

Consensus About the European Union? Understanding the Views of Citizens and Political Parties

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Submitted: 18 January 2026 **Published:** 19 February 2026

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue “Consensus About the European Union? Understanding the Views of Citizens and Political Parties” edited by Sergiu Gherghina (University of Glasgow) and Sergiu Mişcoiu (Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i454>

Abstract

This thematic issue provides evidence that reflects some recent developments in the study of consensus toward the EU. It analyses to what extent citizens and political parties share a consensus about the EU and how this consensus is manifested, constituted, and mobilized. The thematic issue makes two contributions to the literature: it maps the contours of consensus and disagreement across EU member states and candidate countries and explains the degree of convergence in people's attitudes and party positions about key European values, principles, and practices. All these show that consensus on the EU is a dynamic, multi-level process, contingent on institutional contexts, political competition, socio-economic conditions, and identity politics.

Keywords

citizens; consensus; European Union; identity; ideology; political parties

1. Introduction

The EU occupies a unique position in contemporary political science as both a subject of intense scholarly inquiry and a locus of contested normative politics. Since the EU's inception, the promise of European integration has been grounded in ideas of peace, prosperity, and cooperation across national borders. Yet, alongside this narrative of progressive integration, there has been persistent and sometimes deepening disagreement among citizens and political parties over the EU's purpose and trajectory. Understanding the extent of the consensus on the EU is both an empirical endeavor, intended to shed light on explaining current processes, and a broader reflection of stability, accountability, and citizens' expectations that can help build understanding of the possible future directions of political development. This thematic issue

provides evidence that reflects some of the recent developments in the study of consensus toward the EU. It engages with two pressing questions in EU studies: (a) To what extent do citizens and political parties share a consensus about the EU? and (b) How is this consensus manifested, constituted, and mobilized?

In a broad sense, consensus can be defined as agreement on fundamental political issues, such as the legitimacy and policy direction of the EU (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Several different understandings have been proposed in the literature. Normative consensus defines the shared values or ideals associated with European integration, such as commitment to democracy, human rights, and multilateral cooperation (Akaliyski et al., 2022; Risse, 2010). Permissive consensus refers to the acceptance of the practical benefits and costs of European integration and of EU membership, including economic advantages, security cooperation, and regulatory harmonization (Hix & Hoyland, 2011). Discursive consensus refers to the extent to which political parties and citizens frame the EU in similar terms (de Vries, 2018).

Several traditions in EU scholarship underpin the analysis of consensus. Neofunctionalists emphasize integrative spillovers and the convergence of interests across member states, implying an eventual deepening of consensus over time (Niemann, 2020). Intergovernmentalists highlight national preferences and intra-state bargaining, suggesting that consensus may be limited to lowest-common-denominator agreements among elite actors (Moravcsik, 1993; Puetter, 2016). Other scholars have moved beyond this binary approach to investigate how multi-level governance and public contestation shape consensus from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives (Börzel & Risse, 2016).

2. Consensus Among and Between Citizens and Political Parties

Consensus involves several political and societal actors. In this thematic issue, we focus on citizens and political parties, mainly due to their prominence in previous studies on the topic. Consensus can be measured in several ways. In this thematic issue, we look at the consensus among citizens or among political parties, and between citizens and political parties. The latter comparison builds on the broader literature about the convergence of mass-elite attitudes and its implications for the functioning of political systems (Shim, 2024; Shim & Gherghina, 2020). The Eurozone crisis, the 2015 migration and refugee wave, the Covid-19 crisis, and the geopolitical and economic shocks following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have all revealed both fractures and solidarities within and between EU publics and elites (Gherghina et al., 2025; Mişcoiu, 2023; Shebalina & Kotok, 2022).

Regarding citizens, much research on consensus focuses on the importance of public opinion. Citizens vary not only in their overall support for the EU, but also in terms of which aspects of the EU they support. While earlier research focused on aggregate measures of support such as general EU favorability or trust in the EU institutions (Anderson & Kaltenthaler, 1996), more recent studies emphasize attitude structures, identifying distinct dimensions of EU support—economic, cultural, sovereignty-oriented—and exploring the role of underlying identities (Hooghe & Marks, 2005; McCormick, 2020). European publics are commonly located by scholars on a continuum from pro-integration to Eurosceptic. Citizens' attitudes towards the EU are shaped by several factors, such as individuals' assessments of how the EU impacts economic well-being, cultural and identity-based concerns—including attachments to national identity, perceptions of immigration, and cosmopolitan values shaping EU attitudes—and political sophistication and information (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). The general point is that consensus among citizens is often found to be conditional and contingent: while some may endorse EU membership in the abstract, they may also oppose specific policies.

Citizens' views are far from monolithic and consensus is often limited, unstable, or policy-specific (Bankov & Gherghina, 2019; Serricchio et al., 2013).

