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# Does the perceived EU politicization affect election results? A study of four western European countries

Stefano Camatarri, Marta Gallina<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In electoral studies, politicization is generally understood as the conflict over a specific issue within a political system (Grande and Hutter, 2016; Kriesi, 2016) that shapes party competition and might affect voters' electoral behaviour. The effects of politicization over the issue of the EU were neglected until recently, when debate over the topic was mobilized by political entrepreneurs (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). However, thanks to the acceleration of European integration, the consequences of EU politicization on electoral behaviour and the outcome of elections in general have drawn increasing scholarly attention. In particular, in the last two EP elections, the relevance of the EU issue has grown as a consequence of the Eurocrisis, giving political scientists new food for thought. Indeed, EP elections have been traditionally interpreted according to the second-order election model, which suggests that voters tend to be more concerned with domestic than supranational issues. Yet the Eurozone crisis seems to have changed this trend. Political competition in 2014 and especially in 2019 was predominantly driven by stances over European integration (Galpin and Trenz, 2019): the EU became more politicized in the national debates, and voters turned to Eurosceptic parties to show their discontent with the measures taken by the EU to stem the economic crisis (Hobolt, 2015; Hobolt, 2019). Under these changing conditions, scholars have argued that the 2019 EP elections deviated from

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the second-order model, and have been defined as the first case of purely ‘first-order polity’ elections (Galpin and Trenz, 2019) where the legitimacy of the EU becomes central to parties’ agenda and public debate. Against this background, in this chapter we investigate whether EU politicization has indeed played a role in the electoral calculus of voters in the 2019 EP elections. In other words, were parties’ stances on the EU important *per se* in voters’ electoral choice?

Although the study of the effects of EU politicization on electoral behaviour is not new to the literature (Hobolt and Spoon, 2012; Hobolt and de Vries, 2016), there is generally little focus on how party competition within the EU is perceived by voters, and how such perceptions affect voting behaviour and its macro-level consequences. Consistent with the scope of this book, in this chapter we intend to study the electoral consequences of EU politicization. To do so, we rely on a definition of politicization that takes voters’ perceptions into account, i.e. parties’ positions on the EU issue as perceived by voters (understood as the distance between one party’s position on the EU and the average position of all the other parties in the system). By studying EU politicization subjectively rather than as a characteristic of the political system, we avoid the assumption that voters understand the *actual* parties’ discourse and focus on how they grasp political competition.

Our analyses investigate both the individual and the aggregate consequences of the perceived EU politicization by exploring (1) if a party’s ability – in voters’ eyes – to acquire a distinct position on the EU issue actually matters in individual decision making at the ballot box, and (2) how such a dynamic affects the aggregate electoral performance of Euroscepticism *vis-à-vis* mainstream parties. To be specific, the first point is tested by means of logistic binary regression models where the party voted for in the 2019 EP elections is regressed on the issue of perceived EU politicization. The second point is studied by means of a tailored simulation strategy, where respondents’ party choices at the 2019 EP elections are estimated under different scenarios in which the weight of the perceived EU politicization in voting decisions is statistically manipulated. To state it better, we observe how party choice would have changed if the perceived EU politicization had counted less (or not counted) in voters’ electoral calculus.

For the analyses, we rely on data from the last wave of the European Election Voter Study (2019 EES; Schmitt et al., 2020). We focus on the 2019 EP elections since, unlike previous elections, they have been said to deviate clearly from the second-order elections model (Galpin and Trenz, 2019), and to be characterized by the importance of the stances over the EU in the political debate. Moreover, we select countries where parties have been widely described – by both scholars and public commentators – as deriving their success from a successful politicization of the EU (e.g. Treib, 2020). In particular, Hobolt (2019), although stressing that the 2019 EP elections did not bring the expected surge of Eurosceptic parties, identifies four countries where parties with anti-EU traits have witnessed a gain of vote shares.<sup>2</sup> In particular, Italy, with the success of Salvini’s Lega; the UK, where the only six-week-old Brexit Party performed well at the

<sup>2</sup> France is not included since Marine Le Pen’s National Rally had a lower share than in 2014 (Hobolt, 2019).

