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Party competition on European issues in the 2024 EP elections

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Abstract. Recent developments have turned European integration from a "sleeping giant" into an active political issue. The Maastricht Treaty politicized Europe in national and European Parliament elections. Cross-border crises, like migration and environmental challenges, have further increased the importance of coordinated EU responses. Moreover, an entirely new family of Eurosceptic parties has emerged and consolidated over the past decade. Given that one of their main aims is to challenge and criticise the European Union (EU), Eurosceptic parties have a particular interest in European issues – the European polity as well as major European policies. Against this background, this paper examines whether and how political parties have emphasised these issues during the 2024 EP elections, compared to 2019, and contrasting Eurosceptic and mainstream parties. Drawing on annotated data from the 2019 Euromanifesto project, we fine-tune transformer-based deep learning multilingual models to detect parties' salience and positions on European polity and policy issues in nine countries during the 2024 EP elections. Our analyses show that the salience of European issues has increased on average, in particular for the EU polity. In terms of positions, we detect a pattern of increasing negativity of mainstream parties on European policy issues, such as migration and the environment, whereas Eurosceptic parties (in particular of the far-right) appear to have become less negative on the EU. In sum, our results suggest an increasing relevance of EU-wide issues, with different patterns of polarisation.

Keywords: party competition, European Parliament elections, large language models, European integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Several recent developments have transformed European topics into important political issues for party competition in elections, thus turning the issue of European integration from a sleeping giant – using the well-known metaphor by Cees van der Eijk and Marc Franklin (2004) – into an active volcano. An important factor has been the fact that the European Union (EU) entered a truly contested period following the Maastricht Treaty, which led to the politicisation of Europe in both national and European Parlia-

ment (EP) elections (Braun & Grande 2021; Hutter et al. 2016; Costa Lobo 2023). Moreover, multiple crises have increasingly transcended borders in recent years, necessitating a coordinated response from national governments. In such contexts, the ability of European institutions to provide the necessary coordination therefore becomes more important than ever, particularly in areas such as migration and environmental policy. In line with these two major developments, mainstream parties, which are typically known for supporting stronger EU institutions, emphasise the need to deepen European integration, including potential treaty changes, to deal with the international crises. Meanwhile, Eurosceptic parties take the opposite approach, promoting a more divisive narrative and standing against further integration and specific Europe-wide policies. Accordingly, in the two recent rounds of EP elections – in 2019 (Braun & Schäfer 2022; Braun & Carteny 2024) and 2024 – European issues seem to have had the potential to shape party competition (Hartland et al. 2025).

An additional major driving force in this development was the consolidation of Eurosceptic parties all over Europe and at different levels of governance in this period. Previous evidence shows that the rise of Eurosceptic parties has affected party competition in Europe, particularly with regard to European issues (Meijers and Rauh 2016; Meijers 2017; Williams and Ishiyama 2018; Adam et al. 2016; Maier et al. 2021; Braun et al. 2020; Braun and Grande 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte 2021; Beaudonnet and Gomez 2024). Moreover, we can observe important variations when we differentiate between European polity and policy issues, and left and right party competition (Braun and Carteny 2024). The success of Eurosceptic parties affects the issue salience and position of mainstream left parties on the EU polity, for example. In addition, higher levels of support for far-right Eurosceptic parties affect the position of mainstream right parties on EU cultural policy issues, while mainstream left parties seem largely unresponsive to the success of Eurosceptic parties on EU economic policy issues.

In view of these findings and the fact that European issues (a) are more than the often studied EU integration issues and (b) need to be conceptualised at least as EU polity and EU policy issues, we are interested in three types of European issues: EU integration, the environment, and migration. Beside criticising the EU polity, Eurosceptic parties propose alternative approaches particularly for the migration issue, which can be interpreted as the most salient theme in Europe and thus a highly prominent topic for party competition (Grande et al. 2018; Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019; van der Brug et al. 2015). This is, to a lesser but increasing extent, true for the environmental issue (Puleo et al. 2024). Our analysis considers whether political parties emphasise these critical issues as well as the positions they take. We provide empirical insights on whether European issues in the 2024 EP election campaign played a more important role than in the 2019 campaign, and whether differences in salience and positions between mainstream and Eurosceptic parties have grown during the intervening years.

Accordingly, we seek to study the differences in party competition between the 2019 and 2024 EP elections, addressing the following research questions: *Did the salience and importance of key European issues increase in the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019? Have the positions of the political parties, in particular between Eurosceptic and mainstream parties, become more polarised?* To address these questions, this paper examines whether and how Eurosceptic and mainstream parties have emphasised different types of European issues during the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019, as well as their positioning towards these issues.

In terms of data, we draw on annotated data from the 2019 Euromanifesto project (Reinl and Braun 2023) and use this to fine-tune transformer-based deep learning models. With these fine-tuned models, we then classify the topic and stance of each sentence in these documents, from which we estimate party salience and positions on European polity and policy issues in nine EU member states representing Central, Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe (Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain).

