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How Does Eurosceptic Party Consolidation Transform Party Competition Over European Issues?

Daniela Braun · Giuseppe Carteny 

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Abstract The European Union (EU)—the world’s most advanced and exemplary case of regional integration—is adapting to an era when internal criticisms are becoming more influential than ever before in the history of European integration. An entirely new party family of Eurosceptic parties has emerged and consolidated over the last decade. Given that one of their main aims is to challenge and critique the EU, Eurosceptic parties have a particular interest in European issues—the European polity as well as major European policies. Against this backdrop, the paper investigates whether and how the rise and consolidation of Eurosceptic parties of the left and right has affected party competition over European polity and policy issues. Empirically, we use information from the Euromanifesto data set covering the past 40 years (1979–2019) relating to elections to the European Parliament. Our paper’s findings suggest that the upsurge and consolidation of Eurosceptic parties of the left and right has an important effect on party competition over European issues: Eurosceptic party success affects mainstream leftist parties’ issue salience and position when it comes to the EU polity. Moreover, higher levels of support for far-right Eurosceptic parties have an impact on the position of rightist mainstream parties on EU *cultural* policy issues, whereas leftist mainstream parties appear mostly unresponsive to the Eurosceptic parties’ success when it comes to EU *economic* policy issues. These findings give us a clearer insight on how exactly Eurosceptic parties are transforming mainstream party competition.

Keywords Euroscepticism · Political parties · Manifesto research · European integration · European Parliament elections

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1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) is the world's most advanced and exemplary case of regional integration. The European project, initially founded by six nations, has grown into an ever wider and deeper union of 27 member states with increasingly interconnected policies. These changes have not gone unnoticed by the EU's citizens. At the latest after the end of the purportedly "permissive consensus" (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970; Gabel 1998) and in the context of a "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe and Marks 2009), the EU is now adapting to an era when internal criticisms are becoming more influential than ever in the history of European integration. As we can see in Fig. 1, this has also translated into the citizenry's electoral behaviour: The success of Eurosceptic parties in Europe has increased tremendously from 1989 to 2019—almost every national party system nowadays includes a relatively successful Eurosceptic party, and in many countries the strength of these parties has also markedly increased over the last decade.

An entirely new family of Eurosceptic parties has thus emerged and consolidated over the last decade, and this trend will certainly not stop in the near future. This party family, composed of political parties of the left and right as well as moderate and clear-cut friends and foes of European integration, shapes issue priorities both in European member states and in EU institutions. In the case of member states, Eurosceptic parties of the right are currently gaining more and more support from voters on the local, regional, and national levels.¹ The same trend is evident at the EU level of governance (Brack 2015; Ahrens et al. 2022). In the ninth European Parliament (EP), the EU's legislative arena, two "radical right populist groups that oppose European integration" (Kantola et al. 2022, p. 2)—the European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR) and the Identity and Democracy group (ID)—together with one "soft Eurosceptic" (Kantola et al. 2022, p. 2) left-wing party group (GUE-NGL) are involved in EU-level decision-making.²

To put it bluntly, Euroscepticism has evolved over time from a quasi-pathology to a persistent and mainstream phenomenon shaping Europe (Vasilopoulou 2013; Usherwood and Startin 2013; Brack and Startin 2015; Leconte 2015; Treib 2021; Ahrens

¹ In Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*), Sweden (*Sverigedemokraterna*), and Finland (*Perussuomalaiset*), far-right Eurosceptic parties are now in government, while in Poland (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) and Hungary (*Fidesz*), national conservative parties have traditionally been strong and known for their anti-EU stance. Additionally, the EU's traditional "Franco-German engine" has been affected by Euroscepticism: In France the far-right *Rassemblement National* is the largest parliamentary opposition group, and in Germany the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) is currently polling high and is at the same time the largest opposition party in several regional parliaments, particularly in the east (see also Braun and Reinl 2023).

² The European Conservatives and Reformists group is the predecessor of the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (2009–2016) as well as the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (2016–2019) and consists of 66 MEPs from 17 EU member states. The Identity and Democracy group, founded in 2019, is—at the time of writing—composed of the following national parties (62 MEPs): Dansk Folkeparti (DF, Denmark), *Lega Nord* (LN, Italy), *Rassemblement National* (RN, France), *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD, Germany), *Vlaams Belang* (Belgium), *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ, Austria), *Svoboda a přímá demokracie* (SPD, Czech Republik), *Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond*, (EKRE, Estonia), *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV, Netherlands). The Left in the European Parliament (GUE-NGL), established in 1995, consists of 37 MEPs.

