95% confidence intervals; estimates are calculated holding all other covariates at their means.

these patterns reveal that vote switching in Europe reflects the degree of tension between voters' ideological and European orientations vis-à-vis their party, rather than a simple protest reaction.

Control variables perform largely as expected. Older voters and those with partisan attachments and who disapprove of the performance of the government are consistently less likely to switch, consistent with the stabilising role of political experience and partisan attachment.

5. The Conditional Effects of EU Salience and Polarisation

This next set of models examines whether the broader politicisation of European integration conditions the relationship between voter-party incongruence and vote switching. If the politicisation of Europe increases its electoral relevance, the effect of incongruence on switching should become stronger as European integration becomes more salient or more polarised within a political system. While the previous models examined the determinants of switching, this next set explores when switching occurs, specifically, under which political contexts incongruence leads voters to change their vote. Table 2 reports the results from our individual-level models of vote switching.

Table 2. Conditional effects of EU salience and perceived polarisation on vote switching.

	Model 3a: EU salience interaction		Model 3b: EU polarisation interaction	
Intercept	–0.074	(0.185)	0.131	(0.222)
Left-right incongruence	0.288***	(0.024)	0.287***	(0.024)
EU incongruence	0.097***	(0.024)	0.068*	(0.033)
Government disapproval	0.148***	(0.027)	0.148***	(0.027)
Partisan identifier (1 = yes)	–0.701***	(0.060)	–0.701***	(0.060)
Attention to the EU elections	0.016	(0.029)	0.017	(0.029)
Age	–0.134***	(0.024)	–0.132***	(0.024)
Gender (female)	–0.019	(0.048)	–0.017	(0.048)
Education	0.003	(0.024)	0.004	(0.024)
EU salience (party level)	–0.029	(0.095)		
EU incongruence × EU salience	0.053*	(0.026)		
Perceived EU polarisation			–0.020 ⁺	(0.012)
EU incongruence × EU polarisation			0.003	(0.002)
N (observations)	10,250		10,250	
Groups: Parties	135		135	
Groups: Countries	25		25	

Notes: ⁺ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; standard errors in parentheses; models estimated using logistic multilevel regression with random intercepts for country and party.

Model 3a introduces an interaction between voter-party incongruence on the EU dimension and the salience that parties assign to the issue of European integration. The results align with expectations: the interaction term is positive and statistically significant. Substantively, this means that the more parties emphasise Europe, the greater the likelihood that disagreement with the party on this issue translates into switching. In contexts where European integration is highly salient, even moderate levels of voter-party disagreement substantially

increase the likelihood of switching between national and European elections. These findings support the idea that politicisation heightens voters' awareness of European issues and makes them more responsive to policy proximity, rather than engaging in second-order behaviour.

The interaction between voter-party incongruence on the EU dimension and party-level salience provides clear evidence that the impact of disagreement depends on how prominently parties emphasise European integration. When parties devote little attention to Europe, incongruence on this issue has a limited effect on vote switching. As parties increase the salience of European integration, however, the electoral cost of disagreement rises markedly. Figure 2 illustrates this conditional relationship: the marginal effect of EU incongruence increases with party level salience and becomes significant in party systems where the European issue is highly politicised—such as in Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden—where average salience scores exceed five. These results support the expectation that issue salience conditions the activation of European preferences in voter behaviour. Incongruence does not exert a uniform influence across contexts; it becomes a determinant of electoral choice only when parties themselves foreground Europe as a salient and contested issue. Figure A1 in the Supplementary File displays the average party-level salience on European integration across EU member states (CHES 2024).