Based on this procedure, we provide descriptive evidence for the salience attached to three key issues – EU integration, the environment, migration – by European parties, as well as their positions. Our findings show that, compared to 2019, the salience of European issues increased significantly in the 2024 election campaigns, particularly concerning the EU polity. However, the level of emphasis varies across topics, with migration and environmental issues showing less consistent patterns of salience increase. In terms of positions, Eurosceptic parties, particularly those on the far right, have become less critical of the EU polity and migration, while mainstream and far-left parties exhibit more negative stances on migration. On environmental issues, a general shift towards more negative positions is evident across all party types, reflecting growing contestation over EU green policies. Our findings demonstrate both the growing relevance of European issues and the evolving polarisation among political parties on these critical topics, and highlight the challenges ahead for coordinated European responses to international crises.

2. STATE OF THE ART AND THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

Our main research questions are*: Did the salience and importance of key European issues increase in the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019? Have the positions of the political parties, particularly between Eurosceptic and mainstream parties, become more polarised?* To answer these and related questions, we review the scholarly literature on elections to the European Parliament (EP) and the relevance of European issues.

Why should we expect that the salience of key European issues has increased and positions have become more polarized in the 2024 EP elections? First of all, political issues are important in electoral contests (Aardal and Wijnen 2005). Policy preferences are considered a prerequisite for democratic political systems (Macdonald et al. 1991). Even for the particular case of EP elections, which have for a long time been characterised as second-order contests (Reif and Schmitt 1980), this is true in the aftermath of the 'permissive consensus' over European politics (Eichenberg and Dalton 2007), the awakening of the 'sleeping giant' (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004), the new period of 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2009), and in particular the politicisation of Europe (e.g., Costa Lobo 2023; Hutter et al. 2016). All of this has transformed EP elections into contests where European issues finally played an important role. This has been shown for past elections (e.g., de Vries 2010; Jurado and Navarrete 2021; Braun 2021; Carrieri 2024; Maier et al. 2021; Rapp 2024; Schäfer 2021) as well as for the most recent 2024 election to the EP (Hartland et al. 2025). Complementing this literature, Hix and Cunningham (2025) demonstrate that while the 2024 contest still bore the hallmarks of a second-order national election, the usual anti-government penalty was patchy and party-family effects flipped, with mainstream centre-right lists outperforming and the radical left slumping. Mudde (2024) adds that far-right parties nevertheless gained roughly a quarter of the vote – matching 2014 and 2019 – yet remain split across three groups, curbing their ability to convert electoral gains into cohesive parliamentary power. Together these findings suggest that the 2024 EP elections combined heightened issue salience and partisan polarisation with a weakened, more uneven second-order logic, making national dynamics and parliamentary fragmentation central to understanding the outcome.

European issues are complex and difficult to define, given the diverse interpretations and meanings associated with EU-related topics. Previous research has shown that focusing solely on one aspect of Europe – particularly without explicitly addressing the EU polity, meaning the debate over advancing or opposing European integration – provides a highly distorted view of party competition within the EU (Braun et al. 2016). To address this, we adopt a broader conceptualisation of EU issues that captures their complex and multifaceted nature in the way that was suggested theoretically a long time ago (Bartolini 2005; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997, 1999; Schmitt 2008). This approach recognizes that EU polity matters – referring to the institutional and procedural foundations of the EU – are just as important to party competition as concrete policy issues such as the economy, migration or social policies. In our opinion, three European issues in particular have been heavily debated in recent times in European politics, and therefore are expected to matter not only in the 2019 but also in the 2024 EP elections: EU integration, the environment, migration (but see also Braun and Schäfer 2022; Hartland et al. 2025).

The issue of European integration is still a matter of debate in view of the fact that we can observe an ongoing consolidation of Euroscepticism throughout Europe at all levels of governance. With this consolidation of Eurosceptic parties, party competition has become more European and more critical towards European integration (Braun and Carteny 2024). Euroscepticism has evolved over time from a quasi-pathology to a persistent and mainstream phenomenon shaping Europe (Vasilopoulou 2013; Usherwood and Startin 2013; Brack and Startin 2015; Leconte 2015) that is "here to stay" (Treib 2021). In addition to the European integration issue and at least since the mid-2010s, the migration issue has been among the most salient themes in European party competition (Grande et al. 2018; Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019; van der Brug et al. 2015). It was not only a salient topic, but also produced distinct positions among different party families between the 2019 and 2024 EP elections. Although migration was not among the key topics in the 2019 EP election campaign itself, it had the power to mobilise the voters (Braun and Schäfer 2022) and the compromise solution shortly before the 2024 EP elections at the EU level – the EU pact on migration and asylum – brought the topic back onto the public agenda and made it more salient and polarized again. A recent study shows that citizens concerned with migration issues evaluate parties based on the prominence they give to these issues during the 2024 EP election campaign (Hartland et al. 2025). An additional political issue which was debated in Europe in this phase was the environmental issue. It was strongly related to the success of Green parties in the 2019 EP elections (Pearson and Rüdig 2020), together with the prominence of the "European Green Deal" among European Commission

President Ursula von der Leyen's top priorities, but also related to school strikes and the "Fridays for Future" protest movement. Between the 2019 and the 2024 EP elections, environmental protection as well as climate change mitigation lost some visibility and public support. Moreover, just before the 2024 EP elections, widespread farmer protests across Europe challenged the "European Green Deal". This, however, brought environmental issues back into the public spotlight. Again, for this issue, it has been shown recently that citizens concerned with the environment evaluate parties based on the prominence they give to these issues during the 2024 EP election campaign (Hartland et al. 2025).

