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

Edited by Sergiu Gherghina and Sergiu Mișcoiu

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EDITORIAL

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

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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 & Kaltenhalter, 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; Wincławska & Pacześniak, 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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Still Out of Touch? Parties and Their Voters on the EU Dimension

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Abstract

Previous research has uncovered a significant mismatch between parties and their voters on the EU dimension, showing that parties across the EU typically support more European integration than their electorates. Yet there are good theoretical reasons to expect that the gap has narrowed over time. The breakthrough of so-called challenger parties means more ideological alternatives, and the multiple crises have resulted in further politicization of European integration. But both the supply of parties and the impact of crises vary between member states. Utilizing EES survey data from European elections, this article studies opinion congruence between parties and their voters on the EU dimension in the five European Parliament elections conducted in the early 21st century. The findings underline the change in the overall congruence that has taken place in the last two EP elections. Especially, in the latest 2024 elections, the congruence on the EU dimension was practically on the same level as congruence on the left–right dimension, implying that party responsiveness in EU matters is no longer such a major problem as in the beginning of the millennium.

Keywords

congruence; elections; European Parliament; European Union; parties

1. Introduction

European integration and more broadly European politics have gone through testing times since the Treaty of Lisbon, the most recent reform of the treaties, entered into force in late 2009. Multiple crises have brought about increased contestation of both the future trajectory of the EU and of EU policies. While the impact of individual crises has varied, and even though the politicization of the EU has also varied between individual member states, there has arguably been a shift from the era of permissive consensus to one of constraining dissensus (Hooghe & Marks, 2009)—and, perhaps, even to post-constraining dissensus (Sus &

Hadeed, 2021). Shim (2024b) has theorised how the combination of critical junctures and elite agency can produce mass-elite preference discrepancy, and how such incongruence may persist in the long run. Yet also the opposite outcome is possible, with crises and politicization bringing the views of the voters and their representatives closer together.

Politicization requires agency, and so-called challenger parties (de Vries & Hobolt, 2020) have capitalized on the turbulence in European politics, accusing the mainstream parties of neglecting the interests of ordinary people and presenting themselves as defenders of national sovereignty and cultures. In line with the constraining dissensus thesis, this has forced the traditional governing parties to pay closer attention to the preferences of citizens. Intuitively, one would expect this contestation and politicization to result in closer congruence of positions between political parties and their supporters. Yet, a counterargument is also plausible: Crises detach particularly governing parties even further from their electorates, as they have agreed to new European-level measures, many of which have increased the authority or resources of the EU, such as the bailout packages during the euro crisis or the Next Generation EU loan in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The rise of challenger parties, most of which are on the far right, has also contributed to the fragmentation of party systems. National parliaments have more parties, as do coalition governments. This should produce a closer match between the preferences of supporters and their parties, as citizens have a wider range of alternatives to choose from.

European election studies (EES) surveys provide an excellent opportunity for assessing ideological congruence between parties and their supporters. Conducted at the time of European Parliament (EP) elections across all member states, in the surveys, respondents are asked not just about their position regarding European integration, but also about the positions of the political parties in their respective countries. Whether citizens really know where parties stand on the EU dimension does not matter; it is their perceptions of party positions that count. Scholars have shown that a lack of congruence over the EU affects party choice and turnout. In particular, if citizens view their first-choice party or parties in general as being too pro-integrationist or too critical of the EU, they either stay home or choose a different party in national or EP elections (e.g., Bakker et al., 2020; Carrieri, 2024; Carrieri et al., 2025; de Vries et al., 2011; Hobolt et al., 2009; Pannico & Costa Lobo, 2023). This indicates that political parties need to take congruence seriously.

Drawing on EES data, this article examines congruence between political parties and their supporters in all EU member countries. It is structured around two research questions:

1. Has congruence on the EU dimension changed between 1999 and 2024?
2. What factors explain congruence over the EU between parties and their supporters?

The next section contains our theoretical framework, where we discuss the general trends regarding congruence and take stock of existing research to develop hypotheses about factors explaining variation in congruence. After that, we introduce our data and methods before presenting our main findings. The concluding section reflects on our results and suggests avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Why Congruence Over the EU Matters

Opinion congruence between citizens and decision-makers matters. Sometimes, policy leadership by elected representatives might be needed and tolerated, not least during crises that often produce a "rally around the flag" effect with citizens supportive of their leaders (Mueller, 1970). However, should politicians consistently ignore the preferences of the electorate, both regarding the content of policies or patterns of governance, the political system would likely face a serious legitimacy crisis, leading to its potential collapse or at least a major shake-up of the party system.

Wessels (1999, p. 137) argued that "the smallest common denominator in normative terms…is that in a democracy there should be some match between the interests of the people and what representatives promote." This statement echoes the broader sentiments expressed in research on congruence that has expanded significantly in the first quarter of the 21st century (Dalton, 2020; Lefkofridi, 2020; Shim, 2024a; Shim & Farag, 2025; Shim & Gherghina, 2020). A plausible expectation is that issue salience impacts congruence. The further we move away from salient issues, the less knowledgeable citizens probably are of party positions and the lower the congruence between citizens and their parties (e.g., Giger & Lefkofridi, 2016; Spoon & Klüver, 2015; Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013).

Previously, one could convincingly argue that, in most (western) European countries, the left–right dimension constituted the main axis of contestation, and research confirmed congruence on that dimension to be also quite high (e.g., Dalton, 1985; Melchior, 2010; Pierce, 1999; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999). However, the increasing relevance of the sociocultural, GAL-TAN cleavage means that issues such as multiculturalism, immigration, and the EU shape national debates to a larger extent than before. And this transformation of cleavage patterns is both driven by and creates opportunities for challenger parties, as argued for example by Hooghe and Marks (2018, pp. 126–127):

> Change has come not because mainstream parties have shifted in response to voter preferences, but because voters have turned to parties with distinctive profiles on the new cleavage. These parties raise issues related to Europe and immigration that mainstream parties would rather ignore. Radical TAN parties set the frame of competition on these transnational issues, and green parties take diametrically opposite positions. Both parties give these issues much greater salience in their appeals to voters than mainstream parties, and they are less handicapped by internal divisions.

Hooghe and Marks (2018, p. 126) also note that parties, particularly more institutionalized ones, face constraints in their adaptability: "Their efforts are constrained by the policy commitments of self-selected activists and leaders, by brand reputations embedded in the expectations of voters, and by the interests and values of their social base." But while challenger parties, particularly those on the far right, may not face similar constraints, they have also developed a brand reputation in their core questions—such as opposition to immigration and defense of national sovereignty (de Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Here, we must remember that many of these parties have already existed for several decades.

These changes in cleavage structures do not apply equally across the 27 EU countries. Variation between member states remains important, with election campaigns in Central and Eastern European member states (those that joined the EU from 2004 onwards) often revolving around the broader theme of economic development and the fight against corruption. Moreover, accession to the EU has generally been characterized as a one-sided process where the applicant countries adjust to the conditions set by "Brussels" and implement EU legislation. In such circumstances, contestation over the EU may remain low in the pre-accession stage since the goal is to achieve membership. This underlines the need to pay attention to the preferences of the citizens in the post-accession stage when there is more space and need for position-taking and debates on national EU policies and on the future trajectories of European integration (e.g., Bankov & Gherghina, 2020; Božina Beroš & Grdović Gnip, 2023; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020).

Despite such variation, the salience and practical relevance of the EU have clearly increased. Even before the multiple crises, European integration was among the most salient issues in party competition throughout the EU (Benoit & Laver, 2006). The EU wields significant influence in a wide range of policy areas, also due to the expansion of its competences through the Lisbon Treaty. Whether parties are responsive to their electorates over the EU is therefore significant in terms of how both national and EU-level representative democracy works in Europe. It is not just a question of the legitimacy of the EU, but also of the national parties themselves. Overall, these changes in dimensions of contestation and in the division of authority between member states and the EU mean that political parties must navigate a more complex environment than before, and this makes it more difficult for them to maintain internal unity.

2.2. Evidence of Congruence Over the EU

But have the positions of national parties on the EU dimension been congruent with those of their supporters? The empirical evidence provides a mixed picture, starting with the first studies from the 1990s (Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997, 1999; van der Eijk & Franklin, 1991). Marsh and Wessels (1997) showed that MEPs from countries with highly proportional electoral systems represented citizens better than MEPs from countries with less proportional systems. Drawing on elite and citizen survey data from 1979 and 1994, Schmitt and Thomassen (2000) found that congruence between voters and parties about the general development of integration was as high as on the left–right dimension but lower in specific EU policy issues. Based on the 1999 EES data, van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) concluded that the diversity of opinion among the electorate was not replicated among the parties and that parties were far more supportive of integration than the voters.

Utilizing the 2004 EES data, Mattila and Raunio (2006) found that parties were both closer to their voters on the left–right dimension than on the EU dimension and more supportive of European integration than their voters. In a subsequent article, the same authors found that "parties were in 2009 even less representative of their voters over the EU than at the time of the 2004 EP elections. In each of the 27 member states the parties were more pro-European than the voters" (Mattila & Raunio, 2012, p. 602). Whitaker et al. (2025) assessed MEP-voter congruence using EES surveys (1999–2014) and MEP surveys (2000–2015). They showed that the median voter was more Eurosceptic than the median MEP across most mainstream political groups, and that this gap had increased over time.

Pareschi et al. (2023) analysed issue congruence in 2016 in ten member states and established a limited degree of pro-EU bias among the elites and variation in congruence between different dimensions of

integration. Drawing on a variety of surveys from 1979 to 2016 in nine countries, Marzi and Pareschi (2025) reported a difference between pro-EU and Eurosceptic parties, with the former more supportive of integration than their voters and the latter holding even more negative views than their supporters. Covering 15 countries with survey data from 2009, Dolný and Baboš (2015) found congruence to be high, and even higher on the EU dimension than on the left–right dimension. Comparing the positions of the voters and candidates in the 2009 EP elections, Costello et al. (2012) concluded that congruence was higher on the left–right dimension than on the EU dimension, with most parties having more pro-EU positions than their voters. Kelbel et al. (2023), in turn, compared the views of citizens and MEPs in seven member states in 2019–2020, and uncovered considerable variation between different EU issues, with voters in some cases being more pro-integrationist than MEPs. Many of the studies referred to in this section have used different sources for estimating the positions of citizens and political parties or MEPs. We return to this issue when presenting our data and methods.

2.3. Explaining Congruence

Drawing on the previous discussion, we put forward seven hypotheses about congruence on the EU dimension. Three hypotheses deal with developments over time, while four focus on factors explaining levels of congruence. Before motivating the hypotheses, it must be emphasized that we are measuring congruence between the positions of the parties and their voters. Therefore, our party-level approach does not cover non-voters whose preferences may diverge even significantly from those of parties and their supporters (Shim & Farag, 2025).

Starting with the longitudinal dimension, the multiple crises have certainly meant that the EU has received more media coverage than before. But the attention has concentrated very much on the individual crises from the euro crisis, refugee crisis, Brexit, Covid-19, to finally Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. Utilizing EES data from 1999 to 2014, Vasilopoulou and Gattermann (2021) focused on the link between politicization and congruence. Their results indicated no such effect, with party polarization or salience of the EU not affecting levels of congruence. With nine countries in his sample, Real-Dato (2017) observed that the euro crisis did not impact levels of congruence. However, the politicization and increased salience of the EU should bring parties and their supporters closer together. While previously mainstream parties often managed to avoid debates over the EU (e.g., Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008), such a strategy is difficult to follow when the EU is in the news and challenger parties are demanding explanations for why "Brussels" takes citizens' money or forces countries to accept more asylum-seekers. Politicization of European integration has clearly favoured Eurosceptic parties (Beaudonnet & Gomez, 2024). Mainstream parties have needed to respond, both through defending EU decisions and/or re-thinking their positions (e.g., Carrieri et al., 2025). Hobolt et al. (2009, p. 112) argued that, if there is an upward trend in the salience of the EU, "then we might expect the gap between the positions of governing parties and voters on European integration to become smaller over time, as parties adopt positions closer to voters to avoid electoral punishment." While we acknowledge that each crisis has impacted individual member states to different degrees, this leads to our first hypothesis:

> H1: Opinion congruence on the EU dimension has increased over time.

The crises are also different from one another. Brexit and especially the war in Ukraine have united EU citizens, the latter even producing a moderate "rally around the flag" effect, with the large majority of

citizens and parties supportive of assisting Ukraine and of further security and defence integration. There is also evidence that the war has resulted in stronger overall support for the EU (e.g., Fernández et al., 2023; Hooghe et al., 2024; Unan & Klüver, 2024). On the other hand, the euro crisis and the refugee crisis created strong tensions within member states, with governments having to defend unpopular and often expensive EU level decisions. In line with Shim (2024b), these constituted critical junctures, providing opportunities for elite agency to disrupt established patterns of contestation. Particularly the Eurosceptical far right parties, almost all of which were in the opposition in their national parliaments, exercised that elite agency during those turbulent years. However, the EES data is gathered every five years in conjunction with the EP elections, and this is problematic in terms of measuring how individual events affect congruence. The refugee crisis peaked in 2015, one year after the 2014 elections, but then Brexit became the centre of attention in the run-up to the 2019 EP elections. The impact of the euro crisis is less challenging to assess. The crisis lasted for several years from 2010 onwards, and the bailout packages and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) resulted across the EU in heated debates about the legitimacy of European integration. The Eurosceptical parties clearly benefited from the euro crisis at the expense of mainstream parties in the 2014 EP elections (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Nielsen & Franklin, 2017). Mattila and Raunio (2012) also reported lower congruence in the 2009 elections, and this may have resulted at least partly from the global financial crisis that hit many EU countries hard and created uncertainty about economy. This leads to our second and third hypotheses:

H2: Congruence was highest at the time of the 2024 EP elections.

H3: Congruence on the EU dimension was lowest in the 2014 EP elections.

Turning to variables explaining congruence, we have chosen to test the impact of variables identified as having explanatory weight in previous research on party-level congruence over the EU. First, we focus on government-opposition dynamics. The logic is simple and applies to both normal times and crisis periods. While individual parties may have exhibited high levels of congruence before entering the government, joining multi-party coalition cabinets and the bargaining inside them results in ideological compromises among cabinet parties. Moreover, governing parties represent their member states in the Council and the European Council, and this results in further compromises that may distance parties from their voters. Such national and European-level decision-making dynamics should increase the distance between parties and their voters, even though the constraining dissensus argument by Hooghe and Marks (2009) suggests that leaders need to pay more attention to the views of the electorate over the EU. Mattila and Raunio (2006) showed that congruence was lower among governing parties, while Mattila and Raunio (2009) found that government size affected the level of ideological alternatives, with large coalition governments hindering party competition on the EU dimension.

In terms of the general ideological orientation of parties, we draw on the idea initially formulated by Dalton (1985), who showed that ideological centrism had a negative effect on congruence on the left–right dimension. Mattila and Raunio (2006, 2012) reported the same pattern in congruence over the EU: In the 2004 elections, congruence was lower among centrist parties, and in the 2009 elections, it was higher among ideologically more extremist left-wing parties. Whitaker et al. (2025), in turn, showed that challenger parties were not closer to their voters than mainstream parties on the EU dimension. We acknowledge that the dichotomy between mainstream and niche or fringe parties can be misleading, as there is a large variation among the more radical

parties, many of which have diverse electorates and unstable or ambiguous policy agendas (Gherghina & Fagan, 2021). Moreover, there may not be much difference in whether niche or challenger parties and mainstream parties are responsive to their supporters or the general electorate (Ibenskas & Polk, 2024). Yet, we argue that parties situated further away from the centre should overall have clearer policy profiles than centrist parties. Most of such parties are smaller than mainstream parties, and, regarding party size, we expect congruence to be lower in larger parties. Mattila and Raunio (2006, 2012) found that opinion congruence over the EU was higher in smaller parties. Our justification is straightforward: Small parties are likely to be more homogeneous than larger parties that have bigger and thus more heterogeneous electorates. Finally, the fragmentation of party system should make it easier for citizens to choose an alternative that is closer to their own preferences. This discussion leads to the following hypotheses regarding party level factors:

H4: Governing parties have lower opinion congruence than opposition parties.

H5: Parties further from the centre on the left–right dimension display higher congruence.

H6: Congruence is higher in small parties than in large parties.

H7: The more fragmented the party system, the higher the congruence between voters and parties.

3. Data

Our data come from the 2004 (Schmitt et al., 2009), 2009 (van Egmond et al., 2017), 2014 (Schmitt et al., 2015), 2019 (Schmitt et al., 2022), and 2024 (Popa et al., 2024) EES surveys, which consisted of identical post-election voter surveys in EU member states. We use EES data for measuring the positions of both parties and their voters on the anti/pro-integration dimension. Hence, our approach focusing on voter-party congruence differs somewhat from most previous studies on policy representation that typically compare voter data with elite-level data (mainly surveys of MPs or MEPs).

Our analyses are based on the comparison of voters' own policy positions with their assessment of the position of the party they voted for. Our assumption is that when the distance between voters and their party is small, parties perform well in representing their voters and vice versa. For each party, two measures were calculated. First, using only the respondents who indicated that they voted for a particular party in the EP elections, we calculated their average positions on the EU dimension. Second, we calculated from the same respondents where they perceived their "own" party to locate on the same EU dimension. Comparing these two average values enables us to analyse how close voters feel that their parties are to themselves.

We recognise that voters' perceptions of party positions may not be accurate reflections of reality, because most European citizens probably have relatively limited knowledge of party policies, at least when it comes to European integration. It is also possible that voters engage in wishful thinking and project their own policy positions onto their preferred parties (e.g., Brandenburg & Johns, 2013; Melchior, 2010). If this is the case, our data would systematically underestimate the distance between parties and their voters. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that, although voters may not be able to locate parties very accurately on political dimensions, they are likely to base their vote choices on their own perceptions of party positions. Another option would be to use almost similar survey questions from separate surveys of party voters and elites conducted quite

close to each other (Whitaker et al., 2025), but this too would be problematic for at least two reasons. First, party voters and party elites are likely to interpret the party position scales differently, and second, given the longitudinal approach and the wide breadth of parties included in our study gathering such data would be impossible.

It is also worth stressing that other approaches for measuring party positions, such as expert surveys, content analysis of party programmes, or using elite survey data, do not allow for direct comparisons of voter positions and their perceptions of where the parties are located. And, as Golder and Stramski (2010, pp. 98–99) maintain, using different data sources—for example, EES data for placing voters and expert surveys for placing parties on policy dimensions—is problematic, particularly as the surveys are typically not conducted at the same time and they may employ different scales or differently worded questions. EES is the only data where the party and voter placements are measured on the EU dimension at exactly the same time point and with precisely the same question. Additionally, comparisons of different measures of party positions—party manifesto data (1945–1998), Chapel Hill expert surveys (1999), EES data (1999), and elite surveys of MPs and MEPs (1996)—on the EU dimension found that all these measures correlated considerably with each other and, hence, "provide convergent measures of party positioning on European integration" (Marks et al., 2007, p. 33). This implies that voter perceptions are also empirically accurate measures of where parties stand on European integration.

Our data set comprises most of the parties competing in EU member states in the five EP elections held between 2004 to 2024. In the case of some minor parties, only a small number of respondents voted for them. Thus, in our analyses, only parties with a vote share of more than three percentage points are included to decrease the potential unreliability of measuring policy positions only from a very small group of voters. This restriction means that some small parties are excluded from the data set. Fortunately, for most of the member states, it was possible to include all or, at least, most of the major parties.

The main focus of this study is on the distance between voters and their parties on the EU dimension, which was operationalized in the questionnaires as a 0–10 scale measuring voters' attitudes towards European unification. The precise wording of the question was: "Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it has already gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using an 11-point scale. On this scale, 0 means unification *has already gone too far*, and 10 means it *should be pushed further*. What number on this scale best describes your position?" This question was followed by several questions in which the respondents were asked to indicate, with the same scale, where the main parties of their respective countries were located. Although we are mainly interested in where party voters locate their own parties, to check for the validity of our party position measure, we compared it with the Chapel Hill party data (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al., 2024), which is based on country expert surveys. Pearson's correlation coefficient between these two measures is 0.66 for the parties that were included in both data sets, which indicates a relatively good fit.

The rest of the variables, relating to hypotheses H4–H7, are measured in the following way. Government participation was measured with an indicator variable, coded 1 if the party was in government at the time of the EP elections and 0 if it was in opposition. The size of the party was measured with its vote share in the same EP elections. Ideological extremism (or centrism) on the left–right dimension was measured with two indicator variables showing whether the party was a left-wing or a right-wing party. Parties that had average

values below 4 on the 10-point left–right scale were defined as left-wing parties, while parties with values over 7 were categorized as right-wing parties. As the choice of these threshold values was based only on our own deliberation, we also tested how the results change if more stringent threshold values were used to classify a party as a left-wing or a right-wing party. This did not change the results significantly. Finally, party system fragmentation was measured with the effective number of parties competing in the EP elections (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979), calculated from the election results.

Although the data we use makes it possible to study the development of party-voter congruence in a longitudinal view, it is not without its limitations. Given the observational nature of the data, theoretically, we cannot make strong causal claims about our findings (see Pannico & Costa Lobo, 2023). Nevertheless, we can present a comprehensive description of the development of congruence on the EU dimension in a twenty-year perspective covering practically all EU member states.

There are two more limitations in the data. First, comparisons between different EP elections may be biased simply because the member states and parties vary during the research period. The 2004 EP elections were conducted in 25, the 2009 elections in 27, the 2014 and 2019 elections in 28, and, finally, the latest 2024 elections in 27 member states. The EES data also considers Belgium as two distinct party systems with separate surveys in Flanders and Wallonia. Furthermore, the EES2004 study included all the EU member states except for Malta. Unfortunately, in three countries, the 2004 questionnaire did not include the EU and left–right scale questions necessary for our analysis. Therefore, the data set does not include Belgium, Lithuania, and Sweden in 2004. At the same time, the party systems in member states have changed with new parties entering the contestation and old ones leaving the race. To see whether the changing number of member states affects our empirical results, we repeated the analyses using only countries that were included in all five waves. This did not change the overall results significantly, although there were some small changes in the statistical significance of some variable coefficients.

Second, there was a problem with the conduct of the 2014 ESS survey as the first questionnaire did not include the crucial party and voter EU position questions (Popa & Schmitt, 2015). This omission was corrected in the supplementary survey that was fielded about half a year later than the first one. Furthermore, this second survey, which we use to calculate the positions of the voters and their parties on the EU scale, did not include a question about which party the respondents voted for in the 2014 EP elections. As a result, we had to link voters and their parties with a question based on their then-current party choice if parliamentary elections were held at the time of the survey. This may have important consequences for the reliability of the data, as it is well known that in European election voters are more likely to prefer opposition parties than in national parliamentary elections (Ehin & Talving, 2021). This means that one must be cautious when comparing the 2014 results to other elections.

4. Empirical Analysis

To analyse party-level opinion congruence on the EU dimension, we use the regression-based approach originally developed by Achen (1978) and later applied by Dalton (1985). They referred to this approach as responsiveness or dyadic correspondence, but here we prefer the term congruence as it does not imply any directional causal relationship between voter opinions and party positions. This regression-based approach, in its different variants, has been previously used, for example, to study general elite-voter congruence in

West European countries (Iversen, 1994), party congruence in Europe on the left–right dimension (Belchior, 2013), left–right and issue-level congruence in EU member states (Dalton, 2017), and congruence on various EU issues in 10 European countries (Pareschi et al., 2023). The model has also been applied to study party-voter congruence in EP elections by Mattila and Raunio (2006, 2012), but they concentrated only on individual EP elections instead of providing a longitudinal view of the development of congruence as in this study.

The important idea behind the approach is that the better we can predict party positions on issue or policy dimensions with party voter positions on the same dimensions, the higher the congruence. As a regression equation, this can be expressed in the following way (see Dalton, 2017, p. 612):

$$\text{Party EU position} = a + b * (\text{party voter's mean EU position})$$

Here, the degree of dyadic correspondence between a party and its supporters is affected by the intercept, a, and the regression coefficient, b. Ideal congruence ensues when the intercept of the regression line is 0 and the slope coefficient is 1. For example, when the party voter average on the EU dimension is located at 6, the position of their party is also at 6. When the average party voter is located at 3, so will the party be, and so on. Different combinations of a and b correspond to different types of deviation from ideal congruence. If both b and a equal 1, parties have a positive bias in the policy positions, meaning that they are, on average, 1 point more favourable to EU integration than their average voter. Hence, if parties adopt more pro-European positions than their voters, we should see positive intercepts in our regression models.

The regression coefficient b also has a relevant interpretation for congruence. When it is less than 1, parties adopt more convergent positions than their voters, meaning that the opinion differences between parties are smaller than the opinion differences between their voters, indicating a lack of responsiveness among parties. In contrast, if b is greater than 1, the party system is more polarized, and parties accentuate the differences between voters. In practice, this means that, at both ends of the policy dimension, parties are adopting more extreme positions than their voters do.

In the empirical analyses, we did not use fixed country effects for two reasons. First, theoretically, Dalton's congruence measure requires that if country dummies are used, one should also add interactions to produce country-specific slopes for each country. Second, adding country effects and interactions leads to further loss of degrees of freedom, which might be problematic as our N's are not too large to begin with. However, we performed robustness analyses with fixed effects both with and without interactions. The results remained very similar to the ones we presented here.

The congruence results for the last five EP elections are in Table 1. They show that the constant has been clearly larger than one in all elections, indicating, rather unsurprisingly, that throughout the whole research period parties, on average, have been more positive towards European integration than their voters. However, it is the changes in the value that are more interesting. It seems that the gap between parties and their voters increased in the 2009 and 2014 elections compared to the 2004 situation. After this, the gap has markedly decreased and was, in 2024, already rather small. Even with the potential unreliability of the 2014 data, it seems apparent that incongruence between voters and their parties was largest in the first half of the 2010s and, after that, parties and voters have moved closer to each other. Our data cannot directly reveal if the change has occurred because parties have moved closer to voters or vice versa, or whether

voter have switched to supporting parties more closely aligned with their own EU positions. However, given the surge in popularity of Eurosceptical right-wing parties across the EU, we believe that this change has been induced by both the growing support of populist parties and the adoption of more EU-critical positions by many of the other parties.

Table 1. Party-voter congruence on the EU dimension (dependent variable: party EU position, OLS regression, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$).

	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
Constant	1.39**	3.13**	2.97**	1.46**	0.90**
	(0.45)	(0.28)	(0.38)	(0.23)	(0.27)
Voter EU position	0.85**	0.58**	0.75**	0.83**	0.91**
	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Adjusted R^2	0.52	0.44	0.43	0.70	0.69
N	114	154	180	180	167

The regression coefficients on the voter EU position variable in Table 1 seem to be consistent with this interpretation. They also show that, especially in the 2009 and 2014 elections, the range of EU positions offered by the parties (compared to voters) was narrower, suggesting that many voters were forced to choose parties that did not really represent their integration views. Later, in 2019 and 2024, the coefficient started to increase towards one (which would indicate optimal distribution of party positions relative to voter positions). Overall, the results in Table 1 show that incongruence between voters and parties peaked in the 2009 and 2014 elections and, after that, congruence has improved in the two latest elections.

Table 2 adds to the analysis the party or country-level variables related to hypotheses H4–H7. The results show that belonging to the governing coalition increased the gap between voters and parties in the 2004 elections,

Table 2. Party-voter congruence on the EU dimension when party and party system variables are included (dependent variable: party EU position, OLS regression, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$).

	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
Constant	1.21**	2.60**	3.11**	1.71**	0.95**
	(0.46)	(0.35)	(0.51)	(0.37)	(0.40)
Voter EU position	0.81**	0.52**	0.74**	0.80**	0.91**
	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Government party	0.56**	0.10	0.32	−0.00	0.08
	(0.16)	(0.14)	(0.18)	(0.13)	(0.13)
Party size	2.12**	2.81**	−0.18	1.76**	1.72**
	(0.70)	(0.65)	(0.85)	(0.66)	(0.64)
Left-wing party	−0.38*	−0.49**	−0.07	−0.12	−0.00
	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.25)	(0.14)	(0.14)
Right-wing party	0.08	−0.05	0.00	−0.20	0.09
	(0.17)	(0.14)	(0.18)	(0.13)	(0.14)
Effective no. of parties	−0.02	0.09*	−0.03	−0.04	−0.05
	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Adjusted R^2	0.63	0.53	0.43	0.71	0.72
N	114	150	178	180	166

as expected by H4, but in subsequent elections this effect disappears. It seems that the gap was smaller among leftist parties in the 2000s, but this effect vanishes later. Rather surprisingly, party system fragmentation is not related to congruence in any of the elections, but this result may be related to the relative stability of the party system level variable (the finding is also consistent with Vasilopoulou & Gattermann, 2021). Finally, congruence seems to be better in smaller parties, although this effect has also decreased after the 2009 elections (and vanishes momentarily in the 2014 data, but this may be due to the data comparability problems we explained above).

Our results hence demonstrate how, over time, voters and their parties have moved closer to each other. However, without a comparison point, the significance of this closeness is difficult to interpret. An obvious comparison point would be the left–right dimension, arguably still the most important cleavage dividing parties in national politics. For this comparison, we calculated the average distance between parties and voters on both the EU and left–right dimensions in each of the five elections studied here (Figure 1). In accordance with our previous results, they show that party-voter distance over the EU peaked in the 2014 elections and then started to decline. This large peak may be partly explained by the fact that, in the 2014 data, the respondents were asked which party they would support in the national parliamentary elections, unlike in other data sets where the respondents were linked to the party through their vote choice in the EP elections. In contrast, congruence on the left–right dimension has been stable over the elections. Hence, the most interesting observation from Figure 1 is that in the most recent 2024 elections, there was no longer a significant difference between congruence on the EU and on the left–right dimensions, which represents a major change compared to the first three EP elections of the 21st century. However, further research is needed to uncover the exact reasons for this finding. One possible reason could be that the over-time growth in the share of EU-sceptical voters has resulted in a situation where it is easier for these

Figure 1. The development of the average distance between voters and their parties on the EU and left–right dimensions, 2004–2024 (the vertical bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals).

voters to find a party that is close to their own EU-position.

5. Conclusions

Surely our findings must be comforting for those concerned about the gap between political parties and their electorates. The incongruence between voters and parties on the EU dimension has become much smaller, and at the time of the 2024 EP elections, congruence over the EU was effectively as high or low as on the left–right dimension. Congruence was at its lowest in the 2014 elections held in the aftermath of the euro crisis. The longitudinal analysis, therefore, confirms our hypotheses about fluctuations in congruence (H3) and overall increasing congruence (H1).

However, we have deliberately been cautious in interpreting our findings, as it is very difficult to pinpoint the exact mechanisms behind the increased congruence. While we argued in line with the constraining dissensus thesis (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) that politicization of integration through the multiple crises should make parties more responsive to their voters, it is not possible to establish exact causality between individual crises and levels of congruence. For example, our analysis cannot answer the question of whether the observed increase in congruence in the last two elections is due to position movements by parties, voters, or both.

Furthermore, the EES surveys are executed every five years, meaning that factors other than crises can impact congruence. Yet it is interesting to note that the highest congruence recorded in 2024 followed both Brexit and the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, two crises that united more than divided Europeans, thus confirming H2. Future research could thus examine in more detail how individual events shape congruence, also at the level of countries, as the impact of crises varies between member states. More generally, scholars could explore contextual factors explaining variation in levels of congruence between different member states, for example, between southern and northern EU countries. These differences may be related to, for example, varying levels of EU salience between member states, parties, and voter groups.

Our explanatory party-level analysis yielded only weak support for H4–H7. Governing parties were no further apart from their voters than opposition parties. Ideological positions mattered in the 2004 and 2009 elections, but after that, congruence was rather similar between centrist and more radical parties. Party system fragmentation did not matter, and the explanatory power of party size has decreased over time. These findings warrant closer scrutiny in future studies. Particularly intriguing is the situation inside far-right or populist parties, most of which are highly critical of European integration. Many of these parties have joined governing coalitions and have therefore been directly involved in EU decision-making. Subsequent research should thus investigate variation within the far right and other party families. Another potentially interesting line of inquiry concerns variation driven by alternative party organizations. Theoretically, a plausible argument is that leader-centric parties should be more flexible and agile, both in terms of mobilization efforts and policy positions, than more decentralized parties where the leaders have less freedom of manoeuvre (Rahat, 2024; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Such capacity for quick moves should facilitate ideological congruence, although, of course, party leaders have brand reputations and constant ideological zigzagging might backfire.

In line with most existing research, we have relied on the general EES question about the direction of

European integration. This question is arguably a valid measure as it captures respondents' overall preference regarding the future of the EU. Yet scholars have uncovered interesting variation in congruence between specific EU issues (e.g., Kelbel et al., 2023; Pareschi et al., 2023; Schmitt & Thomassen, 2000), but currently, data limitations make it impossible to examine congruence throughout the EU in a range of European questions. Another interesting line of inquiry concerns comparisons between the EU dimension and other cleavages or issues other than just the standard left–right dimension (e.g., Dalton, 2017). It is difficult to determine how congruence works over the EU without meaningful points of comparison. Finally, scholars should pay closer attention to the preferences of non-voters (Shim & Farag, 2025) who comprise around half of all eligible voters in the European Parliament elections.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data is available from the authors upon request.

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ARTICLE

Closer or More Distant? The Congruence Between Elites and Voters on Swiss–EU Relations

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Abstract

Elite-citizen congruence is central to normative theories of representation. This article compares the preferences of Swiss elites and citizens about relations with the EU, examining whether patterns of elite-citizen divergence documented in EU member states extend to a non-member state with exceptionally high levels of economic integration. At a time when Switzerland and the EU are (re)negotiating their relations, this analysis is of great importance. Drawing on survey data from the 2023 Swiss Election Study (Selects) at both candidate and citizen levels, we test two hypotheses from the European integration literature. First, we expect political elites to favor closer relations with the EU more than voters. Second, we hypothesize that elites adopt more extreme positions than voters, with party elites from pro-European parties being more integrationist and those from Eurosceptic parties being more anti-integration than their respective electorates. Results support both hypotheses. Political elites are significantly more pro-EU than voters overall, while voters of the radical right Swiss People's Party are less reluctant about closer Swiss–EU relations than party elites, and moderate party voters (Social Democrats, Liberals, Center, Greens, and Green Liberals) favor closer ties less than their candidates. We argue that elite polarization represents the more fundamental driving factor, while the aggregate pro-EU elite bias reflects the specific balance of political forces in given contexts. This distinction has crucial implications: scholars should prioritize examining polarization dynamics across diverse settings rather than focusing exclusively on directional biases, thereby offering new analytical leverage for understanding democratic representation beyond formal EU membership.

Keywords

democracy; elite-citizen congruence; European integration; European Union; Euroscepticism; political parties; Switzerland

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1. Introduction

A central idea of representative democracy is that citizens elect officials who are committed to act on their behalf. It is thus logical that congruence, i.e., the alignment of the political preferences of citizens with those of elected officials, has become a key criterion against which the quality of democracy is assessed by political scientists (Powell, 2000). Their interest in studying mass-elite congruence has substantially increased in the last two decades, leading to an "explosive growth" in publications about the issue—a growth largely driven by congruence studies covering established Western European democracies (Shim, 2024; Shim & Farag, 2025). The question of policy convergence between the masses and political elites strikes at the heart of democratic representation and raises fundamental issues of democratic governance from a normative perspective. Most importantly, substantial divergence between elite and citizen issue preferences may signal a breakdown in the representative relationship that underpins democratic legitimacy (Pitkin, 1967).

Indeed, persistent incongruence carries significant implications for democratic legitimacy. When elites and citizens operate with fundamentally different issue agendas, it becomes difficult for voters to hold their representatives accountable for addressing their most pressing concerns. This disconnect can foster political alienation, reduce civic engagement, and erode confidence in democratic processes more broadly. When political elites do not sufficiently take citizens' preferences into consideration, this disconnect can undermine the foundational democratic principle that governments should be responsive to the will of the people (Dahl, 1971). Such misalignment potentially violates the implicit social contract between representatives and citizens, thereby calling into question whether democratic institutions are fulfilling their core function of translating citizen preferences into policy outcomes.

Today, this concern is particularly acute in the context of European integration, where persistent elite-citizen incongruence has decisively contributed to what many scholars characterize as a crisis of legitimacy for the European project (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Much ink has been spilled on the widening gap between pro-European political elites and electorates who are becoming increasingly dubious about the European integration process (e.g., Vogel & Göncz, 2018). The recent success of parties that express Euroscepticism or even call for an end to the EU confirms this trend, revealing the extent of mistrust and even open hostility toward European integration among large shares of the electorate.

While most existing research on elite-citizen congruence regarding European integration has focused on EU member states, far less attention has been paid to how these dynamics manifest in non-member states that nevertheless have close ties to the EU. This represents a significant gap in our understanding, particularly given that several European countries have chosen alternative forms of engagement with the EU while remaining outside its formal structures. Switzerland presents a particularly compelling case for examining elite-mass congruence on its relationship with the EU.

Swiss–EU relations not only rank among the most important political problems for Swiss citizens but are also the subject of repeated political contestation, notably in the context of direct-democratic votes. The historic rejection of the European Economic Area membership in 1992, the subsequent bilateral agreements, and ongoing debates about immigration and sovereignty have made European integration an extraordinarily salient and contentious issue in Swiss politics over recent decades (see, e.g., Jenni, 2015; Tresch et al., 2020; Wasserfallen, 2023). This persistent salience creates conditions under which the question of congruence

between political elites and citizens on European integration is of particular significance for both scholarly understanding and practical policymaking, especially in these times as the EU and Switzerland are (re)negotiating the institutional setting of their relationship.

Using data from the 2023 Swiss Election Study (Selects), this article examines the extent to which the opinions of political elites and voters coincide regarding Switzerland's relations with the EU. More specifically, we investigate whether the patterns of elite-citizen divergence documented in EU member states extend to a non-member state with high levels of economic European integration. Our analysis compares the preferences of candidates and voters across Switzerland's main political parties, testing two central hypotheses derived from the extensive literature on elite-citizen congruence in European integration politics.

First, we generally expect political elites to be more in favor of closer relations with the EU than voters, reflecting a pro-integrationist elite stance consistently documented by scholars across European democracies (Lauener, 2022; Mattila & Raunio, 2006; McEvoy, 2012; Moland, 2024; Pareschi et al., 2023; Raines et al., 2017; Real-Dato, 2017; Vogel & Göncz, 2018). This hypothesis draws on the constraining dissensus framework of post-functionalist theory (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) and empirical findings showing that political elites tend to be more cosmopolitan and integrationist than ordinary citizens due to their higher levels of economic, cultural, and educational capital (Strijbis et al., 2019).

Second, we add more nuance by hypothesizing that elites adopt more extreme positions than their electorates, with pro-European parties' elites being more integrationist than their voters, while those from Eurosceptic parties are expected to hold more anti-integrationist views than their voters. This expectation is grounded in directional representation theory, which posits that candidates take issue positions that will move the status quo in the direction their electorate presumably prefers, making candidates' positions more extreme than those of their voters (Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989; Valen & Narud, 2007).

The empirical analysis provides support for both hypotheses derived from the European integration literature, thereby revealing patterns that extend established findings from EU member states to the Swiss non-member context. The results thus suggest that the dynamics of elite-citizen congruence on European integration are not confined to formal EU membership but operate according to similar logics more broadly across different forms of institutional arrangements. The fact that the established patterns of elite-citizen congruence on European integration are more universal features of contemporary European politics than previously recognized calls for a more inclusive approach to European integration studies that embraces the full spectrum of European integration experiences, rather than limiting analysis within the EU's internal borders.

Beyond this empirical contribution, our findings carry important theoretical implications for understanding elite-citizen congruence. The relationship between H1 (pro-EU elite bias) and H2 (elite extremity) reveals a crucial theoretical distinction: while H1 shows that elites appear more pro-integrationist overall, this aggregate pattern likely reflects the dominance of pro-European parties rather than a fundamental mechanism; H2 demonstrates the more fundamental dynamic, namely that parties systematically adopt more polarized positions than their voters regardless of their EU orientation, suggesting that elite polarization—not directional bias—is the primary driving force. This distinction has important implications for future research, as it suggests scholars should prioritize examining polarization dynamics across diverse political settings rather than focusing exclusively on directional biases in general.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In Section 2, we provide a brief overview of the literature on elite-citizen congruence in European integration politics, tracing its evolution from the 1990s to the present. In Section 3, we then outline our case selection, discussing the historical evolution and empirical salience of European integration in Switzerland and describing the specific features that make the country a compelling case for this analysis. After laying out our theoretical expectations and hypotheses in Section 4, we describe the data, the operationalization, and our analytical approach in Section 5. Following the presentation of the empirical results in Section 6, we conclude by discussing their broader implications for understanding democratic representation in the context of European integration in Section 7.

2. Elite-Citizen Congruence on European Integration

The study of attitudes toward European integration has undergone a significant transformation, evolving into an autonomous political dimension within national politics across Europe (e.g., Costello et al., 2020; Pareschi et al., 2024; Shim, 2024). This development has been accompanied by growing scholarly attention to the degree of opinion congruence between political elites and citizens on European matters, particularly in the wake of the various crises that have affected the EU in recent decades. Since the pioneering research by Van der Eijk and Franklin (1991), a substantial body of literature has emerged examining the alignment between elite and mass attitudes on European integration. This research trajectory has been particularly relevant as the politicization of EU matters by partisan issue entrepreneurs has amplified the salience of European questions within individual member states and across the continent more broadly (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

The empirical findings reveal a striking pattern in the evolution of EU mass-elite congruence over the past three decades. Initially, during the 1990s, research documented relatively high levels of congruence regarding general European integration attitudes between political elites and citizens (e.g., Schmitt & Thomassen, 2000; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999; Van der Eijk & Franklin, 1991). However, this agreement began to deteriorate significantly by the 2000s, when a clear divide emerged between pro-European political elites and increasingly opposed citizens (e.g., Costello et al., 2020; Mattila & Raunio, 2006; McEvoy, 2012).

This phenomenon has been characterized by scholars as the rise of "constraining dissensus"—a pivotal shift that highlights the growing gap between supportive political elites and a more skeptical public. The identification of this "sleeping giant" of unrepresented Eurosceptic mass attitudes has raised fundamental questions about democratic representation and legitimacy in the context of European integration (Van der Eijk & Franklin, 2004).

In retrospect, it has become clear that the Maastricht Treaty served as a watershed moment, ushering in an era of heightened issue salience around European integration. Eurosceptic political actors progressively brought the European dimension into the mainstream political discourse, fundamentally altering the political landscape (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In line with this transformation of European party systems, research on congruence has consistently identified significant discrepancies between supportive pro-European political elites and more reluctant citizens across various EU countries, thereby confirming this "pro-EU elite bias" (Mattila & Raunio, 2006; McEvoy, 2012; Pareschi et al., 2023; Raines et al., 2017; Real-Dato, 2017; Vogel & Göncz, 2018).

Some empirical studies have specifically targeted EU issue congruence at the party level, investigating the dynamics of congruence within different types of parties. For example, Bakker et al. (2018) find that in the 2014 European Parliament elections, greater incongruence (i.e., a larger distance) between a party's voters and the party on specific issues (including European integration) increases the likelihood of vote switching away from that party. Interestingly, the effects of incongruence are, however, not consistent across party families. While Liberals, Conservatives, and Socialists electorally suffer when they are incongruent with their voters on the EU integration issue, radical left and Christian Democratic party voters do not switch away from their party when incongruence on this issue is high, and radical right parties actually do even better when they are incongruent with their voters on the EU integration issue. In addition, McDonnell and Werner (2019) find that supporters of radical right populist parties are not always closely aligned with their party on the EU integration dimension—although these parties have hardened or made more salient their Eurosceptic positions after the 2008 economic crisis. The increased salience of Euroscepticism has thus not necessarily translated into tighter voter-party congruence on that issue, giving radical right parties some strategic flexibility.

While the "pro-EU elite bias" is still largely present, Mattila and Raunio (2025) interestingly show in their most recent study about voter-party congruence on the European integration dimension that the gap between the political elites and the masses has narrowed in the latest European elections in 2024, suggesting that voter-party congruence has, to some extent, become less of a problem compared to the beginning of the 2000s. Furthermore, it needs to be pointed out that there have been some instances over the past decade in which the population has adopted stronger pro-EU attitudes than their political elites. This applies in particular to some Eastern European countries with a majoritarian far-right Eurosceptic government, e.g., in Hungary and Poland, home to some of the most Eurosceptic elites in the EU alongside their populations that are rarely Eurosceptic (Gherghina & Tap, 2023; Pacześniak, 2025), or with a divided political elite between pro-European and Eurosceptic parties cutting across government–opposition lines, e.g., in Bulgaria (Bankov & Gherghina, 2020).

3. Case Selection

This study seeks to gain some analytical leverage by focusing on an EU non-member state. Switzerland presents a particularly compelling case for examining elite-citizen congruence on European integration matters. Located at the heart of Europe, it is characterized by very high levels of economic integration within the EU single market. This makes the European integration issue politically both salient and contested (Dardanelli & Mazzoleni, 2021; Kriesi, 2007).

