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**DOI**

[10.1080/13501763.2019.1701531](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1701531)

**Publication date**

2020

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Journal of European Public Policy

**License**

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Goldberg, A. C., van Elsas, E. J., & de Vreese, C. H. (2020). Mismatch? Comparing elite and citizen polarisation on EU issues across four countries. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(2), 310-328. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1701531>

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## Mismatch? Comparing elite and citizen polarisation on EU issues across four countries

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### ABSTRACT

National politicisation of European Union issues has risen following events such as the economic crisis and the refugee influx. This has led to changes at the party (rising Eurosceptic parties) and the voter level (increasing public Euroscepticism). EU politicisation is thus assumed to influence the overall distribution of EU positions in terms of EU polarisation. This raises the question to what extent there is a (mis)match between polarisation at the party and voter level, and its dependence on structural and supply-side dynamics. Using CHES 2017 data and survey data across four EU countries (Germany, Spain, Hungary and the Netherlands) this paper compares elite- and citizen-level EU polarisation. The results show a strong association of party- and citizen-level EU polarisation – for both general and policy-specific EU positions – with higher polarisation among citizens than among parties. Country-specific patterns are due to different political competition on the supply side.

**KEYWORDS** EU politicisation; polarisation; public opinion; parties; policy

### Introduction

The last decades have brought increased politicisation of European Union (EU) issues across EU member states. Events such as the economic crisis starting at the end of the 2000s and the more recent refugee influx have further fuelled the salience of EU issues for domestic politics (e.g., Börzel 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Risse 2015). On the one hand, EU politicisation may help to mitigate the often reported democratic deficit of the EU by providing meaningful party choice during elections or increased citizen participation (Hix 1999; Ladrech 2007; de Wilde 2011). On the other hand, EU politicisation may also have detrimental consequences by ‘stressing unbridgeable differences between the interests, norms and values of the peoples of Europe’ (de

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1701531>.

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Wilde 2011: 565), which is apparent in various failed EU referendums since the 1990s. Indeed, EU politicisation implies increasing Euroscepticism among citizens and a rise of (successful) Eurosceptic parties across Europe.

Despite a more general trend of politicisation of EU issues and related Euroscepticism, these developments have played out differently across EU member states (Hutter *et al.* 2016). In countries where elites hold on to a pro-EU consensus, rising public Euroscepticism may mean that the public becomes more polarised while elites do not – thus exacerbating the mismatch. In countries with strong Eurosceptic parties, in contrast, citizen and elite levels of EU polarisation may nowadays be more in line than before. Generally, the changing ‘level of consensus surrounding the EU (...) is an important and under studied phenomenon’ (Down and Wilson 2008: 46), and this especially holds for a comparison of polarisation levels between the party and voter level. The few existing studies that compare both levels have focused on EU opinion congruence in the relationship between parties and their electorates (e.g., Mattila and Raunio 2012). Such congruence studies are informative to identify (the absence of) a party–voter link, and have revealed that parties are commonly more pro-EU than their voters. However, these studies do not inform us about the overall structure and distribution of EU positions at the two levels, and the extent to which the degree of polarisation of voters and parties is related. By definition, increasing politicisation brings polarisation (Grande and Hutter 2016); yet the question is to what extent EU politicisation has similarly affected party- and voter-level polarisation across the board.

Our study aims to fill this research gap by exploring polarisation in elite’s and citizens’ EU attitudes across four EU countries (Germany, Spain, Hungary and the Netherlands). The examination of a potential mismatch of voter- and party-level polarisation extends congruence studies by focusing on the structure of the party system as a whole, and how it corresponds with the structure of public opinion. Within this general aim, we make three related contributions. First, in addition to analysing polarisation regarding general European integration positions, we examine positions on two specific EU policies about asylum and economic authority at the two levels. By examining citizens’ general and specific EU attitudes we comply with the ‘significant need for further research that focuses on politicisation in citizen arenas and that distinguishes carefully between various objects of politicization’ (Hurrelmann *et al.* 2015: 47). One source for potential differences between general and specific attitudes may be individual factors. Our second contribution is thus taking into account variation in citizens’ levels of political sophistication. Notwithstanding the generally harder task to form opinions about specific policies compared to general EU opinions, especially knowledgeable persons should have an advantage to form (strong) opinions on such complex

topics. Third, to detect potential contextual influences on polarisation levels and a related party–voter mismatch, we examine four countries with varying structural (economic and refugee crisis) and supply-side (availability of parties) factors.

## Theory

### *Politicisation of the European Union*

The Maastricht Treaty (1992) was the starting point of increasing EU politicisation. Decision-making on European integration was no longer an affair reserved for national and European elites, but increasingly involved political parties, citizens and other political groups (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Marks and Steenbergen 2002). As a result, the last decades have transformed the EU from an international organisation into a full political system interwoven in a multilevel logic with the domestic systems of the member states (Hix 1999; Hooghe and Marks 2009). The growing EU politicisation over the past decades has further resulted in a transformation of the EU issue from being *sui generis* and unrelated to basic political competition to being one issue among (many) others that is contested by parties, but also well-structured and important for electoral decisions at the voter level (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

The latter aspect, the stronger involvement of the general public in EU issues, is crucial for EU politicisation (e.g., Dalton and Eichenberg 1998). As a result, European integration has come higher on the agenda of both political parties and citizens (Grande and Hutter 2016; Green-Pedersen 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2009; de Wilde 2011). Following the importance of both elites and citizens for domestic contestation of the European Union, we focus on *actor polarisation* and *actor expansion*, two conceptual dimensions of the common definition of politicisation (Grande and Hutter 2016; de Wilde 2011). The third dimension of *issue salience* – the necessary condition – we consider as given (e.g., Hutter *et al.* 2016). While comparing polarisation between the party and voter level, we test for both the expansion of actors, i.e., the supposed increasing involvement of citizens in the EU debate in addition to parties, and the intensity of conflict among parties and voters. The crucial question is, then, to what extent the structure of conflict is similar at the two levels.

### *Party–citizen link in EU positions*

The two key actors of domestic contestation are strongly linked as ‘citizens in modern democracies are represented through and by parties’ (Sartori 1976: 24). Crucial for this party government model is sufficient choice at the party

level from which citizens can choose the party which comes closest to their preferences (e.g., Dalton 1985; Mattila and Raunio 2006). This party–voter linkage also matters for rising EU politicisation. As Mattila and Raunio (2012: 590) argue ‘(w)hether parties are in tune with their electorates over the EU is also significant in terms of how representative democracy works in Europe’. For instance, Bakker *et al.* (2020) show the effect of party–voter incongruence over the EU on political disaffection and populist voting, and Hobolt and Rodon (2020) show EU congruence effects on British voting behaviour in the aftermath of Brexit (both in this Special Issue).

Existing research has studied the party–citizen link mostly in terms of congruence between the positions of parties and their voters. Overall and particularly for the left–right dimension several studies report a good agreement between European citizens and respective parties (e.g., Dalton 1985; Mattila and Raunio 2006; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997). For EU positions, though, studies reach different conclusions. While van der Eijk and Franklin (1991) found a rather good match between parties and voters on European integration matters, more recent studies provided evidence for poor party–voter congruence (e.g., Mattila and Raunio 2006; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997; van der Eijk and Franklin 2004) concluding that ‘voters and their potential representatives are living in different European worlds’ (Thomassen and Schmitt 1997: 181). Schmitt and Thomassen (2000) found a reasonable match for overall EU attitudes, but a diverging trend for more specific EU policy preferences. A more recent study by Mattila and Raunio