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The role of key European issues in the 2024 election campaign

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ABSTRACT

International crises and Euroscepticism have made European issues prominent in citizens' lives. This article studies the role of three key European issues – migration, the environment, and EU integration – for political parties and citizens. The analysis centres on nine EU member states, combining party manifestos from the 2024 European Parliament elections with survey data. It finds a gap between the concerns of citizens and the political parties, an important consideration for election campaigns in general. Moreover, the analysis suggests that the salience in party manifestos has a modest direct influence and a stronger indirect impact on their appeal to citizens in most countries studied. Specifically, citizens concerned with migration and the environment evaluate parties based on the prominence they give to these issues during the campaign. The findings offer important avenues for further research on party issue emphasis and the measurement of issue salience *via* large language models (LLMs).

KEYWORDS European elections; EU integration; migration; environment; large language models

Multiple international crises increasingly transcend borders, necessitating a coordinated international response. In such contexts, the role of European institutions in managing these challenges becomes crucial, particularly in areas such as migration and environmental policy. Mainstream parties, typically known for their pro-EU stances, emphasise the need to deepen European integration, including potential treaty changes, to more effectively address common challenges. Conversely, Eurosceptic parties promote a more divisive narrative, opposing further integration and specific European policies.

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In either case, Europe has become much more present in the lives of EU citizens in recent years and has thus gained relevance as a mobilising political issue in election campaigns across the various levels of the EU's multi-level system. This is evident not only from the extensive scholarly literature on the politicisation of Europe in both national and EP elections (Costa Lobo 2023; Hutter *et al.* 2016), but also from the phenomenon of EU issue voting (De Vries 2010; De Vries and Hobolt 2016; Jurado and Navarrete 2021) and similar approaches supporting the 'Europe matters' perspective (Braun 2021; Carrieri 2024; Rapp 2024). Most scholars thus agree that Europe, both as a polity and a policy issue (Braun *et al.* 2016), has become increasingly significant over time for both political parties and voters. This trend has been particularly evident in recent election cycles, with the 2019 EP elections serving as a key example (see, for instance, the special issues by Gattermann *et al.* 2021; van der Brug *et al.* 2022). Building on these insights and recognising we are still in the midst of multiple interrelated crises (e.g. climate change, immigration, and the wars in Ukraine and Israel) demanding unified EU-wide action, we expect to observe a similar or even more pronounced pattern in the 2024 EP elections.

In this context, we examine the role of key European issues in the 2024 EP election campaign, positing that both citizens and political parties have placed significant emphasis on these matters – encompassing both polity and critical policy concerns. We argue that European polity and policy issues are expected to play a role in these elections for at least two reasons. First, Eurosceptic parties mobilise their electorates not only through their exit narrative (Martini and Walter 2024), but also by criticising the EU polity as well as specific EU policies, and by proposing alternative approaches. This is particularly true for migration and environmental issues which are part of the cultural dimension of political competition in Europe (Schäfer *et al.* 2021) with a high potential to polarise European societies. Unsurprisingly, these issues are both currently claimed by radical-right Eurosceptic parties, which perceive a strategic vote-winning advantage here (Braun and Carteny 2024). Second, non-Eurosceptic parties advocate for deeper European integration while offering their own suggestions in response to the Eurosceptic challenge. Consequently, alongside discussions about the future of European integration (i.e. the EU polity), issues related to migration and climate change are expected to become contentious points for political parties and rallying concerns for the European citizenry.

In line with these considerations, we investigate the salience of three key European issues – migration, the environment, and EU integration – in the 2024 EP election campaign. Our analysis considers whether political parties address these critical issues as well as their relevance to the European

citizenry. In doing this, we provide empirical insights on the question whether the salience of European issues in the 2024 EP election campaign acts as a direct or indirect linkage between voters and political parties and thus has the potential to reduce the often-mentioned elite-voter gap in European politics. To address these questions, we focus on nine preselected EU member states representing Central, Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe (Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain) and proceed in two separate analytical steps: First, based on the party manifestos published ahead of the 2024 EP elections as well as public opinion survey data (Reinl *et al.* 2025), we describe the salience of these three key European issues. In a second step, we combine the two data sources to detect whether the issues highlighted by political parties affect the vote intention of the respondents. Our findings show that European issues were relevant in the 2024 election campaign in some countries, whereas in others they were not. Moreover, within our bivariate analyses, we observed a notable gap between the main concerns of citizens and the issues political parties choose to emphasise during their campaigns. When moving from descriptive findings to multivariate analyses, our pooled models reveal that the prominence given to the EU in party manifestos is not associated with citizens' more general propensity to vote for a given party. Yet, when disaggregating the analysis by country, the emphasis parties place on these issues in their manifestos appears to correlate with citizen appeal only in a subset of countries. Additionally, we find evidence of interaction effects in several countries, where citizens concerned with migration or the environment exhibit greater support for parties that prioritise these issues. This suggests that patterns of EU-issue voting played a meaningful role around the 2024 EP elections, though their impact varied across countries and was not always straightforward.

Our article makes three major contributions. First, we expand the literature on the relevance of issue salience for voting intentions by theoretically and empirically distinguishing between the direct and indirect effects of salience. Our analysis shows that indirect effects play a more significant role – an insight that has been largely overlooked in previous research. Second, this article is, to our knowledge, the first to use large language models (LLMs) to measure issue salience in Euromanifestos. This innovative approach allows us to make rich and detailed information accessible for empirical modelling. Third, our findings are highly relevant for EU policymakers. We observe that the topics addressed during European Parliament elections often fail to align with citizens' primary concerns at the time, particularly when survey respondents are asked about the most important issues in an independent, unframed context. This misalignment should prompt parties to reflect on how to better address this gap and engage with citizens' priorities effectively.

State of the art and research hypotheses: European issues in EU politics

Do the political issues that political parties emphasise in election campaigns influence individual-level voting intentions? In other words, do voters support political parties based on the issues these parties highlight during electoral campaigns? To address these questions, we first examine theoretical frameworks and empirical studies related to issue voting. Next, we discuss scholarly literature focusing on EP elections to gain a better grip on the specific relevance of European issues in these contexts. Finally, drawing on this discussion of various scholarly perspectives, we formulate our theoretical expectations regarding the 2024 EP elections.