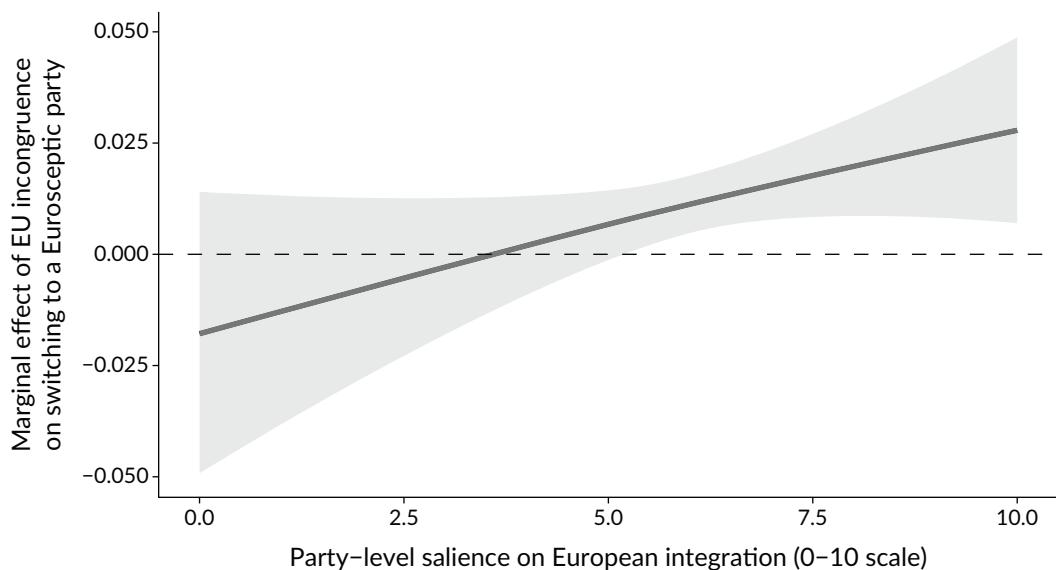


Figure 2. Marginal effect of voter-party incongruence on the EU dimension across levels of party-level salience (Model 3a). Notes: The figure plots the conditional effect of EU incongruence on the probability of vote switching, with shaded areas indicating 95% confidence intervals. The effect strengthens as parties assign greater salience to the issue of European integration, suggesting that incongruence becomes electorally consequential when the European issue is more prominent in party competition.

By contrast, model 3b shows that the moderating effect of system-level polarisation on the EU issue is weaker and not statistically significant. Although the coefficient points in the expected direction—indicating that voters may be somewhat more responsive to incongruence when party systems are more divided over Europe—the effect does not reach statistical significance. This pattern suggests that the activation of European conflict in voting behaviour is driven more by how individual parties emphasise Europe than by overall system-level polarisation. Party-level salience thus provides a clearer and more immediate cognitive cue for voters, whereas system-level polarisation likely remains too abstract or elite-bound to shape individual decision-making directly.

Taken together, these results suggest that the politicisation of Europe matters, but primarily through how parties frame and prioritise the issue. Salience operates as the key mechanism linking elite contestation to voter behaviour: when Europe becomes central to party competition, incongruence on the EU dimension becomes electorally consequential. In contrast, when the issue remains diffuse at the system level, incongruence exerts a weaker pull on voter choices. The findings, therefore, highlight that the micro-foundations of European politicisation lie in voters' relationship with their chosen party rather than in broader patterns of cross-party competition.

6. Direction of Switching: Towards Which Parties Do Voters Move?

Thus far, the analysis has established whether and to what extent varying configurations of cross-pressures influence vote switching between national and European elections. In this section, we turn to the direction of switching to examine where voters go when they change their vote. Specifically, we assess whether voters are more likely to switch towards Eurosceptic parties, thereby contributing to the growing politicisation of European integration across electoral arenas.

The final model (Table 3) examines the determinants of switching towards Eurosceptic parties. The results indicate that ideological and European incongruence both significantly increase the probability of defecting to a Eurosceptic party. Voters who are more distant from their party on the left-right or EU integration dimension are systematically more prone to abandon mainstream competitors in favour of Eurosceptic alternatives. Notably, the coefficient for EU incongruence is almost as large as that for ideological incongruence, signifying that incongruence with one's national level choice on the European dimension constitutes a powerful driver of Eurosceptic realignment.

Table 3. Determinants of switching towards Eurosceptic parties.

Model 4: Switching to Eurosceptic party	
Intercept	-1.771*** (0.204)
Left-right incongruence	0.287*** (0.032)
EU incongruence	0.231*** (0.033)
EU salience (party level)	0.002 (0.106)
EU incongruence × EU salience	0.064 ⁺ (0.037)
Government disapproval	0.302*** (0.039)
Partisan identifier (1 = yes)	-0.437*** (0.086)
Attention to EU elections	0.134** (0.043)
Age	-0.087* (0.036)
Gender (female)	-0.149* (0.070)
Education	-0.025 (0.035)
N (observations)	9,416
Groups: Parties	134
Groups: Countries	25

Notes: ⁺ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, standard errors in parentheses; model estimated using logistic multilevel regression with random intercepts for country and party.

