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EU issue voting and the 2014 European Parliament elections: a dynamic perspective

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ABSTRACT


EU issue voting in European Parliament elections has been shown to be highly conditional upon levels of EU politicization. The present study analyzes this conditionality over time, hypothesizing that the effect of EU attitudes on EP vote preferences is catalyzed as EP elections draw closer. In contrast to extant cross-sectional post-election studies, we use a four-wave panel study covering the six months leading up to the Dutch EP elections of 2014, differentiating between party groups (pro, anti, mixed) and five EU attitude dimensions. We find that EU issue voting occurs for both anti- and pro-EU parties, but only increases for the latter. For mixed parties we find no effect of EU attitudes, yet their support base shifts in the anti-EU direction as the elections draw closer. The overarching image, however, is one of surprising stability: EU attitudes form a consistent part of EP voting motivations even outside EP election times.

KEYWORDS Euroscepticism; voting behaviour; EP elections; panel data

Introduction

The surge in support for Eurosceptic parties in the 2014 European Parliament elections has been widely interpreted as a reflection of increased public Euroscepticism. More than ever, it seemed, European citizens used the EP elections according to how they were originally meant: as a platform to voice their opinions about the EU, its policies, and their stance on the process of European integration. Indeed, contradicting the familiar second-order national election model, recent studies have found that EU attitudes were in fact an important determinant of vote choice in EP elections (Hobolt 2015; Hobolt and De Vries 2016). Yet, studies have also shown that such “EU issue voting” is ephemeral and highly context-dependent. Cross-national comparative studies show that EU attitudes matter for voting behaviour in contexts where the EU is salient to voters

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(De Vries 2007), visible in the media (Hobolt and Spoon 2012), and where there is meaningful partisan conflict (i.e. parties take clearly distinct EU positions) (Van Spanje and De Vreese 2011). Given that such conditions vary across time, it is surprising that almost no research has looked into the *dynamics* of EU issue voting over time. In particular, it is unknown to what extent the relevance of EU attitudes for vote preferences depends on the proximity of EP elections.

The present paper offers a dynamic perspective on EU issue voting. Given the increasing politicization of EU issues in the run-up to the EP elections (Boomgaarden and De Vreese 2016), we expect that EU issue voting – i.e. the effect of EU attitudes on vote preferences – increases as EP elections come closer. Extant research has focused on the conditions enabling EU issue voting from a cross-national perspective or across elections (De Vries and Hobolt 2016). Much less attention has been paid to the dynamics throughout the electoral cycle. We expect upcoming EP elections to function as a catalyst for EU issue voting, as politicization of EU issues increases over the pre-election period. This dynamic has not yet been addressed in studies on EU issue voting in EP elections, in part as a result of the reliance on cross-sectional, post-election data sources such as the European Election Study. We rely on a four-wave panel survey collected before and during the Dutch EP election campaign of 2014 to assess how EU attitudes affect vote preferences in the months before and during the campaign, including the eventual vote.

In doing so, we add to the EU issue voting literature in three ways. First, as noted, most research to date has been conducted on the basis of data collected at a single point in time *after the elections*. Our study is among the first to evaluate how EU issue voting develops over time.¹ Second, we address whether different parties, i.e. pro-, mixed and anti-EU parties, are affected differently by this dynamic. The EU issue voting literature focuses mostly on Eurosceptic parties in isolation, or on EU attitudes as a reason for vote switching or defection, but does not assess whether EU issue voting is stronger for some parties than for others, let alone which parties gain or lose from an increased politicization of EU issue voting over time. Third, in line with recent scholarship on the multidimensionality of EU attitudes, we assess the effect of different EU dimensions. Most existing studies use one-dimensional measures of EU support to explain the EP vote (see Van Spanje and De Vreese 2011 for a notable exception). Hence, we do not know what kind of EU attitude dimensions are most important (and to which parties), and which EU attitudes are catalyzed most towards the EP elections. In sum, our paper offers a detailed analysis of EU issue voting, by assessing variation over time, between parties, and between different kinds of EU attitudes.

Theory

Elections for the European Parliament were introduced in 1979 with the ambition to create a more direct democratic link between citizens and EU

policy-making. Citizens now had the possibility to directly hold politicians accountable for issues of European integration, by voting on the basis of their attitudes towards these issues. Yet, the scholarly verdict has been that when casting a vote in EP elections, voters are motivated by many things, but not so much by European issues (Van der Brug and De Vreese 2016). According to the second-order model (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996), voters regard EP elections as less important than first-order, national elections. This has several consequences for voting behaviour in EP elections, among which higher levels of abstention, voting on the basis of national heuristics, punishing national government parties or voting for small parties one would not vote for in “important” (i.e. national) elections. Either way, EP elections have long been conceived as relatively unimportant mid-term elections rather than as reflecting public opinion about Europe.