Drawing on the above-discussed recent debates and developments concerning the EU's polity and policy challenges, we expect the salience of EU-related issues to persist – and even intensify – during the 2024 European Parliament elections compared to 2019. This heightened salience is likely to be especially pronounced in relation to EU-level policy issues.

H1: The average party emphasis on key EU issues increased between 2019 and 2024.
H2: Salience increased more for EU policy issues (migration and environment) than for the EU polity.

Political parties are supposed to respond to such key European policy issues in their EP election campaigns – this is particularly true for Eurosceptic parties, who benefit even more from emphasising European issues, but it is equally true for mainstream parties. Eurosceptic parties have more strategic reasons than others to highlight European issues. Eurosceptic challenger parties have been characterised as "issue entrepreneurs" that have ultimately emphasised the issue of EU integration – a topic that some view as having been long neglected by mainstream parties (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015; Green-Pedersen 2012; Hobolt and de Vries 2015; Lefkofridi 2020). Eurosceptic parties were thus presumed to benefit the most in terms of votes by emphasising all kinds of EU-related issues. However, once mainstream parties began to realise that they could also benefit from emphasising EU-related issues (galvanised in part by the success of some Eurosceptic parties across the bloc), they also started to put more emphasis there. Hence, mainstream parties first followed de-emphasising strategies (Rovny 2012) and are now following the strategy of moving towards the challenger party (policy convergence), an accommodative strategy to draw voters away from the Eurosceptic challenger parties (Meguid 2005). In recent times of consolidated Euroscepticism, this has eventually resulted in an overall higher salience of EU polity issues as well as a more critical position towards EU integration, also in the case of mainstream parties (Braun and Carteny 2024).

H3: Party positions of mainstream and Eurosceptic parties became less polarised on the EU polity issue between 2019 and 2024.

Although the specific research literature on the impact of Eurosceptic parties on overall party competition is still somewhat mixed (see for example Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2016), more general accounts suggest that parties tend to respond to other parties' positional shifts and past performances (Adams 2012). In addition, research based on European party competition has shown that mainstream parties adjust both their issue salience and strategic positioning in relation to "challenger" parties (Abou-Chadi 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2018). In more recent times this has ultimately resulted in more critical positions towards the EU migration issue, also in the case of mainstream parties (Braun and Carteny 2024). When it comes to the environment, we would expect here also a decreasing polarisation, mainly due to a less supportive stance on environmental policies from mainstream parties. First, we might expect a thermostatic effect (Wlezien 1995, 2004). As policies go in the direction of public opinion preferences, the latter tend to shift towards the opposite direction. In turn, parties might then align with the new perceived public opinion preferences. Thus, the European Green Deal might have triggered, on average, less positive public opinion preferences on pro-environmental policies, which might have then informed party positions on the environment in 2024, especially those of mainstream parties. Second, we might expect that farmers' protests, in addition to increasing public discontent about energy costs, might have drawn mainstream parties towards less supportive stances, as the perceived median voter moves towards more critical positions.

H4: Party positions between mainstream and Eurosceptic parties became less polarised on EU policy issues (migration and environment) between 2019 and 2024.

3. DATA, MEASUREMENT, AND METHODS

For obtaining our estimates of the salience attached by parties to EU-wide issues in the 2024 EP elections, and their positions on these issues, we used quantitative text analysis tools for two classification tasks applied to party manifestos. Party manifestos remain one of the primary sources for empirical analyses of party competition because they are officially sanctioned texts that