elections; Belgium, with the comeback of *Vlaams Belang*; and Spain, where *Vox* (defined as a ‘soft’ Eurosceptic party, see Real-Dato and Sojka, 2020) entered the parliament for the first time (Hobolt, 2019). In selecting these countries, we do not mean to expect only the above-mentioned parties to be affected by the politicization of the EU issue. Indeed, we know that often more than one party in a system may effectively politicize its debate over the EU (for example in Italy, along with the Northern League, the *M5S* compete over Eurosceptic stances and *Europa+* is clearly pro-Europe). We instead aim to narrow down the focus to those countries where EU politicization might indeed have played a role (as demonstrated by the elections’ results), but investigating the effect of politicization across all parties in those countries. This is made possible by the statistical approach we employ in this study (please refer to the ‘Data and Methods’ section for further details).

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, we provide an overview of the existing literature on the relationship between EU politicization and electoral behaviour. Based on this, we introduce our research expectations, which can be summed up in the idea that political contestation over the EU project generally ‘matters’, both at the individual and the election level. To follow, the methodological section enters into the details of our dataset, and of how we adapt it to a proper enquiry through the above-mentioned research questions. Next, the empirical section presents the figures obtained by means of our empirical process, followed by a final paragraph devoted to a wider discussion of the results and of future research perspectives on the topic.

## **EU politicization: what effects on electoral outcomes?**

In the literature, scholars have often interpreted EP elections according to the ‘second-order national election’ theory (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). This model suggests that, compared to national elections, in second-order elections there is ‘less at stake’, and people are more concerned with domestic matters. As a consequence, voter turnout is lower, there is a higher percentage of invalidated votes, a higher probability of success for small parties and a decline in support for government parties depending on the electoral cycles. Specifically, when elections take place in the midterm, the chances are higher that the government parties will be ‘punished’ by the voters and not perform well (see Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Schmitt, 2005).

Hobolt et al. (2009), studying voting behaviour at the 1999 and 2004 EP elections, did not question that domestic concerns are important in European elections, but advanced the idea that also EU-based considerations play a relevant role in the electoral choice. They showed indeed that voters who are more sceptical about EU integration compared to the party they supported on the national ballot are more likely to defect or abstain from EP elections. On a similar note, Hobolt and Spoon (2012), by focusing on voting motivations at the 2009 EP elections, confirmed that the greater the distance between voters and their national party on the EU integration issue, the more voters alter their behaviour in the EP elections by switching to another party or abstaining. Moreover, the degree of politicization of the EU integration

issue in the domestic debate is found to moderate the effect of EU distance on the probability of abstaining or switching. Generally, these findings do not repudiate the second-order model, but suggest that concerns over the EU matter to voters and shape their electoral choices.

In the context of the Eurozone crisis, the EU issue gained new relevance, both in the domestic political discourse and in voters' minds. Hobolt (2015) argued that the 2014 EP elections have been more 'European' than ever before: the EU issue was central to the national public debate across Europe, although with different perspectives on and interpretations of the economic situation (see Kriesi and Grande, 2014). Thus, it is not surprising that the Eurosceptic parties witnessed a surge in their electoral support, a clear signal that voters were more concerned with EU issues. Indeed, the growing role of the EU in co-determining budgetary measures in the countries most affected by the crisis (i.e. Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland; see also Otjes and Katsanidou, 2017) has shifted the blaming mechanisms from the government to the EU (see Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). In such a context, as Hobolt (2015) pointed out, the success of Eurosceptic parties was mainly driven by ideological factors linked to disapproval over EU measures during the crisis. Not by chance, Eurosceptic support was higher among those who were hit harder by the economic crisis, although with important variations across Europe. Specifically, in Northern Europe, where the right-wing Eurosceptic parties performed better, the drivers of Eurosceptic support were the opposition to immigration and to further EU integration. On the contrary, in the debtor states, where the left-wing Eurosceptic parties critical of the EU's austerity policies were more successful, Eurosceptic voters were not more opposed to immigration and EU integration than voters for pro-European parties (Hobolt, 2015; Hobolt and de Vries, 2016).