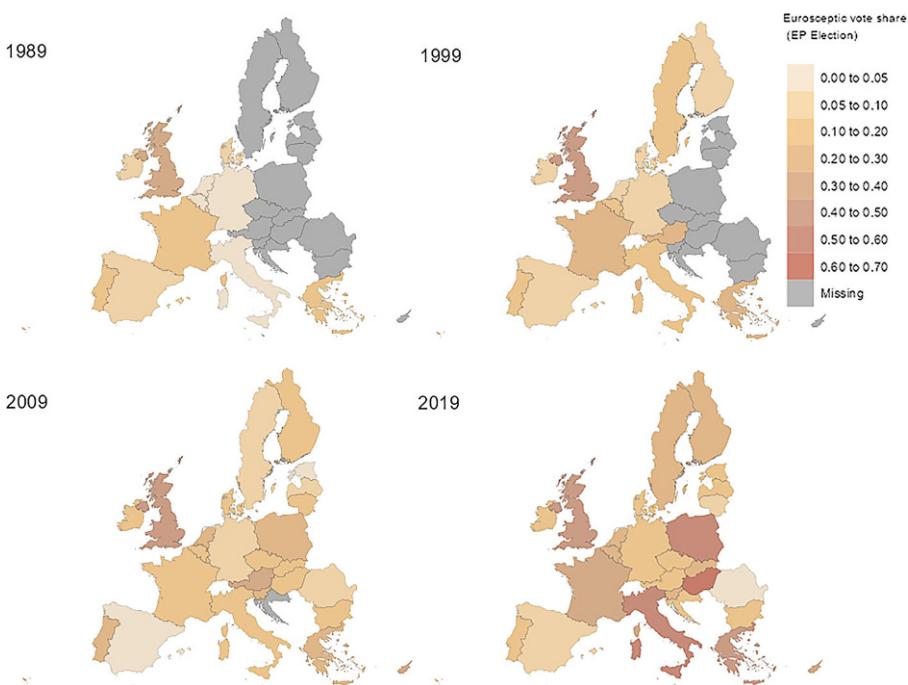


Fig. 1 Vote share for Eurosceptic parties in elections to the EP over time (1989, 1999, 2009, 2019). Figures are based on PopuList data (Rooduijn et al. 2019) linked to ParlGov data (Döring and Manow 2021)

et al. 2022; Blauberger et al. 2022; Börzel and Hartlapp 2022) in much the same way as we can see, in the political arena, the normalisation of ideas and tropes from the radical right that were previously judged beyond the pale (Valentim 2021). Accordingly, the upsurge and consolidation of Eurosceptic parties on both sides of the political spectrum is consequential for party competition over European issues—in other words, in how political parties compete over these political issues in their election campaigns. Although non-Eurosceptic parties are presumed to be reacting to this changing electoral landscape and adapting their programmes and orientations accordingly, research on party competition does not paint a clear-cut picture of this question: Some empirical studies show contagious effects of Eurosceptic parties on mainstream parties (Meijers and Rauh 2016; Meijers 2017), whereas others find that mainstream parties did not respond a great deal to this growing Euroscepticism (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2016). Moreover, strategical considerations of political parties to respond to, but also to silence or downplay, the Eurosceptic challenge seem to play an important role here (Williams and Ishiyama 2018; Adam and Maier 2016; Adam et al. 2016; Maier et al. 2021; Braun et al. 2020; Braun and Grande 2021). Hence, we already know that Eurosceptic parties in a way affect mainstream party competition—but at the same time, we can observe such a pattern only in some specific (country) cases or under certain conditions. Accordingly, the consequences of this transformation for party competition are not well understood.

This is, in our opinion, due to four main reasons: *First*, the research literature is not dealing in the appropriate detail with the definition of EU issues. *Second*, although most researchers agree that Euroscepticism is a phenomenon that interacts with ideological orientations, the distinction between leftist and rightist Eurosceptic parties is not always mirrored in empirical analyses. *Third*, we lack empirical analyses differentiating the behaviour of leftist and rightist non-Eurosceptic parties when the Eurosceptic challenge stems from within their own ideological bloc. *Fourth*, we have a lot of country-specific case studies or empirical analyses for one single point in time, but not a comprehensive empirical study on party competition over time and space.

Accordingly, this paper's first aim is to provide a comprehensive longitudinal study about the impact of Euroscepticism on party competition for the entire set of EU member states. In doing this, we examine the following questions: *Do European political issues become indeed more salient together with Eurosceptic party consolidation? Do European parties become more critical towards European integration in the face of Eurosceptic party consolidation? Does left-wing and right-wing Euroscepticism have a different impact? And, finally, do the ideological proximity of Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties affect the behaviour of the latter?* To study these research questions, we use information from the Euromanifesto (EM) data set covering the past 40 years (1979–2019) relating to EP elections. Our paper's findings show that the upsurge and consolidation of Eurosceptic parties of the left and right have a major impact on party competition over European issues. First, the consolidation of Eurosceptic parties, in particular on the far right, increases the salience that mainstream leftist parties attach to the EU as a polity. Moreover, the latter tend to become less Europhile as the challenge from Eurosceptic parties becomes more prominent. Second, we find that leftist mainstream parties tend to be inconsistently responsive to the Eurosceptic surge when addressing economic issues. Third, we find that rightist non-Eurosceptic parties are highly responsive to the far-right Eurosceptic challenge, becoming more Eurosceptic on cultural issues. These findings finally help to better understand how exactly Eurosceptic parties transform mainstream party competition. Accordingly, this paper adds to the growing literature on the transformation of Europe's electoral and party-political landscape and might also be insightful for policy makers in adapting their party strategies accordingly.