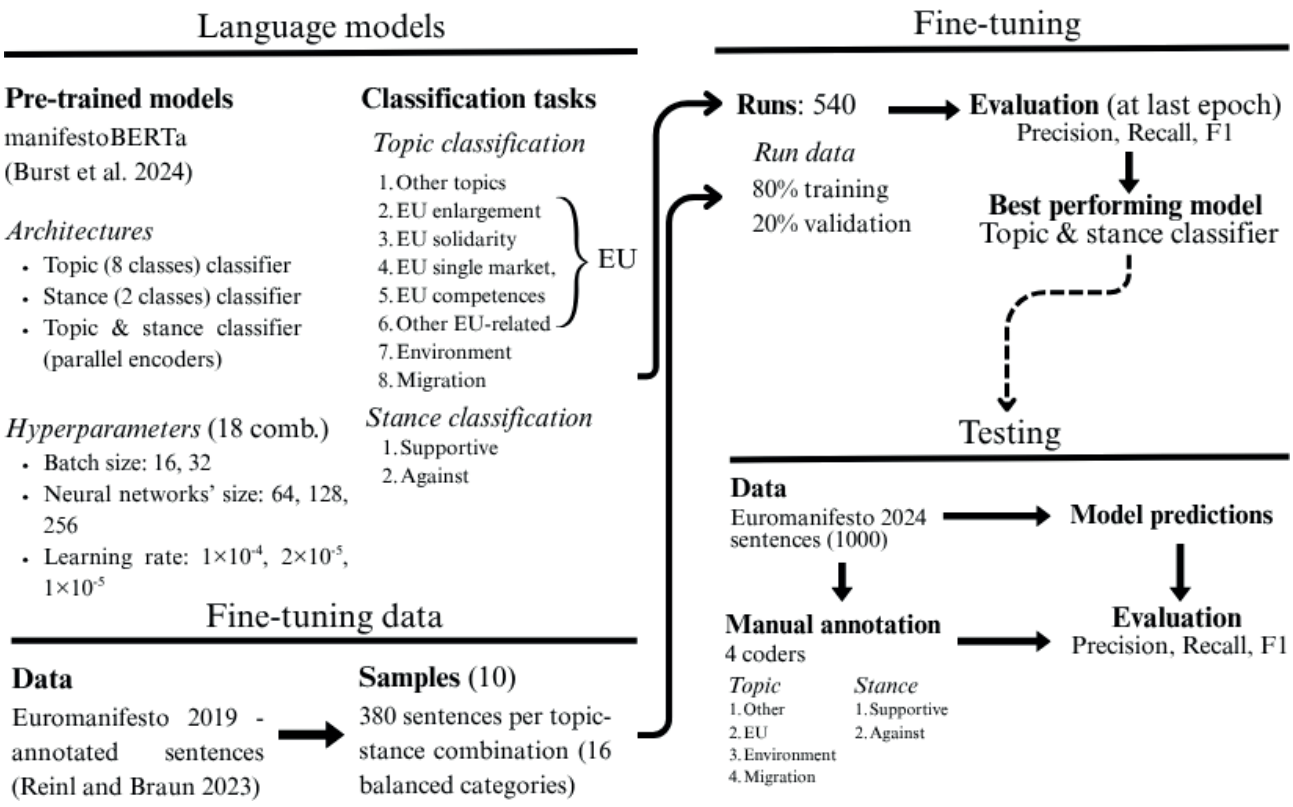


Figure 1. Topic and stance classification workflow.

document the compromises reached within party elites and specify the policy priorities a party chooses to present to the electorate. Although few citizens read these documents and their use requires labour-intensive coding that is prone to different degrees of misclassification (Mikhaylov et al. 2012), these documents still represent an unmatched data source for investigating party competition. First, manifestos are widely used – among other sources – by journalists, pundits, and commentators to inform the electorate at large about party priorities and preferences. Second, the longitudinal availability and cross-national coverage of manifestos provide unmatched leverage for tracking shifts in issue salience and ideological positioning (Braun 2023). Because of this we rely on said documents to estimate our quantities of interest – party issue salience and positions.

Returning to the classification tasks, the first consists of predicting eight thematic classes in the 2024 EP manifesto corpus at the sentence-level. Of these, five are EU-related categories (EU enlargement, EU solidarity, EU single market, EU competences, and other EU-related topics), two relate to migration and the environment, and a residual category for all the remaining topics. The second task consists of predicting the stance of the sentence (Burnham 2024), namely the classification of each sentence as either supportive of or against the sentence topic. To obtain these predictions, we fine-tuned a pre-trained transformer-based deep learning model for multiclass classification, the manifestoBERTa (Burst et al. 2024). This model is an adapted version of the XLM-RoBERTa (Conneau et al. 2019), fine-tuned on approximately 1.7 million annotated statements contained within the Manifesto Corpus (Lehmann et al., 2024). This model was configured in three versions according to the prediction tasks. In particular, we used (a) a classifier for the topics, (b) a classifier only for the stance, and (b) a multi-task classifier for the parallel classification of both topics and stance (see Figure 1).

For training, we utilised 210 manifestos comprising 91,563 quasi-sentences across 25 languages. The data preparation for the models' fine-tuning[1] involved the

[1] Fine-tuning refers to the adaptation of models pre-trained on massive unlabelled corpora – typically through tasks such as masked language modelling – to specific downstream tasks. In our case, we implement two distinct fine-tuning processes. The first, focused on topic classification, can be viewed as domain adaptation, since the model is trained to perform the same task – classification – on a different distribution of topics. The second, centred on stance detection, falls under task trans-

creation of 10 different data samples selected using random seeds, sampling 380 sentences for each of the eight classes selected for training our models, of which half used a positive stance and half negative. These sentences were divided into 80% for training and 20% for validation. To further optimise model performance, various configurations were tested, such as batch sizes of 16 and 32, and hidden state sizes of 64, 128, and 256, and learning rates equal to 0.0001, 0.00002, and 0.00001. Finally, we employed an early stopping method for determining the number of steps for fine-tuning the model (setting the maximum limit at 20) based on the loss score for each iteration. As a result, during the fine-tuning phase, 540 individual runs (180 for each classifier) were conducted to identify the best-performing configurations. For each model, the configurations with the highest F1 scores were then selected for further analysis. This selection ensured that only the most accurate models, as measured by their ability to predict correctly across classes and stance, were used in subsequent testing and prediction phases.