Although pundits and commentators expected the anti-EU parties to become dominant in the 2019 EP elections to the detriment of pro-European parties, this was not the key outcome of the elections. Instead, the electoral result was a highly fragmented European Parliament, with smaller right-wing populist, liberal and Green parties performing well (Hobolt, 2019). Nevertheless, this does not mean that EU issues did not play a role in the elections. On the contrary, as Hobolt (2019) argued, the EU has progressively become more politicized in the domestic debates, and European citizens seemed more inclined to take part in the elections, as the higher turnout rates reveal. In a context characterized by discussions over the implications of Brexit and fear over the success of Eurosceptic parties, the 2019 EP elections have been said to deviate from the 'second-order elections' pattern, and to have been transformed into a competition genuinely driven by stances on European integration (Galpin and Trenz, 2019). Against this background, Galpin and Trenz (2019) defined the 2019 EP elections as 'first-order polity elections', with the legitimacy of the EU being central to the public debate.

Drawing upon this recent research, we investigate the effects of EU politicization on electoral behaviour and election outcomes. To do this, we focus on an 'individual' definition of politicization – i.e. parties' positions on the EU as perceived by voters – in order to grasp the extent to which the EU issue is indeed mobilized by parties in the perception of voters. By testing the effect of EU politicization on electoral choice,

we explore whether voting behaviour is driven by EU-related mechanisms at the individual level. In particular, we expect that:

*H1: The more a party is perceived to have a distinct position on the EU compared to its opponents, the higher the probability that individual voters will vote for it.*

Alongside individual electoral choice, we can expect to see the effects of perceived EU politicization also at the aggregate level. In particular, scholars have pointed out that politicizing the EU issue should reward those parties that take extreme positions on this issue (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004), i.e. the Eurosceptic parties. Building on this, we intend to test whether perceived EU politicization actually contributed to the success of Eurosceptic parties at the 2019 EP elections. To do so, we rely on a counterfactual approach, through which we compare the actual situation (the baseline models) to scenarios where the effect of EU politicization is progressively and artificially decreased towards ‘zero effect’. In technical terms, we investigate how the aggregate support for anti-EU parties would have changed if the perceived EU politicization had counted less (or not counted at all) in voters’ minds. This strategy enables us to respond to the question: to what extent did EU politicization affect the outcomes of the 2019 EP elections?<sup>3</sup> Specifically, we expect that:

*H2: The lower the influence of perceived EU politicization in orienting voters’ decisions, the lower the aggregate support for anti-EU parties.*

## Data and methods

We test our hypotheses based on the 2019 European Election Study (EES) dataset. As other studies have already stressed (Schmitt et al., 2020), this is a well-established statistical source whose design particularly fits for comparative analyses of electoral behaviour. First, this is due to its large-scale nature, which allows us to test the same hypotheses across different countries based on identical series of variables and indicators. Secondly, its stratified random sampling strategy enables a proper accounting of national differences in the analysis (Marsh, 2002).<sup>4</sup> Last but not least, given its proximity to the timing of the European elections (its fieldwork traditionally starts in the weeks immediately following), the 2019 EES survey represents the best empirical standpoint for observing EU politicization processes and their effects on individual choices at the ballot box. In this respect, as mentioned above, in this chapter our gaze will be specifically turned to cases where Eurosceptic parties gained support in comparison to the previous elections, or gained representation for the first time; these are Italy, the UK, Belgium and Spain (Hobolt, 2019). In practical terms, this

<sup>3</sup> Although counterintuitive, this strategy is best when we want to test whether one factor counted for a specific outcome. Doing the opposite, i.e. manipulating the effect of EU politicization so as to increase its weight, would instead show how much this variable would have counted in a hypothetical situation that has not yet occurred.

<sup>4</sup> The only exceptions to such a procedure were Malta and Cyprus. For further information, see: <http://europeanelectionstudies.net/european-election-studies/ees-2019-study/voter-study-2019>

means that the original EES cross-country sample has been reduced to four separate sub-samples – one for each of the selected countries.