The trajectory of Swiss–EU relations has been marked by several pivotal moments that have shaped both elite and public attitudes toward European integration. In this respect, direct democracy played a crucial role (Church, 2021). Most importantly, the historic popular vote of December 1992, in which a slim majority of Swiss voters (50.3%) rejected European Economic Area membership, established the foundation for subsequent debates about European integration.

In 1999, Switzerland and the EU agreed on the Bilateral Agreements I (Schwok, 2020). These agreements, covering seven key domains including free movement of persons, technical barriers to trade, public procurement, agriculture, research, civil aviation, and overland transport, were subsequently endorsed by a two-thirds majority of Swiss voters in a referendum. The so-called "bilateral path" was further extended

through the Bilateral Agreements II in 2004, encompassing nine additional domains, including the controversial Schengen/Dublin cooperation agreements.

Despite initial opposition from radical right parties, these agreements were approved by almost 55% of voters in 2005, demonstrating continued public support for the bilateral approach. Since the bilateral agreements were introduced, the free movement of persons proved most controversial, yet Swiss citizens nevertheless confirmed the "bilateral path" through their acceptance of the extension of the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) to include 10 Eastern European states (2005) as well as Bulgaria and Romania (2009).

Yet the salience of European integration in Swiss politics has experienced some notable fluctuations over time. While the prominence of this topic declined during the 2000s (Jenni, 2015; Safi, 2010), recent years have witnessed a resurgence of European politics as an intensely debated issue (Tresch et al., 2020; Wasserfallen, 2023).

This became particularly evident with the 2014 Against Mass Immigration initiative. This popular initiative, promoted by the Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP; in English, Swiss People's Party) and opposed by moderate parties, resulted in a narrow victory (50.3% of voters and a necessary majority of cantons) calling for quotas on immigration—a direct challenge to the principles of the AFMP. This case epitomizes the enduring conflict lines in contemporary Swiss debates on European integration. The political constellation mirrored what has become a characteristic pattern: the radical right stood against a broad coalition comprising moderate and left parties, employers' associations, trade unions, and the federal government.

The campaign rhetoric crystallized around fundamentally divergent visions of Switzerland's relationship with Europe. The SVP and proponents of the initiative deployed a discourse centered on themes of sovereignty, anti-immigration, and national identity. Their messaging frequently portrayed the EU as an overly bureaucratic entity threatening Swiss autonomy, emphasizing Switzerland's capacity for independent immigration management.

The opponents of the initiative, meanwhile, stressed economic pragmatism and international reliability, warning that the initiative endangered the bilateral path and Switzerland's access to the single market. They emphasized the importance of maintaining trust in international agreements and highlighted the economic risks of jeopardizing Switzerland's relationship with its most important trading partner.

The acceptance of the initiative in the popular vote represented a political shock that highlighted the persistent tensions between European integration commitments and domestic concerns about sovereignty and immigration. Both chambers of the Swiss Parliament implemented the initiative in a diluted form in 2016 by prioritizing Swiss-based job seekers in high-unemployment industries without introducing actual immigration quotas.

Recent developments, including citizens' rejection of the so-called Limitation Initiative in September 2020, which would have terminated the AFMP in the case of a strict implementation, demonstrate the continued importance of understanding how public preferences align with or diverge from elite positions on European integration.

Still today, the future of Swiss–EU relations remains rather uncertain. The Swiss government's decision to withdraw from negotiations about the so-called "institutional framework agreement" in May 2021 (Gago, 2024) created new tensions with Brussels. In March 2024, the EU and Switzerland embarked on new rounds of negotiations about the Bilateral Agreements III. This package aims to balance the customized Swiss sectoral participation in the EU single market and the EU's interest in upholding the integrity of its single market with equal rules for all participants. It comprises several thematic elements, including new agreements (on electricity, food safety, and health) and solutions for the institutional questions, namely a dispute settlement procedure. Negotiations on this package were formally concluded in May 2025.

To summarize, the Swiss case offers valuable insights into how European integration politics function without EU membership, in a context of high levels of economic integration. The combination of direct-democratic institutions, bilateral agreements, and persistent political salience creates conditions where the question of congruence between political elites and citizens on European integration is of particular significance for both scholarly understanding and practical policymaking.

4. Hypotheses

The extensive research on elite-citizen congruence in European integration politics provides a foundation for developing theoretical expectations about how political elites and citizens might diverge in their preferences regarding Switzerland's relations with the EU. In the following, we formulate two hypotheses based on this literature that focus on the relative positioning of elites and voters regarding Switzerland's orientation toward European integration.

4.1. Pro-European Integration Elite Bias Hypothesis

The first hypothesis posits the existence of a general "pro-EU elite bias." This expectation relies on the constraining dissensus framework of post-functionalist theory (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) and is underpinned by numerous elite-mass congruence analyses conducted especially since the 2000s across various European contexts (Mattila & Raunio, 2012; Raines et al., 2017; Real-Dato, 2017; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999; Vogel & Göncz, 2018). Indeed, research on congruence has consistently shown that in EU member states, political elites are generally more supportive of European integration than citizens (e.g., Mattila & Raunio, 2012; Rosset & Stecker, 2019; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997). In other words, the latter have consistently been found to be more Eurosceptic than the former. This pattern extends beyond parties to include governments, which are generally also more EU-integrationist than the citizens of their countries (Rosset & Stecker, 2019). Alongside increasing intra-party conflict on European integration issues (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), some longitudinal studies found evidence of a widening gap between the public and political elites (e.g., Freire et al., 2014; Vogel & Göncz, 2018), while others point to the relative stability of this gap over time (Marzi & Pareschi, 2025; Real-Dato, 2017).

The theoretical foundation for this elite-mass divide rests on what Strijbis et al. (2019) conceptualize as a pervasive "cosmopolitan-communitarian cleavage" in Western European societies. Several mechanisms explain why political elites tend to be more cosmopolitan and therefore more integrationist than ordinary citizens. Individuals with higher economic capital benefit from globalization and supranational economic integration and therefore support it, while those with lower economic capital tend to oppose it. In addition,

people with higher cultural capital, including transnational networks or elite status, favor globalization, while state-bound individuals oppose it. Finally, education plays a crucial role in explaining the divide between elites and citizens according to this theoretical approach. The highly educated are more likely to support supranational integration because they better understand the functional need for collective international problem-solving compared to those with fewer educational opportunities.

More recent comparative studies continue to confirm this general pattern while offering greater nuance. For instance, Pareschi et al. (2023) still find a structured elite-mass divide with elites being more EU-integrationist than voters in eight out of ten investigated countries. A longitudinal analysis reveals a "double-sided" gap whereby elites of pro-EU parties remain more supportive of integration than their voters, while among Eurosceptic parties, the opposite is true (Marzi & Pareschi, 2025). At the same time, the extent of the "pro-EU elite bias" appears to have changed in recent years. Mattila and Raunio (2025) show in their latest study on voter-party congruence in the 2024 European elections that the gap between elites and citizens has narrowed, suggesting that voter-party congruence on the European integration dimension has become less problematic compared to the early 2000s. This finding indicates that while this bias persists, it is gradually diminishing in some contexts, possibly due to the mainstreaming of EU issues and the politicization of integration in party competition.

Moreover, over the past decade, there have been multiple instances where the population exhibits stronger pro-EU attitudes than their political elites. This reversal is particularly visible in Eastern European countries governed by majoritarian far-right or Eurosceptic parties—such as Hungary and Poland—where elites have become among the most Eurosceptic in the EU, while their publics remain comparatively pro-European (Gherghina & Tap, 2023; Pacześniak, 2025). Similar—though less pronounced—dynamics occur in countries with deeply divided political elites, such as Bulgaria, where pro-European and Eurosceptic forces coexist within the governing and opposition blocs (Bankov & Gherghina, 2020) or in the case of the Brexit vote, where almost no traces of a "pro-EU elite bias" could be found (Pareschi, 2024). These patterns highlight that the direction of elite-mass incongruence increasingly depends on domestic political competition and the strategic use of EU rhetoric by ruling elites.

While the general pattern of a more pronounced EU-integrationist stance among the elites than among citizens persists in most EU member states, new empirical evidence shows that such elite-mass incongruence is not confined to member states. In Norway, surveys comparing citizens, politicians, and bureaucrats find that elites—especially bureaucrats—are significantly more supportive of regulatory harmonization with the EU (Moland, 2024). Similarly, research in Switzerland demonstrates persistent elite-voter divergences regarding EU–Swiss relations, with political elites being significantly more EU-integrationist than voters in three out of four European integration matters under scrutiny (Lauener, 2022).

In a nutshell, political elites possess—on average—more economic, cultural, and educational capital than ordinary citizens and are hence more likely to hold cosmopolitan and integrationist attitudes. Yet this tendency is contingent rather than absolute: while in most Western and Southern European contexts, the "pro-EU elite bias" remains robust—although recently diminishing in size—recent evidence from Central and Eastern Europe indicates that the magnitude and direction of the gap depend on domestic political incentives, party-system polarization, and the institutional embeddedness of countries in the EU. Given these theoretical foundations and empirical findings from both EU and non-EU member states, the first hypothesis reads as follows:

H1: Political elites are more in favor of European integration than voters.

4.2. Extremity Hypothesis

The second hypothesis adds more nuance by addressing the aspect of polarization between elites and citizens on European integration. Several representation studies on European political systems have found that political parties tend to adopt more extreme policy positions than their electorates (Esaiasson et al., 1996; Listhaug et al., 1990; Valen & Narud, 2007), meaning their support for or opposition to specific issues is more pronounced (Iversen, 1994; see also Holmberg, 1997). This observation challenges the traditional Downsian model of electoral competition (Downs, 1957), which suggests that politicians should reflect their voters' preferences and share similar positions with their electorate. Instead, some empirical evidence in party-level congruence studies supports the directional theory of issue voting (Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989), which argues that direction rather than proximity attracts voters' interest and attention.

According to the directional representation theory, candidates take issue positions that will move the status quo in the direction their electorate presumably prefers, making candidates' positions necessarily more extreme than those of their voters. In multiparty systems with multidimensional policy spaces, voters may not vote for parties that best reflect their own position, but rather for parties that represent a more extreme view in their preferred direction (Valen & Narud, 2007). From an electoral point of view, this pattern makes sense: political parties need clear ideological profiles and strong opinions on important political issues to mobilize their core constituencies, even at the cost of somewhat reducing representational congruence with them (Dalton, 2017; Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2016). With regard to the issue of European integration, the study by McDonnell and Werner (2019) suggests that directional dynamics suit the political struggle better than congruence-based dynamics in the case of populist radical right parties.

Comparative analyses of European party systems show that polarization on European integration has intensified at the elite level. Drawing on expert surveys before and after the Eurozone crisis, Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2016) demonstrate that while mainstream parties in both Western and Eastern Europe largely maintained pro-integration stances, new challenger and extremist parties moved sharply toward Euroscepticism, widening the divide among political elites. The authors' cross-national evidence further shows that elite positions on European integration cluster at the poles of the integration scale (Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2016), whereas public attitudes tend to be more heterogeneous and context-dependent, shaped by national experiences and partisan cues rather than clear-cut ideological extremes (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). This asymmetry reflects a broader pattern of elite differentiation in Europe's "transnational cleavage" (Hooghe & Marks, 2018), in which elites articulate clearer and more polarized positions on supranational governance than the general electorate.

Research on ideological congruence between political elites and citizens in the Swiss context also reveals that elites tend to be more polarized than citizens (Lauener, 2022; Leimgruber et al., 2010). Indeed, party elites systematically adopt positions that are considerably more extreme than those their electorates prefer. Moreover, Giger and Lefkofridi (2014) show that party-voter congruence in Switzerland depends strongly on issue salience, with niche parties in particular achieving higher congruence when they emphasize the issues their voters care most about. In Switzerland's multiparty system with proportional voting, taking a clear stance on European integration policies—which rank among the political concerns citizens voice most frequently

during election campaigns (e.g., Tresch et al., 2020)—helps candidates sharpen their electoral profile. This leads to the expectation that while candidates represent clear yet more pronounced positions concerning European integration questions, the views of voters tend to be more moderate.

We propose to specify the extremity hypothesis by considering two types of parties—pro-European parties and Eurosceptic parties. The former basically refers to moderate parties and typically includes those from the center-left and the center-right. They have constituted a considerably larger grouping than their Eurosceptic counterparts for decades and have presumably driven the overall presence of the pro-EU elite bias. Political elites of pro-European parties likely maintain more positive stances on European integration than their voters. Conversely, recent studies reveal that contemporary Eurosceptic actors often hold more extreme views than their supporters, whether they are radical right populist parties or parties positioned at the edges of the political spectrum (Bakker et al., 2018; Marzi & Pareschi, 2025; McDonnell & Werner, 2019). This pattern implies that both poles of the integration dimension are marked by elite extremity: pro-European elites are more supportive of European integration and Eurosceptic elites are more reluctant than their respective voters. We are now equipped to formulate the second hypothesis:

> H2: Political elites have more extreme positions on European integration than voters with higher (lower) support levels among political elites of pro-European (Eurosceptic) parties.

5. Data and Operationalization

This study relies on data collected within the framework of the 2023 Swiss Election Study (Selects). We use a question on respondents' opinions regarding a closer relationship with the EU. The focus on the election year of 2023 is important for our study because it marks a critical turning point in negotiations about Swiss–EU relations: after the failed first attempt to negotiate an institutional framework agreement and the Swiss government's pullout in May 2021 (see Section 3), the bilateral relationship between the two partners deteriorated, creating a vacuum in which no one really knew what direction the future relationship might take. This study thus allows for a unique snapshot of opinions on the bilateral relationship, as the data were collected *before* negotiations about the Bilateral Agreements III began in March 2024. On the voters' side, we make use of the Selects Panel Survey (Selects, 2025a). On the candidates' side, we rely on responses to a question from "smartvote," the Swiss Voting Advice Application, that was subsequently merged with the Selects Candidate Survey (Selects, 2025b). The merging of this question into the Candidate Survey was due to the fact that, unfortunately, there were no questions about the Swiss–EU relationship asked directly in the Candidate Survey. However, matching the "smartvote" data with the Candidate Survey data, luckily, allows for our article's endeavor of direct voter-candidate comparisons.

The Selects Panel Survey aims at studying the evolution of political opinions and vote intention/choice during the different phases of the election cycle. It started in 2023 with three online panel waves and continues with yearly follow-up waves until after the next federal elections in 2027. In 2023, the first panel wave was fielded *before* the election campaign (June–August), the second *during* the election campaign (September–October), and the third *after* the elections took place (October–November). A total of 30,872 individuals across all Swiss cantons were randomly sampled by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Sample members had to be Swiss citizens living in Switzerland, aged 18 or older. 8,197 citizens responded in the first wave (response rate, 26.6%), 6,077 in the second (retention rate based on all those who could be recontacted, 75.1%), and 5,579

in the third (retention rate, 91.9%). For this analysis, we mainly use variables from the first panel wave, which also contains the question about closer relations with the EU. As to party vote choice, we use the question on respondents' party vote choice asked in the third (post-election) wave or, in very few cases, in the second wave for voters who had already voted by postal voting toward the end of wave 2. This leaves us with a final *N* of 4,437 voters.

The 2023 Selects Candidate Survey was conducted among all candidates running for the National Council (Lower House) and/or the Council of States (Upper House). Its main aim is to understand the candidates' career paths, political attitudes, and campaign activities. This survey was fielded applying a mixed-mode approach: after the federal elections, all candidates were invited to fill in an online questionnaire, and those who had not taken part before December 2023 received a paper questionnaire as part of a reminder. Out of the 5,997 candidates for the National Council and the Council of States, 2,527 took part in the survey (92% online and 8% through the paper questionnaire; response rate, 42.1%). A total of $N = 2,394$ candidates answered the "smartvote" question on closer relations with the EU and could be matched with the Candidate Survey data.

Voters and candidates were asked about their opinions on whether they supported closer relations with the EU, not in an identical but very similar way. The question from the Panel Survey reads as follows: "Some people believe that Switzerland should strengthen its cooperation with the EU. Others believe that Switzerland should increase its independence from the EU. Where would you position yourself on this issue?" Respondents could position themselves on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *very much in favor of strengthening cooperation with the EU* to 5 = *very much in favor of increasing independence from the EU*, with the middle category 3 = *neither nor*. The wording of the question for candidates was the following: "Do you support closer relations with the European Union (EU)?" Respondents were asked to position themselves on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *no* to 4 = *yes*, with "rather no" and "rather yes" in between. To allow for comparison and congruence analyses between voters and the political elites, the two response scales were standardized to range from 0 (least support) to 3 (most support for closer relations with the EU).

Müller et al. (2012) and Shim and Gherghina (2020) suggest that researchers should clearly outline their research decisions in congruence studies. Above all, this requires a definition of the two groups being compared, i.e., elites and citizens. This study puts the election context in the foreground as the two data sources stem from surveys conducted in the framework of the 2023 Swiss federal elections (see Bernhard, 2024). More specifically, we investigate to what extent the electoral supply side (candidates) is congruent with the demand side (voters). Rather than inquire into the quality of representation of citizens' opinions in parliament, we analyze how parties reflect their electorates on the issue of closer relations with the EU. Unfortunately, the number of elected candidates, i.e., MPs, is simply too low (with standard deviations becoming too large) to allow for reliable and conclusive congruence analyses between party voters and MPs. However, as a robustness check, we nevertheless additionally conducted our congruence analyses on the very restricted sample of elected candidates to see whether our main results hold (see Section 6.2). Therefore, in this article, we do not only mean "elected members of parliament" or "parties' (average) positions"—as is the case for most representation studies (Shim & Gherghina, 2020, p. 512), including those using, e.g., manifesto data—but *all* candidates who ran in the election under scrutiny when referring to the term "political elites." The second group, "the citizens," is defined as those citizens who took part in the elections. Hence, non-voters are excluded from the analyses. The analysis considers the six major parties of Switzerland: SVP, FDP.Die Liberalen (FDP; in English, The Liberals), Die Mitte (The Centre), Grünliberale
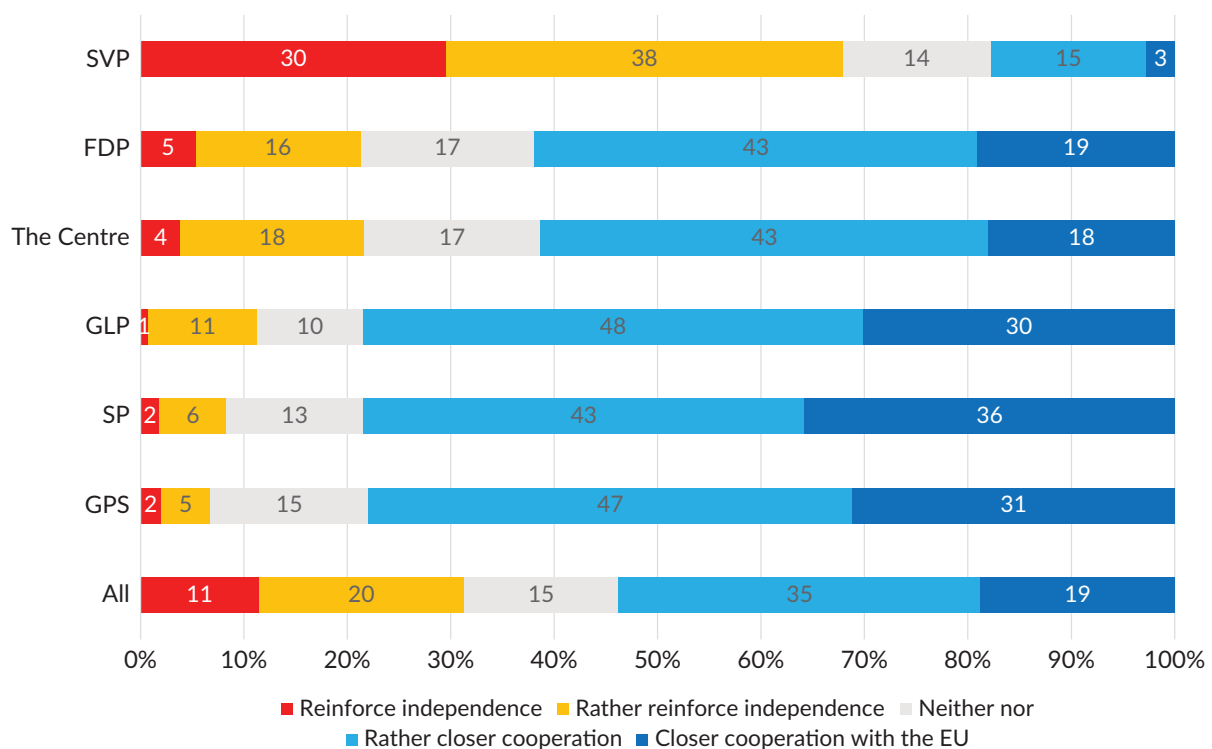
Partei (GLP; Green Liberal Party), Sozialdemokratische Partei (SP; Social Democratic Party), and Grüne Partei der Schweiz (GPS; Green Party).

Our empirical analysis examines candidate-voter congruence on Switzerland's relations with the EU. We proceed in two steps: first, we provide descriptive statistics that map the distribution of preferences among both voters and candidates for Switzerland's main political parties. Second, we rely on inferential statistics to test our two hypotheses. Using t-test statistics, we hereby investigate whether the mean position of candidates is significantly different from the mean position of voters, overall (H1) and across the different parties (H2). Note that for the descriptive and the overall inferential analyses, we use weights that are already available in the data sets to make the data representative of the surveyed populations. For the candidates, we use the design weight and the party weight that correct biases in the cantonal and party-related distribution of candidates. For the voters, we use the total weight that contains both the design and party weight, correcting biases related to the cantonal distribution of voters and adjusting the distribution of party affiliations to the (real) vote shares of the parties in the 2023 federal elections.

6. Results

6.1. Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive analysis reveals distinct patterns in how Swiss voters and political candidates view closer relations with the EU. Beginning with the electorate, Figure 1 shows that Swiss voters exhibit a nuanced but generally favorable stance toward European integration.
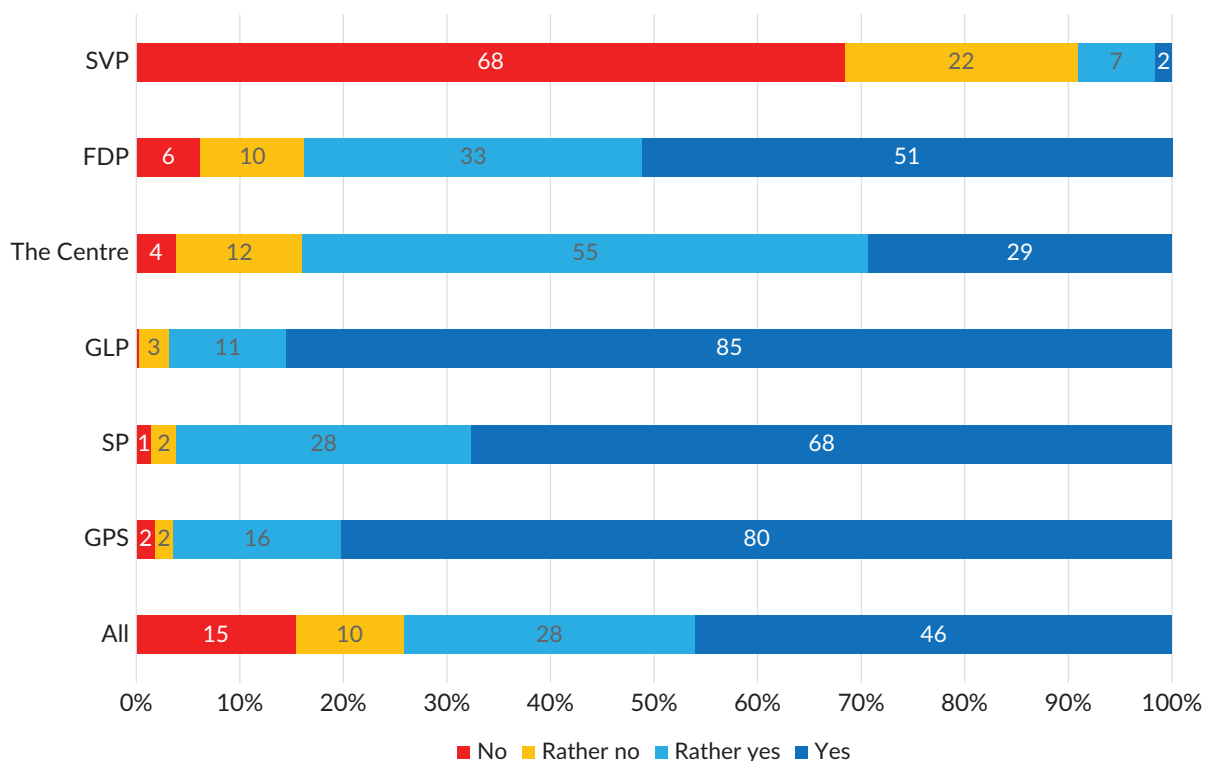

Figure 1. Voters' positions on closer relations with the EU. Notes: Weighted results for the group "all"; $N = 4,437$; N per party, see Table 1.

Overall, a majority (54%) of respondents who participated in the 2023 Swiss federal elections favor closer relations with the EU (sum of the responses "rather closer cooperation" and "closer cooperation with the EU"), while 31% tend to be reluctant (either "reinforce independence" or "rather reinforce independence"), and the remaining 15% choose "neither nor." This finding indicates that the Swiss electorate maintains a generally pro-integrationist orientation.

However, these aggregate figures mask considerable variation across party lines. The strongest support for closer relations emerges among the electorates of the GLP, GPS, and SP (78–79%), reflecting the cosmopolitan orientation typically associated with these parties. Relatively high support levels are observed among The Centre and FDP voters (61–62%). In stark contrast, opposition to closer EU relations originates primarily from the radical right. Indeed, the voters of the SVP tend to be against a closer relationship (68%). This pattern aligns with the SVP's long-standing Eurosceptic positioning and its emphasis on Swiss sovereignty and independence.

Turning to political elites, the survey data reveals more pronounced pro-integrationist tendencies (see Figure 2). Overall, 74% of candidates tend to be in favor of closer relations (28% are rather in favor and 46% in favor), while opposition accounts for the remaining quarter (25%). Compared to voters, candidates are found to be more strongly in favor of closer relations with the EU (more pro-integrationist). This pattern provides initial support for H1, confirming the existence of a pro-European elite bias in the Swiss political landscape.

Figure 2. Candidates' positions on closer relations with the EU. Notes: Weighted results for the group "all"; *N* = 2,394; *N* per party, see Table 1.

At the party level, the strongest support for closer relations with the EU emerges among candidates from the GLP, SP, and GPS (96%), indicating a widespread pro-integrationist sentiment within these parties' political

elites. Very high support is also observable for FDP and The Centre candidates (84%), suggesting that moderate parties' elites are substantially more pro-European than their already favorable electorates. By contrast, fierce opposition to closer relations with the EU characterizes the candidates of the SVP (90%), indicating that the radical right party's Euroscepticism is stronger at the elite level than among its voters.

Hence, candidates exhibit more pronounced opinions than voters, with higher shares in the extreme categories. This pattern provides preliminary evidence supporting H2, the extremity hypothesis.

6.2. Inferential Analysis

Table 1 presents a systematic comparison between the average positions of Swiss voters and candidates on closer relations with the EU using the standardized scale that ranges from 0 to 3. The inferential analysis provides strong empirical support for both hypotheses. Beginning with H1, the comparison of all voters and candidates reveals that candidates (2.05) prove to be significantly more integrationist than voters (1.72). The t-statistics confirm that this difference is significant at the 0.1% error level. Overall, we can thus posit that political elites are more supportive of closer relations with the EU than voters, providing robust support for H1.

Table 1. Comparison between voters and candidates on closer relations with the EU.

Groups	N	Mean support for a closer relationship with the EU (0–3)	Difference (voters-candidates)	T-statistic	Are elites more integrationist than voters?
SVP voters	916	0.92	0.50	7.67***	No
SVP candidates	187	0.42			
FDP voters	583	1.91	−0.38	−5.91***	Yes
FDP candidates	258	2.29			
The Centre voters	667	1.90	−0.19	−3.99***	Yes
The Centre candidates	467	2.09			
GLP voters	442	2.22	−0.60	−13.93***	Yes
GLP candidates	378	2.82			
SP voters	1,037	2.28	−0.34	−7.88***	Yes
SP candidates	337	2.62			
GPS voters	459	2.25	−0.49	−10.70***	Yes
GPS candidates	333	2.75			
All voters	4,437	1.72	−0.32	−12.65***	Yes
All candidates	2,394	2.05			

Notes: Negative values for the difference between voters and candidates indicate weaker mean support among voters than candidates; significance levels: *** = $p < 0.001$, ** = $p < 0.01$, * = $p < 0.05$; weighted results for the groups "all voters" and "all candidates."

Let us now turn to H2. The five pro-integrationist parties all display negative differences, meaning that candidates are, on average, more in favor of closer relations with the EU than their voters. The magnitude of these differences ranges from 0.19 (for The Centre) to 0.60 (for the GLP). However, t-statistics reveal that

these mean differences are highly significant ($p < 0.001$) for all parties. The opposite pattern applies to the SVP from the radical right. Their candidates are, on average, less in favor of closer relations than their voters (0.42 vs. 0.92). Again, the difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that SVP elites adopt more Eurosceptic positions than their electorate.

The analysis at the party level demonstrates that candidates have consistently more pronounced anti-European (in the case of the SVP) or pro-European positions (for the moderate and leftist parties) than their voters. The positions are significantly different in the expected direction across all parties. This pattern thus strongly confirms the extremity hypothesis (H2).

As Golder and Stramski (2010) point out, there are more refined measures of congruence than comparing mean values. In order to investigate the degree to which the two distributions of opinions—among the voters and the political elites—resemble each other, the authors propose a "many-to-many" approach to conceptualize congruence. As this study investigates congruence with regard to where the political elites position themselves and to what degree they represent their electorates' positions (see H1 and H2), such refined measures of congruence based on the variance or distribution of opinions between the two groups are not conducive to the purpose of this article. However, we use the "many-to-many" congruence measure as a robustness check for the empirical analyses on the differences in mean positions presented in Table 1 and describe the obtained results in Section 1 of the Supplementary File.

Furthermore, we additionally conducted the congruence analyses on the restricted sample of elected candidates (MPs) to see whether the in Tabel 1 reported results comparing all political elites with all voters hold (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File). Because of the very low number of MPs in the Candidate Survey, the results need to be interpreted with caution. However, there is a tendency for elected candidates to be more supportive of closer relations than voters. At the party level, the additional analyses substantiate the results: the elected candidates are always (and mostly significantly) more extreme than their electorates. Interestingly, comparing Tables 1 and A2, we can also state that, on the party level, elected candidates are more extreme than the group of elected and non-elected candidates together.

To sum up, the empirical analysis reveals systematic patterns of elite-citizen divergence that are in line with theoretical expectations derived from the broader European integration literature. Both descriptive and inferential analyses confirm that Swiss political elites are more supportive of closer EU relations than voters overall, while simultaneously demonstrating that candidates adopt more polarized positions than their respective party electorates, whether in a pro-integrationist or Eurosceptic direction.

7. Conclusion

This article examined the congruence between political elites and citizens regarding Switzerland's relations with the EU, using data from the 2023 Swiss Election Study (Selects). Our empirical analysis aimed to understand whether the patterns of elite-citizen divergence documented in EU member states extend to a non-member state with exceptionally high levels of economic integration with the EU.

The empirical findings provide strong support for both hypotheses examined in this article. Consistent with the "pro-EU elite bias" documented by previous studies across mostly Western European democracies, we

found that Swiss political elites are, on average, more favorable toward closer EU relations than voters. This basic pattern confirms that the constraining dissensus framework extends beyond the scope of the EU to encompass countries navigating complex bilateral relations with it. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Mattila and Raunio (2025) recently found the congruence gap between voters and parties regarding European integration to have narrowed.

In addition, our results support the more nuanced extremity hypothesis, demonstrating that candidates adopt more polarized positions on European integration than their electorates. More specifically, this pattern manifests differently across the political spectrum. While candidates from the main moderate pro-European parties (i.e., GPS, SP, GLP, The Centre, and FDP) express stronger integrationist preferences than their voters, SVP candidates are even more Eurosceptic than their already skeptical electorate. The confirmation of the extremity hypothesis is substantiated by the recent study of Toshkov (2025) based on 19 EU member states, Norway, Switzerland, and the UK, showing that public opinion is much less structured and less extreme than party positions.

Our results contribute to several scholarly debates. First, they extend the geographic delimitation of elite-citizen congruence research beyond EU member states, demonstrating that similar dynamics operate in countries with alternative forms of European integration. The Swiss case provides valuable insights into how European integration politics function in non-member states, complementing recent findings from Brexit-era Britain (Pareschi, 2024) that similarly challenged simplistic narratives of pro-European elites vs. Eurosceptic citizens. We therefore argue that EU scholars should systematically incorporate non-member states into their analytical frameworks, particularly those with significant levels of European integration. Countries like Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and the UK (in the post-Brexit era) offer valuable analytical leverage for understanding how European integration politics function across different institutional arrangements. Such inclusion would not only enhance the empirical robustness of findings but also contribute to more theoretically sophisticated accounts by scholars when it comes to truly comprehensive European integration.

Second, we believe the relationship between the findings based on the two examined hypotheses deserves further consideration, as it illuminates a crucial theoretical distinction in elite-citizen congruence research. While H1 captures the aggregate pattern showing that political elites are more pro-integrationist than voters overall, this general finding may in fact mask more nuanced dynamics revealed by H2. The overall pro-European elite bias (H1) may emerge largely because pro-European parties such as Conservatives, Socialists, Liberals, and the Greens still constitute the dominant force in many countries. However, the confirmation of the extremity hypothesis (H2) reveals that this aggregate pattern can obscure the underlying mechanism: parties consistently adopt more polarized positions than their electorates, regardless of their pro- or anti-European orientation. This probably suggests that H2 represents the more fundamental driving factor (i.e., elite polarization as opposed to pro-EU bias), while H1 reflects the overall issue-specific power balance between supporters and opponents in a given political context. Understanding this distinction may be crucial for future comparative research. Scholars may prioritize examining elite polarization dynamics across diverse political contexts rather than focusing exclusively on directional biases in general. Hence, systematically analyzing how varying compositions of pro- and anti-European forces in different party systems shape aggregate congruence patterns may resolve some puzzles in congruence research, such as the intriguing cases related to the domination of Eurosceptical parties (e.g., Fidesz in Hungary). In any case, such a clarification can be expected to strengthen both theoretical and empirical contributions in congruence research.

Third, our findings qualify the conventional wisdom about elite-citizen gaps in European integration. While we confirm the existence of systematic differences between elites and citizens, these differences are more nuanced than often portrayed. The high overall degree of congruence we observe suggests that Swiss democracy continues to function effectively in translating citizen preferences into elite representation, even on highly contentious issues like European integration. The persistence of European integration as a salient and contested issue in Swiss politics over the last decades may be key in explaining the high level of congruence shown here. More specifically, the Swiss case may illuminate the role of institutional context in shaping elite-citizen dynamics. Switzerland's direct democratic institutions create unique incentives for political elites, who are obliged to regularly defend their positions before voters in the framework of direct-democratic votes. This institutional factor may thus help explain why the elite-citizen gaps we observe, while systematic, remain relatively modest compared to some EU member states.

This study comes with some limitations, however. First, and most obviously, it focused exclusively on Switzerland, limiting the generalizability of our findings to other non-member states with different institutional arrangements or levels of European integration. Future comparative research should account for the temporal, geographical, historical, and political contexts that shape elite-citizen congruence on European integration. In particular, distinctions between Eastern and Western European democracies warrant careful consideration, especially given the dominance of Eurosceptic parties in government in countries such as Hungary and Poland, which may produce fundamentally different congruence patterns. For instance, Wincławska and Pacześniak (2025) show in their recent study that while Poland remains one of the most pro-European societies, the country has nevertheless encountered growing support for Eurosceptic parties, increasing criticism of the EU across the political spectrum, and a general shift toward the right in its political discourse. The authors explain this seemingly paradoxical finding by the fact that parties are increasingly using different frames—either portraying the EU as an opportunity or a threat—in a very strategic manner, allowing them to incorporate some Eurosceptic elements regarding specific EU policies into their narratives and to constantly adapt their responsiveness to voters and evolving public opinion (Wincławska & Pacześniak, 2025).

Second, the slight methodological inconsistencies between the elite and the citizen survey (4-point vs. 5-point scales) may be cause for concern, though we expect no systematic distortions in this regard. Third, our focus on European integration may not reflect congruence patterns in other or more specific domains, suggesting the need for empirical investigations that offer a more comprehensive look at several issues (see, e.g., Lauener, 2022). In addition, the absence of a Eurosceptic far-left party from our analysis reflects the configuration of Swiss party politics but limits our ability to assess whether the extremity patterns we observe extend across the entire ideological spectrum.

Despite these limitations, our findings offer both theoretical and practical insights. They demonstrate that the dynamics of European integration politics extend beyond formal EU membership, contributing to our understanding of how democratic representation functions in highly salient international relations. As European integration continues to evolve and face new challenges, understanding the relationships between elite and citizen preferences in both member and non-member states remains essential for assessing the democratic foundations of states across the European continent. The pro-European elite bias documented across EU member states clearly extends to Switzerland's unique non-member context, while the extremity hypothesis receives robust confirmation across the Swiss party system. The systematic nature

of these patterns, combined with their high statistical significance, suggests that elite-citizen dynamics on European integration operate according to similar logics regardless of formal EU membership status.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in SWISSUBase at https://doi.org/10.48573/na65-n937 (Selects Panel Survey) and https://doi.org/10.48573/sc3n-yw36 (Selects Candidate Survey).

Supplementary Material

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

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Wincławska, M., & Pacześniak, A. (2025). Deconstructing Polish euro-enthusiasm: The illusory incongruence of party narratives with public opinion. *Politics and Governance, 14*, Article 11082. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.11082

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ARTICLE

Deconstructing Polish Euro-Enthusiasm: The Illusory Incongruence of Party Narratives With Public Opinion

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Abstract

Over 20 years have passed since Poland's accession to the EU. While the EU is no longer perceived by Poles as the "promised land," Eurobarometer surveys still indicate that Poles remain among the most pro-European societies. However, similar to other European countries, Poland has encountered growing support for Eurosceptic parties, increasing criticism of the EU across the political spectrum, and a general shift towards the right in its political discourse. This article applies salient theory and utilises a method of deductive thematic analysis to examine the narratives of relevant political parties regarding the EU across three electoral campaigns in Poland: the parliamentary campaign in 2023, the European Parliament campaign in 2024, and the presidential campaign in 2025. The study aimed to explore how the political parties framed the EU in their electoral narratives and identify the key themes they employed. The findings revealed that, while in the 2023 elections the parties in opposition to the then-ruling United Right presented their own pro-EUness as one of the key elements of their political image, in the subsequent 2024 and 2025 elections almost all of the parties incorporated elements of Eurosceptic narratives in their campaigns or took more critical stands on some of the EU's policies. These findings suggest that even when they adopted different frames—either presenting the EU as an opportunity or a threat—the parties were strategically responsive to voter expectations and evolving public sentiment.

Keywords

Euroscepticism; congruence; Poland; political parties

1. Introduction

Until the country's accession to the EU in 2004, all of the liberal-democratic political parties in Poland—irrespective of their ideological orientation on the left–right spectrum—shared a strategic consensus centred on European integration that was often framed in political discourse as a "return to Europe." This orientation of the political elites reflected not only a geopolitical realignment but also a broader civilisational and normative aspiration to distance the country from its communist past. Moreover, it was perceived as essential for consolidating the young democracy by anchoring Poland within the Western institutional order, thereby securing at the same time its economic development (Góra & Mach, 2010, pp. 227–234).

This pro-European stance was the course of action for successive cabinets (De Waele & Pacześniak, 2012; Zuba, 2021, pp. 397–398) even when public opinion was becoming doubtful, fearful of, or impatient with the difficult accession process. Indeed, Poland's accession to the EU in May 2004 constituted the achievement of a crucial objective in the country's foreign policy and, at the same time, marked the end of a consensus that had existed on this matter among major political actors (Zuba, 2009). From then on, Poland's policies regarding the EU and attitude to the EU would become issues that polarised partisan rivalry while also being a matter of broad consensus among the public.

For years, all of the public opinion polls (e.g., from the Polish Public Opinion Research Centre [Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, CBOS] and from Eurobarometer) had seen 70–80% approval ratings for Poland's membership in the EU—even reaching over 90% in 2022 and coinciding with Russia's attack on neighbouring Ukraine. Poles were also strongly aware of the benefits of European integration. This is why Polish politics, especially between 2015 and 2023, was often analysed in the context of a paradox: Eurosceptic elites under the umbrella of the United Right cabinets had governed a society in which levels of support for the EU had consistently been among the highest in all of Europe (Pacześniak, 2025).

However, in Poland, as in other European countries, voters increasingly supported Eurosceptic parties and politicians in elections (Kotwas & Kubik, 2019; Pareschi et al., 2024, p. 57; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024). A general shift to the right in political discourse was observed (Cianciara, 2022; O'Neal, 2017; Styczyńska & Meijer, 2023), and visible criticism towards the EU was seen across the political spectrum (Gherghina et al., 2025; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). Furthermore, Markowski and Zagórski (2023) identified a new group of "Eurodisappointed" citizens who, although not Eurosceptic, were frustrated by the EU's inadequate response to democratic backsliding in countries such as Poland and Hungary. Although the liberal European media and EU institutions described the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections—which resulted in the formation of a pro-EU coalition cabinet—as Poland's return to Europe (Bill & Stanley, 2025), in fact, the Eurosceptic Law and Justice (PiS) party gathered the most votes in these elections. However, it lacked the coalition potential to govern for a third consecutive term. A year later, in the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, two Eurosceptic formations (PiS and Confederation) won almost 50% of the vote. Finally, in the 2025 presidential election, with 13 candidates, Eurosceptic politicians were collectively supported by more than 50% of voters in the first round. The Eurosceptic candidate Karol Nawrocki, fielded by PiS, won the second round and became the president of Poland.

The aim of this article is to examine the last three election campaigns—the parliamentary campaign in 2023, the EP campaign in 2024, and the presidential campaign in 2025—to explore how relevant EU issues were

in these elections and how the political parties framed the EU in their electoral narratives. Our goal was to answer the research question: How congruent were the political parties' narratives on the EU with the EU-related attitudes of their electorates?

In what follows, we first describe the theoretical perspectives concerning the nature of the links between voters' opinions and national political parties' positions on European integration. Next, we present our methodological approach and propose an analytical matrix for the thematic analysis of the party discourse on the EU. We then delve into the case of Poland, starting with the results of opinion polls before proceeding to our own analysis of party narratives in three electoral campaigns from 2023 to 2025. Finally, we compile the electorates' positions on EU-related issues alongside the parties' narratives and offer conclusions.

2. Theoretical and Research Background

There is an ongoing debate in the literature on the nature of the links between voters' opinions and national political parties' positions on European integration, i.e., the extent to which political parties lead or follow public opinion on this issue. The evidence regarding elite–mass linkages in the context of European integration has been contradictory (Costello et al., 2012; Müller et al., 2012; Ray, 2003). Whereas some scholars have argued that political elites respond to the changing preferences of their electorates, others have suggested that party elites shape public opinion through a process of information and persuasion (Gabel, 1998; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2005).

This discussion is embedded in two competitive perspectives on the relationship between political parties and their voters: the mass- and elite-driven approaches. On the one hand, according to the mass-driven approach, parties are responsive to voters, and the issue-related content of their politics reflects social conflicts (Green-Pedersen, 2019), from which the parties originate and in which they are rooted (see Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). However, this perspective is not at odds with parties making tactical changes, especially on secondary and less important issues (Elias et al., 2015), to respond to modifications in voters' policy preferences (Adams, 2012). Indeed, political parties are adaptive organisations that constantly and strategically update their platforms and policy narratives to maximise electoral support (Koedam, 2022).

The elite-driven approach, on the other hand, claims that parties and their leaders influence the political debate by introducing and shaping public opinion and support of the issues (Arndt, 2016; Pacześniak & Wincławska, 2024). They do so to strengthen the strategic competition between parties and structure social conflicts (Carmines & Stimson, 1986). Moreover, as salient theory asserts, political parties emphasise the issues that are most favourable to them and downplay others (Budge, 2015; Budge et al., 2001). Thus, they prioritise different topics to maximise their support while omitting others that could diminish this support. As Neumayer (2008) showed, political parties utilise their attitudes towards European issues not only to differentiate themselves from one another and define the field of rivalry but also to shape their electorates.

Therefore, the parties' stance towards the EU may be ideological (Hellström, 2008), but it may also be influenced by strategic and contextual factors. Indeed, political parties respond to issues raised, introduced, or defined by their competitors (Laver, 2005). Thus, we find in the electoral campaigns some overlapping issues in the narratives that are addressed by most of the parties in the campaign.