In recent times, however, the second-order national election model is undergoing revision. Several studies suggest that the increased salience of EU issues has made EU attitudes increasingly important for vote decisions. In the 2014 EP elections, EU attitudes (both performance evaluations and policy preferences) were found to have strong effects on voting for Eurosceptic parties (Hobolt 2015; Hobolt and De Vries 2016). The authors explain this finding by the specific context of the 2014 EP elections, which took place in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis. Several studies however suggest a more general mechanism, where heightened EU politicization (i.e. salience and partisan conflict) increases the impact of EU attitudes on voting behaviour. Indeed, in the 2014 EP elections, varying levels of media visibility and party polarization explained why EU issue voting was stronger in some countries than in others (De Vries and Hobolt 2016) – and these same factors also explained cross-national variation in EU issue voting in the 2009 EP elections (De Vries et al. 2011; Hobolt and Spoon 2012). Similarly, Van Spanje and De Vreese (2011) show that different kinds of EU attitudes influenced party choice in the 2009 EP elections, and that these effects were larger in countries with more dispersed party positions regarding European integration, concluding that “when contestation over the EU becomes more salient, the EU itself becomes a more important yardstick for the act of voting” (2011, 424).

While there is agreement that EU issue voting is conditional upon the information context, little consideration has been given to changes in the information context *over time*. EP election campaigns temporarily increase the salience of and polarization over EU issues in the media (Boomgaarden and De Vreese 2016; Boomgaarden et al. 2013). Despite actual EP election campaigns being relatively short, media visibility of EU issues gradually builds up over the months leading up to the elections (De Vreese, Azrout, and Moeller 2016). Hence, the effect of EU attitudes on EP vote preferences should grow stronger when EP elections are coming closer. Given the focus

of previous studies on cross-national comparisons, we know very little of how EU issue voting develops over time, under the circumstances of a changing information context. Does the prospect of EP elections catalyze EU issue voting? Is EU issue voting a short-lived or more durable phenomenon, and how does it develop as the EP elections draw closer? These questions can only be addressed by analysing EU issue voting from a dynamic perspective.

Ceteris paribus, media reporting in a pre-election period is expected to mobilize the electorate by informing voters about the major issues and party positions on these issues (crystallization), and by increasing the salience of certain political issues (priming). Studies conducted in the US on the crystallization of vote preferences demonstrate that the central variables explaining voting behaviour – socio-demographics and issue attitudes – become increasingly important over the course of an election year (Andersen, Tilley, and Heath 2005; Erikson, Panagopoulos, and Wlezien 2010). This increase is interpreted as a process of enlightenment of political preferences (Gelman and King 1993) driven by news media reporting, which enables voters to bring their vote choice in line with their core interests. Next to this information function, however, media reporting also has a priming effect. As voters typically rely on the information that is most accessible rather than equally weighing in all possibly relevant considerations, the issues that receive most media attention before the elections turn into more important considerations for the vote (Krosnick and Kinder 1990).

There is some, albeit scattered, evidence showing that the effect of EU attitudes on voting in EP elections and EU referenda changes in response to EU (campaign) information. Garry, Marsh, and Sinnott (2005) compare survey data on the two Irish Nice Treaty referendums and find that EU issue voting was stronger in the more intensely campaigned second referendum. Similarly, campaigns can make the topic of the referendum more salient vis-à-vis the vote, as demonstrated by De Vreese (2004) using panel survey data during the Danish 2000 referendum on the introduction of the euro. Recently, Goldberg and De Vreese (2018) show significant changes in EU attitudes during the campaign for the 2016 Dutch Ukraine–EU Association Agreement referendum and their subsequent effects on the referendum vote. Beach, Hansen, and Larsen (2017) use rolling cross-sectional data to show that in the 12 weeks of campaign leading up to the EP 2014 elections in Denmark, not only voters' interest in and knowledge of EU politics increased, but also their reliance on EU attitudes for determining their EP vote intention. Finally, Hobolt and Wittrock (2011) experimentally demonstrate the influence of the information context, showing that when voters receive information on party placements regarding European integration, they are more likely to cast a vote based on their EU preferences.

In sum, these findings support our expectation that EU issue voting in EP elections becomes stronger over the months leading up to these elections

– be it through informing or priming. Since we do not know the actual level of EU issue voting several months before the EP elections, the expected effect can take the form of either strengthening or activating the effect of EU attitudes. The hypothesis captures both mechanisms.

H1: EU attitudes become more important for EP vote preferences as the EP elections come closer.

It is unlikely that all parties profit equally from a potential increase in EU issue voting. Following issue-ownership theory (e.g. Petrocik 1996), parties can “own” specific issues by taking clear (positive or negative) positions and emphasizing them in their programme and during campaigns – and parties with a strong issue profile are most likely to profit electorally when this issue becomes politicized (Kriesi and Sciarini 2004). In Western Europe, both pro- and anti-EU parties have put the issue of “Europe” central in their programmes, while a large group of (mostly) mainstream parties takes ambivalent positions (though tilted towards the positive) (Adam et al. 2017). Particularly established parties are torn between their fundamental commitment to the EU and the increasing Eurosceptic pressures from challenger parties, and face constituencies that are divided on the issue. Consequently, they tend to provide voters with mixed messages (Gabel and Scheve 2007) and attempt to depoliticize the issue by giving it little attention (Hooghe and Marks 2009). As Meijers and Rauh (2016) note, established parties can feel forced to respond to Eurosceptic contenders by putting EU issues more central (see studies on “contagion effects”, Adam and Maier 2011; Meijers 2017), and their EU positions tend to be covered more by news media (as found by Meijers and Rauh 2016). However, mobilization is likely to be conditional not only on the amount of attention spent on the EU issue, but also the extent to which a clear-cut position is communicated. In this respect, parties with a clear pro- or anti-EU profile have an electoral advantage.