2 State of the Art and Theoretical Assumptions

This section aims to provide an overview of the research literature examining how Eurosceptic parties have affected European party politics so far. First, we start by discussing how party competition over European issues is in theory presumed to be influenced by this rise and consolidation of Eurosceptic parties. Second, we discuss party-based Euroscepticism and the political issues Eurosceptics are competing with to formulate empirically testable theoretical assumptions to study our research question using a more differentiated perspective on both EU issues and party ideology.

2.1 Theory: The Link Between Eurosceptic Party Success and Party Competition

The aim of this paper is to explore how Eurosceptic parties of the left and right affect party competition over different types of EU issues. This can be studied through the ways in which political parties operate within the legislative process—in this case, inside the EP—as well as outside this institutional setting, in the electoral context within which political parties try to mobilise their existing or prospective voters. Within the EP, Eurosceptic members of the EP (MEPs) have developed a broad range of behavioural strategies for the legislative arena (Brack and Startin 2015). Complementary to this, non-Eurosceptic party members seem to moderately react to these strategies: Bergmann et al. (2021) illustrate that the success of populist radical right parties affects the migration–development policy nexus. Wunsch and Bélanger (2023) detect discursive accommodation of Eurosceptic concerns in the case of pro-European party groups as well as radicalisation in the case of soft Eurosceptics. In addition to this, it has been shown that Eurosceptic party contestation within the legislative arena (Börzel et al. 2023), as well as cooperation of radical right parties on joint polity-based contestation of European integration (Chiru and Wunsch 2023), is lower than expected. Moreover, in trilogue settings, soft Eurosceptics have higher chances to participate and shape the EP’s position than hard Eurosceptic groups (Ripoll Servent and Panning 2019). However, it is certainly true that such dynamics can be entirely understood only by considering informal institutions as well (Kantola and Miller 2021).

Unsurprisingly, scholars of party competition have over the past years also contributed to the question of mainstream parties’ strategies for addressing these issues. This scholarship tends to draw on two key theories that have been formulated to investigate what kind of issue parties emphasise and what positions they take. The first one, salience theory (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik et al. 2003; Petrocik 1996), asserts that parties compete for voters’ support by emphasising those issues that promote their strong points while avoiding issues that are opportune to their opponents. Accordingly, political parties do not put emphasis on all political issues equally; on the contrary, as strategic actors they highlight issues only when their representatives decide they might gain more votes if they stress this line of argument. However, for the particular case of European issues, some parties have more strategic reasons than others: Eurosceptic challenger parties have been characterised as “issue entrepreneurs” that have ultimately emphasised the issue of EU integration—a topic that some view as having been long neglected by mainstream parties (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015; Green-Pedersen 2012; Hobolt and de Vries 2015; Lefkofridi 2020). Eurosceptic parties were thus presumed to benefit the most in terms of votes by emphasising all kinds of EU-related issues. However, once mainstream parties began increasingly to realise that they could also benefit from emphasising EU-related issues (galvanised in part by the success of some Eurosceptic parties across the bloc), they also started to put more emphasis on these. Hence, mainstream parties first followed de-emphasising strategies (Rovny 2012) and are now following the strategy of moving towards the challenger party (policy

convergence), an accommodative strategy to draw voters away from the Eurosceptic challenger parties (Meguid 2005).

For the second theory, in the context of parties' positions, the model is different: It stresses the idea of the smallest distance, whereby parties position themselves on relevant issues where they can expect to maximise their support (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984). Nevertheless, we can apply a similar logic as in the case of issue emphasis: Eurosceptic challenger parties have transformed the terms of the debate around EU integration for mainstream—traditionally pro-EU—parties, such that it is now a much-contested political issue. Now that Eurosceptic parties have started to criticise the EU polity as well as different types of EU policies, mainstream parties also need to adapt to this new arena and adjust their positions accordingly.

When it comes to the state of the art, taking together the findings of a range of empirical studies examining Eurosceptic parties' impact on mainstream party competition, we can conclude that the empirical evidence is still mixed, but there seems to be evidence for a causal link—particularly in more recent elections. In an early study, Adam and Maier (2011) show that, for a country selection of six member states in their research into the 2009 EP elections, EU issues and actors are more prominent on the campaign agenda in countries with Eurosceptic parties. This relates to the tendency for pro-EU mainstream parties to react to and push back against the oppositional stance of Eurosceptic parties (Adam and Maier 2011). However, this tendency, shown for a subset of countries and the earliest phase of Eurosceptic party success, is not a uniform finding, as we will see when considering later studies. Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2016) find that, for 24 European democracies and two points in time (2007/2008 and 2013), mainstream parties did not seem to respond a great deal to this growing Euroscepticism. Meijers (2017) as well as Meijers and Rauh (2016) provide some empirical evidence for France and the Netherlands for the 2014 and 2019 EP elections for this argument but acknowledge that the contagious effect of Eurosceptic parties on mainstream ones was lower in 2014 than in 2009. Williams and Ishiyama (2018) show that over a long time period (1958–2015), but only for far-left parties, mainstream parties became more Eurosceptic when challenged on the basis of the particular issues they were emphasising. Adam et al. (2016) argue that, for a country selection of seven member states and the 2014 EP elections, Eurosceptic as well as pro-EU mainstream parties put Europe on the agenda, although this is less true for pro-European catch-all parties that tend to downplay or even silence Europe as a political issue. For the 2019 EP election, Maier et al. (2021) are able to show—based on expert evaluations in all EU member states—that these silencing strategies are no longer effective. Similarly, an EU-wide study of the 2014 EP elections illustrates that mainstream parties respond to the rising importance of Eurosceptic parties (Braun et al. 2020). In Germany, for example, according to Turnbull-Dugarte (2021), mainstream parties have adopted an adversarial rather than accommodating response, becoming more pro-European and increasingly vocal in their support for the EU. However, so far only the presence of Eurosceptic parties in combination with reactive mainstream parties leads to higher levels of European issue salience at the level of party systems (Braun and Grande 2021)—and this in turn again favours Eurosceptic parties (Beaudonnet and Gomez 2024).