As part of the discussion on the mutual influence of political parties and their electorates, there is a scientific debate on the congruence/discrepancy and convergence/divergence of the policy positions between the masses and elites (Pareschi et al., 2024; Shim & Gherghina, 2020), including in the Eastern and Central Europe context (Ibenskas & Polk, 2021; Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2012). With the politicisation of European integration in all of the EU member states (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Wellings, 2023)—which has become one of the drivers of electoral behaviour (Rapp, 2025; Vasilopoulou & Zur, 2024)—the issue of congruence takes on a greater significance.

Previous comparative studies based on mass and elite survey data from 2016, such as that by Pareschi et al. (2024), showed a relatively high level of congruence between Polish elites and the electorate on certain subdimensions of European integration, measured on the level of the party system. However, our study goes a step further and addresses the gap in the literature by concentrating on a single-country case, Poland, whose political context is well known to the authors and which, as advocated by Pareschi et al., sheds light on the "EU issue congruence and the impact of the European dimension within member states' domestic politics" (Pareschi et al., 2024, p. 80). This focus provides the analytical depth needed to trace congruence not so much at the systemic level but among single political parties.

By situating this finding in a concrete national setting, our study was able to capture the nuances of how congruence and incongruence unfold in practice (Sanders & Toka, 2013) while also revealing how EU-related issues were strategically employed during electoral campaigns to mobilise voter support. In this way, the single-country perspective complements broader comparative approaches by highlighting mechanisms and dynamics that might otherwise remain obscured.

Poland is a suitable case study for research on congruence and incongruence due to its shifts in public sentiment regarding EU-related issues and the spread of Eurosceptic party narratives. Although the level of satisfaction with EU membership remains one of the highest among member states—and still not many voters in Poland would agree to Polexit, which is an extreme case of hard Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008)—the level of soft Eurosceptic attitude is quite high in Polish society compared to other European countries (Csehi & Zgut, 2020; Gherghina et al., 2025). Moreover, Poland was the first EU country against which the European Commission (EC) initiated, in 2017, the procedure described in Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, which is triggered if there is "a clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the values [of the EU] referred to in Article 2" (Treaty on European Union, 2012). The main issue was the violation of the rule of law in the justice system during the rule of the United Right coalition led by PiS.

This fact dramatically increased the importance of EU issues in the internal debate and became one of the main lines of division between the government and the opposition. Although the United Right government (2015–2023) officially denied that it was considering leaving the EU, some PiS politicians suggested that after the end of the 2021–2027 financial perspective, Poles should be asked in a referendum whether they wanted to remain in or leave the EU, knowing that in the next perspective (2028–2034) Poland could become a net contributor to the EU budget. There are, therefore, many "althoughs," which suggests the existence of the paradoxes announced in the title of this article.

3. Methodological Approach

This study aimed to examine the consistency or mismatch between the electorates' positions on European integration in Poland and the political parties' positions on the issue. Although research on the congruence between political parties or political elites and the voters is more often quantitative than qualitative in nature (Costello et al., 2020; Real-Dato, 2017; Shim & Gherghina, 2020; Walczak & van der Brug, 2012), this study adopted a mixed-method approach. This approach is utilised especially in situations when the availability and comparability of quantitative data on the parties' or elites' positions presents a challenge (Bankov & Gherghina, 2020, p. 564) due to a lack of reliable databases. To investigate voters' expectations of various parties regarding the EU, the study employed a secondary data analysis of the opinion polls conducted by the well-established CBOS on the issues related to European integration. The reliance on CBOS data, which use representative probability samples, ensured a high degree of methodological consistency, credibility, and comparability across multiple and regular waves of polling. Nonetheless, recognising the limitations inherent in relying on a single source, the study's findings are contextualised within broader empirical patterns and interpreted with appropriate analytical caution.

To reconstruct the political parties' narratives on European integration during the three electoral campaigns between 2023 and 2025, the study used a deductive thematic analysis with predefined codes. First, four frames of analysis of the political narratives on the EU were identified: (a) sovereignty, (b) legitimisation, (c) cultural issues, and (d) socioeconomic issues (Caiani et al., 2024; Pirro & van Kessel, 2018). Then, the study determined whether the frames and the themes within them were used by the political parties in their electoral campaigns and in what context—as an opportunity or a threat—to reveal the parties' positions on European integration within the predefined frames. An analytical matrix for the thematic analysis of the parties' discourses is presented in Table 1. As a result of this analysis, a set of dominant frames and themes was assigned to each of the parties under study, which were then compared to the frames and themes found among the electorate based on survey data. Then, using discourse–attitude congruence analysis (Bankov & Gherghina, 2020; Gherghina et al., 2024), areas of high congruence and areas of tension or divergence were identified.

Table 1. Analytical matrix for the thematic analysis of the party discourses in electoral campaigns.

Frame of analysis	Opportunity	Threat
Sovereignty	EU as a security provider in the context of regional instability	Erosion of Polish sovereignty, including pressure from Brussels on the rule of law and governance issues
Legitimisation	Poland's influence on European decision-making	EU institutions holding too much power and illegally extending their competences at the cost of the national governments
Cultural issues	EU as a protector and guarantor of human rights	Erosion of Polish traditional values
Socioeconomic issues	Economic prosperity, funding, and modernisation	Overregulation and economic dependency

Traditionally, party positions and their changes have been researched through the analysis of parties' electoral manifestos (e.g., Braun & Schmitt, 2020). Therefore, this article includes such an analysis whenever a party presented a manifesto. However, since it is not uncommon for parties and candidates to either not publish

party platforms at all or to confine their message to a few slogans or merely a few pages of text (see Pacześniak & Wincławska, 2024, p. 6), the analysis also included the content of debates among candidates organised by the public television broadcaster, speeches of party leaders or presidential candidates at party-organised rallies and campaign events, and candidates' leaflets and party footage as used in their electoral campaigns (see the Supplementary File). The analysis did not include content from social media, which may be perceived as a limitation of the study. However, this choice was intentional as the study, by design, analysed more official sources of communication that captured the formal positions of the actors articulated in a less affective and customised style than typically found on social media.

The five political parties that were chosen for the analysis were the Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska [KO]), Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]), Third Way (Trzecia Droga [TD]), New Left (Nowa Lewica [NL]), and Confederation (Konfederacja). They all participated in the three elections that were analysed, crossed the threshold for parliamentary and European elections, and fielded candidates in the 2025 presidential election. More details about the analysed parties are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The political parties analysed relative to the 2023–2025 election campaign period.

Political party/ European political family	General election 2023		EP election 2024		Presidential election 2025			
	Status	% of vote	Status	% of vote	Status	Candidate	1st round % of vote	2nd round % of vote
KO/European People's Party	Opposition	30.7	Government	37.1	Government	Trzaskowski	31.4	49.1
PiS/European Conservatives and Reformists	Government	35.4	Opposition	36.2	Opposition	Nawrocki	29.5	50.9
TD/Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	Opposition	14.4	Government	6.9	Government	Hołownia	5.0	—
NL/Party of European Socialists	Opposition	8.6	Government	6.3	Government	Biejat	4.2	—
Confederation/ divided into Patriots for Europe, and Europe of Sovereign Nations	Opposition	7.2	Opposition	12.1	Opposition	Mentzen	14.8	—

Source: Authors' elaboration of the election results based on Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza (2023, 2024, 2025).

4. Voters' Attitudes Toward the EU and Their Influence on Electoral Decisions

When Poles are asked the general question of whether they support Poland's membership in the EU, the vast majority answer in the affirmative. The highest support was recorded by CBOS in 2022, when more than 90% of respondents gave a positive answer (CBOS, 2024a). Attitudes towards EU membership are mainly determined by political orientation. Twenty years after accession, EU membership was supported by 94% of

respondents who identified with the left, yet only 64% of those declaring right-wing political views supported it. A respondent's support for a specific political party was also an important factor. Support for Poland's presence in the EU was declared by 98% of KO voters, 95% of TD's, and 92% of NL's. Two-thirds of PiS supporters also expressed acceptance of Poland's membership in the EU, while one-third were against. By contrast, among Confederation voters, opponents of EU membership (51%) outnumbered supporters (38%).

The picture became slightly more nuanced when Poles were asked more specific questions related to the EU. The question of whether EU membership limits Poland's sovereignty and independence divided public opinion almost in half: In 2023, 45% of respondents believed that EU membership restricted state sovereignty, while 44% held the opposite opinion (CBOS, 2023). This issue very clearly divided the parties' electorates. Confederation and PiS voters were convinced that Poland's sovereignty within the EU was too limited, whereas this position was not shared by most supporters of KO, NL, or TD. When the respondents were asked about a specific situation, i.e., how Poland should respond to the EC's blocking of funds from the EU Recovery Plan as a consequence of the judicial changes introduced earlier by the United Right government (CBOS, 2023), the majority of respondents (63%) supported the right-wing conservative government's withdrawal of some of these changes so that they would be accepted by the EC and payments to Poland could be released. Only 16% of respondents were against it (mainly Confederation voters and half of PiS voters), which meant that supporters of the ruling parties were also open to concessions if EU money were to follow.

What greatly differentiated the party electorates was the assessment of responsibility for the blocking of the disbursement of the Recovery Plan funds. The supporters of KO blamed the ruling parties (94%). Similarly, the voters of NL (81%) and TD (63%) placed blame on the ruling parties. However, the supporters of PiS saw the culprits in both the opposition parties, which, in their opinion, had lobbied at the EU level for the freezing of European funds (47%), and in the EU itself (23%). Confederation voters blamed the party in power, namely PiS (44%), and the EU (23%), for the lack of funds (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Opinions of the political parties' electorates on the EU. Source: authors' elaboration based on data from CBOS (2023, 2024a, 2025).

The party electorates' perceptions of the EU were reflected in their pre-election declarations (CBOS, 2024b). In 2024, prior to the EP elections, respondents were asked about their voting motives. Sympathisers of the governing parties (which, after the 2023 elections, were KO, NL, and TD) who believed that EU membership did not unduly limit Poland's sovereignty mostly declared that in the EP elections they would vote for a candidate who supported the deepening of European integration (85% of KO voters, 66% of NL's, and 54% of TD's). The majority of the electorates of the opposition parties—PiS and Confederation—expressed the feeling that presence in the EU excessively limited Poland's independence. They wanted to vote for candidates who emphasised Poland's independence in the EU (75% of Confederation voters and 74% of PiS voters).

Although party electorates in Poland are characterised by rather stable views on many important sociopolitical issues, their attitudes towards the EU and EU-related migration issues, such as the relocation mechanism, changed between 2023 and 2025 (CBOS, 2025). The overall percentage in favour of closer integration within the EU decreased from 39% to 35% between 2023 and 2025, while the percentage in favour of retaining as much sovereignty as possible within the EU increased from 39% to 45%.

In 2023, the groups in favour of and against deeper European integration were equally numerous, while in 2025, those in favour of preserving the independence of nation-states within the EU had gained the upper hand. The percentage of such people was the highest since Poland's accession to the EU. Another issue was the attitudes towards migration. In 2023, 68% of all respondents were against the relocation to Poland of refugees from Africa and the Middle East. In 2025, a broader question about migrants was asked, and the majority of respondents (78%) said they would like to see a reduction in the number of migrants, with only 11% believing that Poland should be open to accepting them.

The KO electorate was clearly pro-European, with more than two-thirds (69%) believing that Poland should strive for close integration with the EU. Supporters of this party were slightly less reluctant than average to accept migrants, although most of them (63%) believed that immigration should be restricted (CBOS, 2025). There were several similarities between the voters of KO and NL on these issues. The electorate of NL was also pro-European: Nearly two-thirds of its declared voters (63%) believed that Poland should strive for close integration with the EU. Supporters of NL were more open than others to accepting immigrants to Poland, although the conviction that immigration needs to be limited also prevailed among them (55% were against migrants, and 35% declared openness towards them). The views of TD voters were similar to those of the general public.

On the other side, however, were the PiS and Confederation voters. The belief that Poland should strive to preserve as much independence as possible within the EU was shared by 70% of PiS voters and 76% of Confederation voters. Supporters of those parties were unequivocally in favour of limiting the admission of immigrants: 91% of PiS supporters and 87% of Confederation voters.

In summary, it can be observed that the electorates of the analysed political parties were divided in their assessment of the EU, its policies, and its actions towards the Polish government, especially under the United Right coalition. Whereas voters supporting KO, NL, and TD largely perceived the actions of the EU as legitimate, compatible with the principle of state sovereignty, and even conducive to safeguarding democracy in Poland, considerable segments of the PiS and Confederation electorates viewed the EU as

exceeding its competencies and encroaching upon national sovereignty. However, there were some issues on which the electorates' views were more similar: These concerned EU migration policies, the allocation of irregular migrants, and European Green Deal policies.

5. The Political Parties' Narratives on the EU in Their Electoral Campaigns

This section examines how the major Polish political parties framed the EU in the three electoral campaigns that were analysed for this study by focusing on the narratives they constructed to legitimise or contest the European policies and the balance of power between Brussels and national governments. The analysis shows how the parties framed their narratives and what themes they utilised or omitted. It also demonstrates the deep divisions in terms of how the EU was portrayed and employed on the domestic political stage. The titles of the subsections for every party analysed are direct quotations either from the party leaders' speeches or the parties' programmes.

5.1. KO: "Poland's Place Is in the European Union"

Two leading frameworks were evident in KO's discourse: viewing the EU as a security provider in the context of regional instability, and as a guarantor of economic development, prosperity, funding, and modernisation. Thus, sovereignty and socioeconomic issues were emphasised as opportunities, never as a threat. As all three election campaigns took place after Russia's attack on Ukraine, the EU was presented by the KO in the context of providing military security and protecting the Eastern border. In its election programme "For the first 100 days" in government, the party declared: "We will urgently join the allied European Sky Shield programme. It is in the interest of Poland's security to use all possible tools to protect the Polish and European sky" (KO, 2023). It also said, "We will provide EU funding for the defence of the Polish border with Belarus. We will eliminate the route of smugglers passing from the Middle East through Belarus to Poland and on to the EU" (KO, 2023).

In the campaign before the EP elections, a message about the non-alternative to EU membership was repeated:

> There is no alternative to the European Union in this part of Europe. If anyone doubts this today, they do not understand the world as it is today. The alternative is to be in Putin's embrace. And what that looks like, look at what is happening across our eastern border. (TVP 1, 2024, Borys Budka)

In 2024, the KO was already a member of government. Thus, its election leaflet emphasised the following:

> It was not without difficulty that we managed to convince the member states to engage more in defence cooperation. This is not only about increasing funding, but also supporting research projects aimed at state-of-the-art defence products. All this with the support and in full complementarity with NATO. The more such undertakings, the greater the security of citizens. (KO, 2024b)

The close cooperation between the EU and NATO was repeatedly emphasised by KO politicians and referred to as "two insurance policies" (TVP 1, 2025a, Rafał Trzaskowski). The KO presidential candidate also boasted

of Poland's influence on European decision-making, which fits within the legitimisation frame, by saying the following during the presidential debate:

> The European Union has finally started to speak our language. They want to spend more on the defence industry and on our defence. They want to spend money on borders and on our borders. And that is what it is all about, that the Europeans say exactly what we say to them. (TVP 1, 2025b, Rafał Trzaskowski)

As in the discourse on sovereignty, this narrative depicted the EU primarily as an opportunity. Moreover, the themes of security and EU money were often intertwined, as if the party felt it needed to boost the message about the benefits of EU membership.

Although we did not conduct a quantitative analysis of the election materials' content, the dominance of socioeconomic issues and the portrayal of the EU as a means to achieve economic prosperity were evident in the KO narrative. The KO pointed to how the EU money was already absorbed on "co-financing roads, new schools, kindergartens, cultural institutions, and investments in environmental protection" (KO, 2023a) and presented a long list of further needs: "low-emission trams and buses, cycle paths, revitalisation of green spaces" (KO, 2023b), "increasing the availability of geriatricians and long-term care" (KO, 2023), and "youth programmes and mental health support, investment in greater availability of diagnostics and therapies" (KO, 2024a). In a debate before the EP elections, the representative of KO boasted straightforwardly, "The great success of the first months of our government was the unblocking of huge financial resources for the Polish economy. Never before had such a huge transfer from the European Union flowed into a Polish bank account" (TVP 1, 2024, Borys Budka). This statement demonstrated that the party felt that the financial argument appealed most strongly to voters. In contrast, cultural issues were almost absent from the party's narrative during the analysed period.

5.2. PiS: "Poland First, Poles First"

The EU as a subject was strongly present in PiS's 2023–2025 election narrative. The party focused mainly on the threats posed to member states by an increasingly centralising and federalising EU that was usurping further competences not derived from the treaties. The party expressed this in a condensed way on one of its 2023 election leaflet:

> We oppose the construction of a superstate out of the European Union, that is, plans for federalisation. Today, we are witnessing the slow erosion of EU member states' sovereignty. More decisions are to be made by EU officials, not by representatives elected by the people. (PiS, 2023b)

The portrayal of the EU as a threat appeared in PiS's narrative within three of the four frameworks we applied to this analysis. First, it was evident in relation to the broadly understood sovereignty of the nation-state. Second, PiS depicted the EU as undermining traditional cultural values and constraining the developmental potential of the member states through overregulation. Third, PiS questioned the legitimacy of EU actions by interpreting, for instance, the EC's decision to withhold National Recovery Plan payments for Poland not as an effort to uphold treaty-based values such as the rule of law, but as an attempt to influence the outcome of the 2023 parliamentary elections by undermining the ruling party.

At a party rally in front of the Turów lignite mine, which was to stop mining by a decision of the Court of Justice of the EU, PiS Chairman Kaczyński said:

> The attack on this mine is nothing less than an attack on our sovereignty. In 1989, when we regained independence, it seemed obvious to us that we would be hosts in our own country. And we want to be those hosts! No one will decide for us who is to work in Poland and who is to be unemployed. (PiS, 2023a)

The migration pact was positioned at the centre of PiS's narrative attack. In every election that was analysed for this study, it was presented as a significant threat to Poland's security and a consequence of the "German policy of encouraging the arrival of immigrants" (PiS, 2023c). Illegal immigrants to be forcibly relocated from Western European countries to Poland were portrayed as a source of violence, chaos on the Polish streets, and criminal behaviour. Thus, PiS positioned itself as a defender of the security of the whole of Europe when it said the following:

> The European Union is our great common project, and we must defend it against the deluge of millions of unknown, unidentified people who threaten our security. We have burnt cars, attacked women, and looted shops in Western Europe today. People in Paris or Brussels are afraid of going out into the streets after dark. I [Prime Minister Morawiecki] will maintain a very strong Polish veto on forced relocation. You too can do something: Go to a referendum and say NO to forced relocation. Let's set an example for Europe. Poland will be the first to reject it in a referendum, and other EU countries will follow. Only PiS can stop Tusk from accepting illegal immigrants! (PiS, 2023d)

The European Green Deal and the package of EU regulations known as Fit for 55 were equally contested in PiS election messages. According to PiS, the entry into force of these regulations would inevitably lead to an increase in energy prices, the cost of living felt by individual households, and a decline in the competitiveness of Europe, including the Polish economy, all under the pretext of concern for the climate. During a programme convention ahead of the 2024 EP elections, Kaczyński conducted an exegesis of the effects of the Green Deal, which he said struck at the values that Poles hold dear:

> We are the kind of nation that enjoys various freedoms, from the political to the everyday. We want to drive what we can afford and what we like. We want to travel around Europe, including by plane, and on budget airlines. We want to eat what we like. We want, in short, to live according to the model we know, and we want to strengthen it. We want to be richer. And how can this be obtained? It can be obtained in a way that allows us to grow faster. And the Green Deal hammers this; it limits our development opportunities. It harms not only farmers but also other groups. It harms almost everyone, except the elite. So, it can be said that it harms all Poles....We must stop it. And this is our commitment. (PiS, 2024)

The negative protagonist in the PiS narrative was often the EC President Ursula von der Leyen, who was referred to as Donald Tusk's "crony," and the "European bureaucrats." This was a clear signal by PiS that it denied the democratic legitimacy of EU actions. It was "Brussels bureaucrats" who were preparing a change to the European treaties "to give some states even more power within the EU" (PiS, 2024a).

PiS's politicians drew clear red lines in their election speeches by stating that the EU could not cross them as it would represent the usurpation of the powers of nation-states. In a debate before the 2024 EP elections, the former PiS prime minister said, "Social and welfare programmes should be the responsibility of nation states, as they are at the moment" (TVP 1, 2024, Beata Szydło). Even the EU's turn toward greater defence spending was contested by the party leader:

> Today, we are being offered a concept that is basically to lower our security. It proposes some kind of European army, a European dome. No, our security is our own forces, and we need to expand them and NATO as the great, greatest alliance in history. The foundation of this alliance is the partnership with the United States. (PiS, 2024)

PiS portrayed the EU as a threat in all four of the frames described in this article. It accused the EU of limiting the state's sovereignty, of expanding political control over issues that should not be regulated by the EU, and of stifling the European economy through excessive regulations. It also accused the EU of having a negative impact on traditional Polish values.

However, if anyone was under the impression that PiS is a Eurosceptic party, they would be mistaken. According to the party's assertions:

> We appreciate the importance and achievements of the European Union, while at the same time expect reforms and changes that will give this international community the shape of a "Europe of homelands." We do not accept the erosion of the sovereignty of European states. (PiS, 2023)

5.3. TD: "We Want to Renew Europe"

While TD did not focus extensively on the EU during its campaigns, several distinct EU-related narratives can be identified in its discourse. What needs to be emphasised is that it presented a strongly pro-European stance and advocated for further reinforcement of a united Europe while also highlighting the need for change and reforms in the evolving environment. Within the frame of sovereignty, the party saw the EU as "a great chance and a great provider of Poland's development and security" (TD, 2023a); it characterised Poland as being as powerful as the alliances of which it was a member—NATO and the EU (TVP 1, 2024, Michał Kobosko).

The security narrative of TD in the European context was limited to two aspects. First, the military aspect was present in all three analysed campaigns in the context of the war in Ukraine and the need for preparedness to deter a potential Russian attack on other European countries (TD, 2024). Second, the environmental aspect resonated strongly in the EP campaign, but it was diminished in the presidential campaign, with TD candidate Szymon Hołownia calling for a reform of the EU's Green Deal in order to adapt it to contemporary challenges, such as the war in Ukraine (TD, 2025). Thus, the EU was depicted by the party as a security provider in the context of regional stability.

The narrative about Poland's position and influence on the EU decision-making process was utilised by TD mainly in the EP debate of 2024. At that debate, the party representative underlined that Poland "returned to being active within the Community" and that it has a role in promoting the EU's enlargement. Moreover, the TD representative said that Poland could act as a bridge between the "old EU" and the new countries that were needed by the community (TVP 1, 2024, Michał Kobosko).

The next two analytical frames were either not identified (the cultural frame) or represented by only isolated statements (the socioeconomic frame) in the TD's campaign narratives. In the latter case, the electorate learnt that the party appreciated the role of the EU in the economic development of Poland (TVP 1, 2023, Szymon Hołownia; TD, 2024). TD also expressed that the competitiveness of the EU economy must be improved and investments in new technologies, including AI, must be made at the European level (TVP 1, 2025a, Szymon Hołownia).

5.4. NL: "The Situation Is Serious. Either the Union Is Consolidated, or It Will Fall Apart"

The narrative of NL on the EU was much more developed and profound than that of TD. It was, next to PiS, a party that addressed all the issues defined in our analytical framework. However, contrary to PiS, its narrative was strongly pro-European. It conceptualised the EU as an opportunity—a vital security provider in an increasingly unstable regional and global environment. "Poland's interest," as Magdalena Biejat said in the presidential debate, "lies in our alliance with the European Union, as this is where we are united by common interests and…a shared understanding of the threat posed by the Kremlin" (TVP 1, 2025a, Magdalena Biejat). And indeed, against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and uncertainties surrounding transatlantic relations, the EU was portrayed by the party as an actor capable of responding to collective threats.

In its narrative, NL consistently emphasised the importance of military and strategic cooperation within the EU framework, as the Union, alongside NATO, was the most significant guarantee of Poland's and Europe's security (NL, 2024). The EU's ability to deliver decisive action during the Covid-19 pandemic and its response to Russia's aggression were cited as evidence of its evolving capacity for crisis management (TVP 1, 2023, Joanna Scheuring-Wielgus) as well as a convincing argument to deepen the integration to provide the member states with a more cohesive and effective Union with enhanced democratic accountability and equitable burden sharing.

Concurrently, NL articulated EU membership as a geopolitical necessity, thereby positioning the Union as a foundational anchor of Poland's—and other member states'—security and democratic stability. And security, in the understanding of NL, was not limited to military strength but was tied to broader concepts of resilience— energy security, climate preparedness, socioeconomic stability, and the capacity to negotiate effectively, for instance, in response to President Trump's tariff proposals or the growing influence of American big tech companies. As the party's presidential candidate warned social media platforms:

> In the hands of an American billionaire [Elon Musk] have become a tool for manipulating Europe's public debate and electoral processes. Neither Musk nor Zuckerberg will tell us what our democracy should look like. We need strong European laws to put an end to this. (NL, 2025a)

The dispute over the rule of law between Poland and the EC during the PiS government was widely discussed in Poland. NL, alongside KO and TD, supported Brussels's stance on this issue, accused the government of breaching the rules, and went into the 2023 elections with narratives about resolving this "harmful" dispute (NL, 2023) and strengthening Poland's role in EU structures. As the party stated in one of its leaflets, "Poland, instead of being a problematic member of the European Union, should be a leader of reforms within it" (NL, 2023a).

The leading role of Poland within the EU and the country's influence on EU policies were underlined and even strengthened in the three consecutive electoral campaigns. In its 2023 programme, the party declared that "by repairing relations with its European partners, Poland will have a real influence on the direction of the European Union" (NL, 2023). In the EP debate a year later, the NL representative stated that "Poland must be a powerful player at the EU table who secures Poland's sovereignty and interests" (TVP 1, 2024, Joanna Scheuring-Wielgus). Moreover, "weaker France and Germany present a greater opportunity for Poland to take the lead much more boldly than we have so far. This means prioritising our regional security through joint armaments, joint manoeuvres and joint investments" (TVP 1, 2025a, Magdalena Biejat).

Human rights and cultural issues were key programme values for the NL. The party saw the EU as a protector and provider of these rights to its member and candidate states. It stated that the EU:

> Must guarantee, for example, mutual recognition and transcription of birth and marriage certificates issued by another member state, regardless of the gender of the spouses or parents, [and] to every woman in Europe the right to legal, safe, accessible, and affordable abortion care and services provided without discrimination. (NL, 2024)

Regarding migrants and asylum seekers, NL was the only party that advocated for their protection, including irregular migrants, since "everyone has the right to be treated with dignity" (NL, 2024).

NL had no doubts about the economic benefits of EU membership (NL, 2024). It appreciated the EU's impact on economic development, innovation, and crisis management. As Magdalena Biejat said in the presidential debate of 2025, "When we introduced the European Recovery Fund, a common debt, in response to the coronavirus crisis, none of us lost our ability to self-determine, and we gained additional potential for recovery, another tool to combat crises" (TVP 1, 2025a, Magdalena Biejat).

At the same time, in the economic sphere, NL emphasised the need to align with the EU's core values and to protect the EU-wide labour market by promoting good practices across the EU, including those concerning wage levels, working time and time off, wage transparency, equal pay, the right to benefits, and protection against discrimination at work on the basis of, among others, gender, as well as protection against harassment. The programme further called for immediate legislation on the right to be offline (NL, 2024).

5.5. Confederation: "EU Laws Are Not Laws of Physics"

In Confederation's narrative, the EU and its institutions were portrayed as illegitimate, politically biased, and overreaching actors that systematically exceeded their treaty-based competences at the expense of national sovereignty by expanding their authority into areas that Confederation viewed as exclusive domains of member states, such as climate policy, judiciary systems, and forced migration quotas (Confederation, 2023; TVP 1, 2023, Krzysztof Bosak). This critique of the EU was embedded in a broader narrative of delegitimisation that portrayed the EU as a technocratic, ideologically captured structure that undermined democratic self-determination and imposed harmful policies in the interests of the mighty states, i.e., Germany and France (TVP 1, 2025a, Sławomir Mentzen). Confederation asserted that the EU had transformed from a free trade zone into a centralised political project dominated by left-liberal elites. Thus, the party declared that it would "not allow any further relocation of competences of the Polish government

to Brussels" because, in such a case, "we may cease to be an independent state at all" (TVP 1, 2025a, Sławomir Mentzen). It also explicitly rejected mechanisms that would limit Poland's veto rights (Confederation, 2025a) because "Polish national interests are far more important than the welfare of the European Union" (TVP1, 2025a, Sławomir Mentzen). Although Confederation claimed that it did not advocate Poland's leaving the EU, it was the only party that, in their narratives, admitted that Polexit was an option, at least as a "negotiation tactic" with the EC (TVP 1, 2024, Konrad Berkowicz).

In the narratives of Confederation that were analysed for this study, there was not much attention devoted to cultural issues in the context of EU membership. However, the presidential candidate, Sławomir Mentzen, stated in a debate in 2025, "We cannot replace our culture with the leftist, truth-denying, reason-denying, beauty-denying, gender-denying, leftist ideology that the Polish government, the European Union and the large multinational corporations are trying to instil in us here" (TVP 1, 2025a, Sławomir Mentzen). Nor were economic issues a major part of the narratives on the EU in the analysed campaigns. They were limited to underlining the "excessive regulations" and bureaucratic burdens imposed on economic actors and the "destructive" role of the EU policies, such as the Fit for 55, which Confederation threatened in its narrative would trigger inflation and "climatic poverty" (Confederation, 2025).

6. Congruence Between Voters' Positions and Parties' Narratives

Opinion polls indicated that the electorates of the five analysed parties held different views on the opportunities and threats arising from Poland's membership in the EU. Additionally, the importance attributed to particular issues by the electorates of the parties varied. Political parties finance research on their electorates for their own use before elections and do not rely solely on publicly available research results when constructing their electoral narratives. This approach allows them to more accurately identify priority issues relevant to each party's target groups, those that evoke positive or negative emotions, and to test the effectiveness of specific phrases, expressions, rhetorical tricks, and metaphors. However, the juxtaposition of the publicly available results of electorate preference surveys and the dominant frames of electoral narratives we identified showed that the parties' narratives on the EU were congruent with the attitudes of their electorates. Only a few of the identified themes could be classified as areas of tension, and there were no major divergent themes between the electorate and the parties' narratives.

The two most right-wing parties, PiS and Confederation, consciously constructed a narrative about the EU either almost entirely negative (as was the case with Confederation, more than half of whose voters were opposed to Poland's membership in the EU) or ambivalent—as was the case with PiS. PiS had to address both the smaller segment of its electorate which was sceptical about EU membership, and the two-thirds of PiS voters who, although they did not want to leave the EU, were critical of many decisions of EU institutions. In particular, they criticised the blocking of Recovery Plan funds for Poland and policy proposals such as the Migration Pact and Green Deal.

Reassuring voters that the EU posed a threat to Poland's economic, political, and cultural sovereignty, as was presented in the PiS and Confederation narratives, corresponded with the belief of party supporters that Poland's sovereignty within the EU was in danger. The EU was often portrayed as a tool in the hands of powerful states, mainly Germany and, less frequently, France. Indeed, exploiting the anti-German resentment present among supporters of PiS and Confederation was a hallmark of the narratives of both political parties.

In several of the PiS politicians' statements and election materials, the party depreciated and questioned even the intentions behind EU decisions to increase joint defence spending. However, contestation and scepticism were not dominant, probably because fear of the Russian threat was omnipresent in the PiS electorate, and there was a danger that pushing such a narrative could be interpreted as a display of mismatch and tension.

Voters of KO, TD, and NL were in no doubt that EU membership brought economic and security benefits to Poland; concerns about limiting sovereignty were alien to them. It is therefore not surprising that these three parties framed their narratives in terms of opportunity rather than threat. There were, however, "uncomfortable" topics, such as the European Green Deal, which was presented as an example of overregulation and a policy proposal that would undermine the competitiveness of the European community. The issue dominated the 2024 election campaign and re-echoed in the 2025 presidential campaign. In this case, it was not only Confederation and PiS supporters who were critical of the EU proposals but also voters of the centrist and left-wing parties who expressed their concerns. The issue was avoided in the narrative of NL, and it also did not appear in KO's footage and leaflets. However, during election debates and rallies, the topic was pushed by right-wing parties and could not be escaped. As a result, attempts to downplay the importance of the Green Deal were present in the statements of KO politicians. And TD went even further by advocating a deep reform of the policy proposal to adapt it to the challenges of the present day and the convictions of the public. In 2025, on the other hand, the KO candidate reassured voters that the Green Deal, in practice, no longer existed, as the threat of war in Europe had influenced a shift in EU priorities.

The second incongruent topic for KO, TD, and NL was the issue of migration. Even the most migration-friendly electorate of NL declared in polls that they supported the introduction of immigration restrictions and limits. It was also difficult to find supporters of the migration pact and the concept of relocation. The topic was therefore exploited by PiS and Confederation, while KO politicians argued that, with their experience in the EU and their ability to build coalitions, they would be able to block decisions unfavourable to Poland at the EU level, which was likely a response to the concerns of the party's electorate. NL, even against its electorate, was the only party that underlined the EU's obligations towards migrants and asylum seekers in the framework of human rights during the electoral campaigns.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

At first glance, it may seem a mismatch that the pro-European Polish society supports in elections and votes into office Eurosceptic political parties and their candidates. However, the illusory incongruence between public opinion and political parties' narratives becomes more understandable when we delve into the individual parties' narratives and analyse the electorates' opinions and beliefs on particular EU decisions and policies rather than integration *per se*. Moreover, as some research has indicated (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024), in most cases, it is not only Euroscepticism that makes these parties attractive but also their radicalism, anti-establishment orientation, and populist discourse. However, according to van Kessel (2024), the interrelation between these categories is not straightforward and requires further research.

Our analysis revealed that the political parties framed the EU in different ways and offered their electorates divergent narratives on the EU that reflected both ideological orientations and strategic priorities as well as contextual factors that were often raised in response to each other's messages (McMahon & Kaiser, 2021). Parties such as KO, TD, and NL opted for deeper integration, perceiving the EU as a widely understood security

provider and guarantor of democratic resilience in turbulent times. These narratives corresponded with the generally pro-European attitudes of their electorates.

In contrast, PiS and Confederation presented a much more Eurosceptical attitude. They framed EU–Poland relations as "they" versus "us": "They" want to pursue their interests at "our" expense by illegitimately expanding "their" competences and interfering in "our" national interests, e.g., by attempting to subordinate "our" judicial system to supranational courts or by breaching "our" cultural cohesion through the imposition of liberal and leftist values. This narrative confirmed the direction of change in the dominant hegemonic narrative about the EU that had been initiated by the PiS government in 2015, in which Germany, identified as the leader of the EU, was a particular object of resentment (O'Neal, 2017).

The critiques often resonated with voters who were sceptical of EU bureaucracy, concerned about national identity, or frustrated with specific EU policies, such as those related to migration, climate, or the rule of law. Moreover, these critiques gradually began to resonate with voters in Poland, and a gradual normalisation of right-wing framings of the EU in the public sphere was observed, both in Poland and in other European countries (Zajak et al., 2025). Even the parties that were openly pro-European occasionally drew on sovereignty-focused (e.g., by expressing opposition to the extension of majority voting in the EU), security-oriented (e.g., migration issues and border control), or technocratic critiques of the integration process (e.g., the EU's extensive bureaucracy). In this way, they framed the EU as a site of both opportunity and, if not a threat, as the right-wing parties framed it, a constraint on pursuing national politics.

This rightward drift reflected broader dynamics in Polish and European politics, where concerns about national identity, the imposition of external pressure (Pasquinucci, 2022), and the narrative of regaining control had gained salience. As a result, while the EU remained broadly supported by Polish society, the terms of EU membership were being redefined, not so much related to the question of "in or out," as was the case in the narratives of the British political parties before the Brexit referendum (Bale, 2022), but rather related to who controls the agenda, how the integration should be shaped (McMahon, 2021), and what ends integration should serve.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Existing Research and Theoretical Expectations

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

2.1. Public Opinion and Party Cues

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

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

2.2. Public EU Support and Left–Right Positions

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

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

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

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

2.3. Public EU Support and Policy Attitudes

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

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

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

2.4. Public EU Support and Policy Attitudes Over Time

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Research Approach and Data Collection

3.1. Data Source and Measures

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2. Method of Analysis

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

When the relationships of interest are non-linear, we need a different estimator that summarizes the strength of the relationship than the often-used Pearson's correlation coefficient or the coefficient of the predictor from a linear regression. We consider using the maximal information coefficient and the dCor (Székely et al., 2007). Comparisons of the performance of these estimators are presented in the Supplementary Material. dCor works better for our purposes and type of data, which is why we rely on it for most of the analyses. dCor is an example of the so-called energy statistics, which are functions of distances between statistical observations, and ranges between 0 and 1.
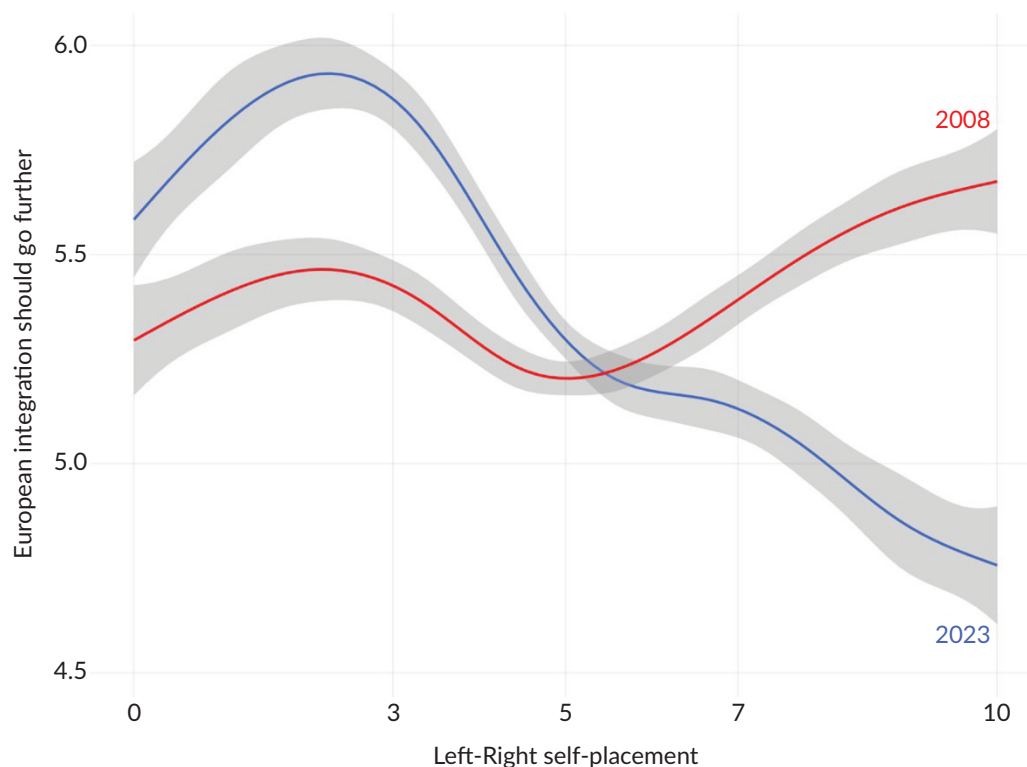
Since one of the research goals of this article is to map in a comprehensive way the relationships between different attitudes across time and countries, the text and graphs presented here are accompanied by an interactive data visualization that lets the user explore any comparison of interest: https://anonyms.shinyapps. io/EUattitudes

4. Empirical Analyses

4.1. EU Attitudes and Left–Right in 2023

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

Looking at Figure 1, we can see that average support for further integration increases as one moves from the extreme left to moderate left (2–3 on the 0–10 scale), after which we see a steeper decline until we reach the moderate right (6 in the 0–10 scale), which is followed by a more gradual decline. The pattern is not exactly an inverted U-curve. There is some evidence for a peak at the moderate left of ideological self-placement, which is however not quite at the center. Support for further integration is lower at the extreme right than it is at the extreme left. This pattern might be specific to the particular aspect of EU support being measured—support for further integration. Even if both the extreme left and the extreme right are dissatisfied with the

Figure 1. Mean support for further European integration as a function of left–right self-placement, estimated with GAMs with smooth terms based on a shrinkage version of cubic regression splines. The shaded area shows the 95% confidence interval of the estimate of the mean. Data are from ESS Wave 4 (2008) and Wave 11 (2023).

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

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

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

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

4.2. EU Support and Policy Attitudes in 2023

Is the relationship of public EU support with policy attitudes rather than with ideological self-placement stronger? In Figure 2, we examine how public support for further EU integration varies with policy attitudes

Figure 2. Support for further European integration as a function of support for (a) government redistribution, (b) immigration, and (c) gay rights. Blue lines show the averages for citizens; black dots and red lines (based on local polynomial regression) show the party positions. Party positions on the policy dimensions have been rescaled to match the public opinion data. Data are from ESS Wave 11 (2023) and CHES (2024).
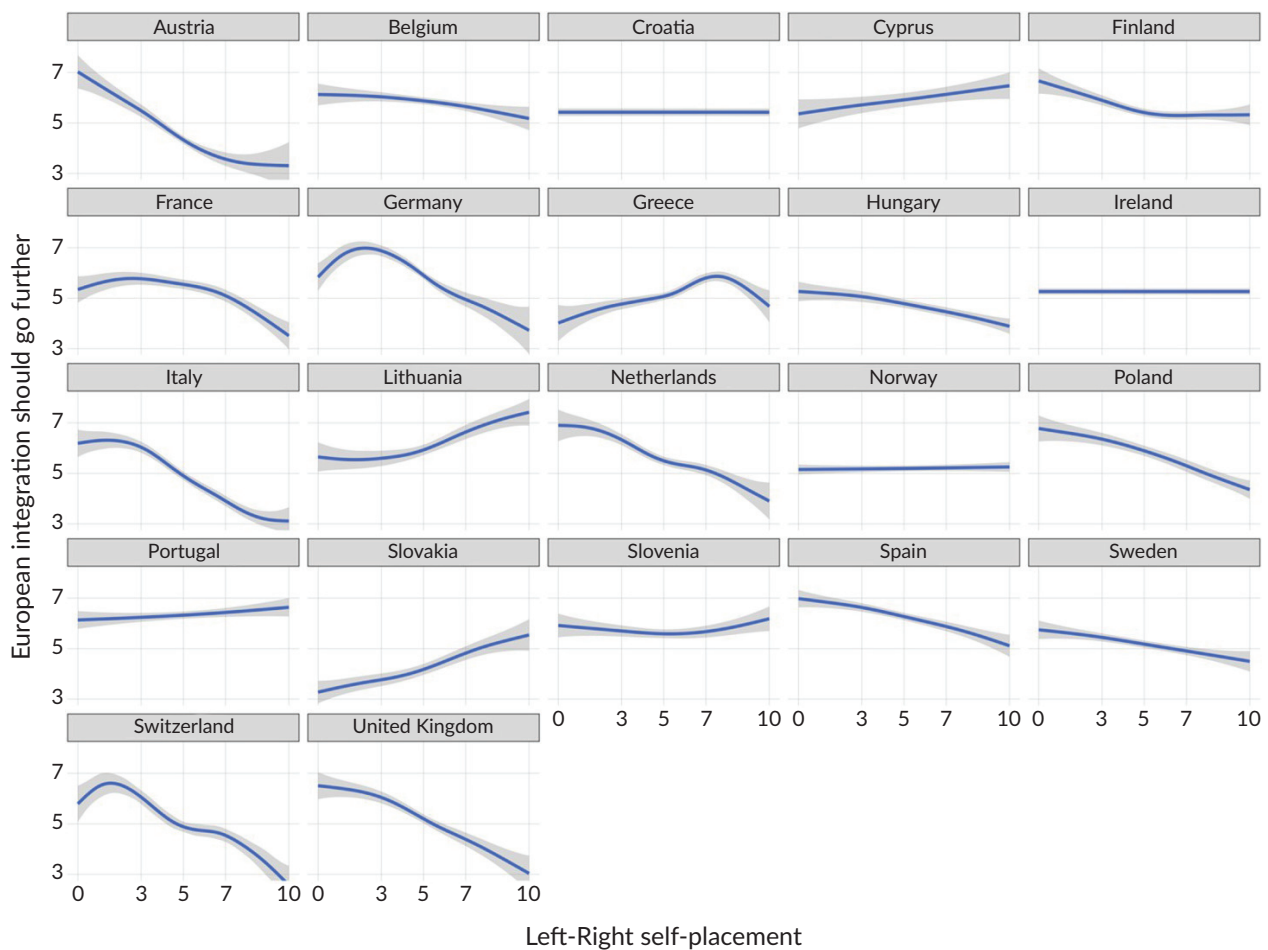
towards redistribution, immigration, and gay rights (blue lines). Figure 2a shows that the link between this aspect of public EU support and agreement with the statement that the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels is very weak. The blue line is practically flat, which means that redistribution attitudes are not predictive of the level of EU support of citizens. To the contrary, the dependence between support for further integration and agreement that immigrants make a country better is very strong and linear (Figure 2b). Respondents who strongly disagree with the statement have on average a value of 3 on EU support, while those who strongly agree have on average a value of 7. Agreement with the statement that gay men and lesbian women should be free to live as they wish is also relatively strongly and (almost) linearly related to EU support, but the slope is not as steep as the one of immigration support (Figure 2c).