Issue voting

It is uncontested that elections ‘are fought over policies and issues that voters, parties, and leaders consider to be important and relevant at the time of the election’ (Aardal and van Wijnen 2005: 192). Policy preferences of the electorate are thus a prerequisite for democratic political systems (Macdonald *et al.* 1991). However, one of the most influential insights in political science is that voters have rather low incentives to become deeply informed about specific policy issues (Downs 1957). From cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), we know that voting behaviour is not only determined by political issues, but also by strong divisions in societies which means that social and demographic factors also matter. From the Michigan Model (Campbell *et al.* 1960), we know that voters are not always purely rational actors but are deeply influenced by long-term loyalties such as party identification.

This conflictive perspective on the role of policy issues in representative democracies has led to a scholarly debate and a large quantity of empirical studies for decades (some examples of this debate: Ansolabehere and Socorro Puy 2018; de Sio and Weber 2014). Theoretically for one group of researchers – the camp following the proximity-based spatial model – it is fairly clear that political issues matter. Their main argument is that the closer an individual’s position aligns with the party’s stance, the more likely the individual is to support that party (e.g. Enelow and Hinich 1984). For others, however, the story is not as straightforward, arguing thus for a more directional approach linking the issue position of the voter to the evaluation of the party (e.g. Iversen 1994; Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989). In line with the latter, Macdonald *et al.* (1991: 1107) state that ‘in order to build support on the basis of issues, parties must offer some strong stands.’

While empirical studies mainly consider parties' and voters' positions, the salience they attach to policy issues has largely been ignored until now. From research on agenda-setting processes (Gilardi *et al.* 2022; Riker 1986), it is fair to assume that political parties play a role in driving the salience of certain issues, potentially influencing the assessments of voters in turn. De Vries and Hobolt (2012, 2020) demonstrate how this dynamic has benefitted 'challenger' parties in recent years, while Green-Pedersen (2019) explains how established parties also attempt to play on these processes. However, a small number of exceptions aside, studies directly linking *party-driven* issue salience to voter behaviour are lacking. Meanwhile, since Dennison's (2019) identification of a lack of clarity in the salience literature, researchers have begun to examine the direct and indirect effects of *individual-level* salience on voting behaviour more rigorously. While earlier analysis by van der Brug (2004) found only a small and intermittent direct effect, more recent studies find a consistent association between individual issue salience and support for certain party families, including both immigration and European integration and support for the far-right (Dennison 2020; Dennison and Geddes 2021) and environmental issues and support for green parties (McAllister and bin Oslan 2021; Puleo *et al.* 2025), indicating that issue salience can be an important predictor of subsequent voting behaviour (Bartle and Laycock 2012). Nevertheless, the mechanism by which salience leads voters to favour certain parties is not always clear. A handful of more recent studies identify the parties themselves as a likely mediator, whether *via* their positioning on key issues (Kurella and Rapp 2025; Vasilopoulou and Zur 2024), pre-existing perceptions of their issue 'ownership' (Meguid 2008; Peeters and Coffé 2024), or their decision to signal a focus on certain issues in response to voter concerns (Dennison and Kriesi 2023). These indirect effects of individual-level salience do not exclude the parties' role in driving issue salience at the individual level found in other studies. While some argue that the effects of real-world conditions outweigh party agenda setting (Seeberg and Adams 2025; Wlezien 2005), other more mixed findings (Barberá *et al.* 2019; Gilardi *et al.* 2022) suggest that the direction of interactions between parties, individuals and voting behaviour is likely to vary and combine differently in different contexts.

To make a theoretically debateable and empirically open question short, we see that policy issues are important in elections and for voting decisions. Moreover, we can observe that studying the effects of salience on national-level voting behaviour across countries either involves studying disparate points in time, potentially requiring the introduction of unseen variations, or the removal of the study from an electoral context, when respondents' connection of the issues to their voting behaviour is likely to be reduced. To avoid these potential inconsistencies, and in light of the

almost exclusive focus of previous studies on specific countries and party families at the national level (but see: Vasilopoulou and Zur 2024), the European level is thus an interesting and under-explored context for further study. Therefore, now we turn to the salience of policy issues in the specific context of EP elections.

Issue salience in EP elections

For the case of EP elections, we need to take into account the particular nature of these elections. The latter have for a long time been considered second-order contests (e.g. Reif and Schmitt 1980). Yet, over time and particularly after the end of the ‘permissive consensus’ over European politics (Eichenberg and Dalton 2007), the awakening of the ‘sleeping giant’ (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004) and the new period of ‘constraining dissensus’ (Hooghe and Marks 2009), this second-order nature has certainly changed (for an extensive discussion on this, see the two Special Issues around the 2019 EP elections: Gattermann *et al.* 2021; van der Brug *et al.* 2022). We see some signs that this exclusive characterisation is not valid anymore, but that EP (as well as national) elections have been accompanied by certain features of Europeanization. Empirical evidence for the latter has been provided by numerous scholars studying the politicisation of Europe (e.g. Costa Lobo 2023; Hutter *et al.* 2016), EU issue voting (e.g. De Vries 2010; Jurado and Navarrete 2021) or similar approaches that prove that Europe matters in present-day European elections (Braun 2021; Carrieri 2024; Maier *et al.* 2021; Rapp 2024; Schäfer 2021). Accordingly, we can act on the assumption that EU issues play a role in EP elections, in the electoral campaigns taking place before these contests, and also have an impact on voting behaviour.

The described transformation or complementation (depending on the perspective) of EP elections occurred in parallel with the broader Europeanization of all dimensions – polity, policy, and politics – over time. Moreover, the multiple crises facing Europe certainly acted as catalysts, prompting unified responses from political parties. However, a growing debate also emerged over the future direction of European integration – the so-called politicisation of Europe (Costa Lobo 2023; Hutter *et al.* 2016). This debate was accompanied by increasing polarisation, not only regarding the future of the EU itself (the polity), but also European policy issues.¹ Therefore, we are interested in both these types of European issues. For the case of EU (polity) issues, previous research has shown their relevance for voting behaviour – EU politics scholars have coined the term ‘EU issue voting’ (De Vries 2010; De Vries and Hobolt 2016; Jurado and Navarrete 2021). Empirical evidence is less strong for the case of European policy issues, but we can observe that

European policy issues, such as environment/climate change and migration already had the power to affect electoral behaviour in the 2019 EP elections (Braun and Schäfer 2022; Puleo *et al.* 2025) and were expected to have a greater impact in future elections (van der Brug *et al.* 2022).