For the sake of our analysis, however, it is important to specify that such derived sub-samples cannot be analysed in their original format (i.e. the ‘respondent\*variable’ structure) if the aim is to answer questions such as those we target (van der Eijk, 2017). Indeed, the overall (and not party-specific) dynamics underlying electoral decision-making and their consequences can be meaningfully explored only if EES data are put in so-called stacked form<sup>5</sup> (e.g. van der Eijk et al., 2006; Franklin and Renko, 2013). A stacked dataset is a reshaped version of an original ‘respondent\*variable’ dataset, where each case is multiplied by the number of parties he/she gets to choose from in an election. Within such a framework, our *dependent variable* – i.e. party choice in the 2019 European Election – is a binary variable which assumes value 1 in correspondence with the party the respondent votes for, and value 0 in the case of all other competing parties. This variable has been used to test both H1 and H2, but in the latter case it is aggregated so as to get a measure of party vote shares.

Moving on to the independent variables, it is worth saying that – along with a measure of the perceived EU politicization among parties – our models include controls for all the main theories of voting behaviour. To start with, we rely on the ideological distance between voters and parties on the left–right spectrum, as ideology has been said to count in electoral choice (e.g. Lachat, 2008). This is measured, for each respondent, as the difference between his/her self-placement on left–right spectrum and his/her perceived position of each political party on the same continuum, represented by a scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). Then, the models include an indicator of party identification, which consists of merging two different variables: closeness to a political party in generic terms (where 1 stands for feeling close to a party and 0 identifies all other non-partisan cases) and ‘strength’ of party identification, which assigns to partisan respondents the values of 1, 2 or 3 corresponding to their reporting of a ‘weak’, ‘moderate’ or ‘high’ sense of closeness to a particular party. Within a stacked data matrix, these two pieces of information are combined in such a way that a cell either assumes value 0 (this is the case with parties the respondent does not identify with) or a value of 1, 2 or 3, indicating the strength of their attachment to the party they identify with. Next, we take into account issue voting by including in our models respondents’ positions on both socio-economic and cultural policy issues, each of which is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (very much against) to 10 (very much in favour). To be exact, the variables involved in our estimates concern individual opinions towards economic redistribution, state intervention in the economy, same sex marriage, immigration and environmental protection. However, since in a stacked environment the units of analysis are no longer individual respondents but dyads (‘respondent\*party’ combinations), these policy variables have to be adjusted accordingly so as to reflect a relationship between

<sup>5</sup> The stacked form, defined also as long form, is necessary when we want to study the effect of certain independent variables on the calculus of voting for each party in the context under study (van der Eijk, 2018). In the short form of the dataset, these analyses would require dummy variables for all the parties and multiple regression models (i.e. as many models as the number of parties in the system).



individuals and each political party. To do that, we relied on an established strategy based on regressing the actual vote choice on each policy issue position (e.g. van der Brug et al., 2000).<sup>6</sup> The resulting predicted probabilities (i.e. *y-hats*) have then been subtracted to a constant term per party so as to prevent any party-specific disturbance in the estimates, and included in the dataset as a proxy measure of voter-party proximity on each predictor (see also Baudewyns and Camatarri, 2020). The same procedure has been applied to the sociodemographic predictors accounting for socio-structural voting theories. These variables concern, in order: gender, age, education, living area (rural vs. urban), church attendance, objective and subjective social class, belonging to a trade union, marital and citizen vs. foreign status in the country. In this case, however, a single ‘summary’ *y-hat*, or predicted value, has been derived based on multiple regressions involving, for each party, EP vote choice, on the one hand, and all these predictors at once, on the other hand.

Last but not least, our key *independent variable*, i.e. perceived EU politicization, has been calculated as the absolute distance on the EU integration issue between each national party and the mean of its party system, as perceived by individual respondents. This means that the higher the value, the higher the ability/success of the concerned party in differentiating from all others on the EU issue. In the EES, survey-perceived party positions on EU unification are measured on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means ‘it should be pushed further’ and 10 means ‘it has already gone too far’. Please refer to Table 1 at the end of this section for a comprehensive overview of all the independent variables we employ and of their descriptive statistics.

As mentioned at the beginning, the test of our second hypothesis relies on a manipulation of this variable’s effect on party choice in each of the four countries in our analysis (Camatarri, 2020; van der Brug et al., 2007). More specifically, the relevance of perceived EU politicization in orienting individual choices is going to be progressively weakened by artificially bringing its regression coefficient towards zero (i.e. a null effect).<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, the aggregate impact of such a decrease is going to be estimated based on a rather established procedure. First, for both the ‘baseline’ and the simulation voting models, we will compute the resulting predicted probabilities of voting for each party. Afterwards, based on the assumption that ‘highest probability = choice’, we will calculate individuals’ predicted vote under both real world and counterfactual conditions. Such information will be then aggregated at the level of each party so as to provide an overview of election results under each estimated scenario.

