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Does Anyone Care? Cohesion Policy Issues in Sub-national Politics

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Abstract

A key element of the European Union's (EU) attempt to foster citizens' EU identification is its goal to improve citizens' quality of life via its Cohesion policy (CP). Although recent findings demonstrate that the allocation of CP money positively affects sub-national parties' positions on EU integration and CP, we still do not know if sub-national parties actually talk about CP issues in their manifestos. Using a unique data set based on manually coded 812 manifestos written by 95 different parties in 47 regions in Germany, Spain, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom between 2007 and 2016, it is argued that several party-level characteristics are decisive for sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues. Even though sub-national parties emphasize CP issues only to a small degree, the results of multilevel mixed-effects Tobit regressions show that it is particularly regional government parties which emphasize CP issues when drafting their regional election manifestos.

Keywords: cohesion policy; salience; manifestos; regional level; sub-national politics; parties

Introduction

One key strategy of the European Union (EU) to foster European integration is by improving citizens' quality of life, mitigating regional disparities, and enhancing the economic well-being of European regions via its regional policy, today known as Cohesion Policy (CP).¹ Even though CP accounts for almost one-third of the EU's annual budget (George and Bache, 2001, p. 303), citizens' awareness of CP is only slowly increasing over the last years (Hlatky, 2021; Schraff, 2019, p. 88). Whereas there is still a huge discussion in the literature about the extent CP increases citizens' awareness of CP and their support for the EU (for example Chalmers and Dellmuth, 2015; Dellmuth and Chalmers, 2018; Dąbrowski *et al.*, 2019; López-Bazo and Royuela, 2019; López-Bazo, forthcoming), this study focuses on political parties as important intermediary actors in the process of European integration by linking EU policies to the citizens.

Parties' emphasis of European issues in supranational, national, regional, and local elections is considered as an important factor for citizens' awareness and perception of CP and EU issues (Capello and Perucca, 2019a, 2019b). Although there is a rather large literature on the salience parties devote to European issues at the (supra-)national level (for example Braun and Schmitt, 2020; Steenbergen and Scott, 2004; Whitefield and Rohrschneider, 2019), sub-national parties' emphasis of EU-related issues at the regional level has not been analysed so far. There is only a scarce number of studies dealing with party positions on and issue emphasis of EU-related issues at the sub-national level. Most

¹In the following, 'Cohesion Policy' is used as an abbreviation for the EU's cohesion, regional and urban policies.

of these studies exclusively focus on the position-taking of regionalist parties towards EU integration (see for example Elias, 2008; Jolly, 2007; Massetti, 2009), and only two studies link sub-national parties' positional data with data on EU regional transfer money (Gross and Debus, 2018; Massetti and Schakel, 2016). Both studies provide evidence that sub-national parties are more pro-European integration oriented if the regions they are electorally competing in receive more EU regional transfer money and if they are more dependent on EU funding compared to other regions. Yet even though this empirical evidence shows that sub-national parties *position* themselves on EU-related issues, these studies rely on one implicit assumption which has not been empirically tested so far — that sub-national parties actually *talk* about CP issues during their election campaigns, in general, and in their election manifestos, in particular. Even though Cohesion Policy issues will not be the main focus of sub-national parties' regional election campaigns, they still have incentives to talk about it (see Section I). Therefore, this study answers the following research question: To what extent do sub-national parties emphasize Cohesion Policy issues in their regional election manifestos?

By using an original data set on 812 sub-national parties' regional election manifestos drafted by 95 individual parties in 47 regions in Germany, Spain, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (UK) between 2007 and 2016, it is argued that sub-national parties' devotion of manifesto space to CP issues is dependent on four party-specific characteristics: campaigning as government party at the regional (and the national) level; being a Eurosceptic party; being a regionalist party. The results of the descriptive and multivariate regression analyses show, first, that sub-national parties only devote 0.96 per cent of their regional election manifestos to CP issues. Second, government parties at the regional level emphasize CP issues more than other parties. Third, being a Eurosceptic or regionalist party does not explain variations in sub-national parties' varying degree of CP issue emphasis.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical arguments and testable hypotheses why sub-national parties should care about CP issues, and why they should emphasize these issues in their regional election manifestos. The novel data set on sub-national parties' emphasis of CP (and other EU-related) issues is presented in Section II, together with a detailed description of the case selection, operationalization of variables, and empirical strategy. Section III summarizes the empirical evidence on sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues. The final section concludes.