In line with this specific outlook based on the findings of the 2019 EP elections, in our opinion three European issues have been so heavily debated in recent times in European politics that they have the power to matter in the 2024 EP elections.² These three issues are part of the new(er) cultural dimension of political competition.³ Issues on this dimension are supposed to have a higher potential to polarise European party systems and societies and are therefore more often debated publicly and in election campaigns than issues which are part of the economic dimension. In the following section we provide more detailed information on each of these issues and why they are supposed to matter in the 2024 EP election campaign.

First, the migration issue has been among the most salient themes in Europe since the sharp upturn in asylum applications of the mid-2010s (Grande *et al.* 2019; Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019; van der Brug *et al.* 2015). It has contributed to the decision of an EU member state (UK) to leave the Union (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017; Hobolt 2016; Nicoli *et al.* 2022) and, after long debates in the EU institution system, finally led to a compromise solution shortly before the 2024 EP elections. The resulting EU pact on migration and asylum thus brought the topic back onto the public agenda.

Second, several factors placed environmental issues at the top of the political agenda during the 8th parliamentary term (2014–2019). The school strikes and the ‘Fridays for Future’ protest movement, along with the success of Green parties in the 2019 EP elections (Pearson and Rüdiger 2020) as well as the prominence of the ‘European Green Deal’ among von der Leyen’s top priorities, all contributed to this focus. Furthermore, just before the 2024 EP elections, widespread farmer protests across Europe challenged the ‘European Green Deal’, bringing environmental issues back into the public spotlight. Also, after the last European Elections, the new composition of the recently elected EU Commission confirmed environmental protection as one of the EU priorities, with one of its two executive vice-presidencies focused on a clean, just and competitive transition, and one commissioner in charge of climate, net zero and clean growth. Thus, environmental protection is no longer ‘a mere side-product of economic integration’ (Biedenkopf and Delreux 2023: 418) but one of the EU’s signs of identity.

Lastly, the issue of European integration (EU polity) is expected to remain significant, given the continued consolidation of Euroscepticism throughout Europe (Treib 2021). Euroscepticism has evolved over time from a quasi-pathology to a persistent and mainstream phenomenon shaping Europe (Brack and Startin 2015; Leconte 2015; Usherwood and

Startin 2013; Vasilopoulou 2013). In the ninth EP, the EU's legislative arena, two 'radical right populist groups that oppose European integration' (Kantola *et al.* 2022: 2) – the European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR) and the Identity and Democracy group (ID) – together with one 'soft Eurosceptic' (Kantola *et al.* 2022: 2) left-wing party group (GUE-NGL) were involved in EU-level decision-making. In the tenth EP, the picture is similar with now three Eurosceptic party groups on the right side, namely ECR, Patriots for Europe (PfE) and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN). Together with this consolidation of Eurosceptic parties, party competition became more European and more critical towards European integration (Braun and Carteny 2024).

Although our theoretical arguments as well as empirical evidence from previous elections (see also Note 3) underline the outstanding role of these three issues in the 2024 election campaign, we cannot rule out the potential relevance of other issues. This is particularly true for economic issues (one of the most stable issue dimensions in electoral politics) and the ongoing debate surrounding the war in Ukraine.⁴

Theoretical expectations

We choose to investigate the role of these three European issues, which we refer to as 'key' issues in this article, in the 2024 EP election campaign. As the EP election campaign is mainly run by national political parties, we study how much emphasis these national political actors put on the three key European issues. In addition to that, we consider the demand side of political competition and study how relevant the three key European issues are for citizens' voting intentions. Integrating these two perspectives – the demand as well as the supply side of political competition, we seek to answer the following research questions: *Do political parties and citizens have the same issue priorities in this 2024 EP election campaign? Can European issues in the 2024 EP election campaign act as a linkage between voters and political parties and thus reduce the often-mentioned elite-voter gap in European politics?* To study these research questions using a quantitative approach, we formulate two hypotheses guiding our empirical analyses:

H1 (direct issue salience effect): Higher emphasis by political parties on key European issues during the 2024 EP election campaign is associated with a greater likelihood of individuals voting for a party.

H2 (moderating issue salience effect): The association between a voter's intention to vote for a party and the party's emphasis on a key European issue varies according to the alignment between the importance the voter places on the issue and the prominence the party gives to it in its manifesto.

Data and methods

In the subsequent section, we justify our country selection and describe the data we are using and the measurement of both our dependent and independent variables as well as the statistical model.

Country selection

Our empirical investigations draw on data from nine member states of the EU. To encompass a comparatively broad range of countries, we include Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain in our analytical sample. These states represent a diverse mix from different regions of the EU (North, South, East, and West) and have played varying roles in previous and current EU-wide crises. In light of the Euro Area Crisis that impacted the community from 2009 onwards, our analytical sample includes both bailed-out countries (Greece and Spain) and creditor countries (the remaining states). Additionally, the selected countries have experienced different dynamics concerning previous and ongoing movements of asylum seekers, with Germany, France, Austria, and the border states of Greece and Italy serving as primary destinations. Moreover, all these countries are differently affected by natural disasters and, consequently, by the impacts of climate change. For instance, Greece has faced wildfires in recent years, while Spain has suffered severe droughts and faced a desert-like climate in some areas, and Germany has been impacted by floods. On top of that, the strength of Eurosceptic parties diverges strongly across the selected cases. Thus, our data encompasses a robust selection of EU member states. Although the sample is not fully representative of all EU states, it still offers a comprehensive overview.

Data: We test the research hypotheses outlined above using a combination of two data sources. First, we analyse the role of the identified key European issues for voters. To this end, we draw on original public opinion data collected in the nine EU member states in April and May 2024 during the time of the EP election campaign (Reinl *et al.* 2025). A total of 11,700 respondents were interviewed – 1,300 per country – *via* computer-assisted web interviewing. The survey was conducted by IPSOS Germany and took approximately 23 min (median) to complete. The sample is based on quotas for gender, age, education, and national region.

The dependent variable required to test our two formulated research hypotheses is the general probability to vote (PTV) for a given party. For this, we use the following question from our survey: ‘We have a number of parties in [country], each of which would like to get your vote. How probable is it that you will ever vote for the following parties?’. Respondents

then rate a list of the parties represented in each country's national parliament from 0 (not at all probable) to 10 (very probable). Thus, respondents are not specifically asked about their voting intention for the upcoming EP elections. Instead, we capture such intention in a much broader, unbiased sense.

In order to measure issue salience at the individual level, we take the first provided answer to a single open-ended question included in the survey, which asked respondents to identify the three most important issues currently facing their country. The wording of the question is as follows: 'As far as you're concerned, what are the three most important issues facing [country] at the present time?' to which 8,982 respondents provided at least one answer. Once again, the formulation of the survey question does not specifically reflect upon the upcoming EP election.