Although the specific research literature on the impact of Eurosceptic parties on overall party competition is still somewhat mixed, more general accounts suggest that parties tend to respond to other parties' positional shifts and past performances (Adams 2012). In addition, research based on European party competition has shown that mainstream parties adjust both their *issue salience* and *strategic positioning* in relation to "challenger" parties (Abou-Chadi 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018). The mechanism at play here is that mainstream parties respond to changes in voting behaviour and thus to voter transitions (Abou-Chadi and Stoetzer 2020).³ They use an accommodative strategy as a reaction to losses in elections because they deduce that they need to draw voters away from the relevant political issues of the challenging parties (Meguid 2005). Such a strategy is applied especially when shifts are initiated by parties of the same ideological stripe (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009).

2.2 A More Differentiated Picture on Party-based Euroscepticism and EU Issues

As stated above, we aim to take a more differentiated perspective on the link between Eurosceptic party challenge and mainstream party response because some of the so-far inconclusive findings are related to two major shortcomings: the lack of both a systematic distinction between distinct types of EU issue and ideological backgrounds of Eurosceptic parties. Party-based Euroscepticism has been studied for more than two decades. One of its starting points is the important work by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002), who introduced the terms "hard" and "soft" Euroscepticism, referring to a differentiation between principled opposition to the EU and qualified opposition (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2002, 2013; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008). More recently, scholars have added an additional (and perhaps complementary) conceptual differentiation: a left-wing and a right-wing Euroscepticism that are born from different motivations (Beaudonnet and Gomez 2017; Hobolt 2015; van Elsas et al. 2016; van Elsas and van der Brug 2015; Vasilopoulou 2018; Braun et al. 2020, 2019). Still—and this is particularly important for party competition—all Eurosceptic parties are generally opposed to the EU as a *polity*, since one of the major aims of Eurosceptic parties is to challenge and criticise the project of European integration. The latter insight occasionally is truer for far-right parties (van Elsas and van der Brug 2015), but far-left Eurosceptic parties can also mobilise voters in their favour through opposition against European integration (Wagner 2022).

Accordingly, for the study of Eurosceptic parties, the distinction between the different types and connotations of EU issues is highly relevant. As we know from previous research, focusing on only one single connotation of Europe (which is without explicitly mentioning the EU polity) leads to an extremely biased picture of EU party competition (Braun et al. 2016). Therefore, we conceptualise EU issues as

³ Although the idea of voter transitions (i.e., the fact that parties take into account their overall gains and losses while adjusting their preferences) is definitely insightful and should be studied in more detail in future studies, it is less straightforward for the particular case of EP elections. The second-order nature of these elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Schmitt et al. 2020) and the related question of whether mainstream parties would then react to gains and losses in previous national or EP elections might be disturbing here.

reflecting their multifaceted nature (Bartolini 2005; Thomassen and Schmitt 1999, 1997; Schmitt 2008). This means that EU polity issues—that is, the institutional and procedural foundations of the EU—are as relevant as EU policy issues (such as the economy, immigration, or social policies) for party competition. This is even more true for research on Euroscepticism because right-wing Euroscepticism is mainly motivated by purportedly *cultural* phenomena such as an opposition to immigration, whereas left-wing Euroscepticism is more likely to be a function of *economic* concerns (Beaudonnet and Gomez 2017; Hobolt 2015; van Elsas et al. 2016; van Elsas and van der Brug 2015; Vasilopoulou 2018; Braun et al. 2020, 2019; Börzel et al. 2023; Wagner 2022). Because both EU issues and Eurosceptic motivations are multidimensional phenomena, we act on the assumption that, beyond their general critique of the EU as a polity, Eurosceptic parties differ in their opposition to EU policies. Accordingly, Eurosceptic parties seem to be most interested in those political issues that can be mapped onto the cultural dimension of politics, such as climate change disputes, gender-related issues, or immigration. This finding on Eurosceptic party behaviour in the EP is also plausible from the perspective of party competition in elections because such cultural issues are supposed to be highly effective in mobilising potential voters for Eurosceptic parties.

Before formulating our hypotheses, we briefly recapitulate the previous sections. First, research on political issues bears witness to the need for differentiating EU-related issues, at the very least between issues regarding the EU polity as a whole and topics concerning particular EU policies. Moreover, many scholars of Euroscepticism argue that right-wing Euroscepticism is more likely to highlight and criticise those political issues that are part of the cultural dimension of political competition (mainly migration, but also gender-related policies and the topic of climate change), whereas left-wing Euroscepticism tends to focus more on economic issues. Based on these insights, we formulate a set of hypotheses dedicated to issue emphasis (H1a and H1b) as well as to parties' positions (H2a and H2b). Finally, additional hypotheses (H3a and H3b) further introduce ideological closeness between challenger and mainstream as a relevant moderating factor.