I. Why Sub-National Parties Should Emphasize Cohesion Policy Issues: Theoretical Considerations and Hypotheses

The last three decades in EU decision-making have demonstrated 'that regions have become an unextractable and important tier of government within the EU multi-level polity' (Schakel, 2020, p. 771). Apart from sub-national authorities' involvement in EU affairs via the Committee of the Regions and from the possibility of regional ministers for representing the EU member state in the Council of Ministers (see Schakel, 2020), particularly the important role sub-national authorities play in the formulation and implementation of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) projects in the Cohesion Policy framework (Leonardi, 2005) should create incentives for sub-national political actors to care about CP issues. Since 1988 regional authorities play a considerable role in CP by

involving sub-national political actors in the decision-making and implementation processes (Brunazzo, 2016, pp. 23–4). This empowerment of sub-national authorities went along with a process of regionalisation by shifting political authority from the national to sub-national levels of government (Tatham, 2018; see also Abels and Battke, 2019). Thus, ‘regions are EU actors in their own rights’ (Abels, 2015, p. 38) and sub-national parliaments do have to co-finance some of the funding programmes within the scope of ESIF (Auel and Große Hüttmann, 2015, p. 352). Consequently, political actors should have incentives to address CP issues in regional level politics (Graziano, 2010), especially since regional transfers enhance regional performance and economic convergence (see Bachtrögl *et al.*, 2020 for additional literature).

Many spending policies outlined in the various ESIF programmes are of a redistributive nature, which should not only increase citizens’ awareness of these policies (Dellmuth and Chalmers, 2018), but which has also been shown to drive partisan politics at the sub-national level (see for example Kemmerling and Bodenstein, 2006; Schraff, 2019). Additionally, ‘the funds distributed to the regions via CP represent the most substantive and tangible manifestation of the EU policy for the regions’ (Massetti and Schakel, 2016, p. 217). Hence, this direct influence of CP on sub-national politics provides sub-national political actors ‘with strong incentives to exercise influence in order to receive more regional funding’ (Schneider *et al.*, 2014, p. 408). Furthermore, these policies are also covered by regional media (Mendez *et al.*, 2020) and thus should contribute to the politicization of CP issues at the sub-national level.

Government Participation at the Regional and at the National Level

It is particularly regional government parties that are directly involved in the formulation and implementation of CP programmes outlining in detail how ESIF money will be allocated to regional and local projects. The structure of the formulation and implementation process of CP suggests that parties participating in regional governments have a stronger incentive of emphasizing such issues than regional opposition parties. Regional government parties are the decisive players in the bargaining process on regional transfers (Chalmers and Dellmuth, 2015, p. 403). Following the first round of negotiations between the EU Commission and the national governments, the second step of negotiations is where ‘regions participate’ by ‘providing their own development programmes’ (Dotti, 2013, p. 599). It is exactly in this stage where national and regional governments go through long and tough negotiations about the form of these CP programmes (Molle, 2007, p. 171). These programmes are subsequently implemented by regional governments and their administrative authorities. Therefore, it is regional government parties that allocate ESIF money in the regions through their programmes, thus giving them the additional possibility to adopt measures which could not have been financed otherwise (Dotti, 2013, p. 602). Additionally, successfully attracting ESIF transfer money to one’s region increases a regional government parties’ chances of keeping electoral promises which voters care about, which in turn should incentivise these parties to highlight these specific issues in their regional election manifestos (see, for example, Matthieß, 2020). Hence, parties that currently form a regional government and their representatives are aware of the financial benefits of receiving EU money and that they could use this money

also ‘for personal electoral gain’ (Stephenson, 2016, p. 44). This leads to the first hypothesis.

H1: Regional government parties emphasize CP issues more than other parties.

This relationship might be even stronger if regional government parties are also represented in the national government (Chalmers, 2013). Regional government parties have an advantage *vis-à-vis* regional opposition parties: they can ‘act as gate-keepers to national-level decision-making’ and ‘monopolise EU-related information’ (Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2017, p. 142). Taking this multi-level perspective into account, Bouvet and Dall’erba (2010) and Dotti (2016) show that national governments spend more EU money in regions which are governed by parties that also form the national government, in particular if the national government needs to secure votes in these regions (see also Dellmuth *et al.*, 2017; Henceroth and Oganessian, 2019; Huliaras and Petropoulos, 2016). Dellmuth and Stoffel (2012) present empirical evidence that sub-national governments in Germany allocate EU regional transfer money to local projects situated in districts where the prime minister’s party already has high electoral support (see also Surubaru, 2017). Consequently, government parties in this region are expected to talk more about the benefits of EU regional transfer money because they might have incentives to get voters’ credits for successfully using intra-party channels for a better bargaining position with the national government about financial grants (see, for example, Stefuriuc, 2009, p. 98). Hence, the second hypothesis reads as follows:

H2: Regional government parties emphasize CP issues more than other parties if they are also represented in the national government.