To create a testing dataset, we first selected a random sample of 1000 German sentences from the EP 2024 German party manifestos of the six largest parties (AfD, CDU/CSU, FDP, Greens, Die Linke, and SPD).[2] These samples were then annotated by two teams of two research assistants trained for the task, with half of the sample (500 quasi-sentences) twice coded by the first team and the other half twice coded by the second team. After a few rounds of annotation, we reached good inter-coder reliability scores (Batch 1 Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.814, Batch 2 Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.712), thus avoiding low inter-coder reliability – a widespread issue for manifesto research (Mikhaylov et al. 2012; Gemenis 2013). We thus used our best-performing BERT model (topic and stance classifier) to estimate class predictions on the same set of sentences annotated by our RAs, selecting for each sentence the class with the highest probability in the model output. Then, we calculated F1, recall, and precision scores.[3] The model performed well, with a macro F1 for topic classification of 0.713, and a macro F1 for the stance classification of 0.878 (see Tables 1 and 2). While the model performs well in most categories, it struggles with classifying EU polity-related sentences – likely due to the broad and diverse semantic space associated with this class. We proceed to use this model for further predictions; however, caution is warranted when interpreting results related to the EU polity category.

Following testing, the selected model was used to produce predictions across the broader EM2024 dataset. This dataset includes 71 manifestos from nine European countries: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain. The selection of these countries was mostly driven by data availability. We selected only those EU national contexts for which we were able to collect the manifestos of all the relevant parties published at the time of the EP 2024 elections.[4] Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of this sample, which includes countries from different regions of the Union, allows us to speculate on the broader dynamics and characteristics of party competition in Europe. Finally, we identify Eurosceptic parties, in particular far-right and far-left parties, by relying on the classification of the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al. 2023).

To address our research questions and test our hypotheses, we rely on visualisations of the data distribution and point estimates, followed by multivariate regression models. Our quantities of interest are the salience attached to a given topic by a specific party and the position of the party on that topic in a specific election. Thus, for estimating these quantities we aggregate our sentence-level predictions at the document (manifesto) level. To estimate salience, we simply rely on the proportion of sentences dedicated to a specific topic relative to the total number of sentences. The second quantity is estimated using Lowe and colleagues' (Lowe et al. 2011) logit scaling technique, namely the natural logarithm of the ratio between the sentences dedicated to a topic classified as supportive of the topic and the sentences for the same topic classified as against the statement – plus a numerical constant in the numerator and denominator to avoid non-numerical estimates. In the aggregate, we first compare the average salience that parties attach to the EU, migration, and environmental issues and the average positions that parties take on these issues in 2019 and 2024.[5] Then we analyse the distribution of party-specific differences in issue salience and positions for those parties that participated in both the 2019 and

fer, as it requires the model to learn a different but related task.

[2] To test the performance of our model across languages, we performed additional tests relying on the EM 2019 data (Reinl and Braun 2023) not used for fine-tuning our model. Our analyses show that the model performs well across the national contexts and languages analysed here. See the supplemental information, Appendix E.

[3] Precision, recall, and the F1 score are standard metrics for evaluating classification models. Precision indicates the proportion of true positives among all predicted positives, while recall (or sensitivity) reflects the proportion of true positives identified among all actual positives. The F1 score is the harmonic mean of precision and recall, providing a single measure that balances the trade-off between false positives and false negatives.

[4] The list of manifestos is available in the supplemental information, Appendix B.

[5] Our dataset includes 67 party manifestos for the 2019 EP elections, and 82 for the 2024 EP elections.

Table 1. Best model F1 scores on test for topic categories.

Class	Tn	Fp	Fn	Tp	Precision	Recall	F1
EU	1,250	322	134	294	0.442	0.788	0.566
Migration	1,806	53	30	111	0.689	0.819	0.748
Environment	1,605	90	61	244	0.746	0.856	0.797
Other	704	170	410	716	0.881	0.637	0.740
Macro					0.673	0.775	0.713

Legenda: Tn = True negative; Fp = False positive; Fn = False negative; Tp = True positive.

Table 2. Best model F1 scores on test for stance categories, by topic.

Class	Tn	Fp	Fn	Tp	Precision	Recall	F1
EU	63	29	33	303	0.913	0.902	0.865
Migration	32	7	14	88	0.926	0.863	0.875
Environment	17	12	33	243	0.953	0.880	0.893
Macro					0.931	0.882	0.878

Legenda: Tn = True negative; Fp = False positive; Fn = False negative; Tp = True positive.

2024 EP elections. [6] We compare these issue salience measures by contrasting mainstream and Eurosceptic parties.[7] Finally, we test these patterns using multivariate models at the party level. Given the interval nature of our dependent variables – issue salience, positions, and their variation over time – we use general linear models (GLM) with an identity link function (i.e., linear regression models). Given that each party is embedded in a specific party system, we then estimate clustered standard errors at the country level. Our quantities of interest in this case are the expected salience and position values by party type. To compute these values, we rely on the simulation approach proposed by King and colleagues (King et al. 2000).

4. RESULTS

Comparing the salience estimates for 2019 and 2024, some patterns are immediately apparent. The EU polity issue appears to be the most salient of the three considered and the one most affected by such an increase. For this issue, we estimate an increase of around 0.2 points on the salience scale – i.e., an increase of around 20 points in the percentage of manifesto sentences devoted to this issue – compared to 2019.[8] When it comes to migration and the environment, the picture is less systematic, but still relevant. Indeed, for the environment, the results suggest a statistically significant increase ($p<0.05$) in the importance of this issue for non-Eurosceptic and far-right parties. For the others, we observe important increases between 2019 and 2024, but they are not consistent – i.e., not statistically significant at $p<0.05$.