There is evidence that parties with a strong profile on EU issues (anti- or pro-EU) gain in EP elections. Hix and Marsh (2011) show that in terms of aggregate support in the EP elections from 1979 to 2004, parties that emphasize EU issues gain electorally (relative to their results in national elections). At the individual level, however, most empirical studies have focused on explaining support for anti-EU parties only, either by comparing anti-EU parties to all other parties (Beach, Hansen, and Larsen 2017; Van Spanje and De Vreese 2014), or by studying propensity to vote scores for Eurosceptic parties in isolation (Hobolt 2015; Van Elsas 2017). Studies on the 2014 EP elections show that EU attitudes are an important motivation for voting for – particularly right-wing – Eurosceptic parties (Hobolt 2015; Hobolt and De Vries 2016). Other studies have looked at the role of EU attitudes in explaining defection from government to opposition parties (Clark and Rohrschneider 2009; Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009) or party-switching from national to EP elections (Hobolt and Spoon 2012) or both

(Giebler et al. 2017). None of these studies, however, address voting for pro-EU parties as a separate category – even if we know that there are parties with a distinctively positive EU stance in most party systems (Adam et al. 2017). We thus know little about the relative importance of EU attitudes for parties with more profiled (either positive or negative) EU positions compared to the mixed mainstream. Recent evidence from the Dutch 2014 EP election suggests that EU attitudes indeed had a stronger effect on voting for parties with more unambiguous and more salient EU positions than on the remaining, less profiled parties (De Vreese, Azrout, and Moeller 2017).

In the light of over-time dynamics, we expect an increasing relevance of EU issues for voting (preferences) particularly for parties with a strong EU profile (both in terms of position and salience). Although empirical research to date has focused on *anti*-EU parties, there is no a priori reason to assume that the mechanism should not also work in the positive direction. Pro-EU parties can use the stage of EP election campaigns to highlight the importance and benefits of the EU. These positive strategies, too, are likely to resonate more with voters in times of increased politicization of EU issues as EP elections come closer. Our second hypothesis, therefore, states:

H2: The increasing importance of EU attitudes as EP elections come closer is most pronounced for voters of parties with a strong (pro or anti) profile on EU issues.

So far, we purposively use the term “EU attitudes” rather than the more common term “Euroscepticism” to refer to the array of attitudes that can induce EU issue voting. The multidimensionality of attitudes towards the EU is crucial when studying the correlates of “Euroscepticism” (Boomgaarden et al. 2011; Hobolt and Brouard 2011). First, some EU dimensions can be more important for voting behaviour than others. Van Spanje and De Vreese (2011) find that five distinct EU attitude dimensions all independently influenced voting in the 2009 EP elections, among which attitudes towards EU strengthening and utilitarian attitudes exerted the strongest effects. Second, different EU attitude dimensions may matter for different kinds of parties. Van Elsas (2017) for instance finds that negative EU performance evaluations induce voting for both radical left and radical right Eurosceptic parties, whereas opposition to EU strengthening is only relevant for right-wing Eurosceptic voting. It is likely that the relative importance of different EU dimensions also varies between pro-, mixed and anti-EU parties. For instance, pro-EU parties might mobilize more on positive, future-oriented attitudes such as visions on future EU strengthening, whereas anti-EU parties focus more on retrospective punishment of EU (mal)performance. Alternatively, identity concerns could be most important to those anti-EU parties portraying the EU as a threat to national identity, whereas pro-EU and mixed parties mobilize on the EU’s economic benefits. Due to the lack of studies comparing different party groups and EU attitude dimensions, this remains an open question in the literature.

We conceptualize EU attitude dimensions following Boomgaarden et al. (2011), who in turn base their framework on Easton's distinction between diffuse and specific support (1975). Diffuse support is a long-term reservoir of trust, relating to the basic principles and the legitimacy of the political regime, while specific support refers to more short-term evaluations of political institutions, authorities and their performance. Boomgaarden et al. (2011) distinguish five EU dimensions, which have been validated over time and cross-nationally (De Vreese, Azrout, and Boomgaarden 2018).² These range from diffuse attitudes towards the community and the regime (*identity* and *affect* towards the EU), to specific attitudes towards the current regime and authorities (*performance* and *utilitarian* evaluations of the EU); The fifth dimension, support for EU *strengthening*, has specific and diffuse elements, as it can entail fundamental support for the idea of ongoing integration – or an “ever closer union” – but also support for concrete policies that imply closer integration and a transfer of authority to the EU level (e.g. a common EU asylum policy). Balancing parsimony and completeness, we choose to focus on negative affect (diffuse), strengthening (medium), and performance (specific) EU attitudes, to cover the full range of conceptually distinct attitudes. Each of these attitudes have been shown to matter during EP campaigns or elections. Studies show that particularly negative affect increases during an EU referendum campaign (Goldberg and De Vreese 2018), that EU performance evaluations are sensitive to campaign media coverage (De Vreese, Azrout, and Moeller 2016), and that support for EU strengthening is key to vote choice in EP elections (Van Spanje and De Vreese 2011). We therefore focus on these three dimensions, but the robustness checks section replicates our models for the remaining two attitudes (identity and utilitarianism, Online Appendix D).