Eurosceptic Parties

Arguing from an issue competition perspective, large, mainstream parties – or dominant parties (see De Vries and Hobolt, 2020) – have less incentives to politicize EU- and CP-related issues because these issues do not give them an electoral advantage *vis-à-vis* Eurosceptic parties and these issues are not easily integrated in the left–right spectrum that still mainly structures party competition in EU member states (see Green-Pedersen, 2012, 2019; van de Wardt *et al.*, 2014). Yet, particularly EU-related issues have been more and more politicized in European countries throughout the last decades (Hutter and Grande, 2014). This is primarily due to the electoral rise of Eurosceptic parties. One core element of their rhetoric is the condemnation of a further European integration, an emphasis of the nation state, and a rejection of the EU as a neoliberal, elite-driven project (see for example Halikiopoulou *et al.*, 2012; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). They do not only oppose the *political* aspects of European integration but also the *economic* aspects, which are closely related to EU regional policy (Marks *et al.*, 2002). Regarding CP issues, however, some scholars argue that Eurosceptic parties should have less incentives to politicize these issues because they do not want to increase citizens’ awareness of the EU’s efforts in promoting regional development via ESIF transfer money (Capello and Perucca, 2019b). Yet, this argument could also be reversed if Eurosceptic parties

particularly highlight the mismanagement or misallocation of ESIF money to policy fields and societal groups they do not seem ‘worthwhile’ to fund. For example, especially parties from the right side of the political spectrum combine their Eurosceptic views with distinctive positions on ‘national identity’ and use ‘ethnonationalist cues’ to criticize the EU for supporting marginalized groups such as refugees, migrants, and minorities (see Hlatky, 2021), thus acting as ‘political entrepreneurs’ by driving ‘a wedge between coalitions and dominant parties’ regarding their EU positions and issues (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020, p. 6). Consequently, Eurosceptic sub-national parties should emphasize CP issues not only in national but also in regional elections (see Ladrech, 2015, pp. 86–7) to voice their grievances regarding their (perceived) minority advancements against their (perceived) majority position (see Bustikova, 2014). Given the different theoretical expectations in the literature, I put forward two competing hypotheses regarding Eurosceptic parties’ emphasis of CP issues:

H3a: Eurosceptic parties emphasize CP issues more than other parties.

H3b: Eurosceptic parties emphasize CP issues less than other parties.

Regionalist Parties

Lastly, extensive research on party families and their positions towards EU-related issues demonstrates that there are remarkable differences between party families. Whereas radical left parties and parties from the far right are much more Eurosceptic and opposed to European integration, regional, liberal, socialist and Christian-democratic parties are largely in favour of European integration (De Winter and Gomez-Reino, 2002; Hooghe *et al.*, 2004; Jolly, 2007; Marks *et al.*, 2002). Recent empirical findings show, however, that there has been a divide in the party family of regionalist parties regarding their positions on European integration since the beginning of the 2000s (see Elias, 2008; Massetti, 2009; Massetti and Schakel, 2021). Furthermore, regionalist parties striving for a secession adopt more Eurosceptic positions than regionalist parties campaigning for a greater degree of autonomy (Cetrà and Liñeira, 2018; Massetti and Schakel, 2021). Yet, these findings are exclusively based on regionalist parties’ *positioning* on European integration issues, whereas this study is interested in their *issue emphasis strategy* regarding CP issues. Notwithstanding their concrete political ideas regarding autonomy or secession, for regionalist parties regional elections are ‘first-order’ elections (even though some regionalist parties might also run for elections at the national level – for example, the German Christian-Social Union (CSU) or the Spanish Canarian Coalition (CC)), and their main political interest lies at the regional level, whereas other parties additionally have the possibility to address CP issues in other election campaigns, particularly at their ‘first-order national elections’. Therefore, I expect regionalist parties to emphasize CP issues more than other party families:

H4: Regionalist parties emphasize CP issues more than other party families.