Issue salience measurement

To make the open-ended survey responses suitable for our statistical analysis, we apply automated text classification methods and recode the written responses into four categories – *EU polity-related topics*, *immigration*, *the environment*, and *other topics* – the residual category. Two groups of two native-speaker research assistants were given instructions to each hand-code a sample of 300 responses from Austria and Germany, producing a total of 600 twice-coded responses to supervise the annotation process. We used half of the sample to train three generative pre-trained models (GPTs) for the task: Llama3.1, Mistral, and Mixtral. In subsequent testing of their performance against the other half of the sample, Mixtral provided the best performance ($F1=0.97$) and was therefore used to classify the other open-ended responses. Full details of the classification process and results can be found in [Online Appendix A](#).

Second, we refer to the electoral manifestos of political parties competing in the 2024 EP elections across the nine selected EU member states. [Table B2 in the Online Appendices](#) provides a list of all the parties included for each country. In some instances, political parties did not publish a manifesto for the election; in these cases, we refer to alternative resources. The main party-level independent variable of our study is again the salience attached to the European issues – *EU polity*,⁵ *immigration*, *environment*, and *other* – by each relevant party in their electoral programs and the estimates are once again calculated using automated text classification methods.

To be more precise, to measure salience we perform classification tasks relying on two different types of large language models, namely multilingual encoder and decoder models. With respect to the former type of LLMs, we rely on two multilingual Bi-directional Encoder Representations

of Transformers (BERT), namely the ManifestoBERTa and XLM-RoBERTa models. These models are sentence-level classifiers fine-tuned on the annotated data of the Euromanifestos (EM) 2019 (Reinl and Braun 2023), with the existing topic categories recoded into the four categories of interest for our study.⁶ By relying on this recoded data, we allow the model to perform transfer learning, or more precisely, domain adaptation.⁷ To select the best performing models, we repeat the fine-tuning process by varying the data basis, several model-related versions and features, including hyperparameters, and then selecting the best performing models in terms of F1 scores on the validation set – namely, part of the annotated training data, not used for training the model. The best four BERT models are then tested on the holdout dataset – data unseen by the model during the training phase – namely 2024 German EP manifesto quasi-sentences annotated under our supervision by four research assistants, German native speakers. When considering the autoregressive models, more precisely GPT models, we employ Mistral, Llama3.1, and Mixtral models. Differently from the BERT-based models, we train our GPTs to perform in-context learning, namely, to make predictions based on natural language prompts and limited labelled data (zero-, and few-shot classification), thus augmenting the model without optimising any parameter. Also in this case, we vary the data basis, prompts, and examples in order to evaluate the model performances on our testing data, then picking the best-performing model using a standard set of goodness-of-fit criteria (F1, recall and precision statistics) computed from our testing data – annotated EP 2024 manifestos' sentences. These criteria are finally used to compare all the best-performing models within our set of encoders and autoregressive LLMs. In this case the model yielding the best performance was the ManifestoBERTa flat model (macro-F1 = .57).

Statistical methods

Our statistical analyses proceed as follows. In the first and descriptive analytical step, we examine the emphasis that political parties and voters place on the three selected key European issues. This analysis provides an initial understanding of the issue salience for both the political demand and supply sides. We compare the two groups to draw preliminary conclusions about whether the issues emphasised align or differ significantly. Next, we test our research hypotheses. The main aim of this article is to explore how the emphasis political parties place on the EU, the environment, and migration influences citizens' voting preferences. To achieve this, we move beyond simply examining vote choice, as this decision is often shaped by other factors, such as potential post-election alliances. Instead, we use probabilities to vote (PTV), which captures how likely

respondents are to vote for certain parties, providing a clearer picture of voter preferences. This approach requires a more advanced data strategy since it involves variables at different levels: individual-level PTVs and party-level issue salience. To address Hypothesis 2, we also examine citizens' perceptions of the most important issues facing their country, as gathered from open-ended responses.

Our analysis is built on a stacked dataset, where each unit of analysis is a dyad between a respondent and a political party (Van der Eijk *et al.* 2006). This approach allows us to analyse multiple variables at different levels simultaneously, integrating individual voter characteristics with party attributes within their respective national contexts. By structuring the data in this way, we can explore the intricate dynamics of party-voter relationships, assess cross-level interactions, and deepen our understanding of the factors that influence electoral behaviour. The dataset includes over 62,000 respondent-party dyads, offering a strong basis for examining these relationships across the nine countries included in the study.

Given that the data is nested within both individuals and parties, we employ multilevel linear models. These models include random intercepts at the country, party and individual levels, as well as random slopes at the country level for individuals' most important issue in some cases. To test our first hypothesis (H1), we examine whether the emphasis political parties place on certain issues is related to respondents' voting intentions. We run our analyses with the pooled data and again separately for each country. This strategy enables us to capture country-specific differences that may arise from particular political contexts. Our primary independent variable for H1 is the salience of each topic in each manifesto.

A range of variables reflects how individual traits influence the likelihood of voting for a particular party and might play a crucial role in shaping voter preferences. Since our analysis utilises stacked data, the observational units consist of respondent-party dyads. These individual-level characteristics cannot be directly incorporated because they remain constant across different party options. To address this, we generated yhat affinities (Pardos-Prado 2012; Van der Eijk *et al.* 2006, 2021) for age, gender, education level, left-right ideology and income and adjusted them relative to the party mean (Jurado and Navarrete 2021; Navarrete 2021; Van der Eijk *et al.* 2021). With regard to the second hypothesis (H2), we investigate whether the individual salience of specific issues moderates this relationship. We achieve this by interacting our party-level estimates with survey respondent's most important issue variable, assessing whether the relationship between a party's issue salience and the propensity to vote for this party is systematically related to the salience voters themselves assign to the key European issues studied in

this article. In essence, we are testing whether greater congruence between voter and party issue salience increases the likelihood of voting for a given party.