Theoretically, given the core purpose of EP elections to hold the EU accountable for its performance, one could expect specific support to be mobilized more strongly over the course of a campaign. On the other hand, the political debate at the EU level tends to focus on fundamental, constitutional issues (Mair 2007, 11), which suggests a larger importance of diffuse attitudes. Furthermore, even if specific EU support is conceptually more prone to short-term change, this is theoretically unrelated to whether it is more easily mobilized. Stable attitudes can just as well become more influential over time. We therefore refrain from formulating a hypothesis about the relative importance of the different EU attitudes.

Data and method

We regard the case of the Netherlands, which fits our purposes for three reasons. First, Dutch parties are dispersed with regard to their EU positions (Van Spanje and De Vreese 2011). There are several parties with strong pro- or anti-EU profiles and these profiles do not coincide with their left-right ideology. Hence, we can be sure to examine effects due to parties' EU profile rather than their

left-right orientation. Second, EU news coverage is medium to low in the Netherlands (Schuck et al. 2011) and thus quite representative of several other European countries. Lastly, extant research has already demonstrated the importance of EU issue voting in Dutch EP elections (De Vreese, Azrout, and Moeller 2017; De Vries and Hobolt 2016). Obviously, for testing dynamics of EU issue voting one needs a case in which EU issues matter in the first place.

Data

The analysis is based on a Dutch panel study conducted in the months before the 2014 EP elections (De Vreese, Azrout, and Möller 2014). It started in December of 2013 and includes four waves up to and including the European Parliament elections in May 2014. The fieldwork dates are: 13 December – 19 January (wave 1); 20–30 March (wave 2); 17–28 April (wave 3, coinciding with the onset of the campaign); and 26 May – 9 June (wave 4). In contrast to studies covering only the final weeks of the EP election campaign, these data enable us to examine the development of EU attitudes and voting behaviour over a longer period including the time before the actual campaign started.

The original sample was drawn from the TNS NIPO Netherlands database, which consists of 200,000 individuals recruited through multiple strategies, including telephone, face-to-face, and online recruitment. Quotas (on age, gender, and education) were enforced in sampling from the database. The subsequent survey was conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). Of the original 2,189 respondents in the first wave, 1,379 respondents were left in the fourth wave, i.e. a retention rate of over 60 per cent. For the analysis, we restrict our sample to those respondents who reported an actual vote in the post-election wave (4). Respondents who did not turn out or intended not to vote, voted “blank” or answered “don’t know” are excluded from the analysis.³ We followed this strategy to avoid that changes over time could be driven by differences in sample composition between the survey waves (e.g. because retention is higher among those interested and voting in the EP elections). This brings the total number of respondents included in our analysis to 654. In this decreased sample, the three sampling variables age, gender and education still show a good spread. There are small differences in the average age and level of education, which relate to the fact that voters tend to be older and higher educated than non-voters. However, the parameters of interest for our study relate to changes over time rather than to population means, and therefore these deviations are relatively unproblematic.

Operationalization

As dependent variable we use reported party choice in the EP elections in the fourth post-election wave (*Which party have you voted for in the EP elections?*)

and intended voting behaviour for the three pre-election waves (*Which party would you vote for in the EP elections if they were held tomorrow?*). We grouped the parties into three blocs – pro-EU, anti-EU and mixed – on the basis of expert placements of both parties' EU position on a 7-point scale and EU salience on a 11-point scale in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey of 2014 (see Figures A1a and A1b in appendix A). We classify parties as having a strong (pro/anti) EU profile if their position is respectively one standard deviation above or below the mean ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.86$), combined with an above-average salience of EU integration ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.27$). Thus, D66 (Social Liberals) and GL (GreenLeft) classify as pro-EU parties. Mixed parties comprise the CDA (Christian Democrats), PvdA (Labour Party), VVD (Conservative Liberal Party), 50plus (Pensioners Party), PvdD (Party for the Animals) and CU-SGP (Christian Union – Reformed Political Party).⁴ Anti-EU parties are the SP (Socialist Party) and PVV (Party for Freedom).⁵ To make sure that the results are not driven by our classification, the Robustness Checks section replicates all analyses with a disaggregated party variable, comparing the five principal parties individually.

The key independent variables are the three EU attitude dimensions derived from Boomgaarden et al. (2011): performance of the EU, negative affect towards the EU and support for strengthening of the EU. For each attitude we combined three to four survey questions into a scale measure ranging from -3 to $+3$ (see table A1 in Appendix A). The three attitudes are measured in all four waves.

As control variables, we include left-right self-placement, satisfaction with democracy, government satisfaction, anti-immigrant attitudes, economic evaluations and common socio-demographic factors (gender, age and education). Previous studies have found these to be the most important explanations of EP voting behaviour (Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). Table A2 in the appendix shows the question wordings and answer categories of the control variables.

Method

Our key interest is predicting vote preference – for a pro-, mixed, or anti-EU party – on the basis of EU attitudes over the four survey waves, and assessing whether these effects change over time. We use multinomial logistic models⁶ and assess over-time dynamics by including interaction terms between wave dummies and the EU attitude dimensions (while also including such interactions for each of the control variables). Given potential multicollinearity issues, we run a separate model for each EU dimension, including the discussed set of controls. To ease interpretation, the results are presented as marginal effects plots (the full regression table including robustness checks can be found in Online Appendix B). These plots show the effect of a one unit increase in each attitude dimension on changes in predicted probabilities to (intend to) vote for a pro-, mixed or anti-

EU party per wave. This allows us to spot over time developments at a glance. For each of the party categories, we test for the significance of changes in the effect of EU attitudes over time by running pairwise comparisons of the marginal effects for all of the subsequent wave combinations.