<sup>6</sup> For further information on the questions’ wording, please see: <http://europeanelectionstudies.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-EES-post-electoral-survey-Master-questionnaire.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> For the record, election results are first simulated under the assumption that EU politicization had two-thirds of its baseline effects in a country (e.g.  $B=0.086$  in Spain) then one-third ( $B=0.043$ ) and finally no effect. Concretely, this is fulfilled by computing a new vote function (i.e. variable) for each fictitious scenario, where all the elements on the right side of the equation reflect exactly the sequence of independent variables above, multiplied by their  $B$  coefficient. In conclusion, we transformed the resulting predicted values in probability form, in line with our binary logit framework.

**Table 1.** List of Independent Variables and Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Min.	Max.	St.dev.	N (respondents*party)
Left–Right proximity to stack party	6.59	0	10	2.87	23,319
Feeling of closeness to stack party	0.26	0	3	0.69	18,279
Attitude towards government’s intervention in the economy (y-hat)	0.50	0.17	0.84	0.08	19,197
Attitude towards immigration (y-hat)	0.50	0.08	0.83	0.12	20,490
Attitude towards same-sex marriage (y-hat)	0.50	0.16	0.81	0.10	20,641
Attitude towards environmental protection (y-hat)	0.50	0.07	0.88	0.10	20,722
Attitude towards redistribution towards the poor (y-hat)	0.50	0.14	0.83	0.10	20,303
Socio-structural characteristics (y-hat)	0.52	0	1	0.20	18,726
Perception of stack party’s EU politicization	1.97	0	8.57	1.63	22,463

Source : 2019 European Election Voter Study

## What ‘shaping power’ for EU politicization? An empirical test of individual reasoning and its aggregate outcomes

In the theoretical section of this chapter, we put forward two specific expectations regarding the electoral impact of EU-based politicization among political parties as perceived by voters. Based on the output of a regression analysis, Table 2 provides an answer to our H1. The regression coefficient of the perceived EU politicization at the party level (as perceived by voters) appears stably positive and statistically significant in each of the involved countries. Within the scenario of a stacked ‘generic’ analysis, this means that the more politicized a party appears, i.e. differentiated from its competitors, the higher the probability it will be voted for. Importantly, such a relationship holds whatever the characteristic of the party (be it populist, mainstream, etc.) and whatever the ‘direction’ of EU politicization (‘pro’- or ‘anti’-integration/unification). Similar specifications cannot be disregarded as non-essential since they indicate that the perceived EU politicization, in voters’ eyes, *matters per se*. Indeed, citizens appear somehow to appreciate ‘clarity’ on the EU issue, and to privilege political parties that hold a distinct stance on that topic, even apart from the actual ‘content’ of their policy platform (i.e. its ‘pro-’ or ‘anti’-European character).

Importantly, this should not instil the false assumption that all other predictors we included are overall negligible. Indeed, the fact that our explanatory models

reached such high levels of explained variance (the Pseudo  $R^2$  never falls below 0.40 in all the four countries) is mostly due to the presence of mid- and long-term predictors of voting behaviour, which are statistically significant across all models and able to cover a relevant portion of the dependent variable. The reference is to party identification, ideological proximity to a party and socio-structural factors. When it comes to policy positions, on the other hand, the picture appears rather less homogeneous, as opinions on socio-economic topics appear to count systematically less than cultural issues in all the countries. Moreover, within this latter group, same-sex marriage and – above all – immigration emerge as clearly prominent compared to environmental protection.