Descriptive overview

Based on our above-described measures, we observe a notable gap between the main concerns of citizens and the issues political parties choose to emphasise during their campaigns (see [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) and [Online Appendices B](#) and [C](#) for full details). This gap must be understood in the context of European elections, where parties tend to focus more on EU-related topics, given the nature of the elections to the European Parliament. However, across all the countries analysed in this study, the EU is a considerably less important issue for voters, who prioritise other problems when asked about the most important challenges facing their country. While less than 1% of respondents described the EU as their most important issue, it was the subject of 18% of the party manifestos sentences on average. At the same time, over 15% of respondents mentioned migration, whereas it occupied only 6% of the party manifestos. That said, we find a closer match between parties and individuals on

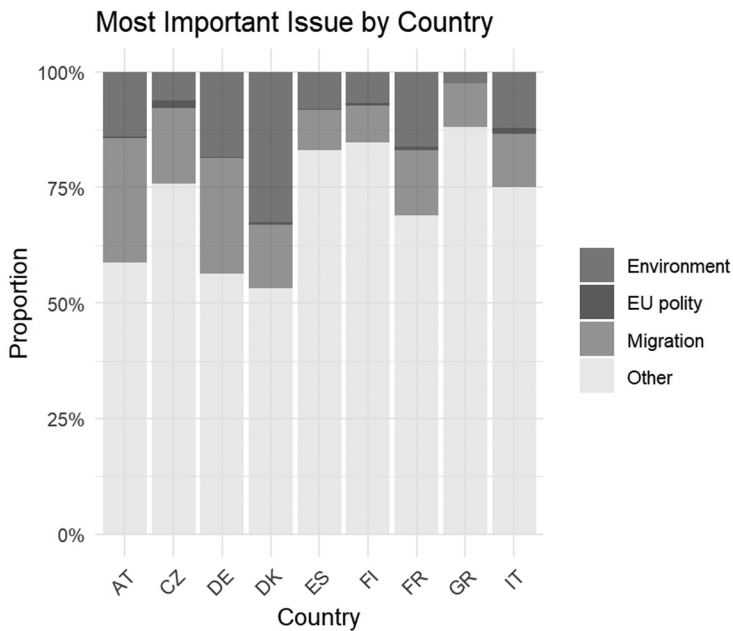


Figure 1. Respondents' most important issue by country. *Note:* Derived from open-ended survey responses. Source: Reinl *et al.* 2025.

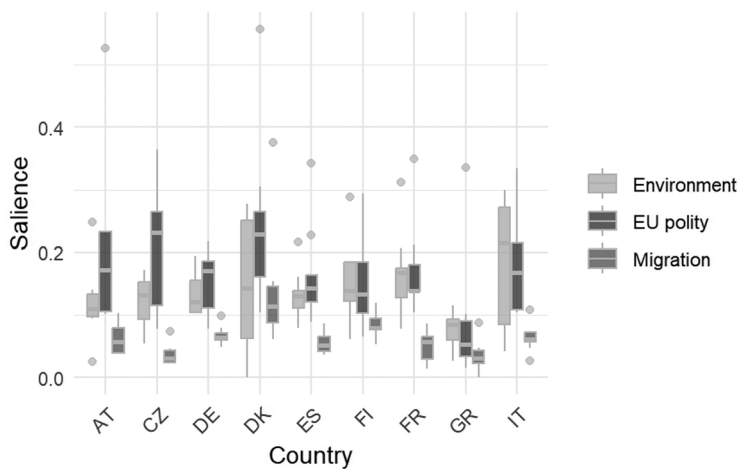


Figure 2. Salience given to the EU polity, environment and migration issues in party manifestos by country. *Note:* Authors own elaboration based on party manifestos for the EP elections 2024. Full list of parties in [Online Appendix B](#).

environmental issues, with 14% and 15% overall shares respectively. Discrepancies in issue salience between voters and parties can have many explanations. One of them could be that political parties simply fail to emphasise the issues that are important to voters. This means that they demonstrate low levels of responsiveness. Another possible explanation could lie in the type of variable used to capture the salience of issues to citizens. In this case, the survey asked about the most important issues from a much broader perspective. It neither mentioned the EU level of governance nor the EP elections. Instead, it asked about the most important issues for their own country, which might be slightly different compared to the EU as a whole.

Results

In order to address our first hypothesis of a direct effect of political parties' issue emphasis on individual voting intentions, we use separate multilevel models of pooled data for each of our key issues: the EU, the environment, and migration. The main findings are shown in [Figure 3](#), with full details available in the [Online Appendices Table D1](#).

As the large confidence intervals in the graphs indicate, there are no significant effects for parties' issue emphasis on individual PTVs for any of the issues, a result which does not support H1 at the aggregate level. However, when we disaggregate the data and run separate models at the country level (see [Figure 4](#)), we find that parties emphasising migration

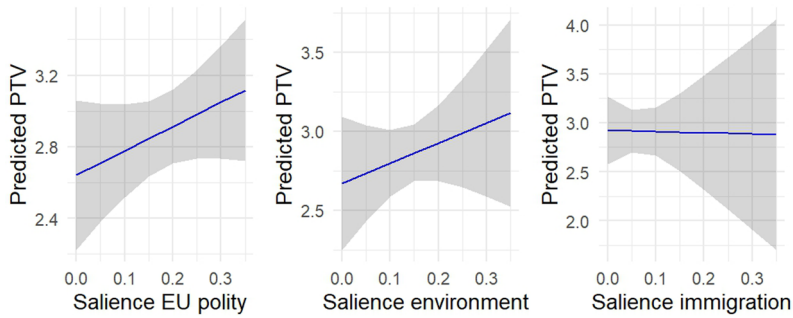


Figure 3. Effects for EU polity, environment, migration. *Note:* Full model results in Table D1 in the Online Appendices.

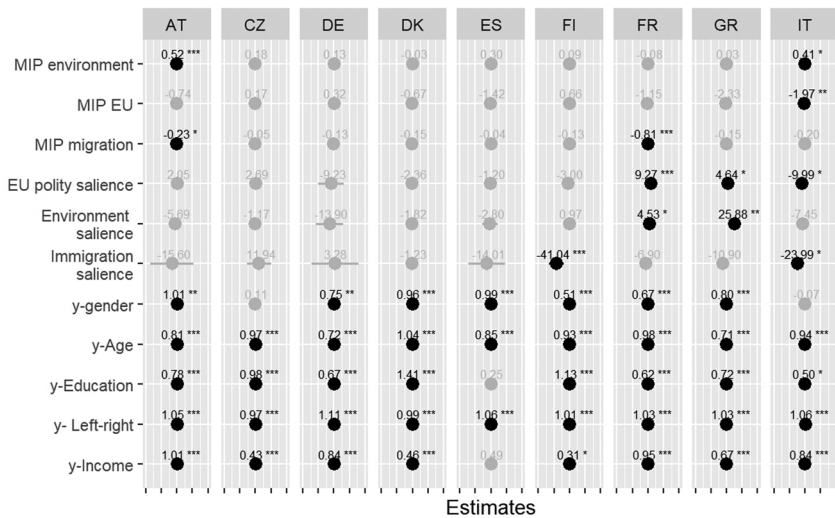


Figure 4. Baseline models. PTVs by most important issue, manifesto salience and individual variables. *Note:* Multilevel regression models with random intercepts for individuals and parties.