H1a The higher the support for far-right Eurosceptic parties in the previous election (t_{-1}), the stronger the emphasis on EU polity issues as well as cultural EU policy issues (immigration)⁴ of mainstream parties (t_0).

H1b The higher the support for far-left Eurosceptic parties in the previous election (t_{-1}), the stronger the emphasis on EU polity issues and economic EU policy issues of mainstream parties (t_0).

H2a The higher the support for far-right Eurosceptic parties in the previous election (t_{-1}), the more negative the position towards EU polity issues as well as cultural EU policy issues (immigration) of mainstream parties (t_0).

⁴ Although in some countries, and particularly in later elections, we would also expect gender as well as environmental issues to play a role here, we focus on migration only, mainly for reasons of data availability. The Euromanifesto data set only provides coding categories relating to the former issues for later elections.

H2b The higher the support for far-left Eurosceptic parties in the previous election (t_1), the more negative the position towards EU polity issues and economic EU policy issues of mainstream parties (t_0).

H3a The effects on EU polity and cultural issues' salience and position are stronger for mainstream rightist parties when considering the electoral support for far-right Eurosceptic parties.

H3b The effects on EU polity and economic issues' salience and position are stronger for mainstream leftist parties when considering the electoral support for far-left Eurosceptic parties.

3 Research Design

3.1 Data

Our research questions and expectations refer to party behaviour. Hence, we address the former and test the latter by developing a longitudinal and comparative party-level study. The data basis of our empirical work is the 1979–2019 Euromanifesto data set (Carteny et al. 2023), which consists in its coded version of 1198 electoral programmes issued by parties ahead of the EP elections between 1979 and 2019 in all EU member states. In our analyses we are interested in how Eurosceptic parties' success at a preceding national election (t_1) affects salience and position changes of non-Eurosceptic parties between two EP elections. Therefore, we exclude from our observations those concerning Eurosceptic parties. We then exclude parties with fewer than two observations over time.

Consequently, we include in our analysis parties' issue salience and positions of 187 non-Eurosceptic parties for which we have at least two observations over time—approximately 58% of the available non-Eurosceptic parties and 48% of all the parties included in our data set. The exact number of observations of our multivariate analyses features in the discussion of the empirical results below.

Because the EM project coded manifestos for EP elections and not for national elections (for the latest version, see Reinl and Braun 2023), we use the adapted coding scheme of the Comparative Manifesto Project (Wüst and Volkens 2003). Although some criticism has been raised concerning the use of manifesto data in general (Mikhaylov et al. 2012), we are convinced that for our undertaking—the investigation of party behaviour—the EM data source is unique and highly appropriate (for a summary of the pros and cons of manifesto-derived data, see Braun 2023). In particular, the data cover many issue categories related to the political system of the EU and allow us to identify the policy level to which an argument in a text sentence refers.⁵ These elements of the EM data are particularly relevant for our measurements, as explained in detail in the following section.

⁵ For example, a coder would assign a European frame to the following statement, “The EU has taken the lead on action to deal with climate change.” By contrast, “We will resist efforts by Labour to push

Our party-level data are then integrated with additional information derived from the PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2019) and ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2021) data sets. The PopuList data set is particularly suited for our analyses because it provides a classification of all the (relevant) Eurosceptic, radical, and populist political parties featuring in the EU party systems during the time period under analysis. The ParlGov provides us with data about the results of political parties in first-order—i.e., national—elections prior to the EP elections considered, as well as data concerning the latter.

3.2 Measurement

Our main variables consist of a set of indices gauging parties' issue *salience* and party issue *positions* on relevant EU issues. In particular, in this study we focus on parties' issue salience and positions on (i) the EU polity, (ii) the economy, and (iii) the immigration issue. The first measure covers all EM categories relating to basic features of the EU's political system, such as the competencies of different European institutions, membership issues, and questions regarding the legitimacy or complexity of the EU. The remaining measures, in contrast, refer to questions about how European institutions should use their competencies in policymaking on said policy issues. As mentioned earlier, to compute these measures we therefore relied only on quasi-sentences⁶ that explicitly link an issue to the EU.

For estimating these measures, we took inspiration from Lowe and colleagues' (Lowe et al. 2011) logit scaling technique, relying on the following formulas:

$$\text{Salience}_{ij} = \log \frac{\text{Pos}_{ij} + \text{Neg}_{ij} + 1}{\text{Tot}_{ij}}$$

$$\text{Position}_{ij} = \log \frac{\text{Pos}_{ij} + 0.5}{\text{Neg}_{ij} + 0.5}$$

where Pos_{ij} and Neg_{ij} are, respectively, the numbers of positive and negative quasi-sentences concerning the issues of interest, and Tot_{ij} is the total number of quasi-sentences in the party manifesto i in year j . Therefore, Salience_{ij} refers to an issue-specific interval measure of salience for party i theoretically ranging from $-\infty$ to 0, and Position_{ij} refers to an interval measure of the position of party i theoretically ranging from $-\infty$ to $+\infty$.