The interaction between EU incongruence and the party-level salience of the European issue reaches marginal significance, suggesting that when European integration is more salient in party competition, incongruence on this dimension exerts an even stronger effect on switching to Eurosceptic parties. In other words, voters appear more responsive to informational cues: their electoral choices take into account levels of incongruence on European integration when the issue is politically visible and contested.

The interaction between EU incongruence and party-level salience also helps explain when voters switch to Eurosceptic parties. As before, the effect of disagreement depends on how prominently parties emphasise Europe. When European integration is not a central issue for the party, incongruence has little impact on whether voters switch to a Eurosceptic alternative. Yet, when parties do put emphasis on Europe, the probability of defection rises sharply. Figure 3 illustrates this relationship: the marginal effect of EU incongruence increases with party salience and becomes statistically significant in politicised systems such as Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden, where average salience levels exceed the point when the interaction term becomes significant. These findings suggest that salient and polarised debates over European integration not only heighten the political relevance of incongruence but also channel voters who are not feeling represented toward Eurosceptic options. Figure A1 in the Supplementary File displays the average party-level salience on European integration across EU member states (CHES 2024).

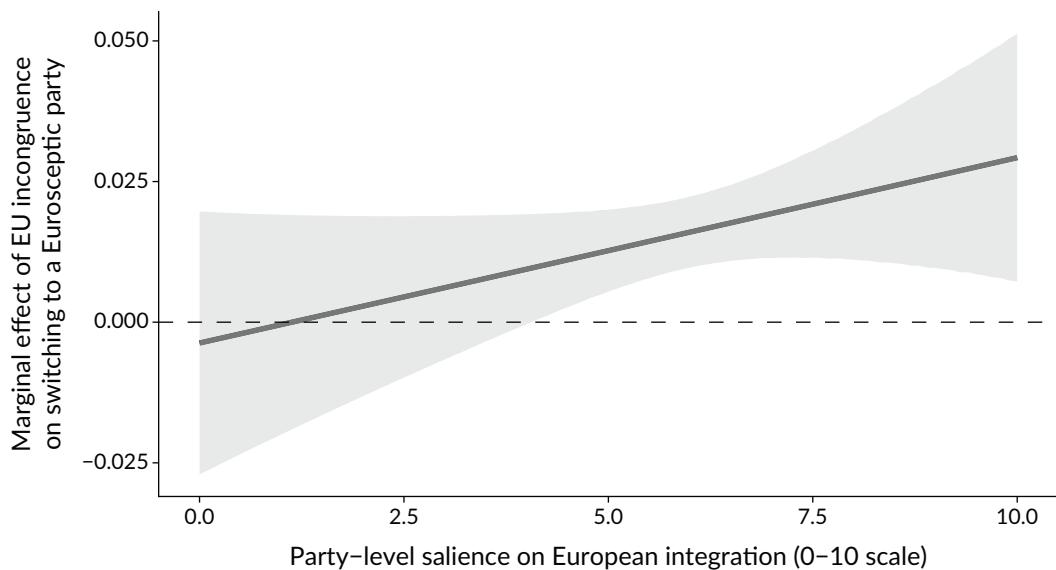


Figure 3. Marginal effect of voter-party incongruence on the EU dimension across levels of party-level salience (Model H4). Notes: The figure plots the conditional effect of EU incongruence on the probability of switching to a Eurosceptic party, with shaded areas indicating 95% confidence intervals. The effect strengthens as party-level salience increases, suggesting that when European integration is more central in party competition, incongruent voters are particularly likely to defect towards Eurosceptic options.

Among control variables, the results reveal that citizens who are older, female, or strongly partisan are less likely to switch towards Eurosceptic parties, whereas those paying closer attention to the European campaign are more likely to do so. Disapproval of the national government substantially reduces the probability of defection, confirming that dissatisfaction with incumbents remains an important motivational channel behind Eurosceptic voting.

Taken together, these findings suggest that switching to Eurosceptic parties is not merely an expression of second-order elections but also a structured response to programmatic incongruence—particularly on the European dimension when the EU issue becomes a salient feature of domestic party competition.