Results

Descriptives

In a first step, we present descriptives regarding aggregate party support over the period under study (based on the panel data), as well as the amount of media reporting on EU issues over this same period. [Figure 1](#) shows the development of the vote (intention) in the months before and right after the EP elections, among those 654 respondents who reported an actual vote in wave 4. Across the whole period, just over 50 per cent of all voters (would) vote for one of the parties in the mixed category. For the pro- and anti-EU parties, in wave 1 the lines are 8 percentage points apart with 27 per cent intending to vote for an anti-EU party and 19 per cent for a pro-EU party. This gap decreases over the four waves as anti-EU support decreases while pro-EU support increases, and both party blocs end up at around 25 per cent. This means that closer to the actual election, more citizens intend to vote for parties in favour of the European Union, whereas support for parties opposing the EU somewhat diminishes.

Next, [Figure 2\(a\)](#) shows the visibility of EU issues in the media, using data from the European Election Media Study (Azrout, Moeller, and de Vreese 2015).⁷ The graph displays the proportion of news articles (y-axis) covering the EU out of all news stories during that time (weeks on the x-axis). Except for the surprisingly high EU coverage (and subsequent decrease) in December, overall we see an increasing pattern with a small peak in March and a

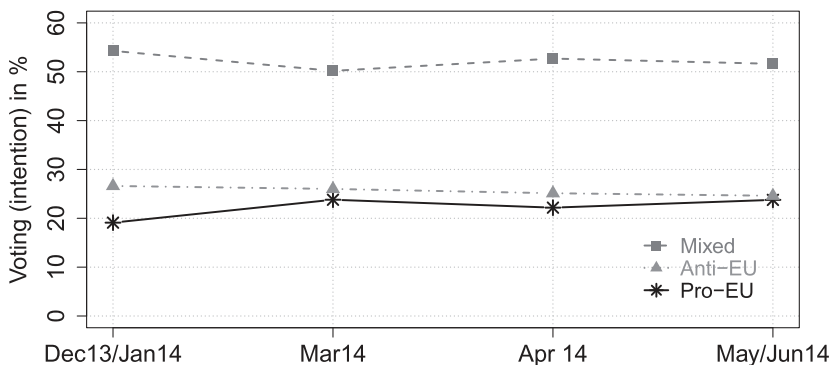


Figure 1. Vote (intention) for mixed, anti-EU and pro-EU parties across survey waves. Note: Numbers are based on respondents who reported actual vote in wave 4.

particularly strong increase in the last three weeks before the elections, when the share of EU coverage in the news doubles. Thus, apart from peaks in EU visibility in December 2013 and March 2014, the largest increase occurs during the actual campaign phase.

In addition to overall EU visibility, [Figure 2\(b\)](#) shows the party bloc-specific visibility to examine which parties are more often associated to EU issues in the media. The three lines stand for the proportion of EU news articles which mention a party from one of our three party blocs, weighted by party size.⁸ The mixed party bloc is always present with coverage in around 20–70% of EU news stories. However, considering the whole period, the anti-EU bloc is even more present in the majority of weeks. Lastly, the pro-EU bloc is on average the least visible one, yet its EU-related coverage increases steeply in the last three weeks. This results in an overrepresentation of the two profiled party blocs in the EU news in the last 2–3 weeks before the elections.

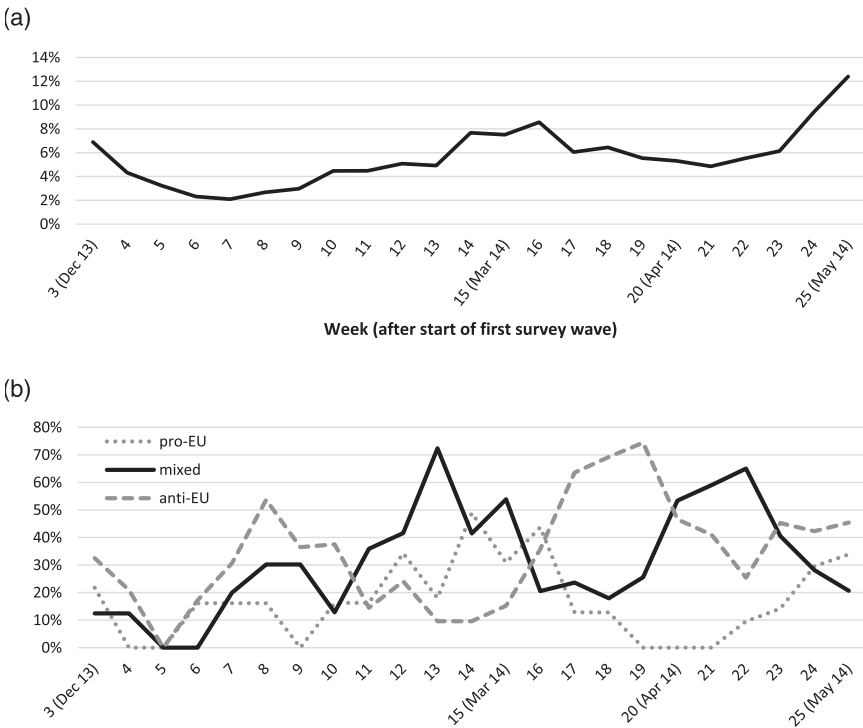


Figure 2. (a) Media visibility of EU as proportion of EU articles in news. (b) Party visibility as proportion of party bloc mentioning in total EU/party articles.