II. Research Design and Data

To evaluate my theoretical expectations explaining sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues, I have compiled a new data set on sub-national parties' emphasis of EU-related issues in 812 regional election manifestos (with at least 1,000 words) by 95 different parties in 47 regions in Germany, Spain, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (that is, Scotland and Wales) from 2007 to 2016. This comprises 129 regional elections in the two EU funding periods 2007–13 and 2014–20, and at least two elections in each region.²

The four West European countries were selected following a diverse case selection strategy to provide a wide range of variation of potentially relevant characteristics without compromising the overall comparability of sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues in regional election manifestos. First, all countries fulfil the criteria of having regions and regional governments because parties compete in a '*coherent territorial entity situated between the local and national levels with a capacity for authoritative decision making*' (Hooghe *et al.*, 2010, p. 4; emphasis in original). Nevertheless, the legislative powers of sub-national parliaments in these countries, and therefore sub-national political actors' involvement in regional politics, varies considerably (for an overview on the role of regional parliaments in the EU see Bursens and Högenauer, 2017). Secondly, all regions are involved 'in EU economic, employment and budgetary policies' and are granted with 'legislative powers' (Stahl and Kuby, 2015, p. 152) to a varying extent. Thirdly, the selected countries and regions vary regarding the responsibilities for administering and implementing CP (for a detailed description see Schakel, 2020, pp. 770–1). Fourthly, regions vary regarding the amount and purpose of ESIF transfer money allocated to the regions, the role regional authorities play in CP implementation (Gross and Debus, 2018, p. 600; Medeiros, 2017, p. 1264), and the regional economic growth effects associated with ESIF transfer money (Crescenzi and Giua, 2020). This variation allows for evaluating the potential effects different levels of EU regional transfer money may have on sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues. Fifthly, the selected countries and regions also differ with regard to citizens' support of EU integration (see Aiello *et al.*, 2019; Dąbrowski *et al.*, 2019). Lastly, all these countries experienced the rise of Eurosceptic parties in the last years which politicized EU-related issues in domestic politics (Braun *et al.*, 2019).

A Novel Data Set on the Saliency of EU-Related Issues in Regional Election Manifestos

To measure sub-national parties' emphasis of both EU and CP issues in their regional election manifestos, these party-related documents have been obtained from the *Political Documents Archive* (Benoit *et al.*, 2009; Gross and Debus, 2018). The documents have been manually coded by, first, extracting every paragraph in which EU-related issues are mentioned, and, secondly, assigning these paragraphs to seven EU-related categories: (i) general issues on Europe; (ii) general mentioning of EU funding; and five different EU funding categories, that is (iii) European Regional and Development Fund (ERDF); (iv)

²Details on the parties and regions included in the empirical analysis are provided in Tables SM1 and SM2 in the Online Supplemental Material (OSM). The data covers 525 manifestos drafted for 88 regional elections in the funding period 2007–13 and 287 manifestos drafted for 41 regional elections in the funding period 2014–20. The data set additionally comprises information on the EU-related saliency in regional governments' coalition agreements, which is not used for the following empirical analyses.

European Social Fund (ESF); (v) Cohesion Fund; (vi) a combined category for agricultural funds comprising the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF), and the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF); and (vii) a combined category for fisheries funds including the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG), the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).

Even though the two latter categories comprise EU funds that are only partly covered by CP, they, first, should matter for sub-national parties because not only do the agricultural funds (also being part of the Common Agricultural Policy) and the regional and structural funds ‘account for over three-quarters of EU spending’ (George and Bache, 2001, p. 303), both EAFRD and EMFF are also part of ESIF. Therefore, by considering EAFRD and EMFF this data set goes beyond the usual focus on ERDF and ESF in the CP literature. Secondly, contrary to receiving regional financial aid from CP, the entry into EAGGF ‘is not dependent on meeting the criteria of “need”, and one does not “exit” once a certain level of well-being is achieved’ (Leonardi, 2005, p. 26). Hence, agricultural funds should matter for sub-national parties since all countries under study receive financial aid for their agricultural sectors. Furthermore, from the 2007–13 programming period on political actors were granted to create ‘multi-fund programmes’, which most of the time resulted in a combined use of ERDF and ESF. Therefore, the general category on EU funding also captures sub-national parties’ emphasis of these multi-fund programmes.³

Operationalization of the Dependent, Independent, and Control Variables

After assigning EU-related paragraphs to the specific categories, the total number of words for each category in each document was calculated and then divided by the total number of words of a document. Based on this data, sub-national parties’ emphasis of CP issues is measured as the share of a sub-national parties’ document devoted to the EU funding-related categories ii–vii (*CP issue emphasis*).

To test the effect of government status at the regional and the national level, two dummy variables (*regional government party*; *national government party*) indicate if a party campaigned as a government party (value 1) or if the party drafted its election manifesto as a non-government party at the regional or national level (value 0), respectively. The effect of being in government both at the regional and at the national level will be tested using an interaction term between *regional government party* and *national government party*. Information on parties’ government status is retrieved from Gross and Debus (2018).