In terms of positions, the picture is less straightforward (see Figure 2, x-axis). Eurosceptic parties, especially the far right, seem to have become less negative about the EU polity. Minor differences can be observed for the other parties. On the issue of migration, we observe minor changes, including a less negative stance on this issue by far-right Eurosceptic parties in 2024 compared to 2019. The issue on which we observe a more consistent pattern is the environment, for which we see a general movement towards less positive positions between 2019 and 2024, in particular for mainstream and far-left Eurosceptic parties.

Although these results are informative, an open question remains: do these aggregate estimates reflect changes in issue salience and positions, or do they reflect

[6] By "issue salience", we refer to the salience attached by political parties to a specific issue. By "issue position", we refer to the position taken by a given political party on one of the issues under investigation.

[7] We avoid comparisons by country and party type because of the relatively small number of parties of each type (especially Eurosceptic parties) in each polity.

[8] Nevertheless, it is important to exercise caution when interpreting this category, as it represents the one in which our classifier has demonstrated the poorest performance in terms of precision (see Table 1). Specifically, the proportion of true EU-related sentences among the predicted ones was relatively low, which could lead to an overestimation. Nonetheless, we performed additional validity checks and found that misclassification constitutes a minor issue, mostly distributed at random. This makes us confident about the general pattern found in our data.

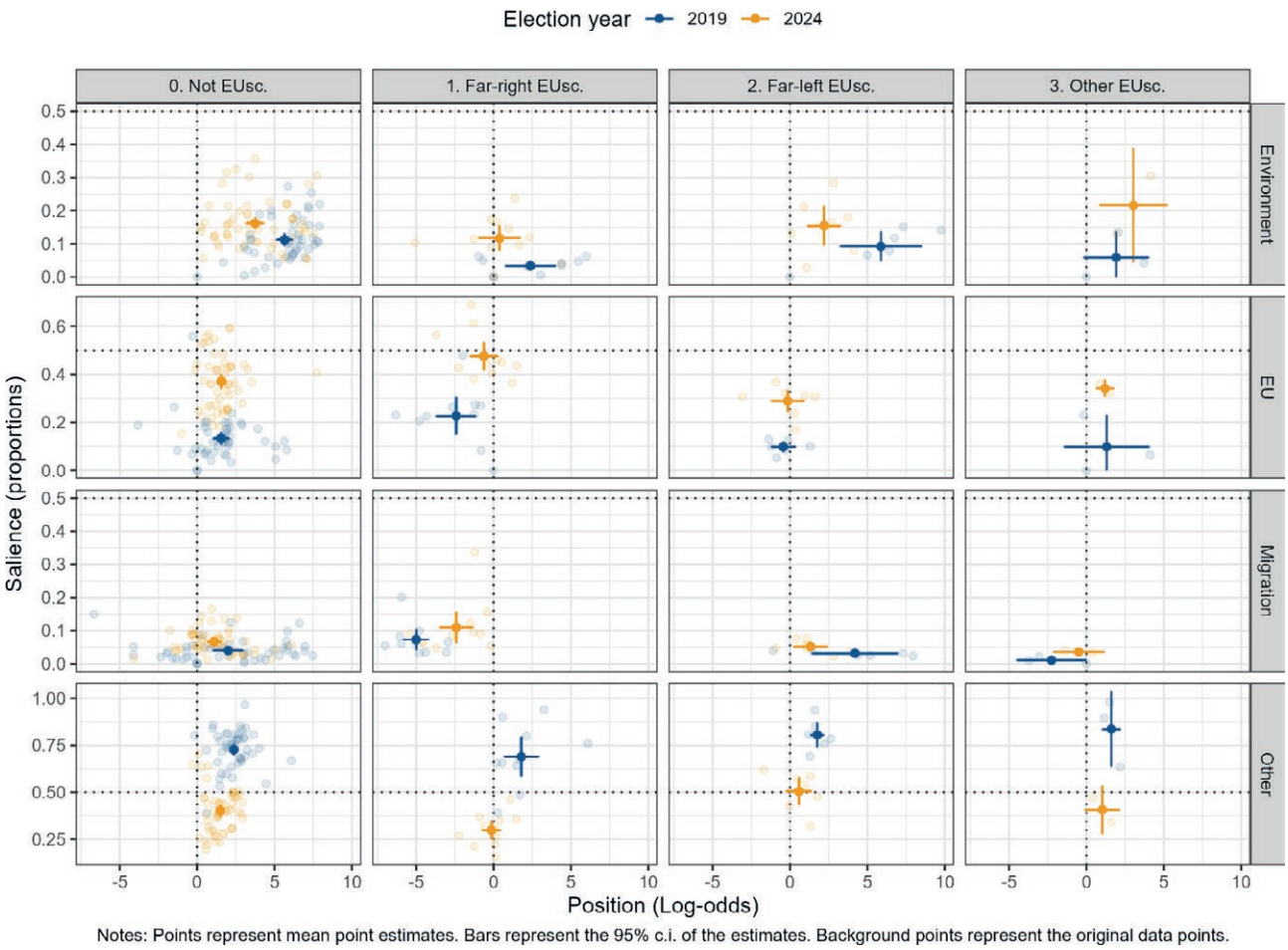


Figure 2. Party issue salience and position, by party type and election year.