Our dependent variables are the salience and position of non-Eurosceptic parties on these dimensions (EU polity, economy, and immigration) for a specific EP election. Our models then include a set of covariates, among which are our main

through Heathrow expansion" clearly refers to national politics and is therefore coded accordingly (the two examples are taken from the Euromanifesto of Britain's Conservative Party in 2009). Note that the European political level is used by the coders when the governing-level frame of the content explicitly refers to the European level.

⁶ Quasi-sentences are arguments, namely verbal expressions of a political idea or issue. They might coincide with natural sentences when the latter include a single argument. Yet, more often, they differ from natural sentences, since the latter may contain more than one argument—hence, more than one quasi-sentence.

independent variable: namely, the vote share obtained by Eurosceptic, far-right Eurosceptic, and far-left Eurosceptic parties at the most recent national election preceding an EP election. In addition, we include in our models a set of standard controls for the analysis of party positions on EU and other issues, namely a dummy variable identifying parties in government and parties in opposition, as well as an interval measure gauging party size.⁷

3.3 Methods

In terms of modelling strategy, we follow a standard approach for the analysis of panel or time-series cross-section data, namely a two-way fixed effects model (Beck and Katz 2011, 1996, 1995) that has previously been applied for analysing party competition based on manifesto data (e.g., Abou-Chadi 2016). To address serial correlation and panel-specific heteroscedasticity, these models incorporate a lagged dependent variable representing non-Eurosceptic party positions on the relevant dimension at the preceding EP elections. Additionally, party-dummy and time-fixed effects have been integrated to accommodate unit-specific and time-based variations. By including these fixed effects, the analysis narrows down the variation to *within-party changes over time*, effectively adjusting for time-constant party- and country-specific features. Finally, we include panel-corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz 1995). In order to deal with the heterogeneity of the effects of Eurosceptic parties' support on leftist and rightist mainstream parties, we then filtered our data basis according to the party families of the latter.⁸ For example, for investigating whether (far-left or far-right) Eurosceptic parties' support affects rightist mainstream parties' position and salience on the issues of interest, we kept in our model data basis mainstream Christian-democrat and conservative parties, filtering out the remaining ones. When investigating the effect of Eurosceptic parties' support on mainstream leftist parties, we kept in our models only mainstream parties' part of the social-democrat, green, and (post-)communist party families. Finally, our quantities of interest are the magnitude of regression coefficients and the average marginal effects (AMEs).⁹ To compute the latter, we rely on the simulation approach proposed by King and colleagues (King et al. 2000) and the observed value approach suggested by Hanmer and Ozan Kalkan (2013). The first approach allows us to focus on inference rather than predictions by estimating inferential rather than the fundamental uncertainty of our quantities of interest. The second approach then allows us to obtain an estimate

⁷ In addition to party size, we estimated additional models in which this covariate was substituted with a variable measuring the percentage change if party size were between t-2 and t-1. In these models, we assumed that previous electoral performances could affect parties' issue salience and positions on the dimension of interest. Despite minor discrepancies, the substantive results of these models are in line with those of our main models (Appendix C).

⁸ Unfortunately, our modelling strategy does not allow us to rely on interactions between the variables of interest. Party family is an (almost) time-invariant characteristic of parties. As such, the effect of such a variable would be not identifiable, biasing the estimates of the model.

⁹ The reported *p*-values in the main text and supplementary information are nominal ones, not adjusted for multiple comparisons.

of the average effect of a variable in the population, rather than the effect for the average case.

4 Empirical Analyses

We expect that the higher the Eurosceptic far-right support, the higher the emphasis and the more Eurosceptic the positions of mainstream parties, in particular rightist ones, on the polity and immigration issues (H1a, H2a, H3a). Finally, we expect that the higher the Eurosceptic far-left support, the higher the emphasis and the more Eurosceptic the positions of mainstream parties, in particular leftist ones, on the polity and economy issues (H1b, H2b, H3b). We discuss the results of our models on EU polity issues in the first step and continue with the different types of EU policy issue, focussing on the effects of the main variables of interest on our dependent variables.¹⁰ As explained below, our results only partially support our hypotheses.

4.1 Results About EU Polity Issues

Starting with the salience that leftist and rightist non-Eurosceptic parties attach to the EU polity, our results suggest that this is fundamentally affected by Eurosceptic parties' support in the preceding national elections. However, this effect is statistically significant only when considering leftist mainstream parties (Fig. 2, top right panels). The greater the support for Eurosceptic parties at the previous national elections, the more likely it is for leftist non-Eurosceptic parties to emphasise the EU polity issue. The effect is somewhat stronger when considering Eurosceptic far-right parties' support (model 7a), as compared to support for Eurosceptic or Eurosceptic far-left parties (models 9a and 8a). Yet the magnitude and error of these coefficients are very similar, and this is also apparent when considering these factors' AMEs (Fig. 3, left panel). Substantively, this result suggests that leftist non-Eurosceptic parties attach more salience to the EU polity issue in the face of any form of Eurosceptic challenge.