**Table 2.** Explaining of EP vote choice in four countries: regression outcomes

	Italy	Belgium	United Kingdom	Spain
<b>Left–Right proximity to stack party</b>	0.294*** (0.0479)	0.247*** (0.0460)	0.279*** (0.0468)	0.333*** (0.0459)
<b>Closeness to stack party</b>	2.478*** (0.108)	2.409*** (128)	1.425*** (0.0795)	2.904*** (0.140)
<b>Attitude towards government's intervention in the economy (y-hat)</b>	0.722 (1.509)	2.437** (1.235)	1.564 (1.366)	1.600 (1.015)
<b>Attitude towards immigration (y-hat)</b>	2.215*** (0.635)	2.204 (1.484)	4.403*** (0.721)	0.706 (0.778)
<b>Attitude towards same-sex marriage (y-hat)</b>	1.757** (0.822)	4.979*** (1.380)	1.842* (1.065)	0.0505 (0.967)
<b>Attitude towards environmental protection (y-hat)</b>	2.131* (1.290)	1.215 (960)	1.042 (0.809)	0.507 (1.126)
<b>Attitude towards economic redistribution (y-hat)</b>	-0.422 (1.397)	0.0340 (1.022)	-1.884 (1.157)	-0.0181 (0.874)
<b>Socio-structural characteristics (y-hat)</b>	1.322*** (0.512)	3.396*** (487)	1.169*** (0.422)	1.566*** (0.495)
<b>Perception of stack party's EU politicization</b>	0.161*** (0.0496)	0.141** (0.0610)	0.281*** (0.0472)	0.130** (0.0534)
<b>Constant</b>	-9.909*** (1.047)	-12.53*** (1.335)	-9.808*** (0.849)	-8.245*** (0.839)
<b>Pseudo <math>R^2</math></b>	0.64	0.56	0.40	0.63
<b>Observations</b>	3,481	2,440	2,304	2,834

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

Source: 2019 European Election Voter Study

All that being established, we can now focus our attention on the second question at the centre of this chapter (H2). As mentioned before, in a context where ‘the assignment of policy competencies to the European Union has reduced the divergence of party policy positions nationally’ (Nanou and Dorussen, 2013, p. 71), we could expect that the parties putting more effort into politicizing the EU (and getting rewarded for it) are the anti-European ones. In counterfactual terms, this would also mean that if voters were less sensitive (or simply more indifferent) to EU-related competitive dynamics, the same anti-European parties would be the most negatively affected from an electoral standpoint. Table A1 in the appendix presents the outcomes of the electoral simulation strategy described in the previous section. As one can see, each row is devoted to a specific electoral scenario, i.e. a baseline EP election outcome (based on prediction on actual data) and three ‘fictitious’ outcomes relying on an artificially decreased effect of the EU politicization factor. The last row corresponds to the hypothetical situation where this variable approximates a ‘zero effect’ in citizens’ electoral decisions at the 2019 EP Election.

To start with the case of Italy, it is rather clear even at first sight that there are not significant changes across the estimated scenarios. Switching indeed from a baseline condition to an ‘extreme’ situation where perceived EU politicization did not matter at all for the voters in May 2019, there are no relevant changes to be reported, especially for what concerns centre-right parties and the Five Star Movement. On the other hand, the Democratic Party would gain 0.3% of the votes under the ‘zero’ EU politicization effect hypothesis, while Europa+ would perform slightly less well. This latter figure should not pass unnoticed, as it indicates that higher EU politicization does not necessarily benefit only anti-EU parties but also specific forces that mobilize the EU issue in a ‘positive’ sense, e.g. associating it with the issue of civil rights, environmental protection, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Moving on to the UK, our numbers appear to tell a rather similar story, in the sense that a decreasing effect of our EU politicization variable does not seem to imply major changes in parties’ electoral sizes at the 2019 EP Election. Yet, unlike in the Italian case, a slightly improved record of traditional parties across the four estimated scenarios (i.e. Labour and especially the Conservatives) is here clearly counterbalanced by the lower success of the Brexit Party. Such a pattern interestingly aligns with our counterfactual expectation that in a world where EU politicization would not matter, the most likely to ‘suffer’ electorally at the EP elections would be parties that strongly invested in contesting EU policies (if not of the whole EU project). Regardless, it must be stressed that the shifts in parties’ performances across scenarios are all in all pretty minor (they hardly exceed 2 per cent of the total votes), which makes the perceived EU politicization basically inconsequential to parties’ electoral fortunes in the country.