are, on average, less appealing to citizens in Finland and Italy. Conversely, in France and Greece, individuals are more likely to vote for parties that give greater prominence to the EU and the environment. However, in Italy, the salience of the EU is associated with a lower average PTV value. While the relationship between issue salience at the party-level and PTV does not appear to be a generalisable phenomenon, there is partial support for our first hypothesis given certain country and issue contexts. Specifically, we find a relationship between the prominence that parties give to certain topics in their manifestos and how appealing citizens find these parties, at least in four of the nine countries included in this study.

For H2, we also theorised a moderating effect⁸ on this relationship, i.e. that the more a person sees an issue as the most important, the more likely they are to vote for a party that gives greater prominence to that issue in their manifesto. To test this, we again ran various multi-level models, this time adding cross-level interactions between our measure of individual-level salience, the most important issue, and issue salience in party manifestos for each of the three issues, and studied their relationship with voting preferences. The aggregated results are shown in [Figure 5](#), with [Figures 6 to 8](#) showing the estimated effects of the interactions on PTVs for the nine countries included in our data.

At the aggregate level, comparisons between the PTVs of respondents who cite one of our key issues as important and the PTVs of other respondents reveal some significant effects of party issue emphasis. As [Figure 5](#) demonstrates, respondents who are concerned about the environment are more likely to favour parties which also emphasise environmental issues in their manifestos. We find a similarly positive effect between respondents who are concerned about migration and parties which emphasise that issue, although any apparent negative trend among respondents who are concerned about other issues is not statistically significant. Meanwhile, we find no significant effect where the topic of the European Union is concerned. Parties which emphasise the EU in their manifestos do not appear to attract more support from respondents with related concerns, at least at the aggregate level. To examine these relationships in more depth, we next turn to analysis of these results at the country level.

Starting with migration in [Figure 6](#), we observe a significant positive effect of party issue emphasis on PTV for those who say migration is the

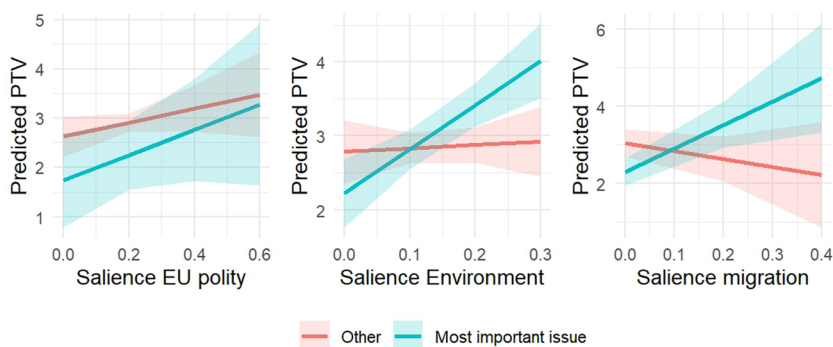


Figure 5. Pooled model interactions. *Note:* Multilevel models with random intercepts for respondent, party and country and random slopes for the most important issue at the country level (though Heisig and Schaeffer (2019) explain that random slopes should be included for all cross-level interaction variables, our models do not converge with this specification and we thus omit the lower level random effect). Full model results in [Table D3 in the Online Appendices](#).

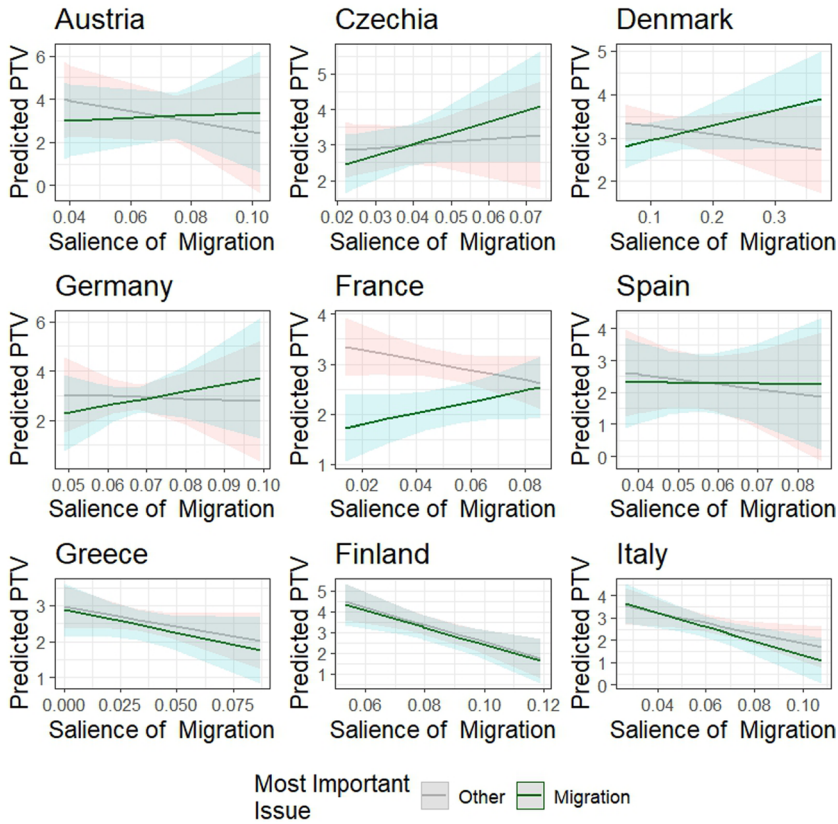


Figure 6. Model interaction migration. Note: Full model results in Table D4 in the Online Appendices.

most important issue in most countries, including Czechia, Denmark, France and Germany. We also find a significant negative effect for parties with other priorities in several countries. Citizens who prioritise migration are on average less likely to vote for a party that does not prioritise migration in its manifesto, compared to one which does. Meanwhile, parties' emphasis on migration has a significant negative effect on average PTVs in Italy and Finland. In sum, the results highlight a significant gap in how migration-focused voters evaluate parties based on the prominence they give to this issue, which is not observed among citizens focused on other problems.