Notes: We used a moving average of three weeks to smooth out the graphs. In contrast to [Figure 2a](#), in [Figure 2b](#) only EU news articles are used that mention any party, i.e. not all EU articles are used. The proportions do not always add up to 100% due to the moving average, but also due to several weeks without any EU news story that includes a party mentioning (e.g. weeks 3–5).

Regression results

Turning to the regression results, **Figure 3** shows the marginal effects of the three EU attitude dimensions across the four waves on the vote (intention) for pro-, mixed- and anti-EU parties. There is some variation between the different dimensions, which underlines the relevance of studying these dimensions separately. We start by discussing the common patterns, afterwards highlighting the dimension-specific deviations.

All three attitude dimensions have effects on preferences for pro-, mixed- and anti-EU parties – although not all dimensions distinguish to a similar extent between each of the party groups. As expected, positive EU attitudes lead to support for pro-EU parties – the marginal effect of each EU attitude on vote preferences for pro-EU parties is significantly different from zero across dimensions and waves (except for performance and negative affect in the first wave). We see a mirror image for anti-EU parties, which find support among voters with negative EU attitudes. The effect for anti-EU parties is somewhat less consistent – for performance and strengthening dimensions, the negative effect is statistically insignificant in the third wave, at the onset of the campaign. For mixed EU parties, the effects are mostly insignificant across waves and dimensions.

Turning to *Hypothesis 1*, we find an increasing effect on EP vote preferences towards the elections only for EU strengthening. Pairwise comparisons of the marginal effects between waves show that this effect is larger in the fourth

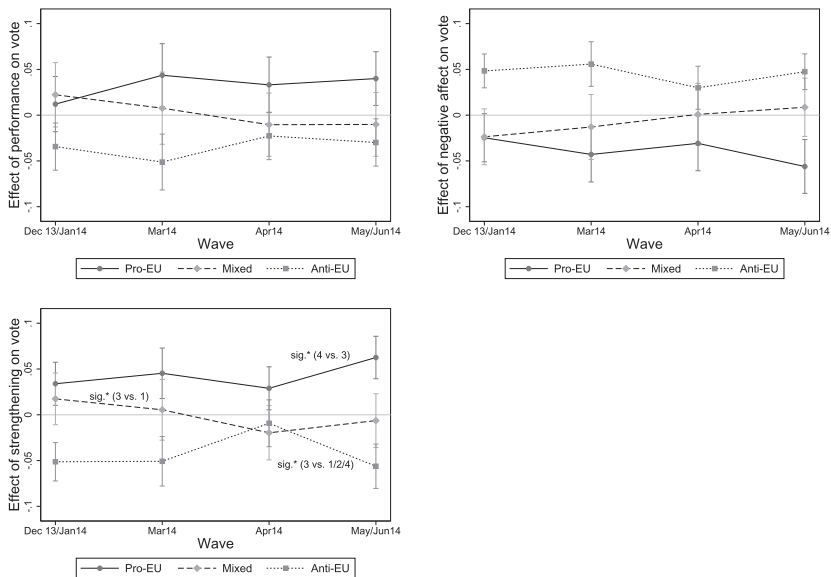


Figure 3. Marginal effects of EU attitude dimensions on support for pro-EU, anti-EU or mixed parties.

wave relative to the previous wave(s). However, for anti-EU parties the actual change takes place in wave 3, where the negative effect of support for EU strengthening temporarily decreases, returning to its initial level in wave 4. Only for pro-EU parties, a genuine increase occurs in the last two waves, i.e. most probably due to the campaign. We find no significant changes over time for performance and negative affect. All in all, this means that Hypothesis 1 is only supported for attitudes towards EU strengthening.

Even if we do not find a uniform increasing influence of EU attitudes on vote preferences over time, some party-specific patterns are relevant in view of *Hypothesis 2*. Compared to mixed and anti-EU parties, the trend for pro-EU parties is most consistent. Besides the significant increase for the strengthening dimension, we also find increasing effects of performance and negative affect between the first and fourth wave, albeit shortly failing significance, and thus lending only tentative support for Hypothesis 2. In contrast, for anti-EU parties no trend is observable in any dimension. For mixed parties, surprisingly, the effects of strengthening and performance increase in the negative direction, while negative affect has an increasingly positive effect. As a result, the pattern of which party blocs are most distinct differs between the time periods outside (wave 1 and 2) and during (wave 3 and 4) the election campaign. The difference between mixed and anti-EU parties is particularly clear in the first two waves, especially for negative affect, and strengthening. In the final two waves, the main difference lies between pro-EU parties on the one hand, and mixed and anti-EU parties on the other hand – as mixed parties move more to the negative side. This pattern across dimensions tentatively suggests that growing EU politicization might also influence EU issue voting for mixed, less profiled parties the closer the elections come, with their supporters becoming more negative about the EU.