Hypotheses 3a and 3b suggest that Eurosceptic parties should emphasize CP issues more (less) than other parties. If Eurosceptic parties express their anti-EU and anti-CP views at all political layers of a multi-level system, I argue that the concept of a ‘Eurosceptic party’ is a dichotomous one, meaning that a sub-national party branch of a Eurosceptic party at the national level should not express pro-EU views in sub-national election campaigns. Even though a sub-national party branch might not be comfortable with the anti-EU views of the national party organization, it probably will rather blur

³Coding instructions can be found in the OSM.

its position and try not to talk about such issues at all instead of promoting pro-EU issues. The binary variable is '1' for a *Eurosceptic party* and '0' for all other parties.⁴

Hypothesis 4 suggests that regionalist parties should emphasize CP issues more than other party families. Regionalist parties are defined as 'parties whose core mission includes the enhancement/defence of territorially based (regional) self-government vis-à-vis the state, no matter whether the extent of self-government claimed is minimal (administrative) or maximum (up to secession from the state)' (Massetti and Schakel, 2017, p. 437). The categorization of regionalist parties from 2007 onwards is based on the information provided by Massetti and Schakel (2017) and supplemented by own research to generate a dummy variable if a party is a *regionalist party*.⁵ Issue competition between sub-national political actors is constrained by institutional, societal, economic, and geographical factors, and this is particularly the case regarding the impact of ESIF transfer money (Fratesi and Wishlade, 2017; Giordano, 2017). Due to a regions' specific and differing needs, some regions will benefit more from ESIF transfer money than other regions. Since recent research suggests that voters reward incumbent parties for directing ESIF money to the voters' home region (Dellmuth and Stoffel, 2012; Henceroth and Oganessian, 2019), and that sub-national parties adopt more pro-European positions the more ESIF transfer money is allocated to a region (Gross and Debus, 2018), I control for the overall sum of ESIF money allocated to regions per capita in the programming periods 2007–13 and 2014–20 (*Regional ESIF money per capita*) by using the data provided by Gross and Debus (2018).⁶ I assume that if parties succeed in attracting ESIF money to their region, they should emphasize this in their election manifestos to get voters' credit for this.⁷ Therefore, I expect to see a positive effect of *Regional ESIF money per capita* on *CP issue emphasis*. I take the natural logarithm of *Regional ESIF money per capita* to get a more normalised distributed variable (see also Gross and Debus, 2018; Massetti and Schakel, 2016).⁸

III. Empirical Analysis

In this section, I will test my theoretical expectations based on the new data set I compiled. I first present some descriptive information about sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues in regional election manifestos. After this, I present the results of a multivariate regression analysis evaluating the impact of party- and regional-level

⁴A detailed description of the coding procedure and a list of Eurosceptic parties is provided in Table SM2 in the OSM.

⁵A list of regionalist parties is provided in Table SM2 in the OSM.

⁶Following Gross and Debus (2018, p. 602) I focus on the allocated money instead of actual spending of EU funding. If a region held an election in 2009, then the regional allocations are the ones for the entire funding period of 2007–13, whereas an election in 2016 receives the allocation numbers for the entire funding period of 2014–20 because the money is already allocated at the beginning of the funding period.

⁷Note, however, that theoretically the reverse could also be true: if the amount of ESIF money allocated to a region is perceived by sub-national parties as being too low, these parties might have an incentive to mention these facts in their election manifestos to blame either national or European institutions for not allocating 'enough' money to the region.

⁸Note that I refrain from including the lagged value of a sub-national parties' emphasis of EU-related issues in the previous manifesto ($t - 1$) to control for the possibility that 'some parties might have stronger tendencies to emphasize EU issues in their manifestos' (Spoon, 2012, p. 566). Unfortunately, this data is only available for all parties and regions from 2007 to 2016 and, therefore, the lagged dependent variable would only be included from the second election on within a region under study, thus dramatically reducing the number of cases in the models using the lagged dependent variable. More importantly, I argue that with regard to changing the salience of issues, parties do not face the same constraints and voter punishments as with radically changing their policy positions (Adams *et al.*, 2004), thus facilitating the choice to not include a sub-national parties' previous emphasis of CP issues.