Similar results apply to Belgium. Indeed, along with most of the other parties, the record of both relevant Eurosceptic actors in the country (i.e. the Front National and Vlaams Belang in Wallonia and Flanders, respectively) appears totally unaffected by

<sup>8</sup> As shown in appendix (Tables A1b and A1c) in particular) this interpretation seems also confirmed by the fact that, in the case of ‘zero’ EU politicization effect, the Greens would have performed less well both in Belgium (the French-speaking part) and in the UK.

the perceived importance of EU politicization to voters' decisions. Despite this, EU politicization still turns out to play a decisive role in determining the 'local' winner in Wallonia. This is not surprising given its high level of party fragmentation in that territory (see also De Winter et al., 2006; De Winter and Baudewyns, 2015). Indeed, if EU politicization was out of the picture, the Socialist Party would be able to unseat Ecolo and gain the first place with only a minimal increase in its total votes (+0.6).

To complete the picture, also in Spain election results look overall poorly affected by EU-related competition dynamics. Indeed, the distribution of the total votes between parties remains strikingly the same both under 'real world' conditions and in each simulated scenario. This also applies to the newcomer VOX, a party that despite its nationalist support base (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020) does not appear to owe any portion of its electoral success to how it appears politicized on the EU in public debates.

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we have studied the electoral consequences of EU politicization. As the volume of studies in this field clearly speaks to, this is far from being a neglected topic in political research. Yet, as mentioned before, scholars have been so far mostly focused on explaining its effects either on voting for specific parties, such as anti-EU ones (e.g. Camatarri and Zucchini, 2019), or on vote switching (Spoon and Klüver, 2019), often overlooking if and how party competition on EU issues characterizes electoral decision-making as a whole and its consequences on election results. Not only that, but apart from a few exceptions (e.g. van Spanje and de Vreese, 2011), current studies have measured EU politicization by means of expert surveys, party manifestos and media content (e.g. Hutter and Kriesi, 2019), without going into the details of how voters actually perceive such processes and how their perceptions of EU politicization come to affect their individual choices at the ballot box, as well as the aggregate consequences of this.

In this contribution, we have tried to advance the existing knowledge on all these fronts by focusing on four countries where successful EU politicization strategies have been repeatedly hypothesized to underlie parties' performance, and particularly the huge success of anti-EU forces at the 2019 EP elections. We did so by analysing electoral data collected within the framework of a well-established international survey program: the 2019 European Election Voter Study. As explained in the results section, the takeaways of our empirical examination are basically two, and can be summarized as follows. First, citizens' perceptions of EU politicization among political parties *matter* for their electoral choices, all the other factors considered. As our models in Table 2 show, the regression coefficients associated with this variable are in fact stably positive and statistically significant (the p-value of these estimates never goes beyond 0.05). This finding complements the results of Le Corre Juratic, Carmo Duarte and Versailles (chapter 1, in this book), who find that when parties provide clearer cues, citizens develop more diverse attitudes, with an important share of negative attitudes

towards the EU. Combining these two findings, we can conclude that EU politicization not only affects citizens' attitudes, but also their voting behaviour.

With respect to the effects of this same predictor on aggregate election results, however, the picture looks radically different. Our simulation models show indeed that if perceived EU politicization had no weight in citizens' decisions, very little (if anything, especially in Spain and in the Belgian Flanders) would have changed at the level of the aggregate distribution of total votes in our four countries. Importantly, this applies to both Eurosceptic and Europhile parties, although in our results some of these actors (i.e., the Brexit Party, Europa+, the UK Greens, Ecolo and DéFI) appear to benefit slightly from the politicization of the EU in public debates.<sup>9</sup> Interpreting this counterintuitive result has represented the challenge of this research. In fact, the contrast between these two findings reflects the substantive difference – too often overlooked in studies of voting behaviour – between the drivers of individual party choices on the one hand and the factors affecting the results of elections on the other hand (Converse, 1975). The former concern indeed the individual psychology of the voter, while the latter are macro-level phenomena that, as such, may be amenable to multiple factors, including party competition. Against this background, it is entirely plausible that EU issues, although enjoying a significant effect in voters' reasoning, have a weak impact on election results. Indeed, excessive competition among too many actors (or overly ambitious positions) on that topic (e.g. Hobolt and Rodon, 2020), could have led, in the aggregate, to a dispersion of citizens' preferences across the party spectrum. Future studies on this topic should be more aware of the analytical distinction between psychological and party-level effects of EU politicization, and should enquire more systematically into what party competition patterns within the EU allow EU issue voting to produce visible aggregate effects beyond the 'sphere' of individual voting behaviour. This study represents a first attempt in this direction, using a limited number of country cases. However, the increasing availability of cross-country electoral data sources provides a rich and promising ground for high-quality comparative analysis in the future, not only limited to the field of European elections, but also to first-order electoral contests in both Western and Eastern countries.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It needs to be acknowledged that tiny changes in the aggregate vote shares can still imply substantive differences in how specific parties manage (or fail) to overcome the minimum thresholds necessary for accessing representation (this is usually the case for minor and/or several challenger actors) in the European election framework.