We find differences between the dimensions in both the overall strength of their effects, and the extent to which these effects change over time. Performance overall has smaller effects on EP vote preferences than negative affect and strengthening. This matches the findings of Van Spanje and De Vreese (2011) on the 2009 EP elections. Furthermore, the effect of strengthening attitudes shows most change over time, as they become more important for the two more profiled pro-/anti-EU party blocs in the post-election wave.

Finally, the control variables (see Online Appendix B) show that younger people are more likely to support anti-EU parties compared to mixed parties, as are lower educated citizens – while the higher educated are more supportive of pro-EU parties. Both pro- and anti-EU supporters are more left-wing than mixed party supporters; For the pro-EU category this makes sense as it comprises a green party and a social-liberal party (both generally drawing more left-leaning voters). The negative effect of left-right on

anti-EU parties is a result of the fact that this category combines a right-wing populist and a left-wing party – and supporters of right-wing populist parties tend to take less pronounced positions on the left-right scale than traditional (i.e. mainstream) right-wing voters. Immigration attitudes distinguish anti-EU parties from the other two groups, but additional analysis shows that this is fully driven by the right-wing populist PVV (see following Robustness Checks section for a note on disaggregated models). The effects of typical “second order” variables, government satisfaction and economic evaluations, are in line with previous research (see Online Appendix C for graphical display). Government satisfaction consistently (and stably) affects vote preferences, but in a partly different direction from EU attitudes. Mixed parties draw more satisfied voters, whereas for pro-EU parties we find no (or even a negative) effect. This underlines the finding that it is indeed EU attitudes as such that differentiate the pro-EU parties for voters, rather than a more general form of political support. Economic evaluations show a similar pattern to EU attitudes, but are smaller and not significant for the actual vote in wave 4. All in all, both first order (i.e. EU attitudes) and second order (i.e. national government support) factors are relevant to the EP vote, but the extent to which they are generally does not change as the elections approach.

Robustness checks

We performed several checks for the robustness of the results. First, we tested whether the results are similar for different kinds of EU attitudes: identity and utilitarianism (see Online Appendix D). These dimensions show similar patterns, with utilitarianism (i.e. whether EU membership is beneficial) exerting stronger effects than identity. Second, we assessed whether we reach similar conclusions once we study individual parties rather than the constructed party groups (see Online Appendix E). Figure E1 presents models distinguishing between the five largest parties, which represent all three (pro/mixed/anti) categories and cover 75 to 80% of the voters in each wave. The results, despite a decreased N per category, show very similar patterns to the main models. Each of the three EU attitudes has the overall most positive effect (or the inverse for negative affect) on voting for the pro-EU D66. Similarly, the effects of EU attitudes are most negative for both anti-EU parties PVV and SP, and particularly so for, strengthening and negative affect (which has a positive effect). The two mixed parties are mostly in-between, showing for most part no effects of EU attitudes on the vote – though it is interesting to note that the VVD in some waves and on some dimensions moves towards the anti-EU category. The control variables show similar effects as in the main models – the most notable result is that immigration attitudes now clearly set apart the PVV (attracting anti-immigrant voters) from the remaining parties.

Discussion

This study has analyzed the dynamics of EU issue voting in the run-up to the EP elections of 2014 in the Netherlands. We expected that EU attitudes would become more influential for EP vote preferences *once the elections come closer* (H1), and we expected these developments to be particularly pronounced for parties that have a *strong profile* on EU issues (H2). Generally, our results show that EU attitudes actually exert a rather stable effect on vote preferences, not only around the EP elections but *also outside election times*. The effects exhibit some change over time, yet these dynamics are only in part in line with our expectations. Hypothesis 1 is supported for attitudes regarding the strengthening of the EU, which attain a significantly larger effect on pro-EU parties towards the final wave. This pattern is echoed in the (albeit insignificant) trends for other attitude dimensions. For anti-EU parties, in contrast, there are no clear trends. Against expectations, the negative effect of several EU attitude dimensions on anti-EU voting actually dissipates in wave three – at the outset of the campaign. With regard to Hypothesis 2, this means that in the run-up to the EP elections, EU issues only become more important for voters of parties with a *positive* profile. EU attitudes affect anti-EU party support as well – however, these parties do not appear to benefit from the increased politicization of EU issues towards the elections.

There are methodological and substantive explanations for the rather stable patterns. First, our methodological choice to focus on respondents reporting an actual vote strongly reduces the sample size. This results in large confidence intervals and makes it more difficult to find significant changes between waves. Second, as a substantive explanation, the first and second survey waves coincide with key events in the Ukraine crisis – the Maidan protests in favour of the EU trade agreement (from late November 2013) and the Russian annexation of the Crimea (18 March 2014) – which were covered in the Dutch news in relation to EU foreign policy (Kleinnijenhuis and Van Atteveldt 2016). This may have primed voters to EU issues early in the pre-election period, raising the bar for finding effects of the approaching EP election itself. The waning salience of the Ukraine crisis from April onwards might explain the temporary decrease in EU coverage at that time, and the accompanying dip in EU issue voting we found for some dimensions. These speculations cannot be tested with the data at hand. Future studies could integrate media content into studies on EU issue voting, preferably across different election contexts.