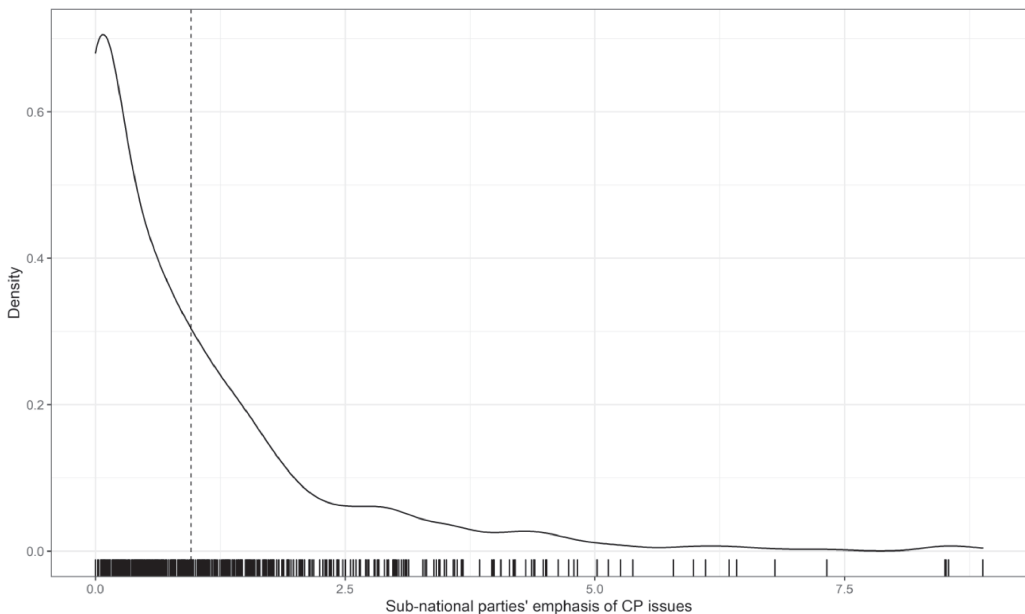
characteristics on sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues in their regional election manifestos.

Descriptive Results of Cohesion Policy Issue Salience in Regional Election Manifestos

How much emphasis do sub-national parties put on CP issues in their regional election manifestos? Figure 1 gives an overview on the distribution of the dependent variable *CP issue emphasis*. The distribution is heavily skewed to the right, demonstrating that many sub-national parties do not emphasize CP issues in their manifestos to a large extent. The mean value for *CP issue emphasis* is at 0.96, meaning that only 0.96 per cent of the entire regional manifesto is dedicated to CP issues. This amount of CP issue emphasis in regional election manifestos is disillusioning. On average, sub-national parties seem to neglect CP issues in their regional election manifestos. However, there is large variation between countries, regions, and individual parties regarding sub-national parties' CP issue emphasis (see Figures SM9–SM13 in the OSM), which requires a more detailed, multivariate explanation.

Taking one step back and focusing on sub-national party manifestos' share of *all* EU-related issues (that is, summing the shares for categories i–vii), sub-national parties' EU-related issue emphasis has a mean value of 3.98 per cent (see Figure SM8 in the OSM) and is actually *higher* than the average amount of manifesto space dedicated to EU issues in national elections (3.2 per cent; see Braun and Schmitt, 2020, p. 644).

Figure 1: Distribution of Dependent Variable *CP Issue Emphasis*



Notes: The figure plots sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues in their regional election manifestos (in per cent). Mean value (indicated by the vertical dotted line) of sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues is 0.96. CP = Cohesion Policy.

Sub-national parties put *more* emphasis on European matters in regional elections than their national counterparts in national elections, but this is not related to their emphasis of the EU's regional policy funding schemes.⁹

Multivariate Results Explaining Sub-national Parties' Emphasis of Cohesion Policy Issues

In the next step, I evaluate my theoretical expectations based on a multivariate regression analysis. The data is hierarchically structured, as sub-national parties (level 1) are nested within regions (level 2) and countries (level 3). Given that these regions and countries vary extensively regarding the structure of party competition at the regional and national level, as well as citizens' support for EU integration and CP, I apply a multilevel mixed effects Tobit regression with random intercepts at the regional level to allow for varying mean emphasis of CP issue-levels across spaces. Using a Tobit regression is appropriate because the observations in the data can solely take on positive values or zero for the dependent variable *CP issue emphasis*. The right-skewed distribution of the dependent variable shown in Figure 1 requires a log-transformation of the dependent variable to meet the assumption of homoscedastic residuals underlying Tobit models. Furthermore, I include country dummies (with The Netherlands as reference category since one could argue that regions in Germany, Spain, and the UK have substantially more legislative competences and that regional political actors are more involved in EU regional policy than in The Netherlands; see Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2017) to account for unobserved variation at the country level and I cluster the standard errors at the regional level. The unit of analysis is a sub-national party that obtains a CP issue emphasis score in its manifestos for a particular regional election. The estimated results are presented in Table 1. The first four models only include the respective independent variables to test Hypotheses 1–4 together with the control variables. The four hypotheses are jointly tested in Model 5.