<sup>10</sup> Among the many, we mention here the Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems, a long-standing collaborative project between a relevant number of National Election Studies worldwide. For more information, see: <https://ceses.org>.

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## Appendixes

**Table A1a.** EU politicization in voters' reasoning and how it affects electoral outcomes: a counterfactual analysis, Italy (%)

	Left	Democratic Party	+Europe	Go Italy	Brothers of Italy	Northern League	5 Star Movement
<b>Baseline conditions</b>	2.54	23.41	5.99	6.72	8.35	33.94	19.06
<b>1st simulation</b>	2.36	23.77	5.81	6.72	8.35	33.94	19.06
<b>2nd simulation</b>	2.36	23.96	5.63	6.72	8.35	33.94	19.06
<b>3rd simulation (zero effect)</b>	2.54	23.77	5.63	6.72	8.35	33.94	19.06

**Table A1b.** EU politicization in voters' reasoning and how it affects electoral outcomes: a counterfactual analysis, United Kingdom (%)

	Green Party	Labour Party	LibDem	Conservatives	SNP	UKIP	Brexit Party
<b>Baseline conditions</b>	5.18	27.79	14.44	26.43	5.45	2.45	18.26
<b>1st simulation</b>	5.18	28.07	14.44	27.25	5.45	2.45	17.17
<b>2nd simulation</b>	4.90	28.07	14.71	27.52	5.72	2.45	16.62
<b>3rd simulation (zero effect)</b>	4.90	28.07	14.71	27.79	5.72	2.45	16.35

**Table A1c.** EU politicization in voters' reasoning and how it affects electoral outcomes: a counterfactual analysis, Belgium (%)

<i>Wallonia</i>	Ecolo	Socialist Party	PTB	MR	cdH	FN	DéFI
<b>Baseline conditions</b>	21.34	20.73	9.15	20.73	17.68	1.22	9.15
<b>1st simulation</b>	20.12	21.34	9.15	20.73	18.29	1.22	9.15
<b>2nd simulation</b>	20.12	21.34	9.15	20.73	18.29	1.22	9.15
<b>3rd simulation (zero effect)</b>	20.12	21.34	10.37	20.12	18.29	1.22	8.54

<i>Flanders</i>	Greens	PvdA	Sp.a	Open VLD	CD&V	VB	N-VA
<b>Baseline conditions</b>	9.76	5.69	10.98	9.76	6.10	21.54	36.18
<b>1st simulation</b>	9.76	5.69	10.98	9.76	6.10	21.54	36.18
<b>2nd simulation</b>	9.76	5.69	10.98	9.76	6.10	21.54	36.18
<b>3rd simulation (zero effect)</b>	9.76	5.69	10.98	9.76	6.10	21.54	36.18

**Table A1d.** EU politicization in voters' reasoning and how it affects electoral outcomes: a counterfactual analysis, Spain (%)

	<b>Compromise</b>	<b>We can</b>	<b>Socialist Party</b>	<b>Citizens</b>	<b>People's Party</b>	<b>Republics Now</b>	<b>VOX</b>
<b>Baseline conditions</b>	1.23	13.99	36.83	14.20	18.93	4.32	10.49
<b>1st simulation</b>	1.23	13.99	36.83	14.20	18.93	4.32	10.49
<b>2nd simulation</b>	1.23	13.99	36.83	14.20	18.93	4.32	10.49
<b>3rd simulation (zero effect)</b>	1.23	13.99	36.83	14.20	18.93	4.32	10.49