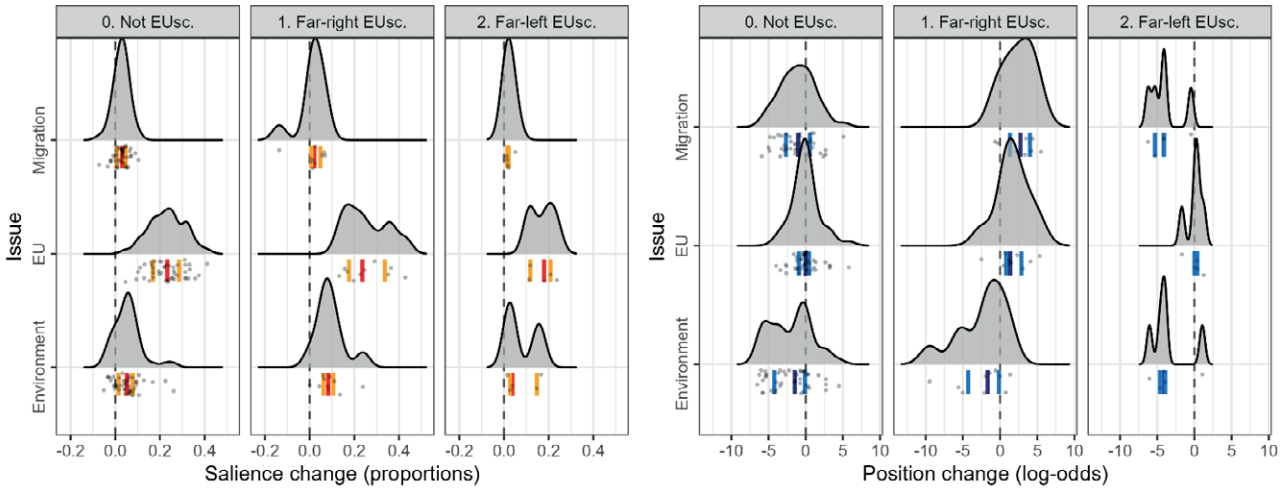
the entry of new actors who have reshaped the political landscape in their respective political systems? To test this hypothesis, we examine the intra-party changes in salience and position between 2019 and 2024 for those parties that participated in both EP elections. However, we exclude from the analysis two Eurosceptic parties that are not included in the far-right and far-left groups, due to the limited number of observations.

What we find is a picture that is consistent with the patterns seen earlier. In terms of salience, we again see a fairly consistent increase for all issues, but particularly for EU polity (see Figure 3, left panel). In terms of positions, we see similar patterns to those in the aggregate (see Figure 3, right panel). When considering the issue of migration, mainstream and far-left parties are mostly more negative in 2024 than they were in 2019. The exception is far-right Eurosceptic parties, which have become slightly less negative over the five years and thus show mostly positive position change values. When looking at the issue of EU polity, mainstream parties are on average rather stable and Eurosceptic parties, especially the far-right, are more positive than they were in 2019. Finally, looking at position changes on the environmental issue, we see a rather consistent movement towards more negative positions for all parties, especially the far-right.

To further test these patterns, we employ multivariate regression models, regressing our salience and position change variables on our three-party types (mainstream, far-right, and far-left Eurosceptic parties), and including dummy variables at the country level to account for unobserved heterogeneity at the country level.[9] Also in this case we consider party-level variation, thus we include in our analyses only parties that participated in both 2019 and 2024 EP elections.

Despite the limited number of observations (ranging from 56 to 59) and the relatively high number of covari-

[9] For the regression tables see Appendix A.



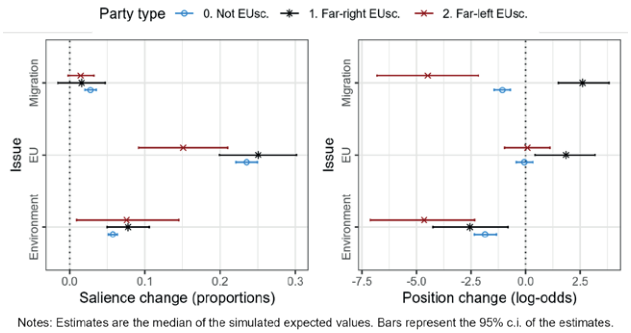
Notes: Curve height is the kernel density of the distribution. Points are party-level differences of the salience/positions estimates. Bars represent the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles of the distribution.

Figure 3. Party issue salience and position change (2019-2024), by party type.

ates, the results largely corroborate the observations made previously (see Figure 4). The simulated change in our salience measures is positive across all issues, but is stronger for the EU polity issue, followed by the environment, and finally by migration (see Figure 4, left panel). The magnitude of change for each issue is similar between mainstream and Eurosceptic parties, with the partial exception of the EU polity, for which far-left Eurosceptic parties increased the salience less than mainstream and far-right Eurosceptic parties.