In line with Hypothesis 1, the regression analysis shows that *Regional government party* has a statistically significant positive effect on sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues. Sub-national parties put more emphasis on CP issues in their regional election manifestos when they are campaigning as a regional government party. Because *CP issue emphasis* is log transformed, the fixed-effect coefficient of *Regional government party* displayed in Table 1 can be interpreted in terms of a percent change. Consequently, on average, parties campaigning as regional government parties substantially dedicate between 30.5 to 37.5 per cent of their manifestos more to CP issues than opposition parties. However, this is not the case when sub-national parties are represented both in the regional and in the national government. It is a party's status as regional government party that is decisive for its level of CP issue emphasis, whereas additionally being in national government does not add anything further to explaining sub-national parties' CP issue emphasis. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 must be rejected.

Regarding the effect of being a Eurosceptic party on sub-national parties' CP issue emphasis, the empirical results lend tentative support to Hypothesis 3b: Eurosceptic parties put *less* emphasis on CP issues in their regional election manifestos than

⁹The mean value of sub-national parties' emphasis of EU issues in general (category i) is 3.02 (see Figure SM7 in the OSM).

Table 1: Determinants of Sub-national Parties' Emphasis of CP Issues (Results of the Multilevel Mixed-Effects Tobit Regression)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>Hypothesis 1:</i>					
Regional government party	0.342*** (0.099)	0.375** (0.120)			0.305** (0.111)
<i>Hypothesis 2:</i>					
National government party		0.028 (0.136)			-0.077 (0.130)
Regional government party X national government party		-0.082 (0.216)			-0.016 (0.213)
<i>Hypothesis 3a + 3b:</i>					
Eurosceptic party			-0.287* (0.137)		-0.210 (0.121)
<i>Hypothesis 4:</i>					
Regionalist party				-0.283 (0.172)	-0.301 (0.173)
<i>Control variables:</i>					
Regional ESIF money per capita (log)	0.416*** (0.057)	0.417*** (0.058)	0.419*** (0.058)	0.404*** (0.058)	0.414*** (0.056)
Germany	-0.327* (0.128)	-0.326* (0.129)	-0.379** (0.131)	-0.353** (0.135)	-0.350** (0.130)
Spain	-1.142*** (0.141)	-1.144*** (0.142)	-1.229*** (0.143)	-1.153*** (0.137)	-1.148*** (0.138)
UK	0.055 (0.090)	0.047 (0.092)	0.003 (0.087)	0.090 (0.092)	0.135 (0.099)
Constant	-2.461*** (0.318)	-2.471*** (0.323)	-2.260*** (0.347)	-2.260*** (0.336)	-2.332*** (0.326)
N	812	812	812	812	812
AIC	1215.525	1219.335	1222.023	1228.642	1216.043
BIC	1253.121	1266.330	1259.619	1266.238	1272.437
Log likelihood	-599.762	-599.668	-603.012	-606.321	-596.021

Notes: Dependent variable: CP issue emphasis (log). Standard errors are clustered at the regional level and given in parentheses. The Netherlands is used as reference category. CP = Cohesion Policy. * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$.

non-Eurosceptic parties. The coefficient is negative and statistically significant in Model 3; however, the estimated effect is not statistically significant anymore in Model 5, and the statistical significance of this negative effect varies between the different models within the different robustness checks (see below). Therefore, the negative effect of being a Eurosceptic party on sub-national parties' CP issue emphasis should be interpreted very cautiously. Being a regionalist party, however, does not explain sub-national parties' CP issues emphasis. The coefficients in Models 4 and 5 do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance and the effect even displays a negative sign. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 must be rejected.

The main substantial result that sub-national regional government parties put more emphasis on CP issues than opposition parties is robust to a series of additional checks (see Tables SM4–SM7 in the OSM). The robustness checks test for the influence of outliers in sub-national parties' issue emphasis, for a different operationalization of sub-national parties' negative and positive stances regarding a further European integration,¹⁰ and for a region's dependency on EU funding instead of a region's ESIF money per capita (both variables are highly correlated; see Table SM3 in the OSM).