Our findings have three major implications for understanding EU issue voting. First and most importantly, we show that EU attitudes already influence vote intentions outside election times. Voters do not need a crystallizing exogenous event such as an upcoming EP election to use their EU attitudes for their vote preferences – they already do so even in the absence of

active political campaigning. This has the important methodological implication that restricting the observation frame to the active party campaign period can yield incomplete, or even unwarranted, conclusions. The differences we found between waves 3 and 4 suggest a campaign-induced activation of EU issue voting, concealing the fact that EU attitudes already influenced vote preferences before the campaign period.

Second, our findings show the merit of distinguishing between party groups, as effects of EU attitudes – and their dynamics – differ depending on the party's EU profile. While extant studies have focused on the Eurosceptic vote, pro-EU parties might actually profit most from heightened politicization of the EU. Counter to general intuition, we find that among the voters in the Dutch 2014 EP elections, aggregate support for anti-EU parties actually went down in the run-up to these elections. In addition, at the individual level an increase in EU issue voting is only visible for pro-EU parties. For anti-EU parties, the EP campaign seems to have harmed more than it has contributed to their success. The most "profitable" EU profile is likely to be conditional upon the campaign context, and more research is needed to understand this unexpected finding by addressing these dynamics in party support cross-nationally. By any means, our findings urge future research on EU issue voting to distinguish between parties with different EU profiles.

Finally, parties with a mixed profile deserve a closer look. We know that many mainstream parties – and especially those with internally divided constituencies – blur or depoliticize their positions on European integration (Adam et al. 2017), which makes them unlikely to draw voters based on EU issues. Indeed, we find that EU attitudes have small and mostly insignificant effects on mixed parties. Yet, interestingly, we find differences in their support base outside and during the EP election campaign. While outside the campaign period these parties are closer to pro-EU parties, i.e. EU attitudes have small positive effects, the effects turn negative from the onset of the campaign, approaching the effects on anti-EU parties. This suggests that EP election campaigns might reinforce the contagion effect of Eurosceptic parties on mainstream parties (Meijers 2017), inducing mixed parties to take more Eurosceptic stances as the elections approach. Over-time analysis of the campaign strategies of different parties is needed to assess the viability of this interpretation.

By bringing panel data into the EU issue voting literature, and by distinguishing between party types and EU attitudes, our study yields valuable insights into the dynamics of EU issue voting. Its main limitation is that these insights are based on a single election in a single country. Comparative research is needed to explore both the generalizability and conditionality of the patterns observed in this study. A second limitation is that we focused on voters only, leaving aside the large group of citizens that decides not to vote, although EU attitudes also matter as motivations for turnout and

abstention (Hobolt and Spoon 2012). A question for further research remains how EU attitudes drive citizens towards the voting booth – and particularly whether and when these motivations are activated in the run-up to the EP elections.

To conclude, we should underline our core finding that EU attitudes have rather stable effects over the whole period under study. We expected that EU attitudes would only matter to the EP vote under particular, stringent conditions – given the conventional image of EP elections as “second order”, and EU attitudes as relatively irrelevant to voters. What we find, however, is that EU attitudes are consistently among the explanatory factors of citizens’ intention to vote for pro- or anti-EU parties. The period leading up to the EP elections is marked by small changes in the importance of EU attitudes – but EP campaigns do not awaken an until then sleeping giant, in the sense that they drastically turn EU issues from irrelevant to relevant. Rather, there is a persistent link between EU attitudes and vote preferences, suggesting that these attitudes might have become more central to voting decisions in general.

Notes

1. The only dynamic study on EU issue voting we know of, by Beach, Hansen, and Larsen (2017), uses rolling cross-sections in Denmark to examine trends over time.
2. The authors have validated the five-dimensional model through confirmatory factor analysis, finding a moderate to good fit across 21 EU member states (De Vreese, Azrout, and Boomgaard 2018).
3. We also excluded 12 respondents who voted for one of the parties that did not gain seats in the EP.
4. Some previous studies have marked the small Christian parties CU and SGP as Eurosceptic (see Hobolt and De Vries 2016). As a robustness check we ran the models including CU-SGP in the anti-EU group. This does not change the results for anti-EU parties. Yet, the effects for mixed parties become somewhat closer to pro-EU than to anti-EU parties.
5. The PVV (radical right) represents a “harder” form of Euroscepticism than the SP (radical left). Running the analyses with the PVV as the only anti-EU party however results in blurring the distinction between mixed and anti-EU voters – which supports the categorization of the SP as anti-EU.
6. We do not use ordinal logistic models for both theoretical and statistical reasons. Theoretically, ordinal logistic models imply similar distances from mixed parties to anti- and pro-EU parties. As mixed parties tend to lean more towards the pro-EU side, we expect smaller distances between mixed and pro-EU parties than between mixed and anti-EU parties. Statistically, a Brant test for ordinal logistic models showed a violation of the parallel regression assumption, a necessary condition to run such models.
7. The data includes television (NOS and RTL4), newspaper (de Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad and de Telegraaf) and online coverage (nu.nl). To be coded as EU story the article has to mention the EU or any sort of EU institution, policy or synonym at least twice.

8. Since the mixed party bloc includes more and larger parties, we weighted the number of news items according to the vote share of the party blocs in the 2012 national elections. In this way we focus on the profile and not the size of the party blocs.

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