The literature distinguishes between mainstream pro-integration parties that generally support deeper integration and supranational cooperation, Eurosceptic and nationalist parties, and ambiguous, ambivalent, or pragmatic parties, whose EU stance may vary across issues or electoral cycles (Adam et al., 2017; Carrieri & Morini, 2026; Leruth et al., 2017; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008). Scholars point to various forms of Euroscepticism, such as principled opposition or hard Euroscepticism—meaning the rejection of EU membership or its core functions—instrumental opposition, or soft Euroscepticism—the critique of specific policies without rejecting EU membership; or conditional support which may be contingent on reforms or repatriation of powers (Heinisch et al., 2021; Kopecký & Mudde, 2002; Kriesi, 2012; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008). Populists often frame the EU as an elite project that seeks to undermine national sovereignty, shaping mass perceptions accordingly. Such parties have built consistent policy profiles over time and used them to mobilize voters (Charalambous et al., 2025; Mişcoiu, 2023). Center-right and center-left parties, and moderate political actors more generally, frame the EU as an area of freedom, prosperity, and solidarity (Adam et al., 2017; Mişcoiu, 2020). Recent evidence, including Mitru and Tap (2026) in this thematic issue, illustrates that the positioning of political parties towards the EU is often nuanced and that the classic ideological or old vs new political differences no longer hold (Mitru et al., 2026; Treib, 2020).

3. Explaining Consensus: General Lines of Enquiry

The EU's political institutions shape both opinion formation and political debates. For instance, the European Commission's technocratic manner of policy adoption may appeal to pragmatic supporters but risks alienating citizens who prioritize democratic control. The European Parliament, in contrast, offers a platform for contested visions of the EU, highlighting either legitimacy gains through representation or fragmentation through partisan conflict (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014).

Framing effects—how national political actors define EU issues—are also important in relation to European consensus. In the context of EU politics, and especially around crises, framing shapes what citizens and parties think about Europe and how they think about it: whether the EU is perceived as an opportunity, a constraint, a protector, or a threat (Capati, 2024; Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022). In this sense, economic, political, and social crises have repeatedly tested European consensus.

Crises can intensify contestation over sovereignty, burden sharing, and identity, or forge a new consensus under threat scenarios, such as increased defense cooperation in response to external aggression. Crisis effects are not uniform: while some people will rally around integrationist solutions, others will become more skeptical, depending on economic exposure, political persuasion, and identity narratives (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022). At the same time, political parties are not always consistent in capitalizing upon public support even when addressing salient issues. For example, amidst a general dissatisfaction and disaffection with representative democracy, very few political parties display support for alternative models of decision-making (Gherghina & Mitru, 2025; Gherghina et al., 2024).

Consensus on the EU is also rooted in identity, in terms of whether individuals see themselves as European, state nationals, or both. Dual identities can facilitate acceptance of supranational governance, whereas

exclusive national identities may fuel resistance (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). Political parties contribute to identity formation by linking EU issues to broader political narratives.

4. Contributions of This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue brings together several comparative analyses and single-case studies that contribute to this rich literature in two ways. First, it maps the contours of consensus and disagreement across EU member states and candidate countries (Capati & Trastulli, 2026; Gherghina, 2026; Mattila & Raunio, 2026; Nezi & Lefkofridi, 2026; Winclawska & Paczeński, 2026), both for citizens and parties. For example, Toshkov (2026) focuses on the relationship between support for European integration, left–right ideological positions, and policy attitudes towards redistribution, immigration, and gay rights across all the EU member states. Petrović's (2026) comparative article focuses on the citizens' level and indicates that support for the EU aligns with class divisions. At the party level, Mitru and Tap's (2026) analysis covering 12 EU member states seeks to uncover differences in how old and new parties view the EU.

Second, it explains people's attitudes and party positions towards the EU and their degree of convergence about key European values, principles, and practices. For example, one article illustrates that the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Ukraine starting in 2022 are associated with more trust in the EU and higher consensus among the members of the European Parliament (Kakhishvili & Felder-Stindt, 2026; Kersting et al., 2026). Another article that focuses on the Democratic Party in Italy shows that the Covid-19 pandemic increased its support for European integration, but the war in Ukraine did not change its approach to the EU (Capati & Trastulli, 2026). One article that brings together the demand and the supply sides shows that the incongruence between citizens and parties on the EU dimension has become much smaller over time, and congruence increased visibly, especially in the 2024 European elections (Mattila & Raunio, 2026). In the case of the Swiss–EU relations, the political elites are generally more EU-integrationist and more extreme than voters, with different findings for Eurosceptic and pro-European parties (Lauener & Bernhard, 2026).

These contributions illustrate that consensus on the EU is a dynamic, multi-level process, contingent on institutional contexts, political competition, socio-economic conditions, and identity politics. By connecting public opinion with party politics, institutional frameworks, and crisis dynamics, the articles in this issue provide comprehensive insights that speak both to academic audiences and to policymakers interested in the resilience and legitimacy of the European project.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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