Conclusion

Do sub-national parties care about Cohesion Policy issues when drafting their manifestos for regional elections? Using a new and unique data set on sub-national parties' emphasis of CP issues in 812 regional election manifestos drafted by 95 parties in 47 regions in Germany, Spain, The Netherlands, and the UK, I first demonstrate that sub-national parties emphasize EU-related issues to a larger extent than their national counterparts, but their specific emphasis of CP issues is disillusioning: on average, sub-national parties only spent 0.96 per cent of their manifestos on CP issues. Yet, there is large variation between countries, regions, and parties. The results of a series of multivariate analysis shows that sub-national parties in regional governments emphasize CP issues to a greater extent than opposition parties. Government parties put between 30.5 to 37.5 per cent more emphasis on CP issues in their regional election manifestos than opposition parties. This supports the idea that government parties are the decisive players in the bargaining process on regional transfers and that they expect electoral rewards from demonstrating to voters that they attracted EU money to the respective region.

It is an open question, however, to what extent this rather small amount of party communication about CP issues in election manifestos translates into electoral campaigns and ultimately affects citizens' awareness of CP and public opinion. Although recent findings, based on Flash Eurobarometer data, suggest that EU citizens are increasingly aware of Cohesion Policy, particularly if they live in a region receiving a considerable amount of ESIF funding (Dellmuth and Chalmers, 2018, p. 7), sub-national parties' emphasis of these issues in regional elections is considered as an important factor for citizens' awareness and perception of CP issues (Capello and Perucca, 2019a, 2019b). If this link is *actually* working, by being promoted via an increase in regional media's coverage of CP issues (Mendez *et al.*, 2020) due to candidate speeches, other forms of campaign

¹⁰I used sub-national parties' positions on European integration (*EU position*) provided in Gross and Debus (2018). Higher values indicate a more pro-European integration position of sub-national parties.

communication additional to the distribution of manifestos, or by more information on television and via the internet (Flash Eurobarometer, 2019), needs to be investigated further.

Contrary to the theoretical expectations, additionally being in national government, being a Eurosceptic party, or being a regionalist parties does not explain sub-national parties' CP issue emphasis, with one exception: there is tentative support for the hypothesis that Eurosceptic parties put less emphasis on CP issues than other parties. Based on the present data, it does not seem to be the case that Eurosceptic parties use their core issue – being Eurosceptic – as a vote-seeking strategy for upper-level elections in their sub-national election manifestos, as could have been expected from previous studies comparing the extent of national and sub-national issues in regional election manifestos (see Cabeza *et al.*, 2017; Clark and Bennie, 2018). Further research is needed if this result holds when the data set would be expanded beyond 2016 (thus covering the ideological shift and new establishment of parties like the Alternative for Germany or the Spanish VOX). Expanding the data set to other European countries would also increase the number of radical right and radical left Eurosceptic parties which could give researchers the opportunity to study potential differences in CP issue emphasis between these two sets of parties (for example, including ethnonationalist appeals related to CP as shown in Hlatky, 2021). Yet, the manual coding of sub-national party manifestos is very time-consuming and expensive (Gross and Jankowski, 2020, pp. 76–8).

At least three caveats of this study remain. First, Eurosceptic parties are the 'political entrepreneurs' which drive 'a wedge between coalitions and dominant parties' regarding EU positions and issues in national politics (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020, p. 6). Once a national party organisation already got the reputation for being Eurosceptic, maybe there is no need for sub-national party branches to highlight this fact any further in their manifestos. Second, the data has only been hand-coded with respect to the *quantitative* CP issue emphasis of sub-national parties, not regarding the *qualitative* aspects. It remains an open question to what extent sub-national parties emphasize CP issues in a negative, neutral, or positive way. As is the case for media articles covering CP (Mendez *et al.*, 2020), sub-national actors might talk about CP issues with different framings. Since manually recoding 812 election manifestos does not seem feasible, applying sentiment analysis techniques could be a promising step for future research in analysing the party documents in more detail regarding the differences between Eurosceptic and regionalist parties, respectively, and other party families. Third, the focus of the study lies on the 'electoral arena' – that is, the time before the elections – and not on the 'governmental arena' – that is, the time following the elections (Baumann *et al.*, 2020). Demonstrating that incumbent parties at the regional level campaign by putting more emphasis on CP issues in their election manifestos than opposition parties, and combining these insights with the empirical fact that incumbent regional governments are more likely to also form the next government (Bäck *et al.*, 2013), it would be worthwhile to analyse if regional government parties' emphasis of CP issues is mirrored – or even intensified – in their coalition agreements.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Data S1. Supporting Information.