7. Conclusions

Traditionally, electoral volatility has been viewed as a symptom of partisan dealignment and system instability (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). The erosion of party attachments across Europe signals a reconfiguration of conflict: the enduring left-right divide now intersects with the integration–demarcation cleavage (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Mattila & Raunio, 2026). Yet, cross-arena switching between national and EP elections cannot be understood through this lens alone. In the EU's multilevel democracy, where national choices shape transnational representation through European party groups (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2014), switching reveals how voters navigate competing political dimensions. This process does not imply volatility in the conventional sense; it indicates an effort to restore alignment between preferences and representation when dissonance becomes visible. From this perspective, cross-arena vote switching is a corrective response to party-voter incongruence, activated when politicisation makes this mismatch salient.

Our study shows that voters respond to incongruence with their national party by recalibrating their choices, restoring alignment between preferences and representation. Cross-arena switching thus functions as a micro-level mechanism of representational adjustment in a multidimensional political space. We find that both left-right ideological and EU integration incongruence increase the likelihood of switching, whereby the left-right dimension retains primacy in structuring behaviour. However, incongruence on the European dimension becomes consequential when parties politicise the issue. When Europe is salient in party competition, voters gain clearer information about party positions and reassess their attachments accordingly. Conversely, system-level polarisation does not amplify the effect of incongruence. These findings show how politicisation at the elite level conditions the behavioural consequences of incongruence, linking macro-level processes of party competition to micro-level acts of choice.

The direction of switching further illuminates how the European cleavage is crystallising within multilevel representation. Voters who feel misrepresented on the integration dimension are systematically more likely to move towards Eurosceptic parties, whereas ideological disagreement alone rarely triggers such realignment. In this sense, cross-arena switching provides behavioural evidence that politicisation has penetrated mass representation: citizens react to the cues parties supply about Europe, and these reactions reshape electoral linkages between arenas.

Overall, our study contributes to understanding political representation in multilevel polities by demonstrating how voters navigate the EU's split-level structure (Schmidt, 2009). When voters recognize incongruence between their preferences and their national party's positioning on the EU dimension, EP elections provide an opportunity to select alternatives that better align with their views on the future of the EU polity. This interpretation refines SOE theory by showing that vote switching in European elections often reflects voters responding to specific gaps between their preferences and their parties' positions, rather than disengagement or protest. Rather than treating European elections just as "low-stakes contests" that mirror national dynamics, our results suggest that they have also become sites where voters negotiate incongruence between national and supranational representation. Switching is not merely a protesting

behaviour but a corrective act through which citizens reconcile tensions between overlapping dimensions of political conflict. By connecting individual-level incongruence to elite-level politicisation, this study identifies a mechanism linking the behavioural micro-foundations of voter choice to the structural evolution of party systems in a multilevel setting. Future research can use this mechanism to trace how repeated cross-arena switching contributes to the consolidation or decline of specific party families, to test whether politicisation leads to stable realignment rather than short-term volatility, and to assess whether similar dynamics operate in other multilevel political systems beyond the EU. Representation in multilevel polities emerges not as a static alignment but as a dynamic process of adjustment across arenas, shaped by the cues parties send and the conflicts they choose to foreground. The mechanism of congruence restoration through cross-arena switching, however, also poses challenges to the process of European integration itself.

This study advances the literature by showing that cross-arena vote switching can be analysed as a link between individual-level preferences and longer-term changes in party competition, rather than temporary protest. By identifying when EU disagreement translates into vote switching, our findings allow scholars to distinguish short-term volatility from processes of representational adjustment that can accumulate over time. This creates new opportunities for analysing party system change: repeated switching under conditions of politicisation can be traced to the consolidation of Eurosceptic parties, shifts in mainstream party strategies, and the realignment of issue dimensions within party competition. More broadly, the study provides a framework for analysing how voter behaviour in elections that do not produce governments can nonetheless shape representation, accountability, and the evolution of party systems in multilevel democracies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data used in this study are publicly available. Individual-level data come from the 2024 European Election Study (EES) Voter Study. Party-level data are drawn from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). All data sources are cited in the references section.

Supplementary Material

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

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About the Authors

Roula Nezi is a senior lecturer in political science at the University of Surrey. She specialises in public opinion, electoral behaviour, and survey research across Europe. Her research examines how citizens' attitudes shape democratic politics. Her current work, funded by the British Academy, focuses on affective polarisation and cultural-issue divides.

Zoe Lefkofridi is a professor of politics & gender, diversity & equality at the University of Salzburg. She coordinates the Horizon Europe project Push*Back*Lash and leads the package on Representation in the ActEU project. Her work received the Käthe Leichter Prize (2023), the Greek International Women Award (2023), and the Lupac Scientific Prize (2025).