The simulated change in position also exhibits the same patterns observed previously (see Figure 4, right panel). The results indicate a shift towards more critical stances on migration for mainstream and far-left Eurosceptic parties, accompanied by a change towards less negative positions for the far-right. With regard to the EU, positions have undergone only a slight alteration, with the exception of those held by far-right parties, which now appear less critical than they did in 2019. Finally, with respect to the environment, there is a tendency toward more negative positions for all parties, more pronounced for the far-right, but also accompanied by more uncertainty.

All in all, these results partially support our hypotheses. First, (a) salience has increased for all the issues considered, thus confirming our first hypothesis (H1). However, salience increased more for the EU polity issue as compared to EU policy issues, thus rejecting our second hypothesis (H2). In terms of positions, we find that the polarisation between mainstream and Eurosceptic parties decreased on the EU polity issue, but also the



Notes: Estimates are the median of the simulated expected values. Bars represent the 95% c.i. of the estimates.

Figure 4. Simulated issue salience and position change (2019-2024), by party type.

migration issue. In only one case, the environment, positions have become more polarised, but only marginally given the movement of all the parties considered towards more negative positions. These results thus confirm our third hypothesis (H3) but only partially support our fourth one (H4).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Europe has grown in importance in the daily lives of EU citizens, influencing public discourse, electoral campaigns, and voting patterns within the Union's multi-level political framework. Global challenges and the strengthening of Eurosceptic parties throughout Europe have significantly contributed to these shifts, intensify-

ing debates on the EU's political structure and pressing cross-border issues like migration and environmental policies. Against this backdrop, we studied the following research questions in our paper: Did the salience and importance of key European issues increase in the 2024 EP elections compared to 2019? Have the positions of the political parties, in particular between Eurosceptic and mainstream parties, become more polarised? In our empirical analysis based on 71 manifestos from nine European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain), we investigated whether political parties address these critical issues (issue emphasis) as well as the positions they have taken on these topics. Our findings highlight the continued and growing relevance of European issues in European party competition, and our research reveals three key findings that offer insights into the evolving dynamics of European party politics.

Firstly, the salience of the three key European issues analysed – polity, migration, and environment – has increased across the board. Despite our expectations, however, discussion about the EU polity has gained even more traction as compared to other topics, underscoring the ongoing Europeanisation of the EP (but also national) elections in the EU. But this might also be an effect of the increasing electoral strength of Eurosceptic parties, which keeps pushing non-Eurosceptics to engage with a topic previously downplayed. Thus, this dynamic reflects a strategic response by mainstream parties to counterbalance the narratives of Eurosceptic actors and reaffirm their commitment to European integration, articulating their stances on the future of the European project more clearly. This has been observed in the UK and France for the 2019 EP elections (see Braun and Grande 2021) and seems to be a persistent evolution in 2024 and presumably also future EP elections.

Second, the positions of political parties on key issues show diverse trajectories. Notably, far-right Eurosceptic parties have adopted less critical stances towards the EU polity and migration compared to 2019. This evidence suggests that, as far-right parties adopt more mainstream positions (in particular, right-wing ones that pursue vote-seeking strategies), they simultaneously moderate their stances as their chances of government inclusion increase. In contrast, mainstream and far-left parties have tended to adopt more critical positions, especially on migration. This is consistent with previous evidence concerning the mainstreaming of far-right parties and their impact on party competition over Europe. It seems that migration has evolved as an even "hotter topic" than it was perceived some years ago (see Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019), meaning that all parties adapt their positions. Today the topic is among the top political issues in Europe.[10] As a consequence, even political parties with liberal positions on migration take (more) negative stances on migration. On environmental issues, all party types have moved towards more negative stances, reflecting increasing contestation over the European Green Deal and related policies, but also a more generalised politicisation of the topic. Taking a long-term perspective on the evolution of European issues in party competition, we seem to be in a phase where party systems start to regulate themselves with political parties aligning on critical and polarised issues such as the EU polity, migration and climate change.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that European issues have become a central element of party competition in the EU's multi-level governance system. The 2024 EP elections thus represent further proof for what we have already seen in 2019 (Gattermann et al. 2021; van der Brug et al. 2022). The growing prominence of these issues, in conjunction with shifts in party stances, indicates that electoral processes in Europe are becoming increasingly influenced by discussions surrounding the future of European integration, environmental policy, and migration. Moreover, our findings lend support to a nuanced perspective on the phenomenon of polarisation. While there has been a decline in the polarisation of views on the EU polity issue, with mainstream and Eurosceptic parties becoming less ideologically distant from one another, the environmental issue has demonstrated a slight increase in polarisation due to varying degrees of negativity. These trends may have profound implications for the cohesion of the European Parliament and the broader trajectory of European politics in the coming years.

However, further research based on a broader sample of party-level data is needed to produce solid generalisations about the dynamics identified in our work.

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[10] Another good example is the 2025 national election campaign in Germany, where all parties – including the Left and the Greens – have adopted much more critical positions than ever before in an election campaign.

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