We see a similar set of results for the interaction between viewing the environment as the most important issue and the saliency of environmental issues in party manifestos in most countries. As shown in Figure 7, there are significant relationships between citizens' concern for environmental issues and their evaluations of parties based on the prominence they give to those issues. This is particularly true in Germany, where

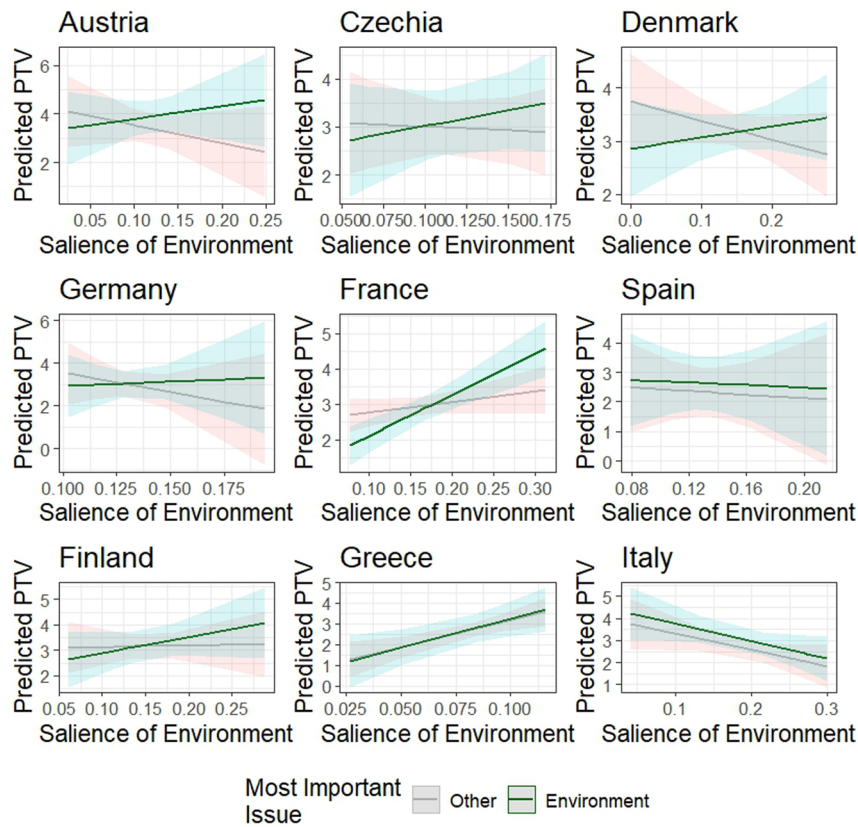


Figure 7. Model interaction environment. Note: Full model results in [Table D5](#) in the [Online Appendices](#).

citizens who prioritise green issues are significantly more likely to vote for parties that emphasise the environment in their manifestos, compared to those who consider other issues to be more important. These differences become more pronounced as the saliency of environmental issues increases.

We also observe similar trends in other countries, including Austria, Czechia, France, and Finland. Conversely, in Greece, environmental saliency appears to have a positive impact on electoral support across all respondents, while respondents with environmental concerns appear to disfavour parties which do not emphasise their priorities in several countries, including Austria, Germany, and France.

Finally, we analyse the effects of EU issue emphasis on individuals who describe it as their most important issue. The results are shown in [Figure 8](#). Unlike the preceding two issues, the prominence given to the EU by a party does not appear to significantly impact an individual's likelihood of voting for that party. In most countries, we observe a strong similarity between citizens who prioritise the EU and those who do not,

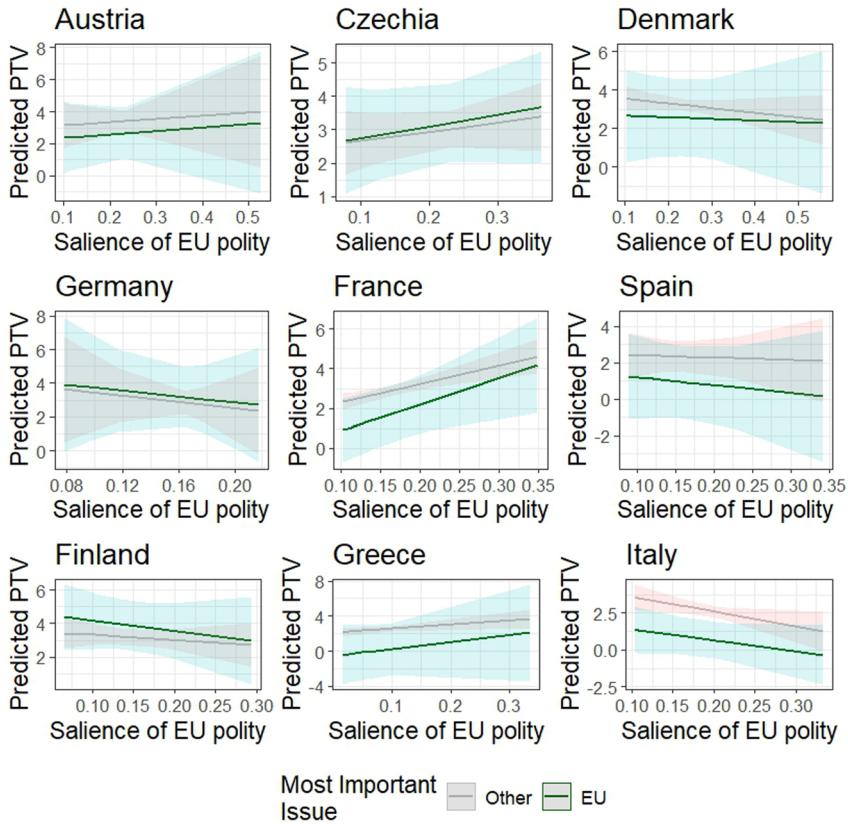


Figure 8. Model interaction EU polity. *Note:* Full model results in Table D6 in the Online Appendices.

in terms of their voting preferences. Moreover, in the majority of countries, the saliency of the EU in party manifestos has little to no effect on citizens' propensity to vote, as indicated by several flat or shallow regression lines. There are a handful of notable exceptions, however. In Italy, while a higher saliency of the EU is generally linked to a lower PTV, for individuals who see the EU as the most important issue, this effect is absent. Among these individuals, we observe a flat effect of EU saliency and a more negative evaluation of party emphasis on other issues, suggesting that the prominence of the EU has no clear impact on those most concerned about it. The large number of non-significant findings may in part be related to the relatively small number of respondents who described the EU and related issues as important.