When considering rightist mainstream parties (models 1a, 2a, and 3a), we find a similar but inconsistent pattern, with none of the coefficients reaching statistical significance at $p < 0.05$. Interestingly, however, we find that the effect is weakly negative when considering the effect of Eurosceptic far-right support (model 1a). Therefore, our analyses partially support our hypotheses. First, the support for far-right Eurosceptic parties in the preceding national elections increases the salience of the EU polity issue only when mainstream leftist parties are considered (model 7a). This result partially confirms our first hypothesis (H1a) but also partially contradicts our hypothesis regarding the moderating effect of ideological closeness (H3a). Second, the support for far-left Eurosceptic parties in the preceding national elections only marginally increases the salience of the EU polity issue for mainstream parties (models 2a and 8a). However, we observe a slightly stronger effect of Eurosceptic leftist parties on mainstream parties within the same ideological bloc. Hence, our re-

¹⁰ The full regression tables are available in the supplementary information of the article, Appendix B.

Fig. 2 Impact of Eurosceptic (EUSc.) parties' support at t-1 on left- and right-wing salience and positions on EU issues at t0 (FR far right, FL far left)

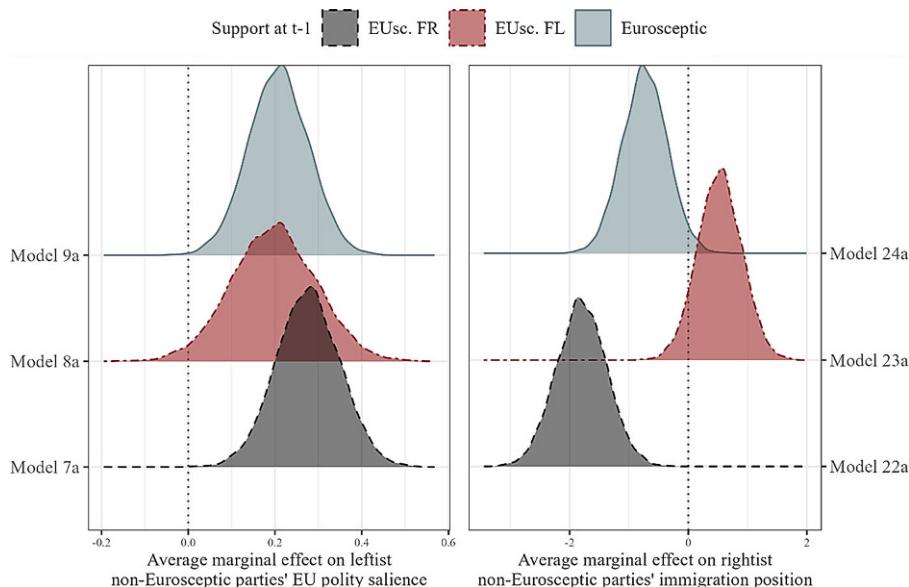
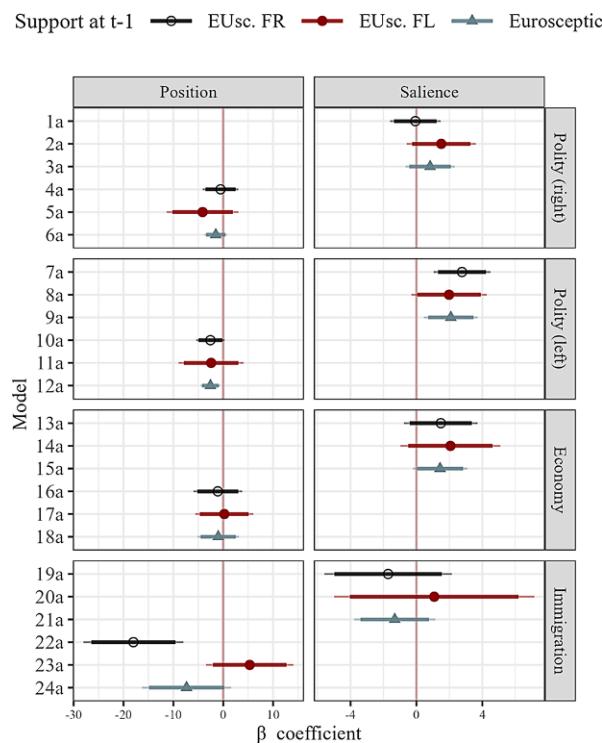


Fig. 3 Distribution of the simulated average marginal effect of Eurosceptic parties' support at t-1 on left- and right-wing parties' salience and positions on EU polity and immigration issues at t0

sults only marginally support our second hypothesis (H1b) and our final hypothesis (H3b).

In terms of *positions* about the EU polity, our results suggest that only leftist non-Eurosceptic parties tend to react consistently to support for far-right or Eurosceptic parties in general (Fig. 2, top right panels). The higher the support for the latter at t_1 , the more the former take a more critical stance on the EU polity issue at t_0 (models 10a and 12a). Thus, these results only partially support our initial hypotheses (H2a, H2b), at least in relation to the EU polity issue. The only noticeable effect is the influence of far-right Eurosceptic support on mainstream leftist positions (model 10a), which, however, contradicts our expectations concerning the moderating effect of ideological closeness (H3a and H3b).

4.2 Results About EU Policy Issues

Turning now to results concerning parties' issue salience and positions regarding the economy, the picture is somewhat in line with our expectations but hardly consistent in terms of statistical significance (Fig. 2, third right panel). The higher the support for Eurosceptic parties, the more salience that leftist non-Eurosceptic parties tend to attach to the economy (models 13a, 14a, and 15a). Yet the effect is significant ($p < 0.05$) only when considering the impact of Eurosceptic parties (model 15a). In terms of positions, leftist non-Eurosceptic parties appear to be unresponsive to Eurosceptic parties' support, as suggested by our weak and not significant regression coefficients (Fig. 2, third left panel, models 16a, 17a, and 18a). These results, therefore, only marginally support our main hypothesis on EU economic issue salience and the moderating effect of ideological closeness on this issue (H1b and H3b).

Finally, when considering the immigration issue, here the results are mixed. In terms of issue salience, rightist parties appear to de-emphasize this issue in the face of Eurosceptic and Eurosceptic far-right parties' success, as suggested by the negative coefficients of these factors in the respective models. However, these factors are largely not significant (Fig. 2, bottom right panel, models 19a and 21a). Interestingly, however, rightist mainstream parties appear to be highly responsive to the challenge coming from Eurosceptic far-right parties. The greater the electoral support for the latter at t_1 , the more Eurosceptic become the former at t_0 (Fig. 2, bottom left panel, model 19a; see also Fig. 3, right panel). This effect is by far the strongest of our regression models. In this case, these results do not support our salience-related hypothesis (H1a) but do support our positional hypothesis (H2a) and our hypothesis on the moderating effect of ideological closeness between Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties (H3a).

5 Conclusions

The EU is adapting to an era when internal criticisms are becoming louder. Due to the fact that the EU is the world's most advanced case of regional integration, the way this process of adaption occurs within the union is an insightful topic in itself. In view of the overall theme of this *special issue* exploring the transformation

of regional organisations from a more general point of view (see the Introduction), the investigation of the EU as an exemplary case of regional integration, however, might also shed further light on the transformation processes of other regional organisations. For the particular case of the EU, we can show in a similar way as other contributions in this *special issue* (for example, those by Rapp, Dassler et al., and Debus and Schweizer) that confronted with internal challenges, this very particular type of regional organisation seems not to be in a crisis mode; rather, it shows resilience in the ways it adapts to these tests. Findings from our paper strengthen this perspective: The party system regulates these internal challenges through mainstream parties adapting to the bloc's evolving electoral landscape.

We acted on the assumption that an entirely new party family of Eurosceptic parties has emerged and consolidated over the last decade. We were therefore interested in how Eurosceptic parties shape EU party politics. The findings presented here suggest that the upsurge and consolidation of Eurosceptic parties of the left and right has a definite effect on party competition over European issues. However, it is important to note that the findings are accompanied by some statistical uncertainty, and some models rely on a thin data basis. Second, our models do not consider other factors that might be important in explaining variations about party salience and positions over time—e.g., sociostructural ones. Accordingly, future scholarly work should also consider that differences in salience and position are at least partly influenced by socioeconomic and structural factors such as economic performance, deindustrialisation trends, and immigration dynamics and that these pathways might help to produce a more nuanced picture of party competition in and around the EU.

Although we are aware of the above-mentioned limitations of our empirical analyses, we argue, based on our findings, that Eurosceptic parties have the power to shape and transform EU party politics. This transformation, incited by Eurosceptic parties, occurs for both EU polity issues and EU policy issues. However, the impact of this change varies according to the issue, the ideological nature of both the Eurosceptic challenge and the parties affected by it. How these factors interact is only partially in line with what we expected. First, we find that leftist, non-Eurosceptic parties react to the Eurosceptic challenge (whatever its nature) by increasing salience and becoming less Europhile on the EU polity issue. Second, we find that rightist parties do not react in the same way, but with different strategies (if at all) to the Eurosceptic challenge on the EU polity issue. Nevertheless, these parties appear highly responsive to the challenge coming from within their own camp when it comes to cultural issues. When the Eurosceptic far-right support increases, these parties become more and more negative about said issues, in particular those related to immigration.

Is this good or bad news for EU democracy? On the one hand, a higher salience of EU issues in election campaigns can be interpreted generally in a positive light for EU democracy. Together with the increasing party-political debates, we would expect a growing public discourse around European issues (at least during election campaigns). This has already been happening during the last decades, as argued by many of those studying the politicisation of Europe (Hutter et al. 2016) and EP election campaigns (Braun 2021). However, in the past, this politicisation over Europe mainly occurred around certain critical events and was often expressed by

politically extreme politicians (Kriesi 2016)—it will be interesting to see in future research whether, alongside the consolidation of Eurosceptic parties, we will be having a more constant public debate over European issues. Such a constant debate could in turn have positive implications for the legitimacy of the EU's political system.

On the other hand, our findings also suggest that some of the non-Eurosceptic parties have become more critical towards the EU polity as a whole. This finding could also lead to more debate over the future path of European integration but can, of course, also have deleterious effects for EU democracy and the stability of the political system: Critique of the EU as a polity and its procedures might lead to further trends towards disintegration or calls for more differentiated kinds of integration in the near future. It will be definitely insightful to investigate party competition in this direction for the case of the 2024 EP elections, in which we are not expecting any decline in the success of Eurosceptic parties, but even stronger reactions by mainstream political parties.

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