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

4.3. Variations Across Countries

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

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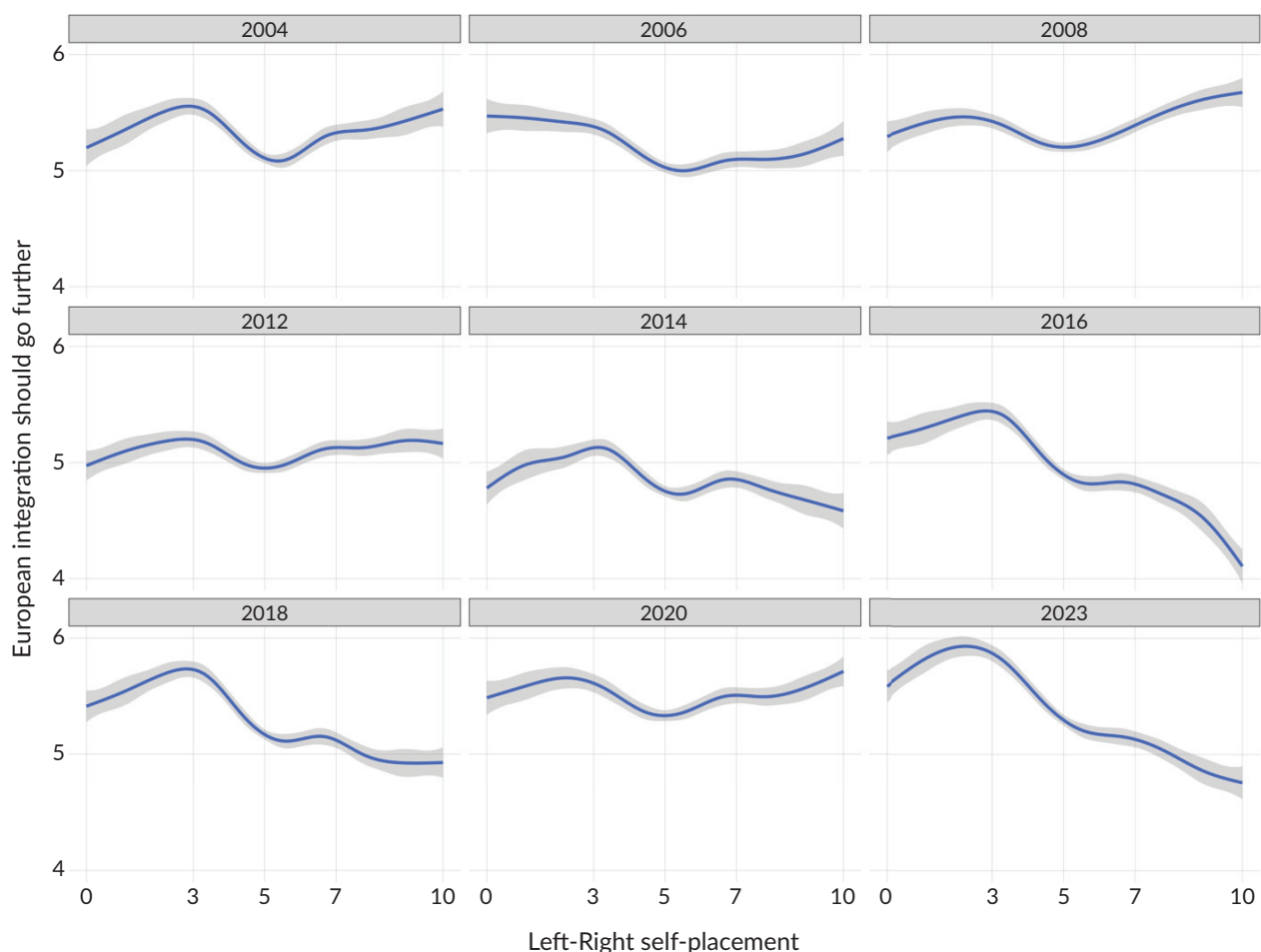
Figure 3. Average support for further European integration of citizens as a function of left–right self-placement of the citizens, per country. Data are from ESS Wave 11 (2023).

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

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

4.4. Variation Over Time

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

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

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

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Mapping Euroscepticism Across Occupational Classes: Economic and Cultural Capital in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Public attitudes towards the EU have fluctuated significantly over the past two decades, with Euroscepticism gaining ground across various national contexts. Previous research indicates that Euroscepticism is most prevalent among the working class and petty bourgeoisie. This article revisits this argument by exploring whether these class-based patterns persist across different national contexts and examining the role of cultural capital in shaping these divides. This study uses survey data from nine European countries to map occupational classes within a two-dimensional framework of cultural and economic capital, drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social space and Oesch's class scheme. Principal component analyses reveal that support for the EU aligns with class divisions, showing that sociocultural professionals tend to be strongly pro-EU, while production workers exhibit more Eurosceptic attitudes. Regression analyses confirm the significance of cultural capital, even within broadly Eurosceptic countries such as Serbia and Switzerland. These findings highlight the need to contextualize class-based explanations and to consider how cultural capital shapes EU attitudes across different national settings.

Keywords

class; cultural capital; economic capital; Euroscepticism; principal component analysis; survey analysis

1. Introduction

A substantial body of research indicates that support for European integration is generally higher among individuals with greater resource endowments (Fligstein, 2008; Kriesi et al., 2012; McLaren, 2002). Scholars have proposed various mechanisms to explain this trend, with one of the most prominent emphasizing

utilitarian considerations. Individuals with higher levels of economic capital (e.g., income and occupational skills) and cultural capital (e.g., educational credentials and engagement in highbrow cultural activities) are typically better positioned to leverage the opportunities presented by European integration. Their enhanced mobility and transnational experiences across Europe foster stronger cross-border ties and are associated with more favourable attitudes towards the EU (Kuhn, 2015; Recchi, 2014).

However, recent sociological and psychological research challenges the dominant focus on utilitarian mechanisms, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of support for the EU. These studies suggest that Euroscepticism is rooted in both economic disadvantage and cultural exclusion, as well as the uneven distribution of cultural capital. This perspective shifts the focus from utilitarian concerns to status conflicts, symbolic boundaries, and exclusion, particularly among those with limited transnational experience and cultural consumption patterns that favour popular culture. It posits that cultural capital influences who feels culturally "at home" in transnational and cosmopolitan spaces such as the EU (Flemmen & Savage, 2017; Westheuser, 2020).

While this perspective broadens our understanding of Euroscepticism, this view overlooks opposition to the EU among privileged groups driven by ideological (including left-wing) opposition to the Union's economic orientation (Bíró-Nagy & Szászi, 2024; Guinjohan & Rico, 2018). This phenomenon is analytically significant as it challenges the assumption that individuals with high levels of cultural capital are inherently pro-EU. Moreover, the timing of accession, sovereignty concerns, and elite narratives may generate Euroscepticism that transcends class and cultural boundaries. Despite the growing recognition of the dual roots of Euroscepticism, few studies systematically examine how economic and cultural capital intersect to shape attitudes towards the EU across diverse political contexts.

Against this background, this article addresses the following question: How do varying endowments of economic and cultural capital shape attitudes towards the EU? Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of social space (Bourdieu, 1983), I conceptualize attitudes towards the EU as structured by both economic and cultural capital. Using principal component analysis (PCA), I construct a two-dimensional space that positions individuals according to their capital endowments and examines how these relate to EU support. I also incorporate occupational class using Oesch's class scheme (Oesch, 2006, 2008) to assess how class locations correspond to these patterns and visualize the alignment of party electorates within this space. Therefore, the article contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it applies the theoretical link between cultural and economic capital and EU attitudes, established in previous research, to a wide range of political and institutional contexts, including both post-socialist and Western European countries, as well as EU and non-EU members. Second, it tests whether higher capital mitigates Euroscepticism and finds only modest (or even absent) context-dependent effects.

The analysis reveals that support for the EU is systematically structured by capital composition: across all countries, both economic and cultural capital are statistically significant predictors of attitudes towards the EU. Sociocultural professionals tend to express pro-EU views, while production workers and small business owners are more likely to exhibit Eurosceptic attitudes. However, the strength of these associations varies across national contexts. Specifically, the effect of economic capital appears negligible in countries such as Croatia, Serbia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, where Euroscepticism is driven more by ideological or historical factors than by material advantage. Descriptive visualizations further indicate that support for

Eurosceptic parties is concentrated among individuals with lower levels of both economic and cultural capital. At the same time, several electorates of nominally pro-EU left-wing parties, according to their programmatic profiles, display high levels of Euroscepticism, even among voters with substantial cultural capital. Finally, the interaction effects between capital endowments and Euroscepticism reveal a small effect among higher-status groups, notably managers, while showing no effect among other occupational classes. This indicates that capital effects operate at the individual level rather than as a class-based cleavage. In other words, capital shapes attitudes, but class boundaries are only weakly politicised in the domain of European integration. Consequently, national contexts and party systems likely influence the expected alignment between capital endowments and class-based support for the EU.

2. Class, Capital, and the EU

2.1. Cleavage Transformation and the Dynamics of Euroscepticism: Utilitarian Explanations

The rise of Euroscepticism in contemporary Europe must be understood within the broader transformation of political cleavages. While 20th century political alignments were predominantly structured along class-based economic divides, where working-class voters aligned with the left and wealthier citizens with the right (Flemmen & Haakestad, 2018; Lipset, 1959, 1981), this pattern has significantly eroded in recent decades (Houtman, 2001). Scholars increasingly emphasize the emergence of a second, cultural axis of political conflict, shaped by structural changes in education, labour markets, and globalization (Kriesi et al., 2006; Marks et al., 2002; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). These developments have led to a new divide between cosmopolitan and traditionalist worldviews, often described using terms such as GAL–TAN or communitarian–cosmopolitan (Beramendi et al., 2015; Lux et al., 2022). Within this framework, Euroscepticism has emerged as a key grievance, structuring contemporary politics and being particularly prevalent among those who feel culturally marginalized or economically vulnerable in the context of European integration and globalization (Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Kurer & Palier, 2019).

Emerging structural divides have increasingly shaped support for new political actors, particularly Eurosceptic and populist parties, that have challenged the mainstream pro-EU consensus since the 1990s. A central debate in this context concerns whether such support is primarily driven by economic insecurity or cultural grievances (Bornschier, 2010; Rydgren, 2013). A key theory explaining Euroscepticism is the factor endowment model, which posits that individuals equipped with the necessary resources (e.g., education or occupational skills) will thrive in a globalized economy and, therefore, tend to support supranational integration. In recent decades, structural changes have given rise to a new culturally dominant segment of the middle class that embraces cosmopolitanism and nurtures international networks (De Vries, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2008). Conversely, these changes have triggered feelings of status anxiety and perceived decline among segments of the older middle class, such as small business owners, who respond by defending more traditional social and cultural hierarchies (Neckel, 2018; Reckwitz, 2019). Multi-country analyses indicate that support for European integration is higher among those with better economic prospects and among citizens in countries that benefit more from EU financial transfers (Hooghe & Marks, 2004; Van der Waal & De Koster, 2015). De Vries (2018) finds that individuals in the UK expressing financial concerns were less likely to support remaining in the EU. While unemployment itself was not a strong predictor, support for leaving the EU was significantly higher in constituencies with lower wages, fewer educational opportunities, and higher proportions of working—and lower-middle-class voters (Bíró-Nagy & Szászi, 2024; De Vries, 2018).

While structural transformations, such as globalization and labour market changes, have undeniably influenced support for European integration, economic indicators like income have proven to be surprisingly inconsistent predictors of populist support (Westheuser, 2020). Moreover, since the Eurozone crisis in 2008, Eurosceptic attitudes have also emerged among individuals with high levels of education and stable occupational status, spanning both ends of the ideological spectrum (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2010; Van Elsas, 2017). Right-wing voters typically reject the EU on the grounds of national sovereignty and cultural identity, while support from the radical left often stems from concerns over social protection and opposition to neoliberal market integration (Carrieri & Vittori, 2021; Van Elsas, 2017). This ideological divergence is mirrored on the supply side: radical right parties tend to oppose the EU as an institution, whereas radical left parties are often critical of its institutional and economic configuration rather than of integration per se (March & Rommerskirchen, 2012; Wagner, 2021). This suggests that material vulnerability alone cannot fully explain patterns of opposition to the EU (Lux et al., 2022).

Recent research highlights the role of symbolic resources and cultural dispositions. The sometimes contradictory effects of income and the cross-class coalitions supporting Eurosceptic parties have led scholars to question the uniform effects of these large-scale structural transformations across individuals or groups and their Eurosceptic attitudes (Flemmen et al., 2019, 2022; Savage et al., 2010; Westheuser, 2020). At the same time, while lower levels of education consistently emerge as strong predictors of Eurosceptic sentiment (Langsæther & Stubager, 2019; Stubager, 2013), previous research has shown that the effect of education operates through both economic and cultural capital (Houtman, 2001; Kalmijn, 1994). Thus, this strand of research moves beyond explanations based solely on material self-interest. Rather than asking who benefits economically from integration, it inquires who "feels at home" in the symbolic space that the EU represents—and who feels symbolically excluded from it (Westheuser, 2020; Westheuser & Della Porta, 2022). In this view, Euroscepticism is not only a reaction to economic dislocation, but also a reflection of perceived symbolic displacement within new hierarchies of value, particularly among those who lack the habits and cultural consumption patterns necessary to thrive in the EU's symbolic space (Van der Waal & De Koster, 2015). This perspective offers a bridge between macro-level structural change and micro-level orientations towards European integration.

2.2. The Role of Cultural Capital in Explaining Euroscepticism

A valuable starting point for investigating whether and how cultural capital shapes Euroscepticism is the sociological literature on cultural practices and political identities. According to Bourdieu, an individual's class position is structured by the relative distribution of various forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1983, 1986, 2001; Cvetičanin et al., 2021). These forms include economic capital (income, wealth, occupational status), social capital (networks and relationships), and cultural capital, which itself takes three forms: institutionalized (educational credentials), objectified (ownership of cultural goods), and embodied (dispositions, tastes, and cultural practices). Crucially, these forms of capital are convertible: advantage in one domain can yield resources or status in another. Together, these forms of capital structure the "social space."

What, then, are the mechanisms of cultural capital that shape Euroscepticism? One prominent theory is the dereification theory (Van der Waal & De Koster, 2015), which posits that higher levels of cultural capital enable individuals to critically question established social structures and ideologies, fostering more reflexive

and cosmopolitan political attitudes. Thus, individuals with high cultural capital—whether through education or exposure to diverse cultural practices—are said to have a more dereified worldview; they recognize that their cultural norms represent just one of many approaches to organizing social life. This understanding makes them more tolerant of cultural differences, more open to diversity, and often less Eurosceptic. Thus, both education and cultural consumption—proxies for the acquisition and expression of cultural capital—correlate positively with cosmopolitan attitudes. Hereby, education intersects with economic capital on redistributive or market issues, but also with cultural capital regarding cultural issues (Houtman, 2001). Regarding the latter, education serves as a foundation for what some call "cosmopolitan dispositions"— defined as openness to cultural difference, reflexivity, and engagement with global diversity (Noordzij et al., 2019). Education thus plays a dual role: on one hand, it acts as a resource that facilitates mobility and access to the economic opportunities of European integration; on the other hand, it serves as a symbolic asset that fosters identification with cosmopolitan norms and transnational spaces. Conversely, those with lower cultural capital are more likely to view their own cultural norms as absolute and superior, thereby exhibiting a reified worldview, rather than seeing them as one of many equally valid ways of interpreting the world (Van der Waal & De Koster, 2015). From this perspective, culturally conservative positions are less a function of material hardship than of limited access to cultural capital (Polacko et al., 2022).

Another mechanism through which cultural capital shapes attitudes towards the EU lies in its symbolic function. In this view, cosmopolitanism operates as a form of embodied cultural capital, a status marker used by the culturally dominant middle class to distinguish themselves from those perceived as "lower" in status (Noordzij et al., 2019; Van der Waal & De Koster, 2015; Westheuser, 2020). These symbolic hierarchies shape both cultural preferences and the perceived proximity or distance to political elites (Weisstanner & Engler, 2025). Such lifestyle distinctions reinforce symbolic boundaries: practices associated with the upper classes gain legitimacy and prestige, while mass culture is devalued (Katz-Gerro, 2017). In this sense, cosmopolitan dispositions help explain why support for the EU is strongest among educated urban segments of the middle class (Gerhards et al., 2013; Meuleman & Savage, 2013; Savage et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2013). These lifestyle-based cultural distinctions have tangible political consequences. Different types of cultural capital influence both class identities (Guzman et al., 2025) and voting behaviour (Debus, 2021; Westheuser & Zollinger, 2025)—echoing Bourdieu's argument that the social hierarchy of class positions is mirrored in patterns of taste, lifestyle, and political orientation (i.e., the "homology of spaces"; Bourdieu, 1986, 2001). Political preferences reflect an individual's position within a social space, shaped by habitus, the internalized dispositions formed through class-specific life trajectories (Bourdieu, 1984; Flemmen & Haakestad, 2018). Studies have consistently found that individuals with lower levels of cultural capital— indicated by limited educational attainment or minimal engagement with highbrow cultural activities—are more likely to express culturally conservative and welfare chauvinist views, such as perceiving immigrants as a threat (Manevska & Achterberg, 2013; Van der Waal & De Koster, 2015; Van der Waal & Houtman, 2011). Indeed, recent efforts to explain voting behaviour through Bourdieusian concepts treat class-based divides not only as structural, but also as expressions of symbolic boundaries. Political conflict lines, and by extension, political behaviour, arise when structural inequalities are culturally reproduced through shared moral and symbolic boundaries, and/or when political actors activate these distinctions within national contexts (Westheuser, 2025). Naturally, cultural capital is closely tied to economic resources. Highbrow cultural consumption, such as attending the opera or theatre, is more prevalent among higher social strata, while those with lower socioeconomic status tend to engage with more popular forms of culture (Gerhards et al., 2013). Indeed, those with both high cultural and economic capital are more likely to engage in

international cultural consumption and to hold favourable views of European integration (Meuleman & Savage, 2013; Rössel & Schroedter, 2015). Conversely, populist and right-wing actors often draw on popular symbols to mobilize boundaries between "ordinary people" and cosmopolitan elites (Weisstanner & Engler, 2025).

To summarise, cultural and economic capital are expected to play important roles in shaping attitudes towards the EU, whereby their effects are unlikely to be uniform across all occupational classes or national contexts. Country-specific factors—such as national welfare regimes, party systems, and historical relationships with the EU—can influence how capital configurations relate to political preferences. The following hypotheses guide the analysis:

> H1. Individuals with higher cultural capital tend to exhibit lower Eurosceptic attitudes than those with lower cultural capital.

> H2. Individuals with higher economic capital tend to exhibit lower Eurosceptic attitudes than those with lower economic capital.

3. Data and Research Strategy

I utilize original survey data collected between May and June 2021 as part of the INVENT Culture Project, financed by the Horizon 2020 programme of the EU. The dataset was gathered through a combination of methods, covering nine countries: Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK. Table A1 in the Supplementary File provides information on the fieldwork period and mode of data collection for each country. The country selection follows the consortium design, including countries with varying institutional ties to the EU, addressing the common methodological bias in European integration research that primarily focuses on member states (Petrović et al., 2025; Rössel, 2012).

To explore how capital configurations relate to Euroscepticism, the analysis proceeds in two steps. First, I employ PCA to map the space of capital composition and plot the positions of occupational classes within it. The goal of PCA is to reduce the dimensionality of the data by identifying a smaller number of components that explain the maximum amount of shared variance in the correlation matrix (Kestilä, 2006; Lebart et al., 1984). To ensure comparability of country-level results, I centred the PCA scores by subtracting the country-specific means. In a second step, I conduct regression analysis to examine how these dimensions, along with occupational class, relate to Euroscepticism and how this relationship varies between countries. The primary predictors in the regression analyses are the two extracted PCA dimensions—cultural and economic capital—as well as occupational class. These variables are used to investigate potential interaction effects between different forms of capital and occupational position. In addition, the models include standard socio-demographic controls that have been found by previous literature to covary with the outcome, such as age, gender (0 = female, 1 = male), and type of residence (0 = rural, 1 = urban, defined as a city at/or above 80,000 inhabitans; Díaz-Lanchas et al., 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Other potential controls discussed in the literature, such as satisfaction with democracy in the EU (Gherghina et al., 2025), are not available in the dataset; this limitation is acknowledged in the discussion in Section five.

3.1. Measuring Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism is a multidimensional concept encompassing both general support for European integration and dissatisfaction with the functioning of the EU or its policy performance (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Kopecký & Mudde, 2002; Taggart, 1998). Hard vs. soft Euroscepticism was initially measured by looking at party positions. This article examines attitudinal Euroscepticism among citizens, measuring diffuse support for European integration rather than policy performance or party ideology (Leruth et al., 2018; Vasilopoulou, 2011). I constructed a single index that combines trust in the EU, perceived threats or opportunities, and support for EU membership, excluding cases with missing values. A reliability analysis confirms that these items form a consistent scale, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74 (see Tables A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File). All items are measured on a scale from 1 to 5, except the trust variable, which ranges from 1 to 7. A score of 1 indicates *strong agreement* (or complete trust), while a score of 5 indicates *strong disagreement* (or complete distrust). Consequently, higher values reflect lower support for the EU and, correspondingly, higher levels of Euroscepticism. Figures A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File illustrate that support for the EU is highest in Croatia, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and Spain, while France, Serbia, Switzerland, and the UK exhibit relatively high levels of Euroscepticism, with Switzerland standing out in particular. This pattern largely aligns with previous research on EU support in these countries (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Diez Medrano, 2003; Sarasin et al., 2018a; Stanojević et al., 2023; Taggart, 1998). The final sample comprises 13,519 cases, ranging from 1,169 cases in Finland to 2,372 cases in the UK.

3.2. Constructing the Social Space: Measuring Cultural and Economic Capital

To develop the social space, I utilize six items to construct a measure of cultural capital and three items for economic capital. Cultural capital is assessed through self-reported engagement in various cultural practices that differentiate social classes (Gerhards et al., 2013). Respondents were asked how often they engage in the following activities: (a) visiting a museum or opera, (b) playing a musical instrument, (c) reading a book, (d) creating other forms of art, (e) attending a popular music concert or festival, and (d) listening to music in various languages from different parts of the world. The final item addresses cosmopolitan cultural consumption, which is often associated with higher social status (Katz-Gerro, 2017; Meuleman & Savage, 2013; Savage et al., 2010). All items are measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*almost daily*) to 5 (*rarely*), and were reverse-coded where appropriate, so that higher values indicate more frequent cultural engagement. Economic capital is measured using three indicators: household income (measured in deciles, from 1 = lowest to 10 = highest percentile), material possessions (ranging from 1 = lowest to 6 = highest), and the respondent's education level (operationalised as an ordinal variable ranging from primary or less, to secondary or tertiary education). Although questions regarding parents' education were included in the survey, they had a high rate of missing values (30%) and were therefore excluded from the analysis. The PCA shows education loading on both dimensions, more strongly on the economic one (see Table 1). The same PCA and regression analyses were run with education as a standalone predictor, to disentangle the specific contribution of cultural capital from the broader effect of educational attainment. The results, presented in the Supplementary File, show that including education separately does not substantially alter the coefficients for cultural or economic capital.

In addition, to address potential measurement concerns, I tested two alternative operationalisations of cultural capital. The first follows a strict Bourdieusian understanding of "highbrow" culture, including

museum visits, opera attendance, book reading, and education as indicators of cultural capital. The second reflects a more recent interpretation that captures cosmopolitan openness, measured through four items related to learning about, exchanging with, and appreciating other cultures. Both indices were tested separately, and results are presented in the Supplementary File (see Table A6, Figure A7–8, and A10). While the magnitude of coefficients varies slightly, the overall patterns remain consistent (for a recent application, see Katz-Gerro et al. 2024). All items were z-standardized prior to analysis. Missing values for income and material possessions were imputed using multiple imputation by chained equations with 20 imputations, applying predictive mean matching (PMM) based on respondents' education, occupation, age, gender, and urban or rural residence. PMM was selected to avoid assuming normality and to better preserve the original distributional characteristics of the variables (Allison, 2002). Trace plots of means and standard deviations across iterations reveal no concerning trends or convergence issues. I also examined kernel density plots to visually compare the distributions of observed, imputed, and completed values for the imputed variables (Eddings & Marchenko, 2012). While PMM helps retain observed distribution properties, I acknowledge that some smoothing of the tails in the imputed distributions is visible (Eddings & Marchenko, 2012).

To map occupational classes within the social space, I position respondents using Oesch's class scheme (Oesch, 2006). Open-ended occupations were recoded into Oesch's eight-class schema: large employers, small business owners, managers, technical professionals, sociocultural professionals, clerks, service workers, and production workers. By mapping these occupational groups onto the social space, I can visually examine whether class positions align with the expected distributions of cultural and economic capital (i.e., clustering of sociocultural professionals in high-capital areas). Although Oesch's class scheme is more differentiated than the class structure outlined by Bourdieu, there is substantial overlap in their underlying logic. According to Bourdieu, the propertied bourgeoisie, primarily comprising self-employed individuals, possesses substantial economic capital but comparatively less cultural capital. In contrast, among academic professionals, cultural capital is the dominant form of capital. The lower middle class, represented by clerks, includes mid-level professional positions, such as middle management, while the working class, comprising production and service workers, is expected to exhibit both low economic and low cultural capital (Houtman, 2001).

4. Empirical Results

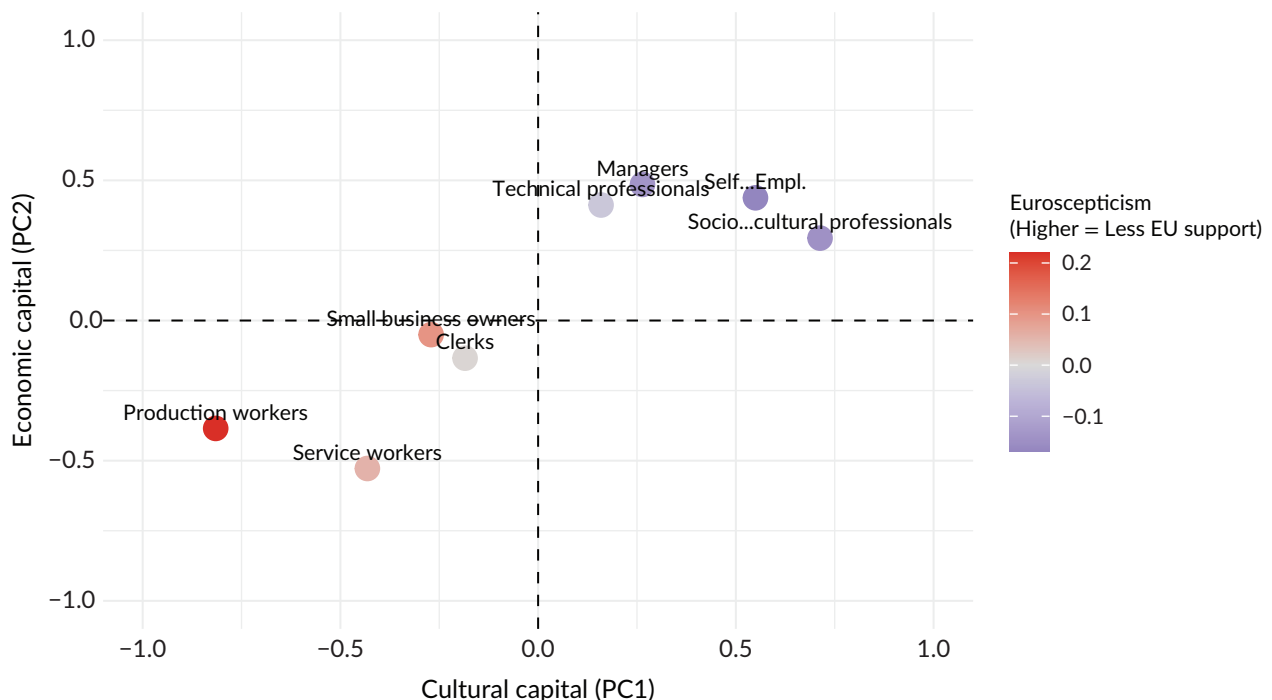### 4.1. PCA Results: Euroscepticism by Economic and Cultural Capital

Table 1 presents the loadings on the principal components, revealing two underlying dimensions. Orthogonal rotation was applied to maximize the distribution of loadings within these components. Positive values on both the cultural and economic capital dimensions indicate higher capital resources. The first component is primarily associated with cultural capital and lifestyles. The second component captures economic resources, alongside education. Income and possessions exhibit the highest loadings, while education shows a lower loading compared to the other two economic indicators. The PCA results confirm that education is an ambiguous variable, loading almost equally on both dimensions. This suggests, in line with Houtman (2001), that education may reflect either economic mobility or cultural distinction, depending on the political context (for regression results with education as a standalone predictor, see Figure A9 in the Supplementary File). Figure 1 utilizes the two extracted dimensions from the PCA (cultural capital and economic capital) to construct a social space and map occupational classes across all nine countries (see Figure 1). Red dots represent more Eurosceptic positions, while purple tones indicate stronger support for the EU.

The distribution of classes largely aligns with theoretical expectations, supporting the validity of the PCA-based dimensions. As expected, sociocultural professionals are positioned at the upper end of the cultural capital axis, whereas production and service workers exhibit the lowest values for both economic and cultural capital, along with the highest Eurosceptic attitudes. While country-level averages suggest a shared pattern, disaggregating by occupational class reveals notable cross-national variation (see Figure 2).

Table 1. Principal component loadings.

	Loadings	
Variable	**1**	**2**
Visit Museum	**0.73**	0.03
Visit Opera	**0.73**	−0.04
Make other art	**0.54**	−0.29
Read books	**0.52**	0.05
Play Instrument	**0.47**	−0.31
Education	**0.42**	**0.45**
Listen to world music	**0.39**	−0.25
Income	0.24	**0.75**
Possession	0.21	**0.74**

Notes: Communalities in bold indicate values > 0.3. The cumulative percentage of variance explained is 43.2%; $N = 12{,}441$.

Figure 1. Occupational classes and Euroscepticism in the social space across nine countries (2021).

The "usual suspects" as the most EU-supportive group are sociocultural professionals, who appear in the upper-right quadrant, indicating relatively high levels of both economic and cultural capital. There are, however, two exceptions: in Serbia and Switzerland, sociocultural professionals display more scepticism, yet
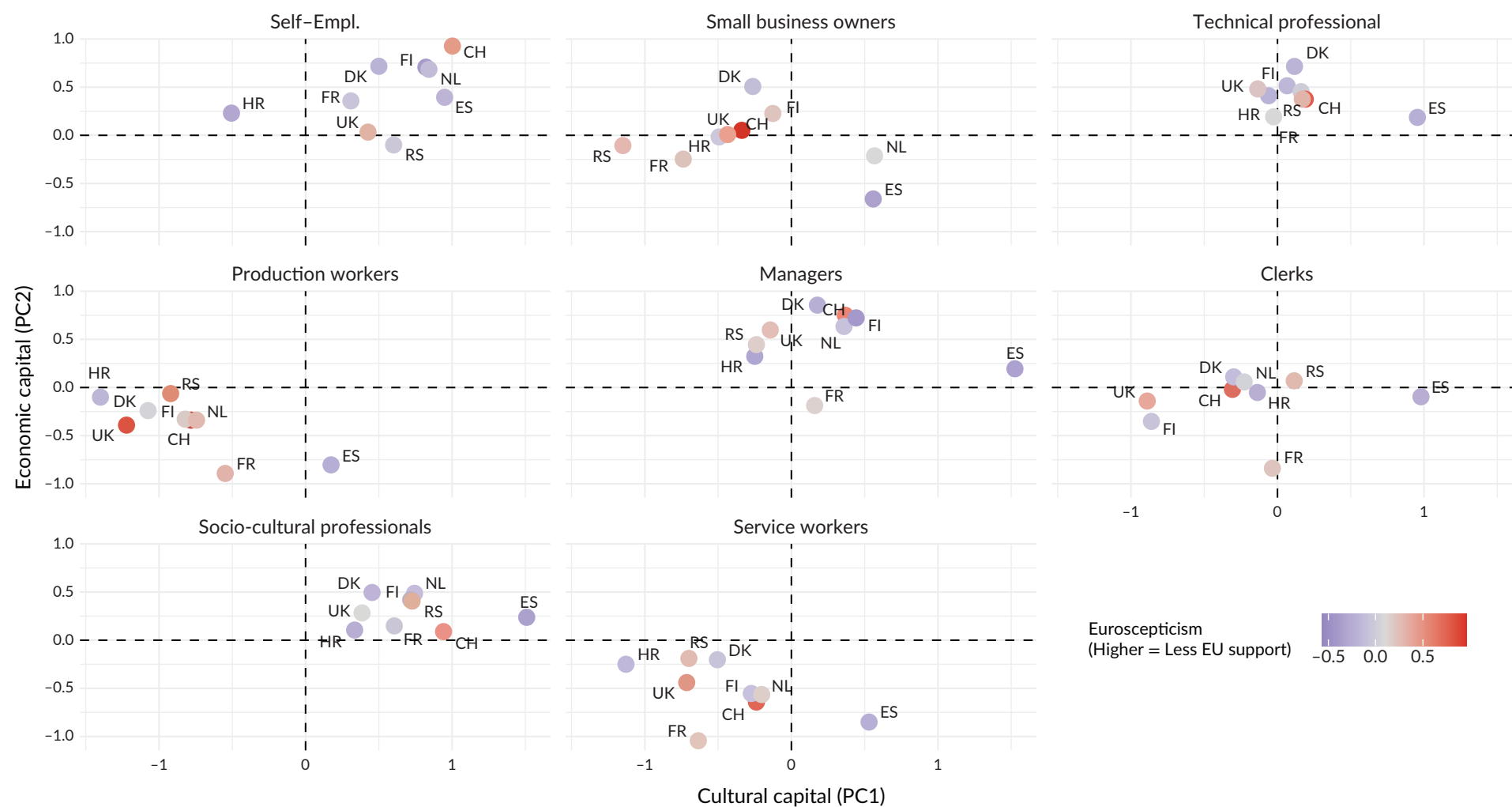
they remain among the least Eurosceptic within their respective countries, alongside the self-employed in Serbia. Turning to classes commonly associated with Euroscepticism—production workers and small business owners—we observe several deviations from expectations. Production workers in Croatia and Spain demonstrate pro-EU attitudes despite their lower capital endowments. A similar pattern is observed among small business owners in Croatia, Denmark, and Spain.

Self-employed individuals and managerial classes, typically associated with high economic capital, are mostly pro-EU. However, Switzerland, Serbia, and the UK diverge: these groups display comparatively higher levels of Euroscepticism, although Serbian self-employed individuals remain the most pro-EU group within Serbia.

The remaining classes—technical professionals, clerks, and service workers—exhibit greater heterogeneity. Technical professionals tend to occupy the upper-right quadrant and lean pro-EU, with Switzerland, Serbia, and the UK as exceptions. Clerks are the most internally diverse, spanning the full range of capital endowments and EU attitudes. Service workers, often grouped with production workers due to their similarly low capital endowments, are generally more Eurosceptic; however, those in Denmark, Finland, Croatia, and Spain tend to hold more pro-EU positions.

Overall, high economic and cultural capital systematically correspond to pro-EU attitudes across all nine countries; however, important national variations exist. Swiss managers and self-employed individuals (representing high economic capital), as well as Serbian and Swiss sociocultural professionals (representing high cultural capital), express significant Euroscepticism. Conversely, sociocultural professionals in most other countries remain supportive of the EU, while production workers and small business owners, who tend to cluster at the lower end of the cultural capital spectrum, lean towards Euroscepticism. Again, there are country-specific variations, with production workers in Croatia and Spain exhibiting pro-EU attitudes. Previous research indicates that Croatian and Spanish citizens are among the highest supporters of the European project in Europe (Diez Medrano, 2003; Petrović et al., 2025). However, while cultural and economic capital can shape opposition to the EU, their relative importance varies across countries. For instance, Serbia and Switzerland—both broadly Eurosceptic—frequently deviate from expected class-based patterns. This suggests that national trajectories of EU integration and elite contestation likely influence public attitudes.

Figure 2. Mapping Euroscepticism—Average positions of occupational classes by country in the social space (2021). Notes: CH = Switzerland, DK = Denmark, FI = Finland, FR = France, HR = Croatia, NE = Netherlands, RS = Serbia, SP = Spain, UK = United Kingdom; *N* = 10,889.

4.2. Regression Results

To assess how economic and cultural capital relate to Euroscepticism—and whether their effects vary by class—I estimated OLS models with country-clustered standard errors (see Table 2). Additionally, I estimate country-specific models to examine how these associations vary across different national contexts (see Figure 3).

Table 2. Regression results—Euroscepticism, nine countries (2021).

	(Model 1)	(Model 2)	(Model 3)
	Euroscepticism	*Euroscepticism*	*Euroscepticism*
Cultural Capital (CC)	−0.11***	−0.09***	−0.11***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Economic Capital (EC)	−0.08***	−0.07***	0.06**
	(0.07)	(0.0328)	(0.06)
Small-business owners (SBO)	0.17*	0.19*	0.17+
(Baseline = Self-empl.)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Technical prof.	0.02	0.02	0.03
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Production workers	0.11	0.17*	0.11
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Managers	−0.02	0.02	−0.01
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Clerks	0.01	0.02	0.01
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Sociocultural professionals	−0.07	−0.04	−0.06
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Service Workers	0.02	0.04	0.03
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Age	0.02	0.02	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Gender	0.00	0.00	0.00
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Urban	−0.19*	−0.19*	−0.19*
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
SBO #CC		−0.02	
		(0.02)	
Technical prof.#CC		−0.02	
		(0.03)	
Production workers#CC		0.02	
		(0.03)	
Managers#CC		−0.05**	
		(0.02)	

Table 2. (Cont.) Regression results—Euroscepticism, nine countries (2021).

	(Model 1)	(Model 2)	(Model 3)
	Euroscepticism	*Euroscepticism*	*Euroscepticism*
Clerks#CC		−0.02 (0.03)	
Sociocultural professionals#CC		−0.04+ (0.02)	
Service workers#CC		−0.00 (0.02)	
SBO#EC			0.03 (0.04)
Technical professionals#EC			−0.02 (0.03)
Production workers#EC			−0.01 (0.0701)
Managers#EC			−0.00 (0.02)
Clerks#EC			0.03 (0.03)
Sociocultural professionals#EC			−0.03 (0.03)
Service workers#EC			0.03 (0.04)
Constant	−0.03 (0.19)	−0.03 (0.19)	−.03 (0.19)
N	10,652	10,652	10,652

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, [+] $p < 0.10$, [*] $p < 0.05$, [**] $p < 0.01$, [***] $p < 0.001$.

Model 1 examines the effects of each covariate separately, while Model 2 tests the interaction between cultural capital and occupational class. Model 3 includes the interaction between economic capital and occupational class. The regression models reveal that both cultural and economic capital are associated with lower levels of Euroscepticism, and these effects remain robust across all three model specifications. In Model 2, among occupational groups, small business owners and production workers exhibit a higher likelihood of Euroscepticism compared to self-employed individuals. For managers, the interaction term suggests that cultural capital reduces their level of Euroscepticism, though the effect is relatively small. Sociocultural professionals also become statistically significant in Model 2 (at $p < 0.10$), remaining pro-EU compared to self-employed individuals. This result may be attributed to the interaction effect revealing latent variation within sociocultural professionals—those with lower cultural capital are less supportive of the EU, which slightly reduces the group's average support once this heterogeneity is taken into account. In Model 3, no statistically significant class interaction emerges for economic capital. Finally, living in urban areas is statistically significant across all three models.

The effects of cultural capital on Euroscepticism are statistically significant and meaningful compared to economic capital, with a one-unit increase in cultural capital reducing Euroscepticism by approximately 0.11 standard deviations. Defining whether an effect is "meaningful" or not is dependent on the variables being studied (McCloskey & Ziliak, 1996; Ziliak & McCloskey, 2004). Following Bernardi et al. (2017), I use informed benchmarking and report confidence intervals to assess both precision and substantive significance. The effect of cultural capital (−0.11; 95% CI: −0.16 to −0.07) exceeds a conservative threshold of substantive relevance (i.e., 0.05 SD), even at the lower bound. In contrast, the effect of economic capital is smaller (−0.06; 95% CI: −0.10 to −0.02) and remains around the threshold, making its substantive relevance less clear. Moreover, across all models, the effect for urban residence remains statistically significant and substantively meaningful (i.e., a shift from rural to urban areas is associated with a 0.19 decrease in the Euroscepticism scale). How do the variables' effects vary across countries? Figure 3 illustrates the effects of cultural capital, economic capital, and urban residency on EU attitudes across nine European countries, focusing on selected key variables for clarity. Given that significant interaction effects between capital and occupation emerged only in a limited number of countries, full interaction models are reported in the Supplementary File (Table A10). Notable findings are integrated into the country-specific discussion in the next paragraphs, where relevant.

Figure 3. The effect of cultural and economic capital across countries (2021).

Figure 3 shows that higher cultural capital is negatively associated with Euroscepticism across all nine countries. This general pattern aligns with previous research that links cultural capital to support for supranational institutions, such as the EU (Van der Waal & De Koster, 2015). Therefore, while the descriptive PCA plots suggest that support for the EU cuts across class lines in countries like Serbia and Switzerland—where even culturally advantaged groups express considerable Euroscepticism—the regression analyses tell a more nuanced story. When controlling for other socio-demographic characteristics, cultural capital remains a statistically significant and substantively important predictor of pro-European attitudes

in all nine countries, including Serbia and Switzerland. This indicates that even in broadly Eurosceptic contexts, individuals with higher levels of cultural capital are relatively more supportive of the EU than others within the same occupational class. Thus, while absolute levels of EU support may be low across all social classes in these countries, the relative positioning within the national context still aligns with broader cross-national patterns.

What stands out, however, are the weak or non-significant effects of economic capital on Euroscepticism in Croatia, Serbia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The limited role of economic capital in shaping attitudes towards the EU in these countries can be partly attributed to their distinct relationships with the organization. In these four countries, support for or opposition to the EU is often not structured around material or economic interests, but rather around cultural identity (in the cases of Croatia and Serbia) and/or distrust in supranational organizations due to concerns over sovereignty (in the UK and Switzerland). This observation aligns with the long-standing scholarly debate on Swiss Euroscepticism (Sarasin et al., 2018b) and the more recent debate surrounding Brexit (De Vries, 2018; Hobolt, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In the Swiss context, the interaction between cultural capital and occupational class reveals a notable pattern (see Table A31 in the Supplementary File): technical professionals and clerks with higher levels of cultural capital express elevated levels of Euroscepticism. Two potential mechanisms may help explain this finding. First, these groups are often situated in sectors that are increasingly exposed to globalized and internationalized labour markets, where EU integration may be perceived as intensifying competition and threatening job security. As such, EU integration may be perceived not as an opportunity for mobility or cooperation, but as a source of external pressure. Second, despite their educational qualifications, these groups may not enjoy the same symbolic status or cultural legitimacy as socio-cultural professionals. This suggests that cultural capital alone does not automatically translate into pro-EU attitudes; its effects are mediated by occupational position and recognition within the broader status hierarchy.

In Serbia, even individuals with the highest cultural capital remain largely Eurosceptic, with only those at the top of the economic hierarchy expressing more neutral or pro-EU views (see PCA results in Figure 2). In contrast, Croatia exhibits unexpectedly high EU support among groups with low economic and cultural capital. These differences suggest that national narratives, historical trajectories, and elite discourses can override structural predispositions, underscoring the importance of contextualizing class effects within country-specific political contexts. Elites in Croatia—particularly the Croatian Democratic Union—have promoted a national identity that links Catholicism and sovereignty to EU integration, fostering a broad pro-EU consensus even among conservative and low-income groups (Petrović et al. 2025; Stanojević et al., 2023). Conversely, in Serbia, EU membership is framed as a threat to sovereignty and Orthodox identity, with Serbian Progressive Party leaders employing selective pro-EU rhetoric while simultaneously reinforcing nationalism and rejecting liberal norms (Swimelar, 2019). Thus, while all classes in Serbia and Switzerland appear broadly Eurosceptic in the PCA, regression analysis reveals that within these generally sceptical contexts, individuals with higher cultural capital are still relatively more supportive of the EU than their peers.