We ran additional models testing the effects of the interaction between individual- and party-level issue saliency on PTVs related to the issues of defence and the economy. While both issues were likely to have been

prominent for some parties and voters during the period of study, and we find a significant effect in some of the countries studied, we do not consider these issues to be as relevant in the European context as the three issues analysed above. Further details of the defence and economic analysis are included in [Online Appendix D, Tables D7 and D8](#).

Conclusion

Multiple international crises also require a higher degree of coordinated international response. This is likewise and in particular true for European institutions when managing for example challenges in areas such as migration and environmental policy. Mainstream parties have an incentive to emphasise the need to deepen European integration, while radical and Eurosceptic parties promote a more divisive narrative, opposing further integration and specific European policies. Either way, for the case of the 2024 EP elections we can act on the assumption that Europe has gained relevance as a mobilising political issue. To test for this relevance of EU issue voting as a direct effect (H1), we assumed that the salience political parties place on key European issues during the 2024 EP election campaign influenced individual voting intentions. In addition to this, and as a moderating effect (H2), we assumed that the more salient the three key European issues are to a voter, the stronger the influence of political parties' issue emphasis on individual voting intentions.

The empirical findings of our different steps of analyses show the following picture: *First*, when looking at the descriptive results, there is a notable gap between the main concerns of citizens and the issues political parties choose to emphasise during their campaigns. Despite a substantial portion of respondents describing migration and the environment as the most important issue, these topics occupy only a small proportion of the parties' attention. They instead focus in large part on the EU itself, despite an apparent lack of interest or concern among respondents. *Second*, while the relationship between issue salience and PTV does not appear to be a generalisable phenomenon, there is partial support for our first hypothesis. Specifically, the prominence that parties give to certain topics in their manifestos seems to influence how appealing citizens find these parties, at least in four of the nine countries included in this study. *Third*, while in the majority of countries the salience of the EU polity in party manifestos has little to no effect on citizens' propensity to vote, there are more noticeable differences in how citizens concerned with environmental issues evaluate parties based on the prominence they give to these issues. But the dynamics surrounding the migration issue are the most intriguing: in some countries, the distinction between how parties are perceived by voters primarily concerned with migration is more pronounced

depending on the salience given to this issue in party manifestos. Thus, taken together, we find evidence of EU-issue voting around the time of the 2024 EP elections, but in some cases the indirect effects of issue salience appear to interact with its direct influence – an important and novel finding that warrants further investigation in future research.

These findings represent a dilemma for political parties and how they campaign in EP elections. On the one hand, the results suggest that focusing on migration and the environment can be detrimental to their support among voters when viewed at the aggregate level. However, a significant minority of voters care about these issues and appear to favour parties who take their concerns seriously. On this basis, both environmentalist and radical right parties may therefore struggle to broaden their appeal beyond their traditional support bases without the use of other strategies. At the same time, despite the apparently pressing need for a coordinated response to these and other issues at the European level, mainstream parties may also struggle to persuade a majority of voters of this necessity. Nevertheless, a shift in emphasis towards other issues and away from the EU may persuade some voters that their interests are being taken care of. For now, the potential success or failure of such a strategy remains unclear.

Where do we go from there? Although our findings illustrate that the prominence parties give to certain topics in their manifestos appears to influence their appeal to citizens at least in a sample of countries studied, further research is necessary to determine the generalisability of these findings. *First of all*, our research includes nine countries for which manifestos and survey data were available shortly after the 2024 elections, but analysing all EU countries would provide a more comprehensive answer to our research questions. Since our findings clearly illustrate country variations, future research within this field should bear in mind the context of each country thoroughly. *Second*, though we focus on both the aggregated data and the included countries individually, we do not look at specific party groups and their supporters. Again, the inclusion of analysis at this level may enable us to describe the party-individual relationships with greater precision. *Third*, the variable used in this study to measure respondents' most important concerns does not prime them regarding the upcoming EP election. Future experimental research could systematically manipulate this distinction between a biased and an unbiased approach to determine whether respondents express different concerns when explicitly considering the EU context. *Finally*, we study the relationship between attention at the party level and concerns at the individual level *via* measurements of salience, rather than the exact positions expressed or the nature of the concerns. As the available technology becomes cheaper and more powerful, and the methods for automated text

classification are refined, it is likely to also be possible in future research to detect stances from the manifestos at lower cost and with greater accuracy than is currently possible. By studying this measure together with attitudinal survey data, we can also assess the relationship between the two in more detail, potentially including additional issues beyond the three we include here. In this study and as part of our robustness checks, we ran our analyses for defence and the economy, but our findings are more limited and we do not consider these issues to be as relevant in the European context as the three issues analysed above. These methods can also be applied to other electoral contexts, for example where national manifestos are already hand coded and survey data is readily available, but also at the local or regional level in cases where parties produce separate manifestos.

Notes

1. It is important to distinguish between EU polity and EU policy issues. 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 conceptualize EU issues as reflecting their multifaceted nature (Bartolini 2005; Thomassen and Schmitt 1999). 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.
2. Please note that our argument is that political issues matter in the 2024 EP election campaign. It is certainly true that in a multi-level system with shared responsibilities over different levels of governance, none of these policy areas are fully Europeanized, nor is the domestic level fully responsible. However, we provide in this and the following sections strong theoretical arguments why even in a context with shared responsibilities, these issues matter in the election campaign. Moreover, empirical evidence from the 2019 EP elections illustrates that approximately 75% of the content dedicated to these issues in party manifestos is framed as European.
3. Party competition in Europe is structured by two main dimensions of political conflict: a socio-economic dimension and a socio-cultural dimension. Schäfer *et al.* (2020) show that party competition over and in Europe has been significantly reshaped in the aftermath of the Maastricht treaty: positions towards European integration have become less connected to the economic dimension and much more related to the cultural dimension.
4. Thus, we control for them in our empirical robustness checks (see [Online Appendixes D7 and D8](#)).
5. For comparability between parties and respondents in the case of Greece, we used only EU economic policy because EU polity was not mentioned by any respondent.
6. In the fine-tuning phase, in order to achieve better performance, we split the EU category into more specific EU-related categories.

7. The Euromanifesto categories used for fine-tuning our models are available in [Online Appendix B, Table B3](#).
8. Here we refer to a potential statistical effect rather than any specific causal effect.

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