Finally, within the "old" EU member states (Denmark, Spain, France, Finland, and the Netherlands), both higher cultural and economic capital correlate with lower Euroscepticism. Yet, studying the Nordic countries, Raunio (2005, 2007) shows how structural predispositions are not directly translated into political outcomes, but depend on political supply. At the same time, older studies on the Netherlands support the relationship between higher education levels and lower Euroscepticism, but emphasise the activation of anti-immigrant

attitudes (Lubbers & Jaspers, 2011). The stratified effects found in this article for France complement older studies demonstrating that social structuring of EU attitudes requires elite activation through broader value conflicts (Cautrès, 2012). Lastly, unlike other older member states, Spain's recent rise in "soft" Euroscepticism reflects frustration with domestic politics rather than capital-based opposition to the EU (Real-Dato & Sojka, 2024). Thus, cultural capital (and, in older member states, economic capital) shapes Euroscepticism, but the lack of strong interaction effects and the uneven results of occupational class show that their political relevance depends on country-specific EU trajectories, institutions, and party mobilisation.

5. Conclusion

This article has addressed how different endowments of economic and cultural capital shape attitudes towards the EU. The analysis confirms that individuals with higher cultural capital tend to be less Eurosceptic across all nine countries examined, although the effect is moderate in size. Two potential mechanisms could help explain this relationship. First, drawing on dereification theory, individuals with higher cultural capital—acquired through education and highbrow culture—may be less likely to perceive the social world or their own national culture as superior, making them more open to supranational integration. Second, cultural capital may function as a symbolic resource: cosmopolitan orientations serve as markers of distinction among culturally dominant groups, reinforcing social boundaries and shaping political preferences accordingly. Importantly, there is little evidence that the effect of cultural capital varies significantly across class positions: interaction effects are weak and even where statistically significant (e.g., among sociocultural professionals or managers), they remain substantively small. Country-specific regression models do not reveal generally significant or consistent patterns of interaction effects. At the same time, higher economic capital is also associated with reduced Euroscepticism; however, this relationship does not hold in Croatia, Serbia, Switzerland, or the UK. Clearly, these countries have very specific EU integration trajectories, where contested relationships with the EU and national narratives likely override the effects of structural positions. Thus, while the results lend support to H1 and H2 by showing a systematic relationship between capital endowments and Euroscepticism, this article does not directly test the underlying mechanisms—such as dereification or symbolic boundary drawing—but points to them as plausible interpretations grounded in existing theory.

The study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, while occupational class serves as a useful heuristic, it may obscure important differences within class categories. For instance, the composition of sociocultural professionals in Serbia may differ from their counterparts in Northern or Western Europe, due to differences in labour market structures and education systems. A more nuanced approach to class composition, one that is sensitive to national trajectories, would enhance our understanding of cross-contextual variations. Second, the dereifying effects of cultural capital are likely context-dependent, fostering either critical reflection or aligning citizens more closely with dominant elites (Coenders & Scheepers, 2003; Van der Waal & De Koster, 2015). Lastly, while this article has focused on attitudes, this analysis highlights a promising direction for future research and my future contribution to the political activation of these divides. Past research has shown that while voters of right-wing Eurosceptic parties tend to be resource-poor, Euroscepticism has also increased among left-wing voters, who are comparatively resource-rich, particularly in terms of cultural capital (Wagner, 2021). Structural divides matter only when parties mobilize them (Marks et al., 2002) and Euroscepticism can also arise without them (Gherghina et al., 2025). Future research should also examine when parties activate or ignore these divides.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data is not yet publicly available and is restricted until the end of 2025. Researchers interested in the data used may contact the author.

LLMs Disclosure

A large language model was used for minor language polishing and proofreading.

Supplementary Material

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

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Geopolitical Crises and Consensus in the European Parliament: Initial Response to the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

Do members of the European Parliament (MEPs) experience the rally-around-the-flag effect? What explains the consensus and dissensus in the European Parliament (EP) when responding to geopolitical crises? Guided by these questions, we compare how MEPs debate the EU's initial response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Considering that the EP is a multi-level and transnational context, we explore the patterns of consensus and dissensus on the EP level, on the EP party group level, and on the regional level of East versus West Europe. To this end, we use an original dataset of hand-coded speeches of MEPs in 12 EP debates. We identify three types of reasoning behind the MEPs' speech acts in terms of the optimal EU response: power-driven, value-driven, and non-response. Each sentence from MEPs' interventions is coded under one of the three categories. Consequently, we create a three-dimensional space where we can locate each individual MEP as well as aggregate MEP positions into a party group, regional, or the EP level. This allows to estimate geometric distances between MEPs' positions and that of their party group, region, and the EP. Basing these estimations on speech acts makes a mixed-methods design possible. We first conduct regression analysis to explore what explains the variance in the distances and then compare patterns of consensus and dissensus across parties and regions qualitatively. We find evidence for the rally-around-the-flag effect, but also show that the effect is not uniform across party groups.

Keywords

consensus; European Parliament; European politics; MEPs; Russian invasion of Ukraine

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1. Introduction

The unity of party groups in legislatures and their ability to exhibit a high degree of cohesion in voting or acting uniformly to achieve collective goals has long puzzled political scientists. This high level of uniformity is frequently observed in the European Parliament (EP) and is an even more puzzling phenomenon (Hix et al., 2005), especially against the background that the EP party groups lack many conventional mechanisms of party discipline such as the ability to control candidate selection or to allocate cabinet positions. Furthermore, the EP context is more fragmented institutionally and ideologically than national parliaments, requiring alternative explanations for the cohesion that EP party groups demonstrate.

Party cohesion or party unity is a well-established concept in the literature on legislative politics and is relevant not only in democracies but also autocracies (Levitsky & Way, 2012). It traditionally refers to the observable unity in group decision-making (Ozbudun, 1970) and is usually measured with the Rice Index (Rice, 1925). Although the concept captures both behavioural outcomes—such as voting unity—and the underlying motivations, including ideological commitment, strategic calculations, or institutional pressures, most scholarly literature is focused on measuring the outcome based on the roll-call votes. This has led some scholars to argue that cohesion indices often mask the multidimensionality of party unity, which includes not only votes but also rhetorical, procedural, and strategic alignment and that cohesion must be understood not only as an outcome but as a process shaped by interactions between party groups, national delegations, and the broader institutional environment (Crespin et al., 2013; Sieberer, 2006).

The EP exemplifies a case where a high level of cohesion is achieved not through coercion or institutional dominance, but through a complex interplay of shared ideology, strategic coordination, and group socialization. Therefore, this article aims to understand consensus within the EP party groups as well as across them. This study bridges the rhetoric of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) with different ideological and geographical backgrounds, particularly in the context of geopolitical crises. The article uses party cohesion, unity, and consensus interchangeably, but as we focus on the language MEPs use when talking about the ways the EU should respond to the Crimean annexation and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we prefer to use consensus and dissensus. We understand consensus as degrees of uniformity of EP party groups, a general amount of agreement among the MEPs (Flater, 2024), how close their preferences are with each other (Chiclana et al., 2015), or how widespread a given opinion is within a group (Riley et al., 1952). This understanding implies gradation as opposed to viewing consensus as a binary phenomenon of complete agreement or unanimity versus disagreement (Crowe, 1983; Halligan & Reid, 2016; Settembri & Neuhold, 2009). Although our focus on rhetorical action implies that we cannot construct the traditional cohesion index that uses roll-call votes as a source for data, this opens new possibilities to compensate for the shortcomings of the traditional indices. Such limitations would include forced reduction of cohesion to a binary choice between "yes" and "no" when politicians vote on legislative initiatives (Sieberer, 2006).

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, EU leaders promptly decided to provide military support to a country in an ongoing war. Notably, the European Peace Facility that now serves the provision of weapons to Ukraine was already established in 2021 (Rehrl, 2022). Moreover, geopolitical understandings of the EU's international role more generally have been furthered by von der Leyen's "Geopolitical Commission" at least since 2019 (Haroche, 2023). Yet, making use of such an instrument and the surge of references to "geopolitical power Europe," including by the High Representative (Håkansson, 2024), point to the unity of

the EU leadership. However, is this unity observed in the increasingly Eurosceptic EP (Hix et al., 2024)? We argue that within a multi-level and multi-faceted actor such as the EU, the EP is a central forum to observe deliberations about the EU's international role (Goinard, 2020; Góra, 2019; Hix & Høyland, 2013; Rosén & Raube, 2018; Szép, 2022). The debates in the EP reflect diverse and presumably competing conceptions of the European project (Kakhishvili & Felder, 2024). In the context of the geopoliticized enlargement following the invasion of Ukraine (Schimmelfennig, 2024; Schimmelfennig & Kakhishvili, 2025), consensus among MEPs becomes especially important for the EU to speak in one voice to ensure credibility of the external incentives for candidate countries (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, 2020). Our analysis aims to answer the following question: What explains the consensus and dissensus in the EP when responding to geopolitical crises?

Our approach introduces a novel measure of consensus, which constitutes a key contribution of this study. Existing research on the EP largely relies on roll-call votes, showing strong cohesion among centrist party groups and weaker cohesion among extremists (Ripoll Servent, 2019). Yet we know little about how consensus is built or contested during debates. This study shifts the focus from voting outcomes to parliamentary discourse, analyzing 12 debates on two major crises: Crimea (2014) and Ukraine (2022). To capture how MEPs reason about the EU's response, we developed an original coding framework based on three frames: capability-driven (actions tied to tangible resources such as military power or sanctions), value-driven (normative or transformative approaches toward neighbors), and non-response (calls for inaction). These frames form a three-dimensional space in which we locate individual MEPs and aggregate positions by party group, region, and the EP as a whole. Consensus is measured as the average distance between MEPs and their respective group, region, and EP positions. We then compare consensus levels across these dimensions and between the two crises, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis to uncover determinants and narratives of unity and division. Our findings reveal a rally effect, but not uniformly: Consensus varies by party family and region, exposing both solidarity and fragmentation in EU crisis politics. This approach complements research on party ideologies and foreign policy (Otjes et al., 2023) and responds to calls for examining how external shocks reshape Europe's transnational foreign policy space.

The article proceeds with a brief literature review on how to explain party unity in legislatures, specifically focusing on the particularities of the EP. This is followed by a brief description of methods and data. We then present the empirical analysis in two parts: First, we analyze the predictors of consensus through regression analysis; and second, we qualitatively look into the narratives emerging in the EP. The final section summarizes the main findings and suggests further avenues for research.

2. What Explains the High Level of Cohesion in the EP Party Groups?

The rally-around-the-flag effect refers to a temporary convergence of political positions and increased support for leading institutions during external threats. Applied to the EP, this raises the question of whether and how geopolitical shocks such as the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine strengthen cohesion within and across EP party groups. Party group cohesion is one of the central features of legislative politics. Research on intra-party cohesion highlights its multidimensional nature (see Close & Gherghina, 2019, for an extensive discussion), which becomes even more complex in a supranational setting (see Felder-Stindt & Kakhishvili, 2026, for an extensive discussion). The multi-level nature of the EP means that party group cohesion is partly shaped by factors that are relevant for national

parliaments, as well as a unique interplay of determinants characteristic to the institutional framework. Party groups in the EP are central actors in structuring debates, allocating resources, and shaping legislative outcomes, yet they lack the disciplinary tools available to national parties. Consequently, cohesion in the EP must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, shaped by ideology, organizational dynamics, and the EU's multi-level structure (Chiru & Stoian, 2019; Ripoll Servent, 2013; Ripoll Servent & MacKenzie, 2011). The multi-level nature of the EP creates an interplay of determinants similar to federal systems, where competing interest constellations can reduce cohesion (Desposato, 2004). Based on the literature, we identify two main explanatory factors: (a) ideological alignment and party group incentives, and (b) the dominance of national interests and country-specific factors. These provide the foundation for analyzing patterns of consensus and dissensus in EP debates during major geopolitical crises.

2.1. Ideological Factors

A consistent finding in the literature is that ideology is one of the strongest predictors of party group cohesion in the EP, particularly policy positions of national parties, which can control the re-election prospects of MEPs (Hix, 2002, 2004; Meserve et al., 2017; Rasmussen, 2008). Hix et al. (2005) show that EP party groups are not only highly cohesive but also ideologically distinct, with economic left–right positions explaining a significant share of group-level voting patterns (see also Hix & Noury, 2007). Similarly, Bowler and McElroy (2015) find that ideological congruence within party groups substantially increases cohesion, particularly when national party positions align with the EP group. Costello and Thomson (2016) add that party groups are more cohesive when national delegations share similar positions and when rapporteurs come from within the party group, thereby aligning legislative agenda-setting with group goals. Raunio (1999) and Chiru and Stoian (2019) further confirm that internal ideological coherence boosts cohesion, even in contexts with weaker party discipline. Chiru and Stoian (2019) find that Romanian MEPs, although coming from a post-communist context, conform to party group lines when ideological compatibility is strong. In contrast, ideological extremity—especially on the far-right—can increase defection (Chiru & Stoian, 2019). However, ideological convergence is not exclusively based on the distance between policy preferences. Klüver and Spoon (2015) argue that variance in issue salience is important enough to lead to MEPs defecting from their party group even if ideological distance is held constant (see also Rahat, 2007; Yordanova & Mühlböck, 2015).

The EP lacks traditional tools of party discipline such as candidate selection or ministerial appointment, making its cohesion especially noteworthy. Institutional norms and incentives can also foster cohesion. Roos (2019) shows that even before direct elections in 1979, EP party groups exhibited considerable unity, driven by norms of ideological solidarity and institutional socialization (see also Gherghina & Chiru, 2014). Lindstädt et al. (2012), on the other hand, demonstrate that the behaviour of new MEPs is different from their more experienced counterparts as they operate under the informational deficit and a high level of uncertainty. Furthermore, Costello and Thomson (2016) argue that incentives like rapporteurship and control over legislative reports help maintain unity, as MEPs are incentivized to support the group to gain access to agenda-setting roles. In the context of EP party groups' inability to control rank-and-file members, the leaderships of the largest party groups tend to increase their control over the EP structures (Kreppel, 2002), which can be used to endogenously manufacture unity within the EP committees (Ringe, 2009).

From this discussion it follows that "the EP stands out by having party politics dominate all business, including external relations" (Raunio & Wagner, 2020a, p. 547; see also Jensen et al., 2007; Raunio &

Wagner, 2020b). Therefore, ideological factors are the key for consensus to emerge. However, party group size and its potential to provide institutional incentives to individual MEPs for advancing their careers should be expected to increase the level of consensus. Therefore, we hypothesize that large, mainstream, and centrist EP party groups exhibit a higher level of consensus compared to smaller groups on the fringes of the ideological spectrum. In other words, members of the mainstream party groups should generally express similar views, and their positions should converge more.

2.2. National Factors

Another recurring theme in the literature is that national party considerations significantly shape the cohesion of EP party groups. Considering the multi-level nature of the EP, national interests have the potential to incentivize defection of MEPs from their party group. For example, Bailer et al. (2009) show that party group cohesion in the EP tends to decline in the later legislative stages, when national governments exert more pressure and party group influence wanes. Furthermore, McElroy (2008) finds that large national delegations often steer the policy direction of party groups, creating cohesion around dominant national interests, indicating that internal power distribution within the EP party groups shapes cohesion.

The importance of the national context particularly increases when the issues discussed in the EP are a matter of national interests. Costello and Thomson (2016) demonstrate that when national governments have a stake in EP legislation, particularly in high-salience areas, national delegations are more likely to side with their home governments than with the EP party line. This is especially true for areas such as foreign policy and external relations. According to Otjes et al. (2023), only a portion of voting patterns in the area of foreign policy can be explained by the MEPs' positions on the left–right and EU-integration dimensions.

Furthermore, there are additional factors related to domestic political incentives that contribute to the defection of MEPs. Chiru and Stoian (2019) underscore the relevance of the degree of strength of national–European party linkages, particularly for MEPs from unstable party systems. When such linkages are weak, which is mostly true for former-communist member states, MEPs are more prone to defection. This finding speaks to national context and the party system stability, on the one hand, and ideological alignment, on the other. A stronger linkage between national and European parties is an indicator of a stable party system, which is closely aligned with EP party group ideology.

Yet another layer is the electoral dimension, which offers variance across member states. Mühlböck (2013), for example, demonstrates that MEPs elected through open-list systems—where personal votes matter—are more prone to defection. According to Hobolt (2015), on the other hand, accountability in front of voters is an important factor: When voters are more informed about EP party groups, MEPs are more responsive to group positions, but when voters view MEPs primarily as national representatives, cohesion suffers.

While the interaction of national-level variables with EP structures more generally produces complex cohesion outcomes, the interaction between ideology and national interests should be particularly salient in foreign and security policy. The literature on EP cohesion proposes that the assumption of ideology generally trumping nationality weakens under geopolitical crises and identifies mechanisms through which national factors shape parliamentary behavior, including power positions, strategic culture, and economic interdependence (Otjes et al., 2023). We operationalize these through variables such as region (East vs. West, i.e., former communist

countries represent the East and countries that have no experience of communist rule represent the West), NATO membership, geographic proximity, energy dependency, and whether the party is in government. These factors are particularly relevant in foreign policy debates, where stakes are high and divergence between supranational and national priorities is likely. External shocks such as Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014) and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022) create conditions where national interests and threat perceptions interact with ideological alignments. We hypothesize that geographic proximity to the active military conflict shapes how politicians view the course of action, producing a geographic division among MEPs with varied levels of consensus. Given that stakes are higher in 2022 compared to 2014, we expect further variance by case. Specifically, due to national interests and threat perception, the level of consensus among Eastern European MEPs should be higher than among Western European MEPs. Moreover, the increased threat of full-scale invasion, as opposed to Crimea's annexation, should lead to stronger overall consensus in 2022. In other words, positions of MEPs from former communist countries should be closer to each other, while the invasion should rally MEPs more broadly around the EU flag.

2.3. Alternative Explanations

Beyond institutional and ideological factors, several scholars emphasize psychological and normative foundations of party group cohesion. Russell (2014) argues that social identity and fear of ostracism contribute to cohesion in contexts like the UK House of Lords, where formal discipline is minimal. Group belonging and loyalty, she argues, exert a powerful behavioural influence (see also Skjæveland, 2001) even if the context may incentivize personalization of political behaviour (see Pedersen & Rahat, 2021). Roos (2019) and Faas (2003) also highlight the role of informal norms in the EP, especially before the first direct elections. Norms of group solidarity and ideological affinity served as substitutes for formal discipline (Roos, 2019), while internal peer pressure and expectations played a larger role than sanctions in enforcing cohesion (Faas, 2003). Furthermore, Owens (2003) advances a purposive model of cohesion that blends rational re-election motives with social and organizational learning, suggesting that loyalty can be internalized through repeated interaction and shared goals. Although our data are limited to test these alternative explanations, we control for factors such as MEPs' previous legislative experience, which we believe should act as a proxy for socialization and loyalty towards their own party group.

Overall, this review demonstrates that party group cohesion in the EP is the product of multiple overlapping factors. Ideological affinity remains a strong unifying force, but institutional roles, national party constraints, electoral incentives, and informal norms also play significant roles. Unlike national parliaments, where cohesion is often enforced through direct party control, the EP relies on non-coercive mechanisms embedded in the structure of the EU's multi-level governance system. This highlights the EP's unique position: It is both similar to and distinct from national legislatures. While it displays high levels of voting unity, the underlying mechanisms are more nuanced. As the EP continues to evolve as a legislative body, understanding the dynamics of cohesion will remain crucial.

3. Methods and Data

To explore the patterns of consensus and dissensus in the EP, we focus on MEPs' interventions in the plenary debates. Putting the language under the spotlight allows us to conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses with the same data. The debates were sampled from the initial response of the EP to geopolitical

crises, which include the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia and 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine (for details on the sampling procedure of the debates, see Annex 1 in the Supplementary File). We treat these cases as most similar because they share key contextual features: Both involve Russian aggression against Ukraine, both triggered EU foreign policy responses under comparable institutional conditions, and both unfolded within the same supranational setting of the EP. This similarity makes any potential differences in consensus particularly noteworthy. If rally effects were automatic and uniform, we would expect similar patterns across both crises. By comparing these cases, we can assess whether this assumption holds and explore how ideology and national interests might interact under conditions of external threat.

The EP debates were processed through content analysis. We coded the data using three broad categories, differentiating between capabilities-driven response, values-driven response, and an *in-vivo* category of non-response. Capabilities-driven response includes statements that focus on the EU capabilities, e.g., appealing to the military and economic capacity of the EU including sanctions as well as geopolitical and strategic thinking. Values-driven response includes statements that advocate for a normative response to the crises. This would focus on the nature of the EU as a normative and transformative actor, putting values, norms, rules, and procedures at the forefront of the EU response. The coding framework was developed as a reflection of the literature on the EU's international roles, where capability-driven and value-driven responses are understood through the traditional distinction between interest-based and value-based arguments (Sjursen, 2006). Specifically, capability-driven frames derive from a logic of consequences, emphasizing issue-specific, interest-oriented reasoning such as appeals to military strength, economic capacity, and strategic considerations (Gehring et al., 2017; Telò, 2006). In contrast, value-driven frames reflect a logic of appropriateness, portraying the EU as a normative and transformative actor that prioritizes values, norms, and procedural legitimacy in its external actions (Aggestam, 2008; Manners, 2002). Finally, a third category of the response was derived from empirical data advocating for inaction by arguing that the EU should not interfere in the relations of third countries. Each of these broad categories was broken down into three sub-categories of goals, values, and instruments. Respectively, these include what issues MEPs think of as problems and goals in the given context, why MEPs believe these goals should be achieved or problems resolved, and what solutions or instruments MEPs advocate for in their speech acts. We derived these lowest-level codes inductively from the data. We focused on a (quasi-)sentence as a coding unit and coded each unit only once. To create the initial coding framework, two coders coded the first debate of 2014 independently and compared the inductively derived set of codes. The converged framework was updated for the 2022 debates, and again both coders agreed on the updated framework (for details on the coding procedure, see Annex 2 in the Supplementary File). Consequently, we created an original dataset that includes every MEP—and their speech acts—who intervened in each session by making a speech or submitting a written question in advance. This resulted in 306 MEPs in the dataset, which was supplemented with additional data about the MEPs' personal, national, and ideological characteristics.

Next, in order to construct a political space, in which we would explore the consensus and dissensus, we treat the three broad categories of responses, i.e., capabilities-driven, value-driven, and non-response, as dimensions of the political space in which MEPs position themselves. Any MEP can argue for capabilities-driven and values-driven responses or argue for hesitation from some types of responses and not others. This means that MEPs can propose multiple (non-)responses, and our goal is to capture the complexity of these positions. Consequently, for each MEP we calculate the share of statements that fall under each of these three categories and treat these figures as coordinates of a given MEP's estimated

position. This ensures that our estimations incorporate MEPs' complex ideas, i.e., the three dimensions, regarding the EU's response to geopolitical crises, without losing any data that we collected. From these data points, we calculate the average position within the EP in 2014 and 2022, within Eastern European and Western European MEPs, and within each EP party group. We then estimate the Euclidean distances between MEPs and the average position at three levels: EP, geographic regions, and EP party groups. As a next step, we estimate, on average, how far MEPs are from the average position. This measure is finally converted into a standardized consensus measure with the following formula:

$$C = \frac{1 - D_{\text{average}}}{\sqrt{3}}$$

C in this formula is a degree of consensus, and its values can range between 0 and 1. Higher values indicate a higher degree of consensus. D_{average} is the average distance between MEPs and the average position of the EP as a whole, a geographic region, or a party group.
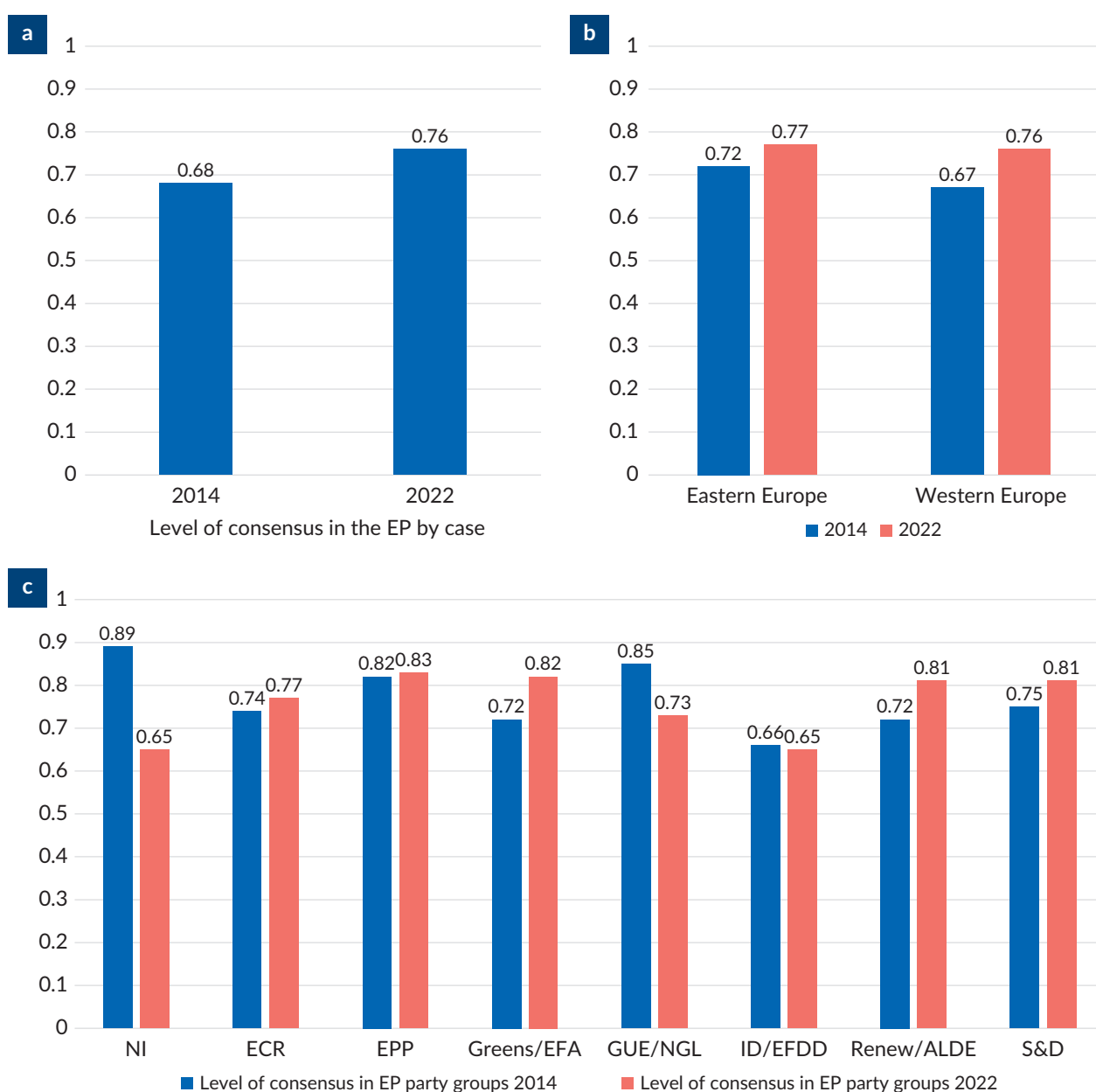
Our analysis combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both the structure and meaning of consensus-making. Quantitatively, we examine two variables of interest: (a) levels of consensus, comparing descriptive statistics between 2014 and 2022 across three levels (EP, party group, and region); and (b) determinants of variation in consensus, using OLS regression to estimate what explains the distance between individual MEP positions and the average position at each level. Standard errors are clustered by country in all models. As a robustness check, we additionally estimated all specifications using two-way clustered standard errors by country and EP party group; the substantive results remain unchanged.

We have two sets of independent variables and additional controls. To explore the ideological explanation of consensus, we include EP party group membership, and economic left–right and GAL–TAN positions of the national party from Chapel Hill Expert Survey data. National characteristics include region of origin divided into Western Europe and Eastern Europe (former communist countries belong to Eastern Europe); membership in NATO; geographic proximity with Kyiv measured in distance from the national capital in Google Maps; military expenditure of the MEP's country measured as an average share of GDP during seven years prior to observation; intensity of trade relations between Russia and the MEP's country measured as an average share of GDP during seven years prior to observation; an average share of Russian imports in the total fossil fuel consumption of the MEP's country during seven years prior to observation; and whether the MEP's national party was in government, which we believe is a proxy for an MEP's sensitivity to national security issues. We additionally include personal characteristics of MEPs in all our models: gender, age, and whether the MEP is a newcomer to the EP. Consequently, we build three models for each dependent variable: (a) ideological factors and control variables; (b) national factors and control variables; (c) full model with all independent and control variables.

To complement this, we conduct a qualitative analysis of parliamentary discourse to uncover the narratives behind these patterns. All speeches from MEPs who intervened in the selected debates were processed and coded using our three-frame scheme (capability-driven, value-driven, non-response). We then selected illustrative examples that represent salient developments identified in the quantitative analysis, such as the increase in consensus among Western European MEPs compared to Eastern counterparts, and persistent dissensus within certain party groups despite the broader rally effect. This qualitative inquiry allows us to explore how MEPs construct their positions in relation to party affiliation, regional identity, and ideology, and contextualize the uneven manifestation of the rally-around-the-flag effect across time and groups.

4. Consensus and Dissensus in the EP About Geopolitical Crises

The first expectation about consensus in the EP is that MEPs experience a rally-around-the-EU-flag effect as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Considering that we compare the invasion to the most similar case of Crimean annexation, this effect understandably can be limited, but we still observe an increase of eight percentage points in the consensus level in the EP as a whole (Figure 1a). Furthermore, we expected that the rally-around-the-EU-flag effect would not be uniform across various constellations of MEPs. This expectation is also confirmed. Although the effect transcends the geographic divides, i.e., whether an MEP comes from a former communist country or not (Figure 1b), we observe the lack of uniformity when it comes to the party groups (Figure 1c).

Level of consensus in the EP by case

Level of consensus in EP party groups 2014   Level of consensus in EP party groups 2022

Figure 1. Levels of consensus in the EP (a) by case, (b) by geographic region, and (c) by party group, in 2014 and 2022.

The level of consensus was five percentage points higher in Eastern Europe in 2014 as opposed to Western Europe, but in 2022 the figure was virtually the same for both regions, with 77 and 76 percent, respectively. On the other hand, comparison of party groups tells a different story. According to our data, consensus levels decreased primarily in two groups of MEPs: non-attached members (NI) and the Left Group in the EP (GUE/NGL). The drop is considerable, with 24 and 12 percentage points, respectively. At the same time, the group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), Renew Europe group (former Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe—Renew/ALDE), and group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the EP (S&D) show increased levels of consensus respectively by 10, 9, and 6 percentage points. Furthermore, the group of the European People's Party (EPP) shows high consensus levels in both cases, with 82 and 83 percent in 2014 and 2022, while the figures for the European Conservative and Reformists group (ECR) stayed at a medium level with 74 and 77 percent, respectively. For the Identity and Democracy group (former Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy—ID/EFDD), consensus remained at lower levels, with 66 and 65 percent in response to the annexation and the invasion, respectively.

These patterns indicate that although the level of consensus increased in the EP overall, consensus within party groups has experienced varied effects of geopolitical crises, while geographic divisions do not seem to matter. As a next step, we turn to regression analysis to explore what factors are associated with the distance between MEPs' positions and the average position of the EP, regions, and party groups.
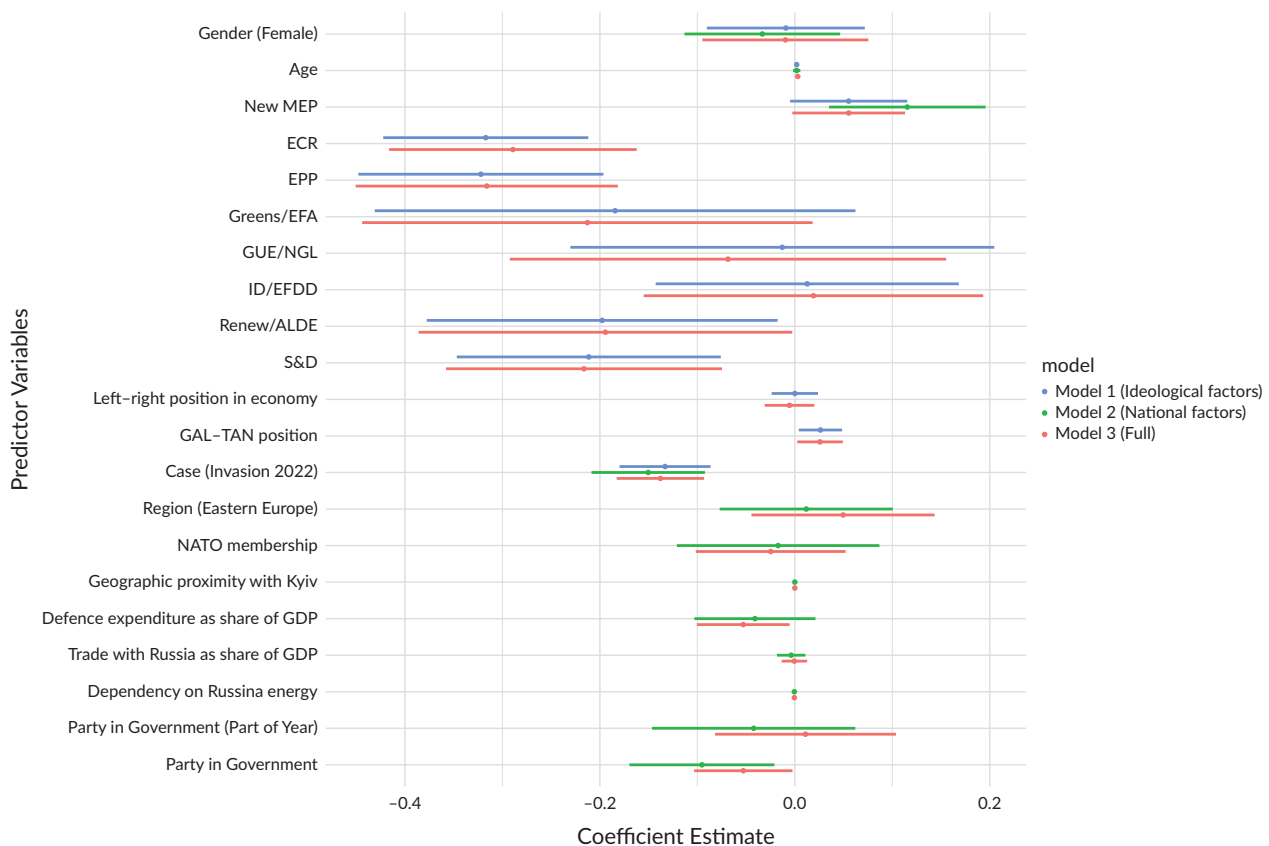
4.1. Patterns of Consensus and Dissensus in the EP From Annexation to Invasion

For OLS regressions, we use three dependent variables that we analyze with three models each. The dependent variables include the distance between an MEP and the EP as a whole, the distance between an MEP and their respective geographic region, and the distance between an MEP and their respective party group. Because the dependent variables measure distance, negative coefficients indicate greater convergence of positions within a given cluster of MEPs.

Apart from differentiating between the cases of annexation and invasion, which are included in all models, we have three sets of independent variables. First, personal characteristics of MEPs, such as gender, age, and whether an MEP is serving their first term, are included in all models. Second, ideological characteristics, such as EP party group, and left–right and GAL–TAN positions of the national party from Chapel Hill Expert Survey data, are included in model 1 and full model 3. Finally, national characteristics, such as whether an MEP comes from a former communist country, NATO membership, geographic proximity of national capital with Kyiv, defense expenditure as share of GDP, trade with Russia as share of GDP, degree of dependency on Russian energy, and whether the national party was in government for part of the year or for full year, are included in model 2 and the full model 3. We provide regression plots in the article, while full regression tables are available in Annex 3 in the Supplementary File.

4.2. The EP-Level Consensus

Figure 2 plots the three models explaining the distance between MEPs and the EP. Three main conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, the case of invasion remains statistically significant in all models and is negatively associated with the distance, meaning that, on average, MEPs are closer to the EP average position in 2022 as opposed to 2014. This suggests the rally-around-the-EU-flag effect of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

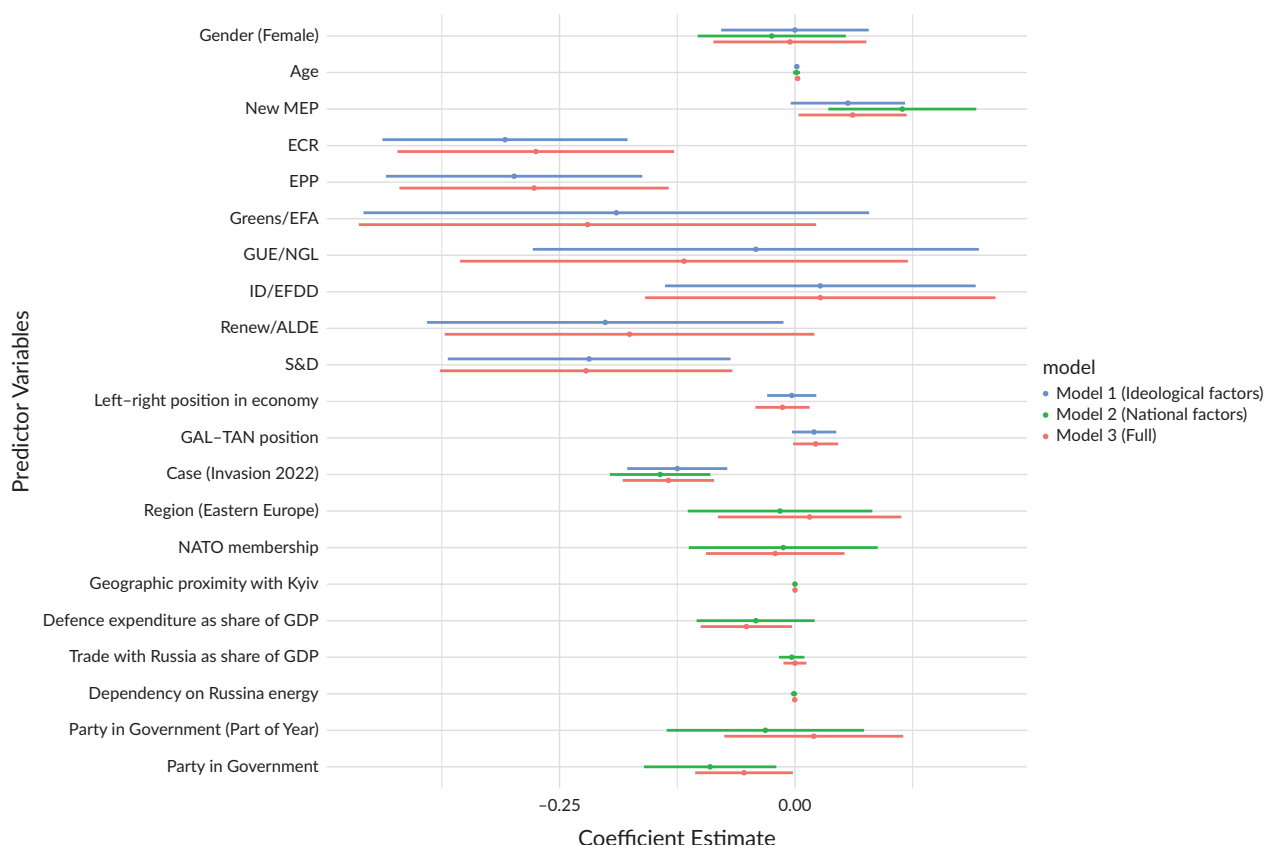**Figure 2.** Explaining distance between MEPs and EP average position.

Second, although the full model performs the best, it is not significantly better than model 1, which includes ideological characteristics of MEPs' parties. Therefore, we argue that it is indeed party characteristics that matter the most for the convergence of positions of MEPs in response to the two geopolitical crises. Indeed, if we look at model 2, which includes primarily national characteristics, we can see that being a new MEP is positively associated with increased distance, while being from a government party decreases the distance between the MEP and the EP average positions. Meanwhile, most national characteristics—such as NATO membership, defense expenditure, proximity to Kyiv, dependence on Russian energy, and trade with Russia— are not statistically significant, while only limited institutional context variables (e.g., government participation) show occasional effects. This finding suggests that MEPs tend to act as popular representatives within a supranational parliament driven by their ideological views and not as national delegations.

Finally, we observe that as opposed to non-attached members, MEPs from ECR, EPP, Renew/ALDE, and S&D— and to a lesser extent Greens/EFA—are closer to the EP average position. The relationship holds in the full model as well when controlling for national characteristics. Furthermore, consensus and dissensus in the EP appear to be more closely related to the GAL–TAN dimension than to left–right economic positions, although this relationship is moderate in size and sensitive to conservative inference. MEPs from TAN parties are, on average, further from the EP position. Consequently, how the EU should respond to geopolitical crises is not affected by material considerations, i.e., left–right positions; instead, the MEPs' view of the EU's response is informed by ideas and values composing the GAL–TAN dimension of party competition. This can potentially be a result of the public good nature of the issues related to security.

4.3. The Regional-Level Consensus

These three conclusions largely hold when we analyze the distance between MEPs and their respective region (see Figure 3). Once again, the invasion is associated with a convergence of positions in terms of how the EU should respond to the crises. The model with ideological characteristics performs just as successfully as the full model, while factors related to the national context are statistically insignificant. Several mainstream party groups—most notably EPP, S&D, ECR, and Renew/ALDE—are associated with higher levels of regional consensus, while the significance of the GAL–TAN dimension is marginal for the regional consensus.
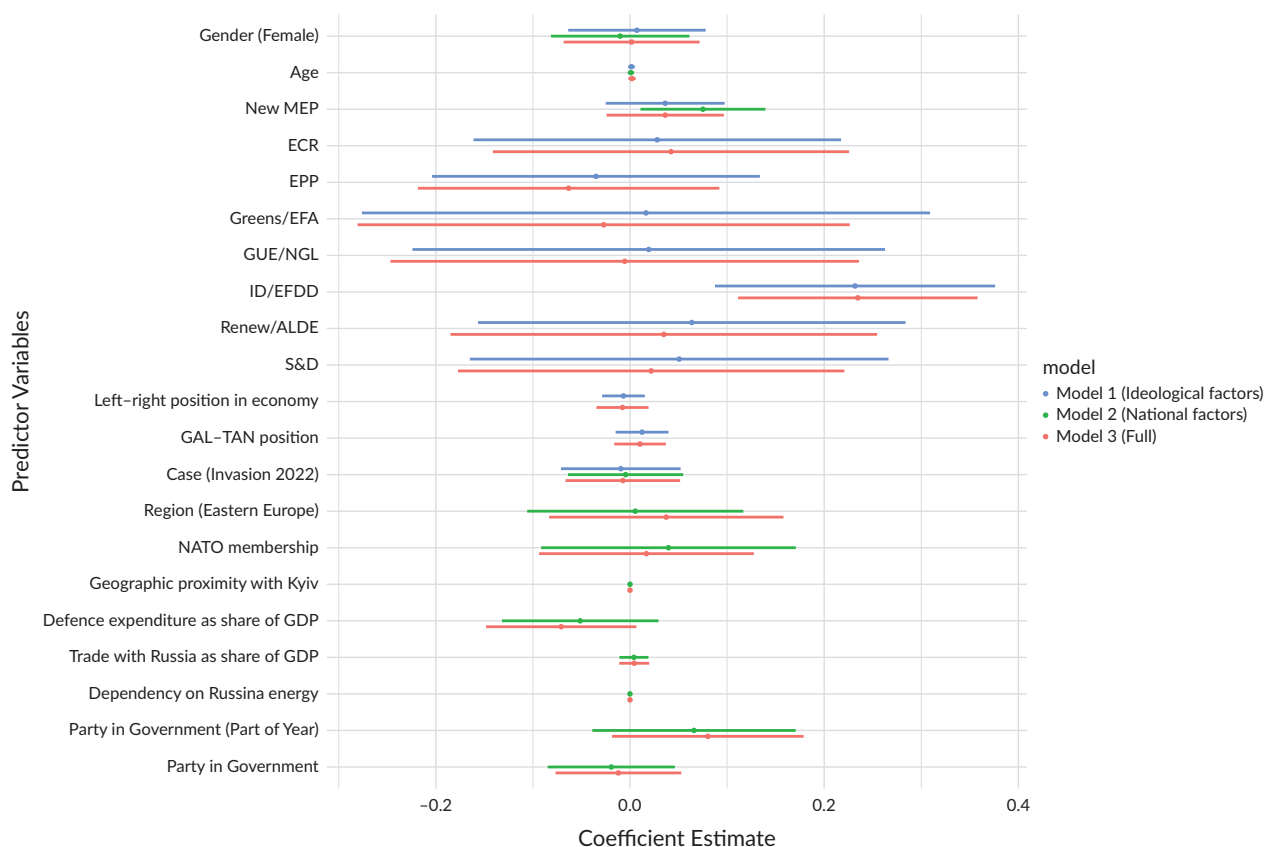

Figure 3. Explaining distance between MEPs and average regional position.

The only difference is that the statistical significance of the new MEPs is still observed in the full model. The distance between the positions of the newcomers to the EP is higher on average than the average position of the region. This pattern may point to the role of socialization within the EP, whereby longer-serving MEPs converge more strongly in their rhetorical positions regarding the EU's response to geopolitical crises.

4.4. The Party-Group-Level Consensus

Finally, we turn to the analysis of the distance between MEPs and their respective EP party group. Different patterns emerge in these results. The first important finding is that model 2, which focuses on national characteristics, is statistically insignificant, which is why in Figure 4 we do not plot the results of this model (see Annex 3 in the Supplementary File). This can be interpreted as evidence of how ideology trumps nationality when it comes to how MEPs view the EU and how they conceive the EU's actions. Second, the

invasion no longer has a statistically significant effect on the convergence of positions. This can be a result of the fact that, on average, the consensus levels within party groups, as shown in Figure 1, have been rather high both in 2014 and 2022. Third, only ID/EFDD is significantly different as a group from non-attached members of the EP. Being a member of ID/EFDD is associated with an increased distance between its members and the group's average position. This higher degree of dissensus within ID/EFDD speaks to the previous findings about the importance of GAL–TAN positions of national parties. Given the ideological heterogeneity and radical positioning of ID/EFDD, party-group membership appears to dominate over GAL–TAN positioning in explaining within-group dissensus in this case. Finally, in the full model, which includes all sets of independent variables, defense expenditure shows a weak and model-dependent association with party-group convergence, which does not remain robust under more conservative inference. The higher the share of defense expenditure in the GDP of member states, the lower the distance of the respective MEPs from their party group.

Figure 4. Explaining distance between MEPs and EP party group average position.

Overall, the quantitative analysis of the EP debates following Russia's annexation of Crimea and full-scale invasion of Ukraine shows that MEPs do experience the rally-around-the-EU-flag effect in response to significant geopolitical crises. This effect is stronger in the case of invasion and the return of a total war on the continent. However, the data also suggest that geopolitical crises have varied effects on different constellations of MEPs. Ideological positioning—particularly along the GAL–TAN dimension—plays a central role in structuring both consensus and dissensus in the EP, with especially strong effects for party-group-level dynamics. MEPs associated with the TAN pole tend to diverge more from common positions, most clearly within their own party groups and, to a lesser extent, at the regional and EP levels.

5. Consenting and Dissenting in Parliamentary Discourse: Divided in Unity?

The quantitative analysis provides a systematic overview of variation in MEPs' positions on the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The qualitative component uncovers the narratives behind these patterns by examining parliamentary speech language to contextualize trends of consensus and dissensus. It explores how positions relate to party affiliation, regional identity, and ideology, complementing the quantitative findings by revealing discursive dynamics underpinning the rally-around-the-flag effect and its uneven manifestation across party groups and time. We focus on speech acts illustrating key developments: greater consensus among Western European MEPs versus Eastern counterparts, and persistent or intensified dissensus within certain party groups despite the broader effect. First, we show how EU foreign policy positions align with the GAL–TAN dimension, emphasizing values, identity, and cultural worldviews in consensus formation. We also consider the moderating role of national defense investment, noting that MEPs from high-spending countries align more closely with their EP party groups. Finally, we examine deviations from the consensus trend, such as enduring dissensus within GUE/NGL, non-affiliated, and far-right MEPs.

5.1. Ideational Foundations of "Unity" and Material Commitments as a Source of Consensus

The quantitative analysis revealed a notable increase in consensus among MEPs between the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which is driven by increased consensus among Western European MEPs. This trend suggests a growing alignment within this regional cluster, particularly in response to the heightened geopolitical stakes of the latter crisis. To understand the discursive underpinnings of this shift, we examine how MEPs frame the EU's role, values, and strategic imperatives. The findings suggest discursive convergence from 2014 to 2022, where the perceived proximity to the conflict and the symbolic weight of Ukraine's European aspirations galvanized a shared narrative. A recurring theme in 2022 speeches is the emphasis on European unity and shared democratic values. Already in 2014, MEPs from traditionally moderate groups such as the EPP and S&D frequently invoked the EU's responsibility to defend peace, sovereignty, and the rules-based international order. Yet, in 2014, especially Western European MEPs were also more cautious and fragmented in their assessments, often expressing concerns about escalation, economic repercussions, and the limits of EU foreign policy capacity. In 2022, however, the tone shifted toward a more assertive and morally charged discourse, with MEPs across the political spectrum converging on the need for a strong, unified EU response.

This discursive shift is closely tied to the GAL–TAN ideological dimension, which, as the quantitative findings show, is a more powerful predictor of consensus and dissensus than the traditional left–right economic spectrum. MEPs' speeches reflect this ideational divide, with the pattern holding across both crises, but being more pronounced in 2022, when the stakes were higher and the symbolic dimensions of the conflict more salient. Most MEPs rallied around a shared narrative of European unity in 2022, evoking "how defending Ukraine means defending the European Union," voiced, e.g., by MEPs such as Mureÿan, EPP; Banifei, S&D; Von Cramon-Taubadel, Greens. Yet, this unity bears different meanings for MEPs. GAL-oriented parties emphasize human rights, multilateralism, and the EU as a moral actor, while TAN-oriented parties prioritize sovereignty, tradition, and national interest. These orientations shape how MEPs interpret the EU's role in foreign policy. For example, GAL MEPs described the invasion as "barbaric" with "the atrocities committed against civilians as part of the invasion [constituting] a crime against

humanity" (Zorrinho, S&D) while TAN-aligned MEPs described the invasion as "unprovoked" and that despite supporting Ukraine with all means, the EU should not forget "one red line, which is that this diplomatic and political process cannot take place to the detriment of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine" (Danjean, EPP). As a result, the GAL–TAN axis involves conflicting normative frameworks that may make consensus more fragile and contingent, particularly when crises touch on identity, sovereignty, and the EU's foundational values.

While much of the variance in MEPs' positions can be explained by ideological factors, the quantitative analysis also uncovered a material correlate of consensus: the higher the share of a member state's GDP allocated to defense, the closer its MEPs tend to be to their party group's average position. This relationship is reflected in the language and reasoning of MEPs. MEPs from countries with higher defense budgets, such as France, Poland, and the Baltic states, often framed the EU's response to Russia in terms of strategic necessity and shared responsibility. This suggests that material investment in defense translates into political alignment, as MEPs from these countries are more likely to support robust EU action and align with their party group's position. Their speeches emphasized the importance of deterrence, military preparedness, and transatlantic cooperation. For instance, a French MEP in 2022 argued:

> Let us...jointly [buy] the armaments that we or our partners need. What we have done for vaccines—buying together and producing in Europe—let's do it for the equipment....I suggest going further and directing us towards a "Buy European Act" in terms of military equipment. Our sovereignty also depends on this and our credibility. (Loiseau, Renew)

MEPs from center-left groups echoed similar themes, such as Androulakis from S&D:

> The European army, joint armaments programmes, strong economic sanctions and arms embargoes are tools that can guard our prosperity and our borders, from Estonia and Finland to Greece and Cyprus. I am by no means calling for Europe to return to militarism, but we must do everything in our power not to allow it to return. (Androulakis, S&D)

From this pragmatic understanding of security policy, consensus is not just a normative goal but a strategic imperative so that consensus may cut across ideological lines. Such statements reveal how material commitments can foster cross-party consensus, especially when national interests align with broader EU objectives.

5.2. Persistent and Rising Intra-Group Dissensus of Leftist, Non-Attached, and Radical Right MEPs

Despite the overall trend toward increased consensus in 2022, several groups stand out for their persistent and, in some cases, intensifying intra-group dissensus. The GUE/NGL group, NI MEPs, and members of the radical right consistently diverged from the rally-around-the-flag effect. A closer look into the substance of MEP's speech acts allows us to conclude that this divergence stems from a combination of ideological heterogeneity and national-level strategic positioning, which complicate consensus-building at the supranational level.

Within GUE/NGL, speech acts reveal deep internal tensions between anti-militarist, anti-imperialist, and pro-solidarity standpoints. While some MEPs condemned Russia's actions and supported EU solidarity with Ukraine, others framed the EU's response as part of a broader militarization trend, expressing skepticism toward NATO and Western foreign policy. For instance, a French left MEP in 2022 acknowledged the illegality of the invasion but warned against "military escalation and the arms race which would put our continent on fire and sword" (Aubry, GUE/NGL); whereas a Belgian MEP criticized the EU's double standard for sanctioning Russia but not the US, Saudi Arabia, Israel, or the EU itself:

> When Russia attacks Ukraine, Europe sanctions, of course. But when the United States bombs Iraq, no sanctions, when Saudi Arabia bombs Yemen, no sanctions, when we, the European Union, bomb and destroy Libya, no sanctions, and when Israel is colonizing Palestine, no sanctions. It's two weights, two measures. (Botenga, GUE/NGL)

These conflicting narratives—solidarity versus systemic critique—reflect parallel but incompatible logics that prevent the formation of a unified group position. The result is a discursive fragmentation that mirrors the quantitative finding of increased intra-group distance, especially in 2022 when the stakes were higher.

A similar pattern emerges among non-attached MEPs, whose lack of formal group affiliation results in a highly individualized and ideologically diverse discursive space. NI MEPs include far-right, nationalist, and single-issue representatives whose positions are shaped more by domestic political agendas than by any transnational alignment. In both 2014 and 2022, their speeches ranged from support for Russia to isolationist calls for EU non-intervention. One NI MEP, for example, criticized the EU for dragging member states "into the tragic war next door" that does not serve people's interests (Kinga, NI). This deep skepticism toward EU foreign policy and preference for national sovereignty over collective action further reinforces their structural and ideological distance from the EP overall.

The radical-right groups represented in the EP across the two periods—first EFDD and later ID—also exhibited pronounced intra-group dissensus. Unlike mainstream EP groups, which tend to coalesce around shared values and strategic goals, both EFDD and ID brought together national parties united primarily by their opposition to EU integration rather than a coherent ideological platform. This lack of a coherent foreign policy vision leads to strategic ambiguity and rhetorical divergence. In the 2022 debates, for instance, one MEP emphasized that "support for the Ukrainian people must be total and we must ensure that, as soon as possible, the solution to this conflict is a peace that restores the territorial integrity of Ukraine" (Zanni, ID) while another warned that it is "dishonest for the European institutions to use this war to advance a federalist agenda that the people refuse" (Bardella, ID). Both invoked nationalist rhetoric, yet their strategic preferences—engagement versus isolation—diverged sharply. This fragmentation is not new; similar contradictions were evident in 2014, when EFDD members expressed conflicting views on Crimea.

The persistence of these divisions suggests that national party ideologies, particularly along the GAL–TAN axis, play a stronger role than EP group affiliation in shaping MEPs' positions. TAN-oriented parties, which emphasize tradition, authority, and nationalism, are especially prone to strategic ambiguity. Their MEPs often avoid clear endorsements or condemnations, instead framing the EU's response in terms of national interest and cultural identity. For example, one ID MEP in 2022 warned against escalation of the situation with Russia as a nuclear power and argued that "Russia and Ukraine are two sides of the same coin" (Zimniok, ID). Such

equivocation reflects a worldview in which supranational cooperation is inherently suspect, making consensus within these groups difficult to achieve—even in moments of acute geopolitical urgency.

6. Conclusion

This article explored MEPs' initial response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as their conception of the EU's course of action. We aimed to investigate whether MEPs experience the rally-around-the-flag effect when the EU faces acute geopolitical crises. Relying on a mixed-methods approach, our analysis of EP plenary debates from 2014 and 2022 shows that MEPs do indeed rally around the EU flag. However, as expected, this effect is uneven across different clusters of MEPs. The quantitative part of the study uncovered that although the level of consensus increased in larger groups of MEPs, within individual party groups, patterns diverge. If on the EP and regional, i.e., Eastern and Western Europe, levels, consensus has become more pronounced in 2022 compared to 2014, party groups experienced varied effects. In groups such as Greens/EFA, Renew/ALDE, and S&D, consensus increased notably, while non-attached MEPs and GUE/NGL show declining consensus levels.

Regression analysis indicates that ideological factors play a central role in structuring patterns of consensus and dissensus in the EP, whereas national and material characteristics account for relatively little of the observed variation. Particularly, party-group membership emerges as the most consistent predictor across models, providing more evidence for arguments developed by Jensen et al. (2007) and Raunio and Wagner (2020a), while positions along the GAL–TAN dimension are associated with convergence and divergence at the EP and regional levels. MEPs affiliated with GAL-oriented parties tend to be closer to common positions, whereas representatives of TAN-oriented parties are more likely to deviate from aggregate positions of the EP and, to some extent, from regional averages. Unlike Hix et al. (2005) and Hix and Noury (2007), however, we find that left–right economic positions do not systematically shape convergence patterns.

Qualitative analysis of MEPs' speeches reveals a more nuanced picture underlying these quantitative patterns. When examining debates along the GAL–TAN axis, distinct normative frameworks emerge that render consensus inherently fragile. While MEPs from GAL-oriented parties tend to frame the crises in humanitarian and rules-based terms, TAN-oriented parties emphasize sovereignty, territorial integrity, and capability-based responses. As a result, even when MEPs converge on broad outcomes—such as the desirability of ceasefire or peace—these goals are often underpinned by divergent meanings. Consensus therefore appears contingent not only on shared policy positions but also on how crises intersect with identity, sovereignty, and foundational EU values. Our findings closely relate to the arguments of Börzel and Hartlapp (2022), who show that Eurosceptic MEPs contest most strongly issues related to foreign policy, particularly those that are situated on the GAL–TAN dimension. This is also where they show the highest level of cohesion (Börzel & Hartlapp, 2022). Our evidence shows that these MEPs offer policy options that differ from what the mainstream party groups would advocate. The option of non-response in our data is a direct result of the contestation of Eurosceptic MEPs. However, we have shown that they do not exhibit the same degree of consensus as MEPs from more mainstream party groups.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that among the non-attached MEPs and those from the fringes of the ideological spectrum, consensus is relatively lower or decreased between 2014 and 2022. Qualitative analysis showed that this is due to the ideological heterogeneity of these clusters of MEPs, reinforcing the findings from

the regression analysis about the importance of ideological factors. The ideological heterogeneity, on the one hand, and a lack of common vision of the EU foreign policy, on the other, lead the MEPs from these clusters to either employ ambiguous rhetoric or engage in the construction of conflicting narratives, confirming previous findings in the existing literature (see Gherghina & Fagan, 2021; Mitru & Tap, 2026). Furthermore, especially left MEPs are often caught between the willingness to support Ukraine and systemic criticism of the military imperative in the current world order, which leads to lower consensus as the stakes get higher in geopolitical crises, forcing some of these MEPs to pick a position (see Capati & Trastulli, 2026, on how crises affect the positioning of leftist parties).

Overall, our study confirms the importance of ideological factors for explaining MEPs' positions. We explored the consensus and dissensus in the EP with unique data that allow us to measure consensus in an innovative way and analyze the process of meaning-making behind the quantitative patterns. Our contributions speak to the importance of the values MEPs hold when analyzing legislative politics of the EP. This is related to not only the importance of ideological factors as shown in regression analysis, but also to within-group ideological heterogeneity and the conflicting values some MEPs may adhere to, as revealed by the in-depth analysis of the speech acts in the EP debates. We recognize that our data are limited to geopolitical crises and to the initial response to these crises. Therefore, exploring the same phenomena in the context of different types of crises or in a longitudinal manner to observe potential variance in the consensus levels has the potential to expand our understanding of legislative politics on a supranational level.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
The data associated with this article are available from the corresponding author upon request.

LLMs Disclosure
The authors used ChatGPT 5.1 and 5.2 (OpenAI) to assist with drafting and troubleshooting R code. All analytical decisions (model choice, variable construction, robustness checks) were made by the authors, who reviewed, executed, and validated all code and results. All substantive interpretations and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

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

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Citizens' Trust in the European Union During Crisis and Conflicts Across 10 Countries

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Abstract

The increasing support for populism is indicative of a profound crisis in European societies. The prevailing cultural narrative posits that support for populist parties, particularly those of a right-wing orientation, is predominantly a reaction to the erosion of nationalistic and religious identities. A growing critique of supranational institutions became visible in some countries. In Europe, populist parties are growing, but Euroscepticism seems to show different trends. Euroscepticism is diminishing and trust in Europe has been growing since 2018 and in particular since 2022. Is there a lack of trust in the European institutions which is reflected in all political parties? What are the reasons for trust and distrust within the political parties in general and within the populist parties in particular? In most countries, the war between Ukraine and Russia is seen as an external threat to the European Union. Did the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war lead to a "rally around the flag" phenomenon, and is trust in the European Union increasing because of this external hostility? We found evidence of people switching back from populist to mainstream parties and becoming less Eurosceptic, hinting at a "rally around the flag" effect. The study focuses on panel data from voters in 10 countries—Spain, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the UK, Sweden, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Hungary—from two waves, namely 2018 and 2023, as well as a cross-section of the 2023 wave.

The main focus is on supporters of populist parties, which will be compared to mainstream parties. This study thus explores whether the Ukraine war reinvigorated trust in the European Union.

1. Introduction

Since the end of the 2010s, trust in the European Union (EU) has been growing. This trend is evident despite the growing strength of populist parties. Following the democratic "honeymoon" period after 1989, trust in the EU declined until the mid-2010s (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). Since then, however, trust has been on the rise. There was a significant increase in 2022. Using a broad comparative survey and panel data at the individual level, we attempt to explain this phenomenon. We argue that an external shock in the form of aggression leads to higher trust in supranational institutions. The Russian war against Ukraine can be seen as such a hostile aggression and a threat to EU member states. Did external hostility lead to greater internal solidarity and trust in the EU?

This article is a result of the PRECEDE (Populism's Roots: Economic and Cultural Explanations in Democracies of Europe, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation) project. In our project, the focus was on the social, economic, and cultural triggers of populist voting, and on the relationship between political parties' agendas and populist voters' demands. One idea was to detect the push and pull factors that transform voters from mainstream parties into supporters of populist parties. Secondly, we analysed pull factors that move voters away from populist parties and back towards less radical mainstream parties. The focus was on comparing supporters of mainstream and populist parties in 10 different countries, namely the UK, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Spain, Romania, France, Sweden, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. In recent years the world has been facing multiple overlapping crises, a situation often described as a *polycrisis*. During times of external shocks and instability, maintaining political stability requires broad support from citizens. Public trust in local, national, and supranational institutions becomes crucial, as the rise of extremist movements and populist parties can hinder the development of effective public policies. In particular, citizen trust in non-populist parties plays a vital role during external shocks such as the war in Ukraine (Gherghina et al., 2025). In this context, our focus is less on external shocks themselves and more on their imminent threat and their implications for citizens' attitudes. While previous research has focused on data from the supply side (political party perspective), this study focuses on data from the demand side (citizen perspective), using two waves of our survey panel data from 2018 and 2023/2024.

Mainstream parties are in distress, as populism has been on the rise in Europe in recent years. Since 2010, populists have won in Hungary and Italy and gained seats in most other countries, including France and Sweden. Populism and Euroscepticism are cross-European phenomena that occur in countries with and without extensive social systems. European citizens report growing dissatisfaction with their standard of living and working conditions, which can result in declining support for the EU and national democratic institutions.

Euroscepticism was prevalent in the 2000s. Since the end of the 2010s, however, we have not seen a similar increase, even though opposition to European integration is one of the common correlates of populism. But there are some exemptions, such as the Scottish National Party, the Irish Sinn Féin, the Welsh Plaid Cymru, the Bulgarian GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), and the parties supported by individual politicians such as Boyko Borisov in Bulgaria (Petrović & Bilić, 2025). The trend in trust in the 24 EU countries (excluding the UK, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania) is based on Eurobarometer data. In fact, trust in the EU has increased since 2018. So, while populism is growing, trust in the EU is increasing. In this article, we seek to explain this apparent contradiction. We can do so because we have data on both populism and trust in the EU at the individual level from 10 European countries.

In the early 2010s, most right-wing populist parties were highly critical of the EU. By 2015, this trend decreased. However, the effect on their election and poll results varied despite these similarities. This gives rise to several questions, which we intend to answer below: How did mainstream and populist voters react to the war between Russia and Ukraine, as some right-wing parties supported the Russian invasion? Did their voters continue to vote for right-wing populist parties, or did they switch to non-populist mainstream parties? Did the ruling parties benefit from a "rally around the flag" effect, persuading formerly populist voters to defect?

In the following section, we will develop and formulate our research questions and hypotheses. Section 3 presents contextual data and details of the various political developments in our case study countries during the crisis. It includes details of the case selection, our methodology, and our definition of populist parties. Finally, Section 5 presents our empirical data analysis and conclusions.

2. Trust in Europe, Mainstream and Populist Parties, and "Rally Around the Flag"

Our comparative survey analyses mainstream and populist parties across European countries. This article reflects party positions but focuses on the demand side and presents panel survey data of party supporters.

This article is concerned with the concept of trust in supranational democratic institutions, namely the EU. Trust is widely regarded as a pivotal component of democratic systems, functioning as a cohesive agent that binds society and political systems together. Trust is established over time and is predicated on various forms of legitimacy. Trust is based on input legitimacy, as well as output legitimacy. According to Easton (1965), this diffuse support is based on specific support over the years. The legitimacy of a political organisation such as the EU can be characterised by satisfaction with the policies implemented by the political organisation. Its trust is affected by the openness towards citizen participation (see for input legitimacy and democratic innovation in this regard: Dahl, 1965; Habermas, 2000; Kersting, 2023; Smith, 2009). The correlation between the input list and the outputs is direct, since the inclusion of citizens in the process of policymaking is regarded as a favourable factor in the development of suitable policies.

It becomes obvious that the concept of populism is related to trust in Europe and Euroscepticism (Hooghe & Marks, 2007). Party systems in Europe are affected by strong polarisation, and this is strongly related to the development of populist parties. The right-wing populist parties are anti-establishment, anti-migration, and nationalistic. Consequently, these parties predominantly oppose supranational institutions. Left-wing populist parties are against economic elites and thus criticise the EU's neoliberal profile rather than the process of

European integration. In the following we use the concept of populism defined as "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004); for ideational populism see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017). Other definitions highlight populism as a strategy and the necessity for controversy and conflicts (Laclau, 2005), as primarily a rhetorical device or communication strategy used to shape political discourse (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Kampwirth, 2012), as a distinct political style characterized by moral dichotomies and hostility toward outgroups (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013), as an organizational strategy employed by political parties, or as a distinct mode of communication (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016; Weyland, 2001, 2017). The ideational approach has a significant advantage for empirically driven research, as it provides relative conceptual clarity and analytical precision with its minimal definition.

In the 2000s, EU scepticism was growing after the failed referendums of 2005 and the rejection of the constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands, as well as the 2008 Irish referendum (Ultan Sönmez & Ornek, 2015). The reasons for EU scepticism and distrust were less prevalent among those facing economic hardship due to EU policies, but more prevalent among citizens with lower education (see for Belgium, Abts et al., 2009). Citizens in lower-income regions have more trust than those in middle-income regions (Gherghina & Tap, 2023; Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2024).

Thielmann and Hilbig (2023) argue that conspiracy mentality shares an ideological core with populism in that they both rely on "us versus them" narratives, which is accompanied by strong nationalism and strong anti-establishment attitudes towards international organisations such as the EU. In this context, European institutions are perceived as part of the governing elites and as tools that national elites can use to insulate themselves (Moravcsik, 1994).

Nevertheless, we must differentiate between the party's position (supply side) and that of its voters (demand side). Populist parties do not appear to be any closer to their voters on the issue of Euroscepticism. Support for populist parties may be driven less by their contribution to closing representation gaps in Euroscepticism and more by the rise of ideational populism. Populist parties appear to adopt radical anti-European positions in pursuit of their long-term goals rather than to maximise their votes.

The relationship between populism and attitudes towards the EU has become a focal point in political science literature, particularly since the financial crisis of 2008 and the refugee crisis of 2015, both of which exposed tensions between national democracies and supranational governance (De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Kriesi et al., 2016). Many scholars have analysed this relationship at both the party level (Pirro et al., 2018) and the voter level (Ivaldi, 2020). Evidence suggests that, although the two phenomena are conceptually distinct, they often occur together in practice.

Empirical research shows that distrust of EU institutions is strongly correlated with support for populist parties. De Vries and Edwards (2009) found that Eurosceptic attitudes were a significant predictor of voting for parties at the political extremes. Furthermore, Kopecký and Mudde (2002) showed the Eurosceptic tendencies of populist parties. Similarly, Rooduijn et al. (2016) demonstrate that individuals with strong populist attitudes, characterised by anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a demand for popular sovereignty, are more likely to be Eurosceptic, particularly when they perceive the EU as distant and technocratic. However,

the alignment between populist parties and their voters is often weak, as the policy positions of populist parties (supply side) frequently diverge from the attitudes of their populist supporters (Zhirnov et al., 2025).

Euroscepticism is also linked to nativism and strong nationalism, which are core components of right-wing populism and its opposition to international cooperation (Isernia et al., 2025). This is reflected in xenophobic attitudes and nationalism, as well as exclusionary identity politics rather than European integration (Noury & Roland, 2020, p. 423). Van Der Brug et al. (2021) demonstrate that support for illiberal democracy is negatively correlated with support for the EU. Therefore, it is not surprising that the advance of populist parties and the spread of populist attitudes among European voters in recent decades have been associated with increased contestation of supranational governance structures and political institutions. Various crises, such as the eurozone and migratory crises, have further exacerbated and intertwined these trends until the mid-2010s. Surprisingly, however, the rise of populist parties and their better electoral results were accompanied by a higher level of trust in the EU in the following years.

To resolve this conundrum, it is necessary to turn to the concept of the "rallying around the flag" effect. This effect posits the hypothesis that, in periods of international crisis, citizens will frequently respond by expressing increased support for their political leaders (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Kizilova & Norris, 2024). In times of crisis, voters have been observed to coalesce around the flag. Hooghe et al. (2024, p. 460) posit that an "external threat produces collective governance" as a fundamental hypothesis within political science. The presence of external threats has been shown to engender a state of tension between populist and Eurosceptic tendencies, compelling even populist parties to acknowledge the necessity of embracing a degree of supranational collective action. In the following, the research questions will be developed.

It is argued that trust can also be influenced by external factors and events. The present study hypothesises that a strong national identity and a strong dissatisfaction with supranational institutions can compromise trust in supranational institutions. The present study posits that the EU's inability to address issues of inequality has precipitated a pervasive sense of disillusionment, particularly among Eastern European nations. This phenomenon emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s. Consequently, the EU was witnessing a decline in its popularity. A growing mistrust was observed among members of newly established right-wing and left-wing populist parties.

In the context of the global coronavirus pandemic, starting in 2020, the role of the EU assumed a diminished significance, with national governments assuming primary responsibility. However, the EU demonstrated its support for this strong position of national governments. In response to the pandemic, the EU created the Next Generation EU programme. It is imperative to acknowledge the pivotal function it fulfilled in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, particularly its pivotal role in defence. The EU emerged as a source of stability. Following the crisis on migration in 2015, its legitimacy increased once more. In the Russia–Ukraine war starting in February 2022, the EU and most of its member states strongly supported Ukraine.

The social and economic divide is regarded as a significant social deficit within the EU, precipitating mounting discontent towards political institutions in European societies. This discontent encompasses diverse political institutions at all levels, ranging from local to regional, national, and supranational bodies such as the EU. Moreover, the EU initiated the European Pillar of Social Rights, which delineates 20 key principles on equal opportunities. Despite the absence of a comprehensive dissemination strategy, this

information was not widely circulated. The relationship between economic growth and redistribution on the one hand, and trust and legitimacy on the other, is a highly relevant one. In this regard, trust in political institutions and in the EU can be regarded as a significant indicator of support for the political system and of stability (Easton, 1965).

The initial Hypothesis 1 (H1) is predicated on this line of argumentation and employs an analytical framework that encompasses both mainstream political parties and left-wing and right-wing factions during the late 2010s and early 2020s. It is argued that, concomitantly, there is an increase in trust in the EU; however, strong supporters of right-wing populist parties exhibit a pronounced anti-EU stance. Furthermore, the within change of people who switched back from voting for populist parties to mainstream parties have become less Eurosceptic due to a "rally around the flag" effect.

Nevertheless, this is indicative of Hypothesis 2 (H2). A series of events transpired between 2018 and 2023/2024, including the Ukraine war and the emergence of the coronavirus in 2020. In this instance, the countries in question employed a variety of strategies in response. The EU was not perceived as the primary agent responsible for the harmonisation of policies concerning Covid-19. This was because these policies were implemented by national governments in a variety of different ways. Nonetheless, it appears that the EU was regarded in a favourable light, with relations within the EU assuming greater significance. It is argued that this should have resulted in a greater degree of trust in the EU. In the short term, a proportion of voters from populist parties opted to abstain and instead cast their votes for mainstream parties. Nevertheless, since the mid-2010s, there has been an increase in the level of trust in the EU, whilst anti-establishment and anti-EU sentiments have become less significant. This phenomenon of national unity can be understood as a reflexive response to external hostility, particularly in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This was the final escalation of the Russia–Ukraine conflict after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The present analysis will utilise unique comparative survey data, thereby facilitating a comparison across a total of 10 countries. Secondly, the unique nature of the panel datasets under consideration facilitates the analysis of potential shifts in attitude at the individual level.

Consequently, this study has concentrated on mainstream and right-wing populists associated with Euroscepticism, and from these theoretical assumptions, the initial hypothesis (H1) has been formulated as follows:

> H1: Increased trust in the EU is accompanied by declining Euroscepticism among voters who moved from populist to mainstream parties, whereas right-wing populist supporters remain strongly Eurosceptic.

H2 is as follows:

> H2: In times of crisis, such as the Ukraine war and the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a "rally around the flag" effect which leads to a higher level of trust in the supranational institutions, such as those of the EU, among voters of all parties.

3. Case Selection, Definition of Parties, Context, and Methodology

3.1. Case Selection

The present study uses individual panel data, which allow the analysis of the change of attitudes at the individual level. It adopts a distinctive approach, utilising a non-standardised measurement tool to facilitate the analysis of general visible trends concerning political party systems and, more specifically, populism in Europe.

In the context of the PRECEDE project, colleagues from the UK, the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany participated. Due to scheduled elections during the designated project period, significant countries were included. We followed a most different system design including countries from Northern and Western Europe (Germany, France, Spain, the Netherlands, UK, Sweden), Southern Europe (Italy, Spain), and Central/Eastern Europe (Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic). The selected countries are distinguished by a variety of social, economic, and historical conditions. They exhibit a diverse array of welfare state models and political party systems, with distinct types of mainstream and populist parties present in each. The selected countries all had elections in the project period 2020–2023. All political systems have shown a decline in mainstream parties and a stronger influence of populist parties. In some countries populist parties were in government (Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands). We could use the dataset EVES2 from 2018, which was organised by the researchers in a former research project. In our final survey in 2023, all 10 countries are included. These are analysed in the 2023 analysis. Furthermore, the initial survey from the dataset EVES2 only consisted of a subset of countries, thus narrowing down the selection of countries for the panel regression. Additionally, panel attrition led to a reduced number of participants.

The study focuses on a variety of political systems and welfare state regimes (Continental, Southern European, Nordic, and Eastern European countries). The countries under scrutiny in this study are representative of a variety of populist parties, including left-wing populism (as seen in Spain, Germany, and France, with examples including Podemos, Die Linke, and La France Insoumise), right-wing populism (as seen in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and France, with examples including the PVV [Party for Freedom], AfD [Alternative for Germany], the Swedish Democrats, and the Rassemblement National), and populist parties in government (as seen in the Czech Republic, Italy, and Hungary) and in opposition (as seen in Germany, Spain, and France). The level of European integration differs with the depth and duration of participation in mechanisms such as the Schengen and euro zones, yet as shown by Božina Beroš and Grdović Gnip for the case of Croatia, differentiated integration has remained a low-salience issue despite its practical importance for EU relations (Božina Beroš & Grdović Gnip, 2023). The UK is included as a former member state.

3.2. Mainstream, Right-Wing, Centrist, and Left-Wing Populist Parties: Definitions and Contexts

The present study sets out to compare mainstream parties with right-wing populist parties. The term "populist parties" is defined here according to Mudde (2004). Furthermore, right-wing populist parties have been observed to exhibit a pronounced xenophobic sentiment (see also Section 2 above). The identification of these parties was facilitated by the utilisation of the PopuList database (Rooduijn et al., 2016) and the ParlGov database (Döring & Manow, 2024). The right-wing parties identified were then verified using other databases: CHES (Jolly et al., 2022), POPPA (Coppedge et al., 2021), VDem (Lührmann et al., 2020), GPS

(Norris & Inglehart, 2019), EES Voter Study (Schmitt et al., 2024), and TIMBRO (Müller & Schnabl, 2020). Even though Berlusconi's Forza Italia is defined as a mainstream party in the PopuList, and thus we classify it as such, we acknowledge that it has affiliations with right-wing extremists.

In the following discussion, we deviate from extant research on governing and opposition parties. As Schraff (2021) and Mueller (1973) have demonstrated, a crisis constitutes a pivotal juncture for incumbent parties, frequently engendering a pronounced "rally around the flag" effect. In the context of external threats, governing parties and mainstream political parties have historically leveraged these exogenous shocks for their own benefit. In the following discussion, the development of the polycrisis and the strategies deployed in these countries, in addition to the party positions, will be described.

The spectrum of populist parties encompasses leftist parties such as Syriza, as well as far-right parties including Lega, Anexartiti Ellines (ANEL), the AfD, and Golden Dawn. Nevertheless, there are also far-left political parties, such as the non-populist Greek Communist Party (KKE). Some populist parties have been in existence for a considerable time, including La France Insoumise, Lega, Syriza, and ANEL. In the context of Europe, certain political parties, such as the Greek party KKE and the Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, are Eurosceptic but not considered populist.

In the ideational approach, populism is regarded as a thin-centred ideology. In addition to the established political parties, there is a presence of centre-populist parties, such as the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S), which occupy a more ambiguous position. These parties can be categorised as centrist populists, as opposed to those positioned at the extreme right of the political spectrum, such as Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which are not considered radical.

It is evident that right-wing and far-right populist parties particularly adhere to the notion of nativism, which is characterised by a synthesis of nationalism and xenophobia, often accompanied by a pronounced authoritarianism. In this instance, the relationship with the EU becomes a salient factor. Whilst the majority of radical right-wing populist parties are, at the very least, Eurosceptic, a proportion of these parties advocate for the exit option. Nevertheless, there are notable variations. Some of these parties began as pro-EU parties but later adopted a Eurosceptic stance (Mudde, 2007).

The political orientation of left-wing populist parties is characterised by a robust opposition to capitalism and a commitment to the pursuit of egalitarianism. In this section, though, we will focus on left-wing scepticism of the EU. The EU is widely regarded as a staunch proponent of neoliberal economic policies, with a notable absence of any radical social welfare initiatives. This perception positions the EU as a distinct entity, not aligned with the more progressive ideals associated with the concept of "social Europe." In recent years, a new left has emerged, encompassing a range of social and political movements, including environmentalism, feminism, participation, and the protection of minority rights. Conversely, in Eastern Europe, left-wing populist parties adopt an extremely nationalistic stance, accentuating social and economic inequality, and the pervasive anti-elite distrust that impacts their stance on the EU (March, 2012, p. 148).

Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that the relationship between populist attitudes and opposition to supranational integration in Europe may be more complex than was previously hypothesised. Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of Euroscepticism within populist parties, with right-wing populists often

focusing on issues of immigration and cultural identity (e.g., the Rassemblement National in France or Lega in Italy) and left-wing populists basing their critique of the EU on its neoliberal economic agenda and austerity policies, as demonstrated by Halikiopoulou et al. (2012) and Hobolt and Tilley (2016), the correlation between populist attitudes and trust in supranational institutions is influenced by both individual-level variables and external events, as evidenced by the examples of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

3.3. Methodology

Two datasets are employed in this study: the PRECEDE3 2023 and EVES2 2018 surveys, which partially included the same people. Both waves include questions regarding the level of trust placed in international organisations, including the EU. Both of these surveys include the measures of populist attitudes and demonstrate the views of party supporter (demand side). The data are not open to the public at the time of writing.

In the comparative study conducted in 2023, survey research was utilised, drawing upon e-mail addresses retrieved from the Kieskompas voting advice application database since the 2010s. A total of approximately 16,300 citizens were included in the 10 countries: the Czech Republic (1,955), Germany (2,660), Spain (1,925), France (1,665), the UK (848), Hungary (1,934), Italy (1,448), the Netherlands (1,566), Romania (1,262), and Sweden (1,086). In each country, participants were representatively selected.

For the dependent variable, a trust scale is employed, utilising a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The question concerning trust in Europe is as follows: "How much trust, if any, do you have in each of the following?—European Union."

The classification of populist parties was determined by utilising the PopuList 2023 classification system, which divided the parties into two distinct categories: mainstream (non-populist) parties, and centre, left-, and right-wing populist parties. The propensity to vote (PTV) is used as a metric for the identification of party affiliation. The age of the subjects was divided into four categories: the Baby Boomer generation up to 1963, Generation X until 1984, Generation Y up to 1994, and Generation Z born after 1995. Regarding gender, 0 denotes male (reference group), and 1 denotes female. In the context of educational attainment, the range of codes utilised goes from 0, denoting minimal educational attainment and serving as a reference point, to 2, which denotes attainment at the level of higher education. The index of internal efficacy analyses the self-perception of political knowledge: As the numerical value increases, so too does the sense of ignorance and political marginalisation.

The research design follows a three-step logic. First, a binary regression is estimated for 2023 to model party affiliations (PTV) and assess how these affiliations influence trust in the EU, capturing differences in voter attitudes across our 10 countries. Second, an OLS regression is used to estimate the effect of a vector of covariates on trust in the EU, capturing between-country variation among citizens in the same year. Finally, a fixed-effect regression is applied to measure within-individual changes over time, focusing on how shifts in the voting behaviour and trust in Russia affect trust in the EU. This final step is conducted only for countries with sufficiently low panel mortality to ensure reliable estimates.
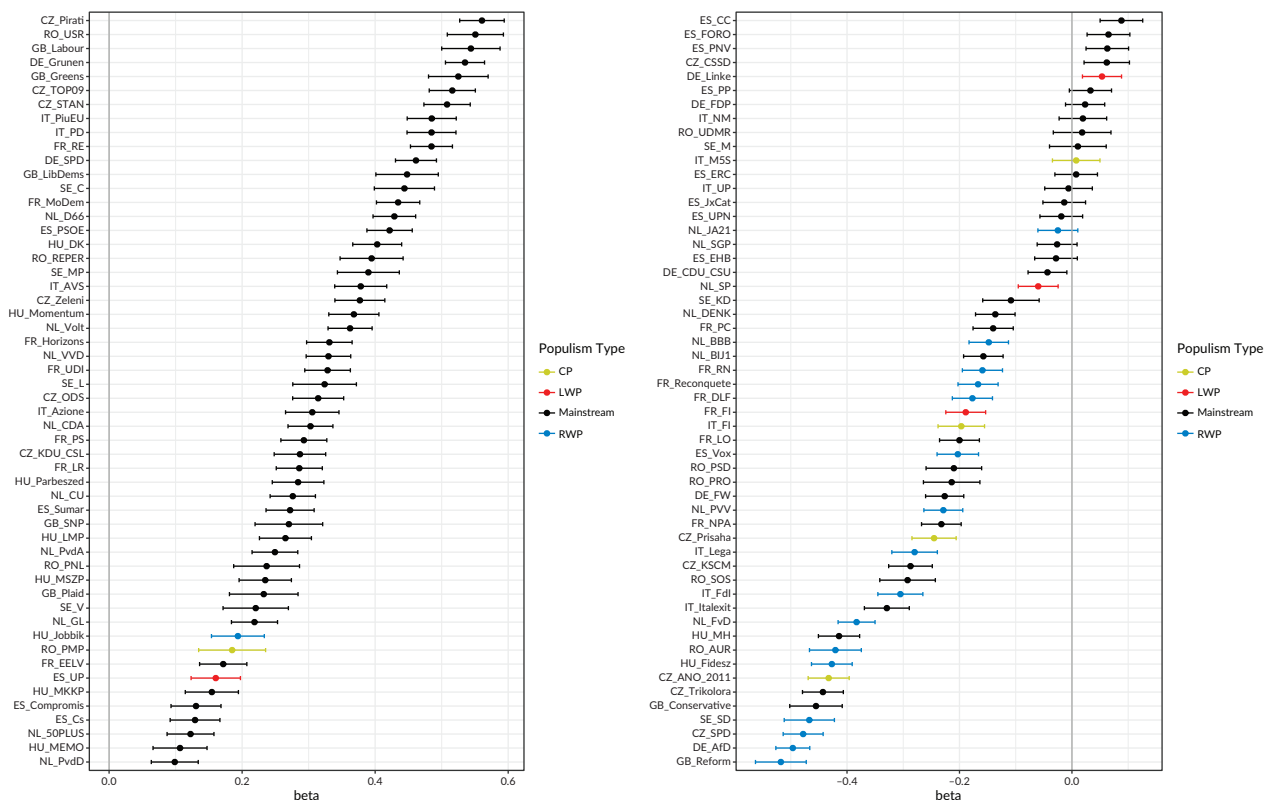
4. Empirical Results

The empirical results of our analysis of panel data demonstrate significant variations in levels of trust across European countries. This study seeks to ascertain whether individuals with a deep mistrust of the EU are disproportionately impacted by the ongoing Ukraine war. The present study employs a PTV linear regression and a trust logistic regression to examine the effects of the Ukraine war on trust in each country. The present study focuses on the variable of trust in Russia as a proxy.

4.1. PTV and Trust in the EU in 2023

In this section, we present a series of data points pertaining to the various political parties and levels of trust in Europe in 2023. In the initial phase of our analysis, we focus on a comprehensive set of descriptive data concerning all mainstream parties, ranging from left to right, including those of a populist nature. In this study, the criteria employed are derived from the populist paradigm (Rooduijn, 2015). The populist political landscape is characterised by the presence of two dominant types of parties: right-wing populist parties and left-wing populist parties. In addition to these, there is a modest representation of centre-populist parties.

In France, supporters of mainstream political parties demonstrate comparatively elevated levels of support for Europe and confidence in European institutions. Specifically, 10% of respondents expressed very high levels of trust, while 59% indicated high levels of trust. The level of trust in Europe is notably lower among left-wing parties, with a mere 36% of the populace expressing support. A somewhat higher figure of 41% is recorded among right-wing populist parties. Our survey conducted in Germany revealed that 66% of individuals who align with the mainstream parties expressed a high level of trust in the EU. In this segment, supporters of left-wing parties demonstrated a notable level of trust, with 39% of respondents expressing high levels of confidence. The percentage for supporters of the populist parties on the right wing is minimal, with a mere 2%. In the Netherlands, 71% of supporters of mainstream political parties expressed a positive sentiment towards the EU. This number is also notably high among supporters of left-wing populist parties, with 50% of them holding a favourable view. The result is even higher among supporters of right-wing populist parties, with 54% expressing a positive sentiment. In Sweden, support is primarily concentrated among the supporters of mainstream political parties. Finally, in the non-EU member state UK, in the dominant mainstream parties the EU is supported by 57% of the population. In contrast, in the small right-wing populist parties, the EU enjoys a significantly lower level of support. Over 70% of Italian mainstream political party supporters express a lack of confidence in the EU. Notably, even within the populist centre, which includes M5S, this figure stands at 55%. A survey has revealed that 24% of supporters of right-wing populist parties still have confidence in the EU. In Spain, the proportion of supporters of mainstream parties who expressed high or very high levels of trust was 67%. In contrast, among supporters of left-wing populist parties, this number was 53%. Nevertheless, a mere 25% of supporters of right-wing populist parties expressed confidence in the EU. In Hungary, among the smaller group of mainstream political parties, 88% of these supporters expressed a high level of trust in the EU. In contrast, only 50% of those who expressed a high level of trust in the ruling right-wing populist parties also expressed a high level of trust in the EU. In the Czech Republic, 79% of supporters of mainstream political parties expressed trust in the EU. In contrast, within the populist parties of the right wing, this figure is nearly 100% mistrust. A similar pattern is observed in the centre populist parties, where only 21% of their supporters expressed trust in the EU. In Romania, 64% of supporters of mainstream parties expressed trust in the EU. This figure is also high in the centre populist parties, with 65% of their supporters expressing trust. In contrast, in the right-wing populist parties, only 4% of their supporters expressed trust.

As demonstrated in Figure 1 (PTV and trust in the EU), supporters of the majority of mainstream political parties in Southern, Northern, and Western Europe, as well as Central Europe, exhibit a relatively high level of trust in the EU.

Figure 1. Standardized beta of binary linear regression of trust in the EU and propensity to vote for mainstream and populist parties in 2023. Notes: CP = centre populist; LWP = left-wing populist; RWP = right-wing populist.

A comparative analysis of the attitudes of voters of green parties reveals that those affiliated with the Pirate Party in the Czech Republic and the Green Party in Germany demonstrate a relatively high level of trust in the EU. This is a common occurrence for most green parties across Europe. Furthermore, it is evident that supporters of social democratic parties, such as the Spanish PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) and the German SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands), also have a high level of trust in the EU. The level of trust in the EU is significantly lower among supporters of left-wing populist parties, such as Die Linke in Germany and Podemos in Spain, as well as centre-populist parties, including M5S in Italy and Partidul Mișcarea Populară in Romania. The present study also investigates the attitudes of supporters of left-wing populist parties towards the EU. The data demonstrate that, while these supporters exhibit a lower level of trust in the EU than supporters of social democratic or green parties, their attitudes towards the EU are predominantly positive. The left-wing populist parties, including the Dutch Socialistische Partij and the French La France Insoumise, have expressed a lack of confidence in the EU due to their opposition to its neoliberal agenda.

The present study explores the correlation between support for right-wing populist parties and distrust of the EU. The analysis reveals a notable exception to this trend, as support for the Hungarian Jobbik party does not correspond with a lack of trust in the EU. The present study explores the levels of mistrust among

supporters of the following political parties: the AfD in Germany, the Social Democratic Party in the Czech Republic, the Swedish Democrats in Sweden, Fidesz in Hungary, the Alliance of Conservatives and Democrats in Romania, the Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, PVV in the Netherlands, Vox in Spain, and Rassemblement National in France. Moreover, supporters of certain mainstream parties harbour a degree of mistrust towards the EU. These parties encompass the German CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union), as well as the British Conservatives.

4.2. Regression Analysis Within the Countries

The regression analysis demonstrates a discrepancy between the countries in terms of trust in the EU (see Table 1). A notable correlation has been observed between gender and support for the EU among the French and Spanish populations. Specifically, there is a higher proportion of women expressing support for the EU in France and Spain compared to the Netherlands and Hungary, where a greater proportion of men demonstrate support and exhibit higher levels of trust in the EU. The present study seeks to explore the relationship between secondary and tertiary education on the one hand, and trust in the EU in the UK, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Sweden on the other. The results of the study indicate a positive correlation between the two variables in the four countries. Citizens who exhibit lower internal efficacy demonstrate a greater propensity to place their trust in Europe, and vice versa. The presence of disparate populist groups across Europe serves as a compelling indication of the pervasive influence of right-wing populism, with the notable exceptions of Hungary and the Netherlands. The concept of left-wing populism holds particular salience in Germany, Spain, and France, though its significance is comparatively diminished in the Netherlands.

An analysis of significant populism indicators, including anti-establishment sentiment and migration, reveals a robust negative correlation between the question dealing with anti-migration stance (Q36_core_populism_12), and most countries, except for the Netherlands and France, where no significant correlation is observed.

The same is true in relation to question 4 on populism and anti-establishment. Here, a strong negative correlation is evident in the Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden. However, in Hungary and the UK, a positive correlation is observed.

In the present study, the argument is advanced that trust in Russia and the evaluation of the Russo-Ukrainian war are relevant factors in the development of trust in Europe. It has been demonstrated that, with the exception of the UK, the topic of Russia is a highly significant predictor of levels of mistrust in the EU. There is an absence of data concerning levels of trust in Russia in France and Hungary. However, it is notable that the Hungarian Fidesz party is well known for its very positive attitude towards Russia and for its strong Eurosceptic tendency. Consequently, we argue that the results of this study align with the existing body of literature. In France, there is a greater degree of scepticism towards Russia, even among right-wing populist parties. Conversely, there is comparatively higher support for the EU among this demographic, in contrast to other populist parties in Europe. In conclusion, with the exception of Hungary, there is still a negative correlation between populist parties and trust in the EU. But we argue that the escalation of the Ukraine–Russia crisis and the Ukraine–Russia war triggered a "rally around the flag" effect in Europe, thus becoming an important factor in the EU's support in 2023.

Table 1. Trust in the EU: OLS regression 2023.

	CZ	DE	ES	FR	GB	HU	IT	NL	RO	SE
(Intercept)	4.50*** (0.21)	4.03*** (0.07)	4.00*** (0.13)	3.70*** (0.12)	3.24*** (0.19)	3.34*** (0.22)	4.53*** (0.17)	4.00*** (0.14)	4.37*** (0.43)	4.62*** (0.16)
Gender	0.08+ (0.05)	0.00 (0.03)	0.11* (0.05)	0.17*** (0.04)	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.13* (0.05)	−0.07 (0.06)	−0.15** (0.05)	−0.13 (0.09)	0.07 (0.06)
Baby Boomer	−0.29+ (0.17)	−0.10+ (0.06)	−0.18+ (0.10)	−0.05 (0.08)	−0.14 (0.09)	−0.08 (0.07)	−0.19 (0.16)	−0.09 (0.09)	−0.23 (0.38)	−0.32*** (0.09)
Generation X	−0.24 (0.16)	−0.07 (0.05)	−0.18+ (0.10)	−0.11 (0.09)	−0.23* (0.09)	−0.34*** (0.08)	−0.11 (0.15)	−0.15+ (0.09)	−0.22 (0.38)	−0.41*** (0.09)
Generation Y	−0.18 (0.16)	0.00 (0.05)	−0.17+ (0.10)	−0.05 (0.09)	−0.31** (0.10)	−0.36*** (0.08)	0.04 (0.14)	−0.10 (0.09)	−0.01 (0.38)	−0.32*** (0.09)
Education	0.07+ (0.04)	0.00 (0.02)	0.05 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.14* (0.06)	0.12** (0.04)	−0.01 (0.05)	0.13** (0.05)	0.07 (0.06)	0.18*** (0.05)
Internal efficacy index	−0.26** (0.08)	−0.12*** (0.03)	−0.12* (0.06)	−0.07+ (0.04)	0.00 (0.06)	0.04 (0.05)	−0.10 (0.06)	−0.14* (0.05)	−0.21* (0.08)	−0.09 (0.05)
Centre Populism	−0.27* (0.11)							−0.07 (0.09)	−0.07 (0.11)	
Right-Wing Populism	−0.43** (0.14)	−0.53*** (0.05)	−0.27** (0.10)	−0.23** (0.07)	−0.64*** (0.09)	−0.03 (0.10)	−0.44*** (0.11)	−0.12+ (0.07)	−0.76*** (0.14)	−0.55*** (0.08)
Left-Wing Populism		−0.26*** (0.06)	−0.29*** (0.06)	−0.26*** (0.06)				−0.11 (0.16)		
Trust in Russia	−0.25*** (0.07)	−0.17*** (0.03)	−0.16** (0.05)		−0.06 (0.06)		−0.29*** (0.04)	−0.33*** (0.06)	−0.39*** (0.08)	−0.37*** (0.06)
Q36_core_populism_12	−0.29*** (0.03)	−0.17*** (0.01)	−0.05* (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.34*** (0.03)	−0.25*** (0.03)	−0.19*** (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)	−0.33*** (0.04)	−0.10*** (0.02)

Table 1. (Cont.) Trust in the EU: OLS regression 2023.

	CZ	DE	ES	FR	GB	HU	IT	NL	RO	SE
Q10_populism_4	−0.20*** (0.03)	−0.22*** (0.01)	−0.24*** (0.02)	−0.30*** (0.02)	0.08** (0.03)	0.19*** (0.04)	−0.26*** (0.03)	−0.19*** (0.03)	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.26*** (0.03)
Num. Obs.	2,155	3,064	2,544	2,692	1,294	2,285	1,940	2,957	1,409	1,408
R^2	0.448	0.433	0.240	0.238	0.437	0.277	0.364	0.238	0.424	0.379
R^2 Adj.	0.445	0.431	0.236	0.235	0.433	0.274	0.361	0.235	0.420	0.375
AIC	6,174.1	6,529.2	7,105.4	7,230.4	3,285.4	6,846.5	6,155.6	7,940.8	4,811.1	3,714.5
BIC	6,247.8	6,607.6	7,181.4	7,301.2	3,347.4	6,909.5	6,228.1	8,018.7	4,879.4	3,777.5
Log. Lik.	−3,074.033	−3,251.618	−3,539.709	−3,603.216	−1,630.686	−3,412.237	−3,064.822	−3,957.409	−2,392.565	−1,845.258
RMSE	0.68	0.62	0.72	0.75	0.68	0.76	0.70	0.64	0.78	0.74

Notes: $^+$ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; generational age effects are in reference to Generation Z.

4.3. Trust in the EU: Panel Analysis 2018–2023

The two timepoints of the waves EVES2 (2018) and PRECEDE3 (2023) represent a time before the start of the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, and after the start of the war and the pandemic, respectively. Across most countries in the sample, the average within-person change in trust in the EU between the two waves is positive and statistically significant, suggesting a widespread "rally around the flag" effect in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The only exception is Italy, where no such significant increase is observed. We can also observe a significant positive change of trust in the EU for those participants who changed their voting behaviour by switching from a populist party (either left-wing or right-wing) to a mainstream party in all countries except Italy, indicating that political realignment toward the mainstream may coincide with a stronger attachment to supranational governance in times of crisis. An increased mistrust in Russia is positively correlated with trust in the EU in Italy. The OLS regression above suggests a strong positive correlation between the mistrust in Russia and trust in the EU, whilst the data show a consistent opinion towards Russia which cannot be analysed using a fixed-effect regression. Together, these patterns highlight not only the unifying effect of external threats on EU legitimacy but also the role of national context and political realignment in shaping political identification frameworks.

Table 2. Trust in the EU: Fixed-effect regression 2018–2023.

	DE	ES	FR	IT	NL
Back to Mainstream	0.10	0.29***	0.24***	−0.11	0.24***
Trust in Russia	−0.04	0.09		−0.14**	0.00
Time	0.12***	0.13***	0.22***	0.03	0.27***
Num. Obs.	2,010	1,681	1,453	1,244	2,684
R^2	0.820	0.751	0.832	0.817	0.844
R^2 Adj.	0.636	0.500	0.663	0.615	0.676
R^2 Within	0.047	0.079	0.057	0.033	0.140
R^2 Within Adj.	0.044	0.075	0.055	0.029	0.138
AIC	3,528.3	3,515.2	2,689.2	2,417.8	4,527.0
BIC	9,223.9	8,106.5	6,549.9	5,760.0	12,721.1
RMSE	0.35	0.42	0.37	0.38	0.34

Notes: $^+$ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Conclusion

The present study uses a comparative survey in 10 countries, as well as individual panel data, which allows the analysis of the change of attitudes at the individual level from 2018 to 2022. A decline in populist attitudes at the voter level is evident, as evidenced by the election results until 2023. Recent data from the Eurobarometer survey indicate a general rise in confidence in the EU among the general public. It is possible to account for a significant proportion of the increase in support for the EU by introducing trust in Russia as a factor in the equation.

To summarise, there has been a decline in Euroscepticism during the Ukraine war, accompanied by an increase in EU-related trust since the late 2010s. The panel regression (Table 2) shows that among voters

who switched "back to mainstream" parties, within-person trust in the EU rises—significantly and positively in three of five cases (Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands)—which aligns with H1—that returning to mainstream parties is accompanied by declining Euroscepticism. H1 is also corroborated by both the binary indicators in Figure 1 and the multivariate OLS (Table 1): Right-wing populist parties are consistently negatively aligned with trust in the EU, with the notable exception of Jobbik. Table 1 largely replicates this pattern: The right-wing populist coefficient is significantly negative across countries, except in Hungary—likely driven by Jobbik rather than Fidesz—and in the Netherlands, where it is only borderline significant. Taken together, these results indicate that trust increases among mainstream returnees while right-wing populist supporters remain markedly Eurosceptic, with country-specific nuances. Furthermore, in the panel regression (Table 2), the consistently positive time coefficient indicates that average trust in the EU rises over the waves corresponding to these crisis periods. This pattern is not confined to a single party family but is observed among voters of both mainstream and populist parties, suggesting that external shocks can temporarily mute partisan divides in attitudes toward the EU. Concurrently, certain right-wing populist parties expressed opposition to the provision of support to Ukraine and instead voiced support for the Putin regime. Evidently, the degree of trust in the EU is somewhat diminished in Eastern Europe when compared with the levels observed in Western, Northern, and Southern Europe. It appears that the supporters of populist parties in this region do not adhere to the principles of right-wing populism in this particular context. In this instance, there is an additional decline in party voter congruence.

This study has a few limitations. Panel attrition may modestly affect representativeness, and the panel regression covers only five countries, limiting generalizability. Not all potentially relevant covariates (e.g., income) are included, leaving some scope for omitted-variable bias. Finally, given the observational design and specific modelling choices, results should be read as associative and somewhat specification dependent.

From the beginning of the Russia–Ukraine war in February 2022, the EU and the clear majority of its member states strongly supported the Ukrainian government. The Ukraine war had a positive effect on trust in the EU. A clear "rally around the flag" effect was observed, especially at the onset of the crisis. Evidence of this effect was observable in the fact that most diverse social groups (age, education, and gender) were represented. A survey of political party voters has revealed a predominant trust in the EU and a concomitant distrust of Russia. This is due to a prevailing sentiment of distrust towards Russia and its regime. It is conceivable that a similar sequence of events could occur in the event of subsequent crises. It appears that crises are conducive to the adoption of safety-first attitudes, and that they have a temporary mitigating effect on political party polarisation, at least about political culture. However, this is not the case in the context of elections, where populist parties are able to profit from their role as protest parties. The evidence presented indicates that populism is no longer a marginal phenomenon; rather, it has become a prevalent and enduring element within the broader context of European party systems. Nevertheless, the post-Covid environment gave rise to new tensions and triggered EU policies such as the Next Generation EU programme. Concurrently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to a resurgence in the importance of NATO and EU collaboration on issues that extend beyond conventional policy domains, such as defence and military assistance. One potential solution to this issue of public dissatisfaction is to enhance inclusivity and encourage participation in various political systems. This, in turn, can lead to greater input legitimacy by democratic innovation. It is imperative to consider the legitimacy of output, as well as the distribution of economic and social outcomes, in order to achieve a high and equitable result and a higher trust in the EU.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The research data used in this article are from the PRECEDE project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. The data are up to this day not publicly available but can be shared for replication purposes on special request.

LLMs Disclosure

For writing coherent English throughout the article, DeepL was partly used to adjust existing self-written text, but not for generating new text.

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Cogitatio

ARTICLE

In the Pursuit of Democracy: Support for Referendums in Moldova

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Abstract

Support for referendums has often been investigated in new and established democracies. However, we know very little about what drives support for referendums in transition countries. This article addresses that gap and aims to identify the determinants of support for referendums in the Republic of Moldova. The analysis uses individual-level data from a survey in November 2024 based on a nationally representative sample in the aftermath of a divisive popular vote on EU accession. The results indicate that support is rooted both in long-term attitudes, such as democratic satisfaction, democratic values, and high interest in politics, as well as in more immediate situational and strategic considerations. Compared to earlier evidence from democracies, people in Moldova attach more hope to referendums as a way to improve democracy and disconnect them from critiques against politicians.

Keywords

citizens; democracy; referendum; Republic of Moldova; support

1. Introduction

The public support for referendums as decision-making mechanisms and the drivers behind this support have been intensely scrutinized over the past three decades. Most studies have assessed the levels and determinants of support for referendums in new or established democracies (Anderson & Goodyear-Grant, 2010; Bowler et al., 2007; Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). One common finding in this field is that the critical attitudes towards representative democracy and political institutions often favor support for referendums because people consider them as avenues to complement and improve the functioning of democracy. In this context, we know very little about what drives support for referendums in

countries where representative democracy has not yet been fully achieved, and where public institutions face challenges in performing their functions.

Understanding the support for referendums in transition countries is important because it can inform future institutional decisions, such as whether to hold a referendum if or when the situation requires it, or about the public's political behavior, such as their likely turnout when such referendums are organized. Moreover, people's political opinions and attitudes in transition countries are often sensitive to the short-run state of affairs and developments in the country (Grosjean et al., 2013). Observing whether the level of support for referendums is determined by short-term developments or more established attitudes and behaviors can indicate whether referendums can make a difference to the country's institutional setting over the long term. Equally important, understanding whether support for referendums is associated with democratic values can shed light on the ways such direct democracy practices can boost people's views of the current practices of representative democracy and raise the overall quality of democracy in the country.

This article addresses this gap in the literature and aims to identify the determinants of support for referendums in the Republic of Moldova. This country is an appropriate setting for the analysis because it is a transition country with referendum experience at the national level. It organized what turned out to be a divisive referendum in October 2024 about EU accession that would shape the country's foreign policy and political priorities in the following period. The existence of a recent referendum allows the influence of short-term vs long-term determinants on people's support for referendums to be tested. This analysis uses individual-level data from a survey conducted in November 2024 on a national representative sample of 1,031 respondents (for details, see Section 4 on data and method). The research tests the explanatory power of democratic attitudes, attitudes about political institutions and decisions, political interest, and short-term contextual elements such as being on the winning side of a recent referendum. The study controls for critical attitudes towards politicians, conflict-aversity, and socio-demographic variables (age, education, and gender).

The next section provides an overview of the various types of referendums and their aims. The third section reviews the literature on the determinants for support and formulates five testable hypotheses. Then, we discuss the case selection, method of data collection, and data analysis. The fifth section includes the analysis and interpretation of results. We conclude by setting out the main findings and implications for the broader field of study.

2. Types of Referendums

Referendums are direct democratic practices that allow citizens to engage directly in political decisions and address some of the problems faced by many representative democracies (Cheneval & Ferrín, 2018; Smith, 2021). They are usually held based on the principle of two mutually exclusive alternatives, whereby citizens can cast a "Yes/No" vote on a specific issue. They confer legitimacy on a collective decision on the basis of majoritarian rule (Morel & Qvortrup, 2018). In terms of the effects they produce, referendums can be mandatory or non-mandatory. Mandatory referendums are required by the constitution, and their results are binding. Several EU accession referendums organized in the early 2000s in Europe fell into this category because the accession of the countries in question involved either a change of constitutional provisions or of laws on sovereignty-related issues. In contrast, non-mandatory referendums can be initiated by a series of political players or by citizens, and their results do not produce normative effects. Referendums can also be

categorized according to the ways in which they are initiated: they can be top-down when called by political actors such as the country's president, a parliamentary majority vote, or a minority opposition, or bottom-up when citizens initiate them.

Referendums further differ by policy domains, and tend to mainly concern the international system, domestic norms, state welfare, and post-materialist policies. This categorization is relevant because it takes into consideration all the particularities that specific policies hold and explains why and how different actors or campaign strategies are employed to organize a successful referendum (Silagadze & Gherghina, 2020). Referendums also differ according to the reasons why they have been called. One of the main reasons for their initiation is that referendums can be used as problem-solving or mediation devices. They can be initiated by political parties and presidents when there is deadlock between the executive and legislative powers, or when the initiators seek to avoid a split within parties or coalitions (Gherghina, 2019; Sottilotta, 2017). Another reason why referendums can be called is to outflank the political competition (Durán-Martínez, 2012).

Referendums can also be called for consultative purposes. Still, they are issued by political actors when the population needs to be consulted before taking a specific course of action (e.g., international negotiations; López & Sanjaume-Calvet, 2020). Other reasons why referendums are called involve agenda-setting. In this case, referendums can be initiated by political actors and citizens since their aim is to adopt or reject a specific initiative, law, or policy (Breuer, 2008; Tap, 2023). In addition, referendums are initiated to stimulate the idea of participation and engagement in political processes (Laisney, 2012). By this, the initiators—whether political actors or citizens—may increase the level of participation of individuals who have alienated themselves from other forms of political participation such as voting. Similarly, referendums that are initiated by citizens increase the latter's overall empowerment on the political scene and make them more aware of the socio-political realities within their setting (Morel & Qvortrup, 2018).

3. Support for Referendums: Hypotheses

This section identifies several potential factors that could shape support for referendums. It focuses on stable democratic principles, political attitudes, and the prospect of achieving the desired outcomes. Specifically, the following lines present several arguments about how long-term beliefs and short-term factors can influence support: critical views towards representative democracy, the existence of democratic values, trust in political institutions, the idea that citizens have the ability to decide, political interest, and being on the winning side of a recent referendum.

The low capacity of contemporary representative democracies to represent citizens' preferences and needs has resulted in two categories of citizens. On the one hand, there are people motivated to engage in political action beyond voting to alter the status quo of their communities, to invalidate a vote, or to signal their frustration about the overall functioning of democracy (Doorenspleet, 2012; Norris, 2011; Singh, 2017). On the other hand, citizens who are dissatisfied with representative democracy can alienate themselves from the political sphere and renounce involvement in the practices of representative democracy (Doorenspleet, 2012; Kim, 2010; Webb, 2013). Regardless of the category, critical citizens are likely to support referendums as a feasible alternative to the usual decision-making mechanisms of representative democracy. Referendums are efficient processes that can be deployed to shape decisions and provide

people with opportunities to voice their concerns and express their policy preferences without political or institutional intermediaries (Chollet, 2018). Moreover, dissatisfied and critical citizens who tend to alienate themselves from political action could regard referendums as a suitable avenue for political action (Damore et al., 2012; Singh, 2017). In addition, referendums are known for their potential to empower citizens in decision-making, and this could be a way to address the dissatisfied citizens' perception that they are insignificant on the political scene (Chollet, 2018).

Nevertheless, even if referendums are considered alternative models of democracy or decision-making compared to representative democracy, there is broad scholarly agreement that they are often used as practices within the representative systems or as complements to the standard practices instead of replacing them. By allowing citizens to directly express their will on, or preference for, specific policy issues, referendums increase the legitimacy of decisions and reinforce the principle of popular sovereignty (Qvortrup, 2017). Referendums are integrated into representative systems and can help to enhance regime legitimacy (Gherghina, 2017) or to provide direction to elected representatives by specifying and clarifying their mandate (Trueblood, 2024). In doing so, referendums act as effective checks on elected representatives by ensuring that major decisions reflect the public's preferences and not just elite interests. Referendums bring benefits to representation by fostering representative outcomes and reinforcing accountability and responsiveness without supplanting representative structures (Leininger & Heyne, 2017). Together, all these characteristics indicate that referendums are democratic practices. Evidence shows that people who value democratic practices and ideals are likely to support referendums (Rose & Wessels, 2020; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). Following these lines of argumentation, we expect that:

H1: Dissatisfaction with representative democracy favors support for referendums.

H2: A high level of democratic values favors support for referendums.

Since political parties are key institutions in representative democracy, people's attitudes towards them may stimulate support for referendums. Political parties are usually key actors in organizing referendum campaigns. They play a central role in helping citizens to shape their decisions regarding what stance should be adopted toward the issue covered by the referendum and, through the latter, citizens can reinforce their relationship with the political parties if the information they receive is accurate and trustworthy (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Gherghina, 2019; Hollander, 2019). When political parties engage in referendum campaigns, they send signals to their sympathizers and members in particular and also to the wider citizenry that this political action is important (Sottilotta, 2017; Walker, 2003). Recent evidence shows that many countries around the world have implemented referendum campaign finance regulations (Paulissen & Horncastle, 2024) that facilitate the active engagement of political parties. On a more substantive note, political parties offer cues in referendum campaigns that help voters to make decisions, especially when the issues being considered are particularly complex or when voters lack detailed policy knowledge (Hobolt, 2006; LeDuc, 2002).

Although political parties and other institutions of representation (e.g., parliaments, governments) may have a highly important role in referendum initiation, campaigning, and the implementation of referendum results, ordinary citizens are the key decision-makers in referendums as the latter can challenge the traditional role of politicians/representatives in making decisions and bring forth the idea of the people as relevant non-political decision-makers. Evidence from established democracies shows that when people prefer

politicians as decision-makers, they engage actively in forms of political participation that are suitable to representative democracy, like voting. When people prefer citizens as main decision-makers, they are more likely to engage in participatory processes, including referendums (Font et al., 2015; Gherghina & Geissel, 2017, 2019). Similarly, support for referendums could be higher among those who prefer citizens as decision-makers. Following these lines of argumentation, we expect that:

H3: High trust in political parties favors support for referendums.

H4: High preference for citizens as decision-makers favors support for referendums.

People with high political interest are more likely to support referendums for several reasons. They generally seek further information and follow events and current affairs, which enhances their ability and willingness to engage in various forms of political action (Wolfsfeld et al., 2016). Political interest reflects the high value that individuals place on politics, which leads them to consider political participation as worthwhile and to expect positive outcomes from their involvement (Levy & Akiva, 2019). Political interest also enhances the perceived relevance of electoral participation, making turnout more likely (Söderlund et al., 2011). Specifically, people with high political interest have more information about how the political system works—and thus understand that referendums are an avenue they can use to directly influence the decision-making process— and the policies that require change.

Finally, support for referendums may be driven by practical and outcome-oriented considerations. Citizens are more likely to support referendums when the outcome may reflect their preferred policy, or when they see themselves as part of the majority (Werner, 2020). There is a winner effect in referendums, with those on the winning side likely to be more willing to have more referendums, while those who lose referendums often become less supportive (Marien & Kern, 2018). Since people are unlikely to always be part of majorities, this is a short-term effect that is particularly visible in the aftermath of referendums until a new popular vote is called. Consequently, we expect that:

H5: High political interest favors support for referendums.

H6: Being in the majority in a recent referendum favors support for referendums.

3.1. Control Variables

In addition to these main effects, the article tests for several variables that could influence citizens' support for referendums: critical attitudes towards politicians, conflict-averse attitudes, and age, education, and gender. Regarding critical attitudes towards politicians, referendums are practices of direct democracy that bypass political institutions and politicians' debates. As such, those who are critical of politicians, considering them unfit to rule, corrupt, or unresponsive, could be more supportive of referendums (Bessen, 2020). This control variable is a complement to the main effect of the view of citizens as main decision-makers in society (H4). Some referendums are used to decide contentious questions, and their results can divide a society and amplify the disappointment or dissatisfaction of some groups who feel unheard (Bowler & Donovan, 2019). Referendums provide binary choices that limit opportunities for compromise, increasing the risk that minority perspectives—which may be just under 50% of the total voting population—are

ultimately entirely discarded (Bellamy, 2018). As such, referendums are characterized by a certain degree of conflict.

Age could be an important driver for referendum support since younger people favor participatory procedures more than older people do (Dalton et al., 2001; Gherghina & Geissel, 2020). More highly educated individuals could show more support for referendums in the sense that, as in the case of better-informed and politically active citizens, they are more aware of the benefits of these practices and tend to manifest interest in them (Clark, 2016; Dow, 2011). When it comes to gender, there might be no differences between men and women regarding their attitudes towards referendums, at least in theory, since the latter are inclusive and accessible to everybody. However, men are more likely to engage in conventional forms of political participation in comparison to women (Grasso & Smith, 2022).

Other control variables were considered here but were discarded for methodological reasons. For example, efficacy can have an effect on support for referendums (Schuck & de Vreese, 2015), but in the survey, efficacy correlates highly with political interest. Satisfaction with government performance or trust in the parliament/president can also influence referendum support, but in Moldova, all these correlate highly between themselves and with satisfaction with democracy. Political participation could also influence support for referendums (Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2013), but there is limited variation among the Moldovan respondents because very few had attended rallies, demonstrations, or signed petitions.

4. Data and Method

To test these hypotheses, this article uses individual data from a survey conducted in November 2024 on a national representative sample in the Republic of Moldova of 1,031 respondents (all of whom completed their answers) aged 18 or above. The Republic of Moldova is an exemplary case study to explore how support for referendums works in transition countries. This case is analytically relevant because insights gained from it can inform the understanding of referendums in other transitional post-Soviet settings. The Republic of Moldova is illustrative of struggles with democratization and experience with referendums, but at the same time, it provides a deep contextual understanding of recent referendums that can inform us about public support for them. It also allows the exploration of social realities and the interplay of multiple variables in a real-world context.

Regarding its struggles with democratization, Moldova has faced several consistent challenges since its independence following the collapse of the USSR in 1991: weak institutions and rule of law, systemic corruption, national identity issues, sustained oligarchic collusion in which oligarchs funded and controlled the ruling parties, and a precarious location in the international system (Crowther, 2023; Marandici, 2025). There have been two main periods of democratic regress. The first occurred in 2001, when the Party of Communists emerged as the dominant party in the legislature and used quasi-authoritarian practices to remain in power, including political repression and restrictions, civil society intimidation, media censorship, and the curtailment of political and human rights (Knott, 2018; Marandici, 2025). This lasted until 2009, when, after the elections organized in July, the Communists were pushed into opposition by a group of parties forming a pro-European coalition that initiated several important reforms. The second regression occurred between 2014 and 2019 and was characterized by a period of state capture in which oligarchs gained control over state institutions, including the electoral system and the rule of law. This was possible,

among other reasons, due to the wide presence of systemic corruption in the country (Knott, 2018). The situation ended when the legislative elections under a mixed electoral system did not result in a majority favored by the main oligarch, and the directly elected national presidents in 2016 and 2020 publicly opposed the oligarchs (Marandici, 2025). Maia Sandu's election as president in 2020 and the legislative majority gained by her party (Party of Action and Solidarity) marked a visible positive shift in the country's foreign policy towards the EU and the West, proposing several democratic measures and policy changes (Simanschi, 2025).

The Republic of Moldova has experience with referendums at the national level: it has organized five since its independence. The first of those referendums was initiated in 1994 by the country's president, and asked the people if they were in favor of Moldova remaining an independent nation and an indivisible state, with a policy of neutrality. The referendum had a turnout slightly higher than 75% and almost 98% of those who voted supported the president's initiative (Nohlen & Stöver, 2010, p. 1330). The referendum was initiated by the president against a background of discussions about a potential unification of Moldova with Romania. A second referendum was organized in 1999 to ask the population whether it agreed with changing to a presidential system (Armașu, 2022). Similar to the referendum in 1994, this was also consultative, initiated by the country's president, and approved by the population. Despite the result, one year later, the parliament passed several constitutional amendments that reduced the powers of the president and increased those of the parliament, including the election of the country's president by the parliament with a majority of three-fifths of its members (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2025).

In 2010, a referendum was organized to amend the constitution to return to the direct popular election of the country's president. Although a majority of votes supported this initiative, the referendum was rendered invalid due to the low turnout—slightly more than 30% compared to the required 33% for the referendum to be considered valid (Drabczuk, 2018). In 2019, a consultative referendum initiated by the president of one of the governing parties asked the people two questions about parliamentarians: whether their number should be reduced, and whether parliamentarians should be subjected to recall procedures (Gherghina & Tap, 2024). Although the people voted in favor of both proposals, the results were not discussed or subjected to a parliamentary vote. Finally, in 2024, the country's president organized a constitutional referendum proposing to amend the constitution so that it included the Moldovan citizens' wish for EU membership. Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova submitted an application for EU membership. The referendum was organized at the same time as the first round of the presidential election and passed with a narrow victory of almost 50.4% (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2024). The country's president, who supported the referendum, had a pro-European agenda and faced a pro-Russian challenger in the second round of the presidential election. This referendum has broader significance than its predecessors for several reasons. First, its narrow outcome indicated the pro-European orientation of a plurality of voters, as was reflected in the results of the 2025 legislative elections. Second, it was organized at the same time as the first round of the presidential elections, which allowed the pro-European incumbent president to build her campaign around the referendum. Third, it has implications for the regional geopolitical context characterized by the Russia–Ukraine war and EU enlargement debates in the area.

The survey used for the analysis followed a quota sampling method representative of the Moldovan population at the national level in terms of gender, education, age, area of residence, and language. All the quotas were relative to the 2024 census. Since the survey was interested in understanding Moldovan citizens' political

behavior, it purposively recruited more people who voted. For example, the referendum turnout was slightly above 50%, while in the survey, roughly 80% of the respondents declared that they had cast a vote. The survey was conducted three weeks after the referendum and presidential election, so that memories about voting preferences would still be fresh. That consideration was essential to minimize memory bias. The questionnaire was bilingual (Romanian and Russian) and the survey data collection included a combination of in-person (30% of the questionnaires), computer-assisted telephone interviewing (50% of the questionnaires), and online (20% of the questionnaires) to reach a variety of target audiences and ensure optimal sample coverage. A pilot study conducted on 50 respondents before fielding the survey did not reveal any problems with the design.

The dependent variable of this study is *support for referendums*, measured as the answer to the question: "Some people believe that referendums are useful for decision-making, while others oppose them. Where would you position yourself on the following scale between 0 (completely against) and 10 (completely in favor) regarding the use of referendums in Moldova?" The answers were recorded on the ordinal 10-point scale indicated in the question wording. The first independent variable is *satisfaction with the functioning of democracy* (H1), which was measured through the answer provided to the question: "On a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much), how satisfied are you with the functioning of democracy in Moldova?" *Democratic values* (H2) were measured through an index including two variables: opposing the results of elections and universal voting. The respondents answered the following questions: "To what extent do you believe that the results of elections should be respected no matter who won?," and "To what extent do you believe that the universal vote should be reconsidered in the Republic of Moldova since many voters are uninformed and disinterested?," with answers on a five-point ordinal scale ranging between *very little* (coded 1) to *very much* (coded 5). The answers to the second question were recoded so that they ranged from nondemocratic to democratic values and we created a cumulative index comprising values between 2 (opposing both the results of elections and the universal vote) and 10 (respecting the results of elections and agreeing with the universal vote).

Trust in political parties (H4) was measured through the answers given to the following straightforward question, which is a local version of those used in many international surveys: "On a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much), how much trust do you have in the political parties in Moldova?" The preference for *citizens as decision-makers* (H4) was measured via the following question: "In your view, who should take the major decisions that affect the society in the Republic of Moldova?" The available single-choice answers included citizens, politicians, and experts. The answers are coded 1 for citizens and 0 for any of the other two categories of decision-makers. *Interest in politics* (H5) was measured through the answer given to the following question, which was a variation of one posed in many international surveys: "How interested are you in general in the politics of Moldova?" The available answers were recorded on a four-point ordinal scale ranging between *not at all* (1) and *very much* (5). *Belonging to the majority in a recent referendum* (H6) was operationalized through the vote in the 2024 referendum. The available options included "against the EU accession" (coded 0) and "for the EU accession" (coded 1). The latter meant belonging to the majority. Respondents who declared that they had not voted in the referendum were excluded from the analysis (see Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File).

Among the controls, critique against politicians is an additive index (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89) of five items in which the respondents were asked to indicate on a 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very much*) scale how well prepared, responsive, oriented towards the general good, close to citizens, and non-corrupt their national politicians are. Low values indicate a critique of them, while high values indicate an appreciation of the politicians.

Conflict-averse attitudes are measured with the help of a vignette giving the respondents a fictional scenario about a work environment, to which most of the respondents could meaningfully relate, as indicated by the pilot conducted before the survey was fielded. The vignette had the following wording:

> You get along very well with a colleague at work. Three days ago, your boss gave you a very important task to complete with that colleague within a maximum of a week. If you don't complete it, you will both lose your jobs. For three days, you were the only one working on the task, the colleague did nothing even though you asked him nicely several times to contribute. If you argue with your colleague and tell him in a harsh tone to do his part, it may have an effect. Position yourself on a scale from 0 (which means conflict with your colleague about the task every day until he completes his part) to 10 (avoid conflict with your colleague and do the entire task yourself, including your colleague's part).
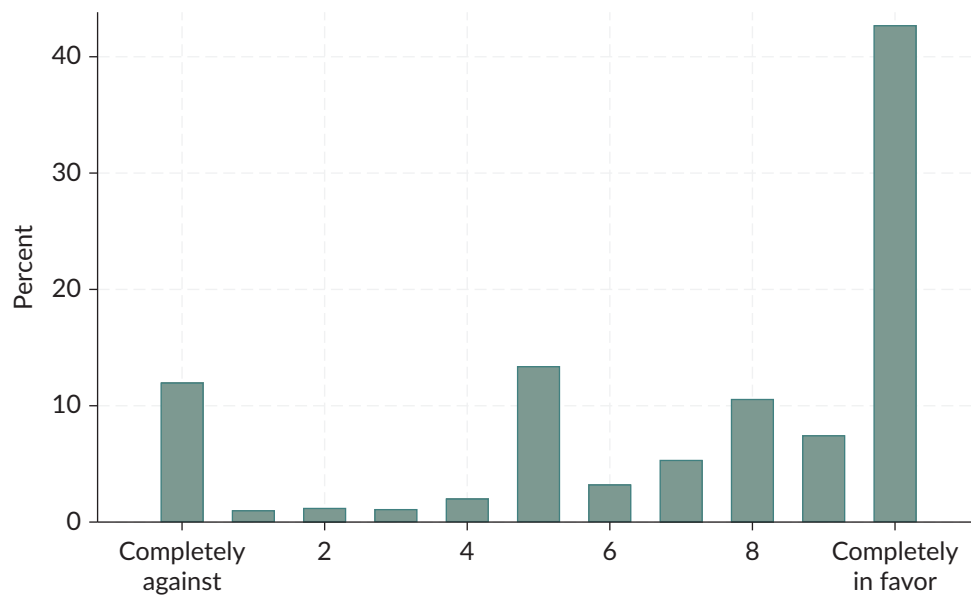
Age was measured as an ordinal variable distinguishing between cohorts, from 18–29 years old (1) to over 60 years old (4). Education is an ordinal variable that measures the respondents' highest level of education, using values between primary school (1) and university degree (5). Gender is a dichotomous variable coded 1 for male and 2 for female.

For the statistical analysis, all the variables were standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation for each value. All "do not know/no answer" options were removed from the analysis. The statistical analysis uses multivariate ordered logistic regression (due to the measurement of the dependent variable) with two models: one with the main effects and another including the controls. The test for multicollinearity shows that the independent variables and controls are not highly correlated: the highest value of the correlation coefficient is 0.30 (between political interest and education) and all the values of the variance inflation factor are lower than 1.80.

5. Analysis and Results

The survey asked the respondents about referendums in Moldova in general. Figure 1 displays high support for referendums, in line with earlier findings about the popularity of this direct democracy practice in new and established democracies (Rose & Wessels, 2020; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). Two-thirds of the respondents are overall in favor of referendums, i.e., at point 6 or above on the scale. Only a few respondents (roughly 12%) oppose referendums. At the other extreme, slightly more than 40% of respondents are in favor of referendums with no reservations. This distribution is not surprising since the turnout in four out of the five referendums organized to date in Moldova was above the threshold required for validation. This appetite for referendums could also be linked to the fact that all five nationwide referendums in Moldova were organized on salient policy issues such as independence, the system of government, the structure of parliament, and the EU-oriented future of the country.

Figure 2 presents the effects for the two ordinal regression models (the full results are presented in Appendix 2 of the Supplementary File). There is empirical evidence for almost all the hypothesized effects. Higher satisfaction with democracy (H1) increases support for referendums, which goes against the theoretical reasons outlined in the second section of this article. One possible explanation for this positive and strong effect of government satisfaction relates to the backing of the referendums in Moldova in general and of the 2024 referendum in particular by the national presidents and/or the parties in government.
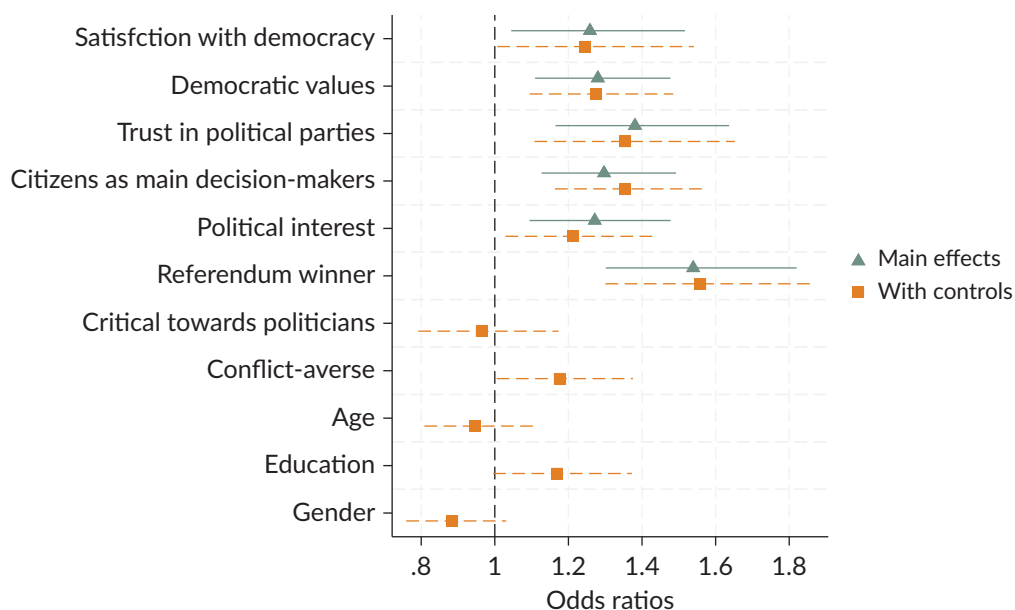
Figure 1. The distribution of support for referendums among the Moldovan respondents.

Policies adopted through referendums can complement the mechanisms of representative democracy; in this case, people may associate the referendums with policies desired by institutions of representation that may not have been adopted in parliament, especially since the main party in government backed the popular initiative. The high correlation between satisfaction with democracy and satisfaction with government performance or trust in the country president (higher than 0.7)—although these two variables were not included in the analysis—reinforces the belief that many respondents associate the democratic process in the country with the office holder. It is quite likely that the presidential election's proximity to the 2024 referendum played a role in this association.

People with democratic values (H2) and those with high trust in political parties (H3) support the referendums, which strengthens the idea that many Moldovans see the referendums as complementary to representative democracy, with the aim of improving rather than replacing the institutions of representation. The effect of trust in parties is likely linked with the cues that they often provide in referendum campaigns, especially in those on EU-related topics (Gherghina & Tap, 2024; Hobolt, 2006). There is strong empirical evidence for the remaining three hypotheses: people who see citizens as main decision-makers in society (H4), those who have high political interest (H5), and those who belong to the winning side in the most recent referendum (H6) all support referendums considerably more than respondents without these attitudes or characteristics do. Being on the winning side in a highly-disputed referendum like that held on EU accession (2024), which brings change—since it was a constitutional referendum—could enhance people's idea that they were part of a majority that produces meaningful results with the help of referendums. An argument could be made about the risks of conflating support for referendums in general with support for EU membership or with the political actors supporting the EU membership in this specific referendum in Moldova. This may particularly be the case since the major opposition parties advocated for a boycott of the referendum, mostly because they considered the 2024 referendum to be a strategy used by the ruling party and the incumbent national president, Sandu, to mobilize support. It was partially possible to disentangle referendum boycott strategies as expressions of partisan politics versus principled opposition to referendums by controlling for the political party to which the respondents feel closest. In the specific case of the 2024 referendum, political parties matter because parties

in Europe often develop rhetoric about the EU (Mitru & Tap, 2026). There was an explicit question about party closeness in the questionnaire: the respondents could choose between parties, choose the "other" option and insert the name of the party, or choose the "none" option. The correlation between support for referendums and party closeness to political parties supporting them is moderate (correlation coefficient 0.28), and the variable has very little effect in the multivariate statistical models. This variable is not reported in the analysis because of the large number of missing values (because many people do not feel close to a political party), which would affect the number of respondents in the analysis.

These effects hold when running the regression models with controls. Among the controls, only conflict-averse attitudes have a statistically significant effect on the support for referendums. Some referendums have a divisive component, and the binary choice they offer pushes people into different camps, with the 2024 referendum on EU membership being a good example of this. Nevertheless, the findings show that Moldovans who avoid conflicts are more oriented to support referendums, although the effect size is relatively small. One possible explanation is that people can see referendums as legitimate and peaceful ways to resolve disputes or contentious issues. As has previously been outlined in the literature, referendums can provide a sense of fairness, inclusiveness, and shared decision-making, especially in deeply divided or post-conflict societies, as is the case in Moldova, by allowing various groups in society to have a voice in important decisions (Germann, 2022; McEvoy, 2018).

Figure 2. The effects on support for referendums.

There are three main takeaways from these findings. First, the Moldovan people who support referendums have a democratic orientation and a high interest in politics. This contrasts with evidence from an increasingly illiberal regime in Hungary, where the support for referendums is driven by anti-democratic attitudes (Gherghina et al., 2024). In a country like Moldova that has not yet completed its process of democratization, referendums are associated with democracy and seen as a step forward in improving the quality of democracy. Second, the support for referendums is a combination of long-term or more stable political attitudes, such as satisfaction with democracy, democratic values, or political interest, and short-term factors like whether individuals were on the winning side in a referendum and/or were aligned

with the majority opinion. This confirms earlier evidence from democratic regimes (Marien & Kern, 2018; Rojon & Rijken, 2021), by indicating that Moldovans follow a similar attitudinal pattern. Third, support for referendums in Moldova is connected to both politics and society. While in other cases, people who were critical towards representative institutions or politicians favor referendums (Bessen, 2020; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015), the evidence here shows that positive attitudes towards institutions of representative democracy drive support, while criticism of politicians does not play a role. The importance of trust in political parties confirms that these remain highly valuable and unique for the functioning of the political system (Vandamme & Lucardie, 2025), including an influence on people's preferences about referendums. These observations are accompanied by an orientation toward society in which people are considered the main decision-makers and the respondents are conflict-averse.

6. Conclusion

This article has aimed to identify the determinants of referendum support in a transition country. The results indicate that support is rooted both in long-term attitudes and more immediate instrumental considerations. The positive public attitudes towards representative democracy, its institutions, and democratic values are strong explanations for support. Equally important, people in Moldova do not see referendums as a practice solely in the hands of ordinary citizens or as intended to bypass political institutions or politicians. In that sense, the survey respondents take a more integrated view of referendums in a representative system of government than people in several new or established democracies.

The present findings have two broader implications for the empirical discussion about support for referendums, which go beyond the case study examined here. First, views about referendums in transition countries are largely similar to those held in democracies. One important particularity is that people in transition countries may attach greater hopes to referendums as a way to improve what is already going well in democracy in their view. Another particularity is that support for referendums in Moldova is disconnected from critiques against politicians, very likely because people consider that politicians initiate the referendums and will implement their outcomes. Second, the instrumental and contextual factors, such as positive experience with referendums, can shape support, but the long-term attitudes appear to be its foundation. This could be relevant for policy makers such as political parties who could shape people's attitudes through their performance in office, and for civil society or international organizations, which could develop information campaigns about the use of referendums.

One limitation of the study was that the survey was performed so close to the 2024 referendum, so its timing could have augmented the importance of the situational and strategic considerations. The survey was deliberately scheduled at that time to gauge the short-term effects, but some other explanations may have been obscured by such effects. Further research could use a similar questionnaire after a future referendum to check the robustness of these findings or to identify new explanations. For example, the perception of insecurity explains vote choice in referendums elsewhere (Bilbao & Navia, 2025) and may be a relevant driver of preference for referendums in Moldova, especially due to the proximity of the war in Ukraine. Another venue could be the extension of research to other transitional countries that face similar threats from Russia (e.g., Georgia), to observe the role of disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference in shaping public opinion on referendums. Such a comparative analysis would favor a fine-grained understanding of the process of attitude formation in various political contexts.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request.

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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
Economy	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.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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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ARTICLE

Large-Scale Crises and Variation in Social Democratic Europeanism: The Italian Democratic Party

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Abstract

Since the late-2000s Great Recession and the beginning of the "polycrisis" era, scholars have reignited their interest in the (problematic) relationship between social democracy and European integration. What was the impact of the latest large-scale crises—the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine—on this relationship? In this article, we empirically assess the reaction of social democracy to these events in terms of party positions on the European Union (EU). Specifically, we look at one of Europe's largest social democratic formations, the Italian Democratic Party (PD). This case is especially relevant as Italy is a founding EU member and historically a driving force for EU integration, and was significantly exposed to the social, economic, and international consequences of the "polycrisis" at a time when the PD was often in government. We employ a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence to show both, respectively, *what* directional effects these large-scale crises exerted on the PD's EU positions and exactly *how* such impacts translated into party rhetoric on the EU. By doing so, we find that the PD reacted differently to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war. On the one hand, the pandemic bolstered the PD's support for further European integration; on the other, the war has not significantly altered the party's approach to the EU. We attribute this to the crises' different policy implications. The pandemic foregrounded issues central to the centre-left, such as welfare and socioeconomic redistribution, including in the policy responses at the EU level; while the war shifted focus to more ideologically distant policy areas, such as common security and defence.

Keywords

Covid-19; European Union; Italian Democratic Party; Russian invasion; social democracy

1. Introduction

This article examines the evolving position of social-democratic parties towards the European Union (EU) in times of crisis, with a particular focus on the Italian Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, henceforth PD). Over the past decade and a half, the EU has experienced what has been described as a prolonged polycrisis (Zeitlin et al., 2019)—a series of interlinked and overlapping challenges that have collectively reshaped the dynamics of European integration. These crises have not only tested the Union's institutional resilience but have also affected national political debates and party competition across member states. The most recent events—i.e., the Covid-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in the 2020s—are especially significant, both because of their scale and because they required unprecedented EU-level responses that expanded the EU's role in policy areas traditionally dominated by national governments, paving the way for potential new developments in EU integration.

The literature has examined these two crises from multiple perspectives. A substantial body of research has explored their implications for European integration dynamics (Anghel & Jones, 2022; Buti & Fabbrini, 2023; Capati, 2025), the transformation of EU governance modes (Capati, 2024b; Håkansson, 2024), and the development of novel policies and instruments (Schelkle, 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2024). At the same time, these crises have become highly salient issues in national public debates, shaping people's attitudes towards the EU based on its perceived capacity to handle such external shocks (Gherghina et al., 2025). The Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine have thus contributed to polarising domestic political arenas (Lehtonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2025) and to reshaping party competition over EU-related issues (Capati et al., 2024). Consequently, the literature on party politics has paid growing attention to national party reactions, focusing on their positions towards governments' immediate responses to the pandemic (Rovny et al., 2022) as well as their foreign policy orientations following Russia's aggression against Ukraine (Holesch et al., 2024). Another strand of the literature has focused specifically on changing party positions towards the EU, suggesting that these have implications for the direction of European integration as well as for the accession prospects of candidate countries (Gherghina, 2026).

Yet, despite this growing interest, there have been no systematic attempts to examine how political parties position themselves vis-à-vis the EU—the central institutional framework through which crisis management plays out—across crises. This article seeks to address this gap. Specifically, it investigates how the Italian social democrats, represented by the PD, adjusted their stance towards European integration in the aftermath of the pandemic and the onset of war, analysing whether and how their positions shifted in response to these different but overlapping external shocks.

Italy offers a particularly compelling case for such an analysis. As a founding member of the EU and a historically strong advocate of European integration, Italy has often aligned itself with deeper supranational cooperation. At the same time, it was among the member states most severely affected by the economic, social, and political repercussions of the polycrisis. These crises struck during a period in which the PD frequently held governmental responsibility, placing the party at the centre of decision-making processes regarding both domestic crisis management and negotiations at the EU level. Furthermore, Italy experienced the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine with particular intensity: the country was one of the earliest and hardest hit by the pandemic in Europe, and its economic structure made it especially vulnerable to the energy and security consequences of the war (Siddi, 2019). This context provides a unique

opportunity to analyse how a mainstream, pro-European party responded to major external shocks that simultaneously reinforced the need for EU-level solidarity and heightened domestic political tensions.

Finally, the Italian party system itself has undergone a significant transformation in recent years. The rise of populist, Eurosceptic, and anti-establishment parties—several of which have held governmental power—has challenged the PD and its status as the largest (and staunchly) pro-European formation in the Italian party system on the grounds of EU-related political conflict. In this volatile and increasingly polarised environment (Capati & Trastulli, 2025), the implications of these large-scale crises left considerable room for variation in Italian parties'—and especially social democrats'—positional responses vis-à-vis the EU: specifically, we argue, in light of the different policy domains impacted by these events and the Union's specific responses to them. The PD has faced the dual challenge of maintaining its traditional pro-EU-integration identity while adapting to a shifting political landscape marked by rising electoral volatility, changing public attitudes towards the EU, and competition from both the populist right and, to a lesser extent, the radical left (e.g., Chiaramonte et al., 2022). This makes Italy not only a crucial national context but also an illustrative case for understanding how social-democratic parties across Europe may recalibrate their EU positions when confronted with multiple crises and rapidly evolving domestic political dynamics.

This article argues that party families respond to EU crises in ways that are conditioned by their ideological orientation and the specific policy implications foregrounded by each crisis. Crises do not produce uniform responses across the political spectrum. Rather, they activate distinct opportunity structures for parties to either increase or decrease their support for European integration depending on the alignment between the crisis's policy implications—and related EU responses—and the party's ideological priorities (e.g., Marks et al., 2002). The Covid-19 pandemic brought forth issues closely aligned with traditional centre-left concerns such as welfare provision, public healthcare, and socioeconomic redistribution—policy areas where the EU's crisis response opened space for a more proactive and solidaristic approach to integration. By contrast, the Russian invasion of Ukraine shifted the policy focus toward foreign policy, defence, and security—domains that are historically distant from the centre-left's ideological orientation. On this basis, we argue that the PD increased its support for European integration during the pandemic, given the congruence between its ideological agenda and the nature of the EU's response. Conversely, we do not anticipate a significant shift in the party's stance on European integration in the context of the Ukraine war, as the prevailing policy implication of this crisis is less compatible with the centre-left's core ideological commitments. Through a mixed-methods analysis, aimed at assessing both *what* effects these large-scale crises had on the Europeanism of this relevant social democratic party and exactly *how*—i.e., through which arguments—such impacts transpired in party rhetoric, quantitative and qualitative evidence provide empirical support to our argument.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 elaborates on the theoretical framework and lays out its guiding argument. Section 3 presents the article's design choices. Section 4 illustrates the empirical analysis, finally discussed in the concluding Section 5.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Democracy and European Integration

Similarly to other leftist formations, the origins of social democracy lie in the political representation of workers within the class cleavage (e.g., Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Emanuele, 2024; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Przeworski, 2009). Indeed, both its historical roots and achievements—such as the construction of national welfare states across Western European countries—have contributed to establishing economic redistribution at the core of issues "owned" by social democracy (Keman, 2017), including in contemporary voters' views (e.g., Sandberg, 2022). As per the established literature on cleavage-based party ideology and support for EU integration, this signals the centrality of economics for social democratic parties' pro-European or Eurosceptic stances on an ideological basis, leading scholars to theorise a not entirely supportive posture (Marks et al., 2002, p. 587).

In this light, social democracy's longstanding and *de facto* largely acritical support for EU integration has constituted one of the central conundrums for left politics scholars (e.g., Bailey, 2009). This is because of the neoliberal nature of this process, especially in the context of the Economic and Monetary Union (Johansson & Raunio, 2001). Regional economic integration in the EU has traditionally favoured export- rather than consumption-led economic models (Hope & Soskice, 2016), detracting from the more comprehensive redistributive measures and universalistic welfare provisions traditionally at the ideological core of social democracy. In fact, if anything, EU integration has been profoundly influential in domestic politics, in the opposite direction: that is, constituting one of the main determinants of social democrats' well-known convergence to the ideological centre (e.g., Steiner & Martin, 2012). To this end, the comprehensive transformation towards a neoliberal economic platform of "Third Way" social democracy over the 1990s, at the heyday of globalisation, is emblematic (e.g., Giddens, 1998).

Since then, however, the circumstances have profoundly changed. After its collapse with the late-2000s' Great Recession, the international economic order based on neoliberalism and globalisation was no longer generally seen as a system with no losers (Kriesi et al., 2008), which made it more vulnerable to criticisms. Although the reality of external constraints has often prevented mainstream and routinely governing parties, such as social democrats, from sharply departing from essentially neoliberal economic policies (e.g., Mair, 2011), intellectual elaboration on alternative political systems was spurred amongst centre-left intellectuals—including about the EU. Notably, the "Good Society" debate of the early 2010s, aimed at providing a political blueprint for social democratic parties, placed much of its focus on the idea of "Social Europe" (Meyer & Spiegel, 2010). This is a considerably transformed EU, with much deeper degrees of socioeconomic integration through instruments, such as supranational fiscal policy levers and a "European welfare," able to redistribute and pursue greater equality beyond the nation state—a level already comprehensively overcome by economic globalisation. As some of these principles transpired in the programmatic outlook of important Western European social democratic parties during the 2010s (Diamond & Guidi, 2019), this reinforces the idea that the direction of socioeconomic EU integration might fundamentally impact the nature of social democratic parties' support towards the European project. This is an especially important consideration in the face of factors that may, indeed, steer EU integration in different directions.

2.2. Crisis Policy Implications: Social Democracy and EU Integration in the Large-Scale Crises of the 2020s

To this end, we argue that large-scale crises may, under specific conditions, impact social democratic parties' positions on EU integration, by impacting EU integration itself. Over the past 15 years, the EU has faced a succession of crises commonly described in the literature as the "multiple crises" of European integration (Fabbrini, 2020) or the EU's "polycrisis" (Zeitlin et al., 2019). These include—though are not limited to—the eurozone crisis (2009–2012), the Crimean crisis (2014), the asylum and refugee crisis (2015), Brexit (2016), the security crisis (2016), the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2022), and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine (since 2022). Each of these episodes has represented a "moment of truth" for the EU, marking what Van Middelaar (2020) has called a "return of politics." Importantly, these crises have spanned a range of policy areas and have varied in terms of EU competence, levels of politicisation, the symmetry of their impact, and the extent to which their origins were exogenous as opposed to endogenous.

The literature on crisis pressures has suggested that some of these factors may play a crucial role in shaping the type of policymaking process the EU adopts in its response to crises. In particular, Ferrara and Kriesi (2022) argue that the nature of EU competence in the affected policy domain and the symmetry of a crisis's impact give rise to four distinct modes of policymaking—constraining dissensus, enabling dissensus, enabling consensus, and permissive consensus. They apply these categories to the refugee crisis, the eurozone crisis, Brexit, and the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting how each configuration has long-term implications for the effectiveness of the EU's crisis response. Similarly, Bojar and Kriesi (2023) contend that differences in the degree of politicisation, pace, and symmetry account for the divergent outcomes in the EU's handling of the refugee crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, they point to similarities across both cases, notably the prevalence of executive-led decision-making prompted by the urgency and uncertainty inherent in the crisis context.

Building on this literature, we apply the logic of crisis pressures to explain variation in the positions of political parties towards the EU, using the concept of "crisis policy implications" as an analytical tool. We argue that just as crisis pressures shape the behaviour of institutional actors—including EU supranational and intergovernmental institutions as well as member state governments—by creating specific incentive structures for crisis policymaking, they also foreground policy implications that compel political parties to reassess and potentially adjust their stance on European integration.

We apply this perspective to the two large-scale crises of the 2020s under investigation in this article: the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which generated distinct policy implications (Anghel & Jones, 2022). The pandemic raised pressing concerns related to welfare systems, public health, and socioeconomic redistribution, thereby creating an opportunity to promote a more solidaristic vision of integration as opposed to the austerity-driven response to the eurozone crisis (Oana & Truchlewski, 2024). As a result, the EU adopted NextGenerationEU, with its landmark Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF): an unprecedentedly expansionary socioeconomic policy based on debt mutualisation (Bekker, 2021), with interventions chiefly aimed at member states' healthcare and welfare systems. In contrast, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought renewed focus to foreign policy, security and defence, asylum, and enlargement—areas that have traditionally remained peripheral to the EU integration project and have largely operated through intergovernmental coordination mechanisms among member states (Genschel &

Jachtenfuchs, 2014). The EU's own response to the Russian war has been multifaceted. It has encompassed measures under the Common Foreign and Security Policy, notably the adoption of extensive restrictive sanctions against Moscow; actions within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy, including the activation of the European Peace Facility in support of Ukraine's defence; policies in the area of asylum, such as the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive to facilitate the reception of Ukrainian refugees across the Union's territory; as well as the launch of the enlargement process towards Kiev, recognising Ukraine's candidate status and linking reconstruction support to accession-related reforms (Capati, 2024a). Beyond that, Russia's aggression has led to a renewed awareness of NATO's central role in ensuring European security, with the United States pressing for substantial increases in defence spending by EU member states (Howorth, 2025).

We argue that, because the two large-scale crises of the 2020s chiefly pertained to distinct policy domains that, in turn, are differently related to the ideological core issues of social democracy, social democratic parties will have reacted differently to them in terms of their positions on EU integration. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic chiefly impacted socioeconomic policy areas that are ideologically central to social democracy, and were met by redistributive and expansionary EU policy responses that we expect to be appreciated by social democrats. On the other hand, the Russian invasion of Ukraine pertained to a multitude of policy domains, some of which—including asylum—were in line with social democracy's longstanding ideological commitments; and others, such as security and defence, which were outside of social democracy's ideological core (e.g., Trastulli, 2025). For this reason, we do not expect that social democrats will shift their EU integration stances on an ideological basis as a result of the Russian war on Ukraine.

Therefore, this article puts forward a two-fold argument. First, it argues that the PD, as the Italian social democratic party formation, has adopted more favourable positions on EU integration in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, it argues that the PD has not altered its positions on EU integration following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.
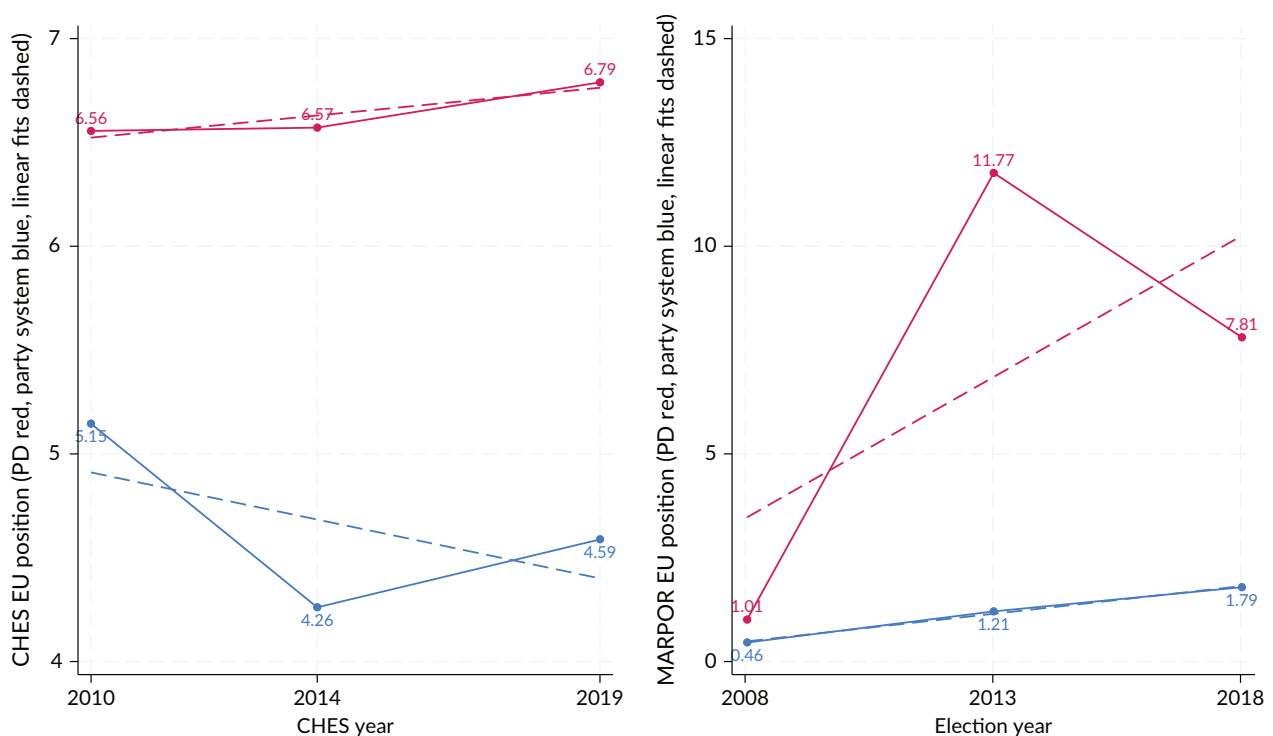
3. Research Design

3.1. The Case of the PD Within the Contemporary Italian Political System

As a case setting, contemporary Italy is a substantively important—and surely peculiar—context for our analysis. Currently in its "Third Republic" phase, Italy boasts an unprecedentedly unstable and deinstitutionalised party system (e.g., Chiaramonte et al., 2022), although currently experiencing a relatively stable radical-right-led government made up of Fratelli d'Italia, Lega, and Forza Italia. Despite the longstanding divisions on foreign policy between historically pro-Russian (Lega) and other pro-EU/NATO forces (Forza Italia and, more recently, Fratelli d'Italia), the centre-right parties' pragmatic focus on common domestic policy positions, including in terms of responses to large-scale crises, makes for the coalition's cohesiveness.

On the left of the political spectrum, 2007 brought about a new formation in the Italian party system and a new reality in the country's broader political context. Indeed, this is when the PD was founded as a uniquely peculiar formation: the merger of both Italy's main leftist formation—the Left Democrats, direct heir to the Italian Communist Party—and social-liberal Christian democrats from The Daisy. The PD was explicitly

conceived as a centre-left party with a "majoritarian vocation," ready to take on the Berlusconi-led centre-right coalition at a time of *de facto* bipolar party competition in Italy (e.g., Donovan, 2011). As a result, although it is routinely included in comparative political analyses of social democracy (e.g., Emanuele & Trastulli, 2024), some have come so far as to question whether the PD constitutes an authentically social democratic formation (Pasquino, 2013). For instance, the PD has historically had a complicated relationship with the Party of European Socialists and Democrats—only joining it in 2014—and is a highly factionalised party with complex positions on several issues, including on the Russian-Ukrainian war and Italy's relationship with Moscow. Despite these peculiarities, as shown in Figure 1, the main sources of data on partisan supply—the Chapel Hill Expert Survey and the Manifesto Project datasets—both concur that the PD has displayed increasingly high and consistently above-average levels of pro-Europeanism in the Italian party system over the course of its history. This contributes to making the PD a most likely case of continued support for EU integration in response to large-scale crises.

Figure 1. Levels of PD and Italian party system's (mean) Europeanism. Notes: CHES = Chapel Hill Expert Survey; MARPOR = Manifesto Project; data can be accessed at https://www.chesdata.eu (CHES) and https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu (MARPOR).

3.2. Data and Methods

Our methodological framework builds on two fundamental premises: the press-release assumption and saliency theory. The press-release assumption posits that parties use social media as a strategic tool for their political communication aimed at the public (De Sio et al., 2017; Kreiss, 2016). Saliency theory, in turn, suggests that, given the limited space for political communication through any platform, parties expound their political positions by putting different emphasis on different issues and ideological positions in their political messaging (Budge & Farlie, 1983). We move from these premises to analyse party positions vis-à-vis the EU through social media output. In particular, we leverage original datasets of Facebook posts obtained

via Meta's research platform, Crowdtangle. Differently from one-off forms of programmatic output to convey parties' ideological stances, such as party manifestos, social media are used by parties to continuously communicate and engage with their audience, which makes them ideal for the analysis of responses to events outside of electoral campaigns, such as Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is even more so as recent research has shown that party discourses on European integration may differ from the views expressed in their electoral manifestos (Mitru & Tap, 2026). Furthermore, social media provide an unmediated look into the positions that parties intend to convey, rather than through the lens of media reports. In particular, Facebook is an especially apt choice for our analytical purposes, being both a social media platform on which Italian parties are particularly active and that lends itself especially well compared to others—e.g., Twitter/X—to the discussion of political issues often mobilised from a populist perspective (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019), such as European integration. Because existing research has shown that Italian parties refrain from talking about potentially controversial or politically uncomfortable crises—such as the Russian war in Ukraine—in their electoral manifestos (Trastulli & Mastroianni, 2024), the mentioned qualities make Facebook data particularly fitting for measuring parties' EU positions in a way that is both reactive to critical events and continuous over time.

Relatedly, to measure party positions on the EU before and after the two considered critical events, we followed established approaches in the literature (e.g., Capati et al., 2024; Capati & Trastulli, 2025). In particular, we look at Facebook posts from the official PD page over the continuous four-month span made up of the month preceding the outbreak of each crisis, to have a positional baseline in pre-crisis times, and the three months following the outbreak of the crisis, to allow for parties' immediate programmatic response to such events to fully emerge and consolidate. To this end, we identify the following key dates for the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. For Covid-19, we select the televised national address of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on the evening of 9 March 2020, in which the first lockdown measures were announced, as the crisis starting point, hence collecting Facebook posts between 9 February and 9 March 2020 for the pre-crisis period and between 10 March and 4 June 2020 for the following three months. For the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we similarly adopt Russian President Vladimir Putin's televised address in the early hours of the morning on 24 February 2022, in which the beginning of the full-scale military operations was announced to the world, as the starting point in our empirical investigation of this crisis. Therefore, for the pre-crisis period, Facebook posts for Italian parties were collected between 23 January and 23 February 2022, whereas posts from 24 February to 25 May 2022 were collected for the subsequent three months. This resulted in the collection of 1,815 Facebook posts made by the official PD page in the timespan considered for the Covid-19 pandemic, of which 405 pre-crisis and 1,410 post-crisis; and 236 posts during the four months under investigation for the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, of which 50 pre-crisis and 186 post-crisis.

After the data collection, two independent coders performed a claims analysis of the Facebook posts (e.g., Koopmans & Statham, 1999) based on the codebook reported in Table A1 in the Supplementary File (with reliability scores reassuring about intercoder agreement: percent agreement of 98.70% for Covid-19 and 96.98% for the Russian invasion of Ukraine; Cohen's κ of 0.912 for Covid-19 and 0.893 for the Russian invasion of Ukraine). This allowed for gathering information concerning whether the content of each Facebook post contained a positionally favourable (i.e., pro-EU), unfavourable (i.e., anti-EU), or unclear message. These extensive data were subsequently reshaped to a time-series cross-section dataset, by considering party-day combinations as the unit of analysis. This allowed us to build measures of

pro-Europeanism and anti-Europeanism, capturing the proportion of daily posts that the PD devoted to either pro- or anti-EU messages over the total of daily posts. The difference between the proportion of pro- and anti-EU posts was employed to derive a synthetic measure of partisan "Position on the EU," potentially ranging between 1 (all daily Facebook posts thematically in favour of the EU/EU integration) and −1 (all daily Facebook posts thematically against the EU/EU integration).

Table 1 presents descriptive information concerning the thematic nature of Facebook posts sent out by the PD during the two analysed crises versus all other formations in the Italian party system for which we gathered data (the full list of parties by crisis is reported in Table A2 in the Supplementary File). As evident, whilst rising in politicisation between the two crises—in line with historical trends shown by time-series data on party supply such as, for instance, the Manifesto Project's—the EU issue is only one of many in the multidimensional electoral contestation of contemporary Italy (e.g., Bakker et al., 2012), overall thematising around 10% or less of Italian parties' Facebook posts. Against this backdrop, the PD's levels of pro-Europeanism appear, on average, as consistently higher than those of the rest of the Italian party system, in light of its comparatively and consistently high proportion of pro-EU posts and low proportion of anti-EU posts. This applies at both time points and especially during the Covid-19 crisis, when the proportion of pro-European posts by other parties was significantly lower than during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Overall, this descriptive evidence confirms the idea that the main social democratic party of Italy is a staunchly pro-European formation, highly supportive of EU integration (e.g., Trastulli & Mastroianni, 2024)—aligning with the historical evidence presented in Figure 1.

Table 1. Posts on the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine: PD versus all other Italian parties.

Party	Posts on EU	Pro-EU posts	Anti-EU posts	Position on the EU
PD (Covid-19)	0.087	0.078	0.001	0.078
Rest of Italian party system (Covid-19)	0.073	0.030	0.033	−0.003
PD (Russia's invasion of Ukraine)	0.101	0.077	0.012	0.065
Rest of Italian party system (Russia's invasion of Ukraine)	0.108	0.069	0.027	0.042

To answer our research question as to whether the PD reacted differently to the two large-scale crises of the 2020s under analysis, we employ a two-step mixed-methods approach. Indeed, this allows us to tend to two analytical necessities: (a) in the quantitative part, gauging whether such large-scale crises do exert a directional effect—and, if so, *what* effect they exert—on the PD's Europeanism; (b) in the qualitative part, assessing exactly *how*—i.e., through which rhetorical arguments—the Italian social-democratic party linked these critical events to the related changes (or lack thereof) in their EU positions. Therefore, in the first quantitative step, we empirically probe our two arguments by performing *t*-tests (e.g., Ross & Wilson, 2017) aimed at assessing whether the PD's mean "Position on the EU" is statistically significantly different before and after the outbreak of the two crises, the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Subsequently, we complement these results with qualitative evidence by carrying out a thematic analysis (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998) of those posts aimed at detecting the PD's specific position on the EU's own policy response to the two crises—including on such instruments as the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and the RRF in the context of the pandemic, as well as policies such as enlargement, asylum, and defence in the context of the war.

4. Results

Table 2 provides the results for the *t*-tests concerning the PD's "Position on the EU" before and after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (see also Mann-Whitney *U* tests in Table A3 of the Supplementary File). As is evident, in the three months following the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis in Italy, the PD adopted much more favourable stances vis-à-vis the EU than in the month preceding this critical event. Indeed, the PD's positive mean "Position on the EU" after 9 March 2020 (0.098) is more than five times larger than between 9 February and 9 March 2020 (0.019), and this difference is statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. This evidence goes in the direction of the argument by which the PD should have adopted more favourable positions on EU integration after the Covid-19 pandemic. Conversely, Table 2 shows that the PD's mean "Position on the EU" before and after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is not different in a statistically significant fashion, in line with our corresponding argument on this crisis. Therefore, the preliminary statistical evidence provided by the analysis of our original data allows us to say that, in the Italian case, social democrats have reacted to the two large-scale crises in different ways vis-à-vis EU integration: by increasing their pro-Europeanism after Covid-19, whilst not altering their EU positions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Table 2. *t*-tests: PD's "Position on the EU" before and after the two large-scale crises.

Subgroup	*N*	PD's mean Position on the EU (standard deviation)
Pre-Covid-19	30	0.019 (0.040)
Post-Covid-19	86	0.098*** (0.116)
Pre-Russian invasion of Ukraine	28	0.207 (0.361)
Post-Russian invasion of Ukraine	81	0.236 (0.320)

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

How exactly did this different positional reaction by the PD to these large-scale crises vis-à-vis the EU come about? We argue that this is because of the different policy implications foregrounded by these two large-scale crises, and their relation to the ideological core of social democracy. This argument finds empirical support in the qualitative thematic analysis of the PD's Facebook posts on the EU's policy response to the two crises, illustrating the rhetorical arguments underlying the different positional responses by the PD to the two crises vis-à-vis the EU.

The findings show that the PD supported the establishment and activation of both the reformed ESM (with its ad-hoc Pandemic Crisis Support credit line) and the RRF without reserves. Largely in contrast to the rest of the party system, on 8 May 2020, the PD claimed:

> The ESM will be able to offer financing for 2% of GDP at near-zero interest rates for direct and indirect healthcare and prevention expenditure related to Covid-19. The Commission will only verify this requirement. No additional conditions may be imposed.

Therefore, it is evident how—supporting the EU's response to the Covid-19 pandemic—the PD's even heightened support for further EU integration after this critical event was thematically linked to the expansionary approach to public investment in the economy and in health and welfare, as both fall in the traditional ideological core of social democracy (e.g., Keman, 2017; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) and in newer

"Social Europe" visions (e.g., Meyer & Spiegel, 2010). Along the same lines, on 27 May 2020, talking about the RRF, the PD stressed:

> Italy will receive the largest share of the proposal: 172.7 billion, of which 81 billion is non-repayable. This is a success for Italy and for Europe. Because no country in Europe can save itself on its own, but together we can recover and start again.

Here too, because of the socioeconomic policy domains impacted by both the Covid-19 crisis and the EU's response, the PD—already a staunch advocate of European integration—reinvigorated its support for the EU even further, pushing for the adoption of both policy instruments proposed by the EU in its political communication.

Similarly, the PD espoused the EU's approach to enlargement and asylum in the context of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, further signalling the need to build a common supranational European defence system. The PD favoured welcoming Ukrainian refugees into the Union's territory along with their integration into the EU's single market. On 27 February 2022, it also remarked that Ukraine's application to join the Union is "legitimate and on the agenda, to the extent that it could lead to a possible solution to the ongoing conflict." However, this party also pointed out some limitations in the EU's approach to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. With respect to enlargement, on 9 May 2022, it claimed that "Ukraine's accession process to the EU will be completed in 2036. It is unthinkable to make a people under siege who are asking to be part of the European family wait," and thereby proposed the establishment of a European Confederation (complementary to the EU) to welcome Ukraine and other Eastern European countries.

At the same time, on 9 March 2022, the PD recognised:

> This conflict…presents us with new challenges that the EU must be able to address: building its strategic autonomy, which includes a common foreign and defence policy and a European Energy Union.

The same patterns emerge from the party leaders' rhetoric on Facebook. Nicola Zingaretti, party secretary from March 2019 to March 2021, supported all the EU's policy initiatives to counter the socio-economic costs of Covid-19 at the national level, including the activation of the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, the expansionary monetary policy of the European Central Bank, the ESM, Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency, and RRF. Zingaretti was succeeded by Enrico Letta as party secretary in March 2021, and his approach to the EU during the Russian war on Ukraine was more mixed. On the one hand, he argued that the EU took "the right direction by voting…for a complete #EnergyRussiaEmbargo" (post of 7 April 2022). On the other, Letta criticised the EU's enlargement policy, which would only lead to Ukrainian membership in 2036 (post of 23 April 2022).

In sum, our qualitative analyses of the rhetorical arguments underlying the different positional reactions of the PD to the two large-scale crises vis-à-vis the EU show that this party continued to invariably support European integration but highlighted shortcomings in the EU's policy response to the war in ways that it did not during Covid-19. This was facilitated by the misalignment between the policy implications foregrounded by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which primarily concerned defence and security, and the PD's ideological orientation as a social democratic party. These are policy areas that have traditionally been less central to

the centre-left's programmatic agenda and where calls for deeper integration do not easily translate into programmatic gains for social-democratic actors. As a result, while the PD reaffirmed its commitment to EU unity and collective action, it was less enthusiastic about EU policymaking in domains that lie outside its core ideological priorities. This contrasts with the clear pattern of increased support the party expressed in response to the EU's handling of the pandemic.

5. Conclusion

This article analysed the PD's positions on the EU in the aftermath of the two large-scale crises of the 2020s: the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The findings of our mixed-methods approach, which aptly analysed both the extent of the crises' impact on the PD's Europeanism and the arguments through which it was reflected in party rhetoric, suggest that this party increased its support for European integration after the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, while no significant variation in its support for the EU emerged following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Whilst the positive effect of Covid-19 is in line with the aforementioned idea of the PD as a "most likely case" to further support EU integration when facing large-scale crises, the ambivalent impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war is not. We attribute this divergence to the different policy implications foregrounded by the two crises and their alignment with the PD's ideological orientation. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic chiefly primed policy issues central to the PD's ideological connotation, such as the sustainability and enhancement of national welfare systems, public healthcare, and socioeconomic redistribution (Trastulli, 2025). On the contrary, the Russian invasion of Ukraine mostly made salient policy issues far from social democracy's ideological core, including the provision of common security and defence. To this end, the quantitative and qualitative evidence of our mixed-methods analysis converge, as per Table 3.

Table 3. Alignment between quantitative patterns and qualitative evidence from our mixed-methods analysis.

Crisis	T-test on PD's positional response vis-à-vis EU	Underlying rhetorical arguments
Covid-19	Significantly more pro-EU	Pro-ESM Pro-investment in healthcare Pro-expansionary policy instruments
Russia's invasion of Ukraine	No significant difference	Pro-asylum Pro-embargo Critical of slow enlargement policy Need for further common defence capacity

The PD's increased support for the EU after Covid-19, but not after the Russian war on Ukraine, was rhetorically substantiated by arguments, on the one hand, wholeheartedly supportive of the EU's socioeconomic policy responses to the crisis; whilst, on the other hand, by both supportive comments on the EU's stances towards questions of asylum and embargo, but also more critical ones on the Union's current inertia regarding enlargement and further defence integration.

This allows us to further elaborate on our main finding: Large-scale crises *can*, but *do not necessarily* influence the Europeanism of social democracy. Indeed, the sensitivity of social democratic Europeanism is heightened when these critical events directly involve social democracy's core policy issues—such as

economic redistribution, welfare, and healthcare. In these cases, the positional reaction of social democracy vis-à-vis the EU will be contingent on the Union's policy response—i.e., greater or lower integration in the respective policy domains. Therefore, not all large-scale crises matter in the same way for the social democrats' Europeanism, and whether they do so depends on the policy domains they chiefly pertain to.

Hence, the article makes both theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, it suggests that the impact of external shocks such as large-scale crises on party positions towards the EU is conditioned by the alignment between the specific policy implications foregrounded by the crisis and the party's traditional ideological stances. In contrast to accounts that view EU crises as uniformly integration-enabling or constraining, we argue that they create distinct opportunity structures for party positioning on EU integration, building on parties' historical predisposition towards the EU on the basis of their pre-existing ideological characteristics (e.g., Marks et al., 2002). In particular, crises that prime owned policy domains and are met by EU-level responses in line with parties' ideology are more likely to induce a pro-EU and integration-supportive response. Conversely, crises that chiefly pertain to policy domains outside of parties' ideological core may elicit more ambiguous positional reactions. This perspective contributes to the literature on EU crisis politics by introducing a party-centred, ideological lens through which to understand national political responses to European integration.

Empirically, the article provides a detailed analysis of the PD's evolving position on the EU across two major external shocks. In the case of the pandemic, the PD embraced EU initiatives such as the reformed ESM with its Pandemic Crisis Support, and NextGenerationEU—the latter as a historic step forward for socioeconomic EU integration—thereby aligning the EU's economic response with both long-standing and more recent social-democratic priorities. The party's discourse increasingly framed the EU not merely as a guarantor of macroeconomic stability, but as a vehicle for solidarity, social investment, and welfare resilience, in line with the idea of a "Social Europe." By contrast, the PD's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was more mixed in terms of its implications for European integration. While the party strongly endorsed the EU's response to the war in terms of enlargement and asylum, it also pointed out limitations in such a response and called for the establishment of complementary political organisations, such as the European Confederation.

We acknowledge that our findings may not travel beyond our peculiar national context and social democratic formation. Yet, we deem the dynamics of social democratic EU-position recalibration in response to different large-scale crises emerging from our article worthy of investigation in other spatial-temporal settings. Support for EU integration is not automatic, even for traditionally pro-European actors such as the PD. Rather, it depends on the nature of the crisis, the EU's policy response, and the extent to which these resonate with the party's ideological core. The PD's evolving stance may highlight both the potential and the limits of ideological adaptation in times of crisis.

More broadly, this analysis has implications for the future of European integration. As the EU faces increasingly complex and cross-cutting challenges, the role of national parties in shaping the legitimacy and direction of EU integration in the domestic politics of member states becomes ever more significant. The differentiated response of the PD across crises may suggest that the trajectory of EU integration could be uneven, with certain policy domains primed by large-scale crises and directions of EU's responses—such as social and financial assistance policy—attracting stronger support from the centre-left, while others—such as security and defence—may in theory elicit more enthusiasm from ideologically different parties.

These dynamics may point to a future of selective or "functional" EU integration, shaped not only by institutional constraints and intergovernmental bargaining but also by the preferences and ideational orientations of domestic political actors. Understanding how and why parties adjust their EU positions in different crisis contexts is therefore essential for grasping the political foundations of the EU integration process in the years ahead.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data are available upon request from the authors.

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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

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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

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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 (EES; 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 (EU = 0, left–right = 1); (b) incongruent only on the left–right dimension (EU = 1, left–right = 0); (c) incongruent on both (EU = 0, left–right = 0); and (d) congruent on both (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.

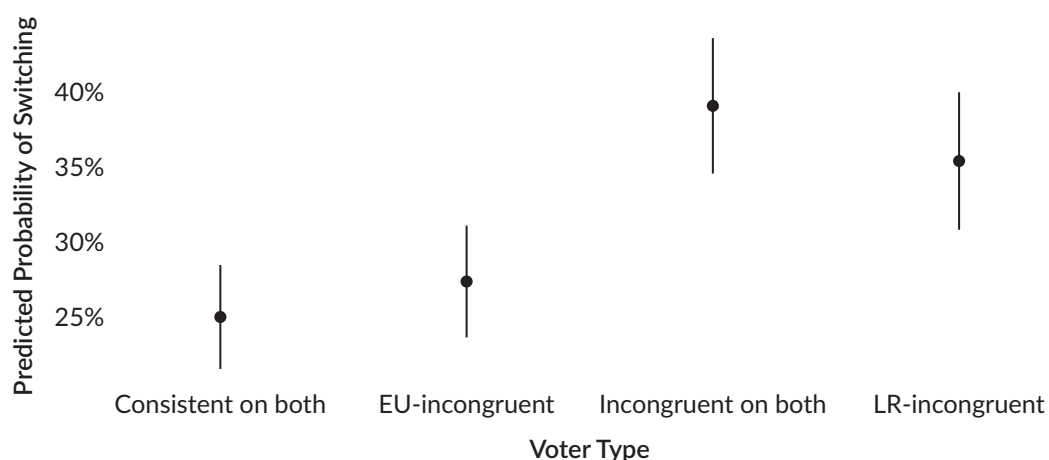|	Model 1: Issue incongruence	Model 2: Cross-pressures (perceived)
Intercept	−0.073 (0.184)	−0.491*** (0.126)
Left–right incongruence	0.288*** (0.024)	
EU incongruence	0.099*** (0.024)	
EU-incongruent (vs. consistent)		0.160** (0.056)
Left–right incongruent (vs. consistent)		0.554*** (0.055)
Incongruent 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.
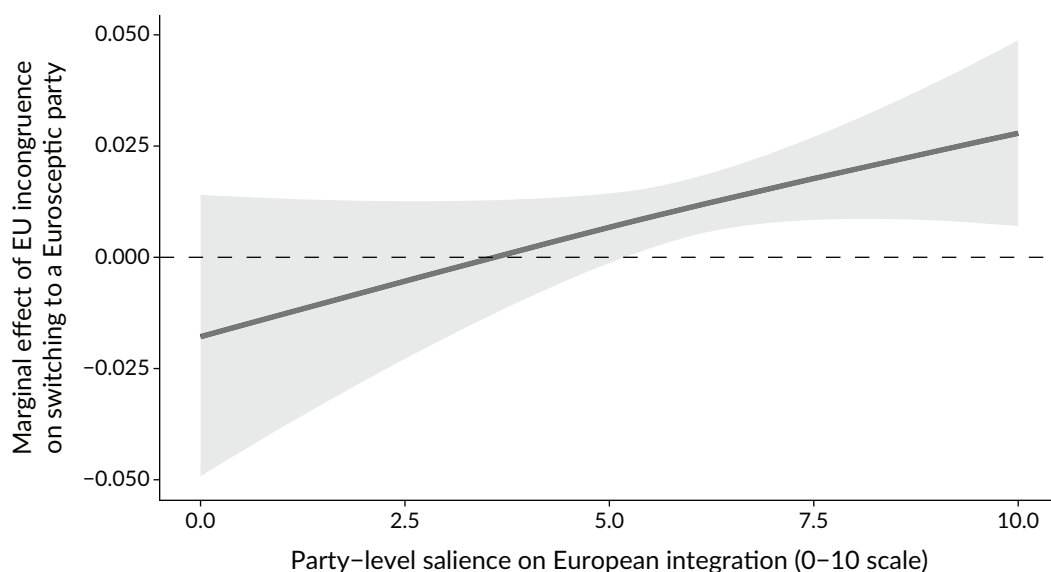
	Model 3a: EU salience interaction		Model 3b: EU polarisation interaction	
Intercept	−0.074	(0.185)	0.131	(0.222)
Left–right incongruence	0.288***	(0.024)	0.287***	(0.024)
EU incongruence	0.097***	(0.024)	0.068*	(0.033)
Government disapproval	0.148***	(0.027)	0.148***	(0.027)
Partisan identifier (1 = 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.
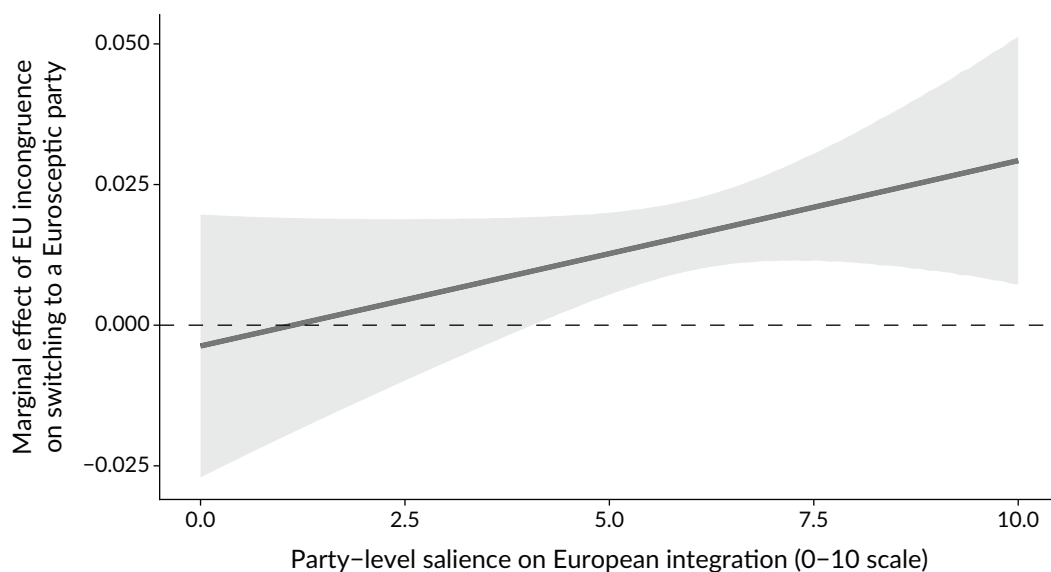
Table 3. Determinants of switching towards Eurosceptic parties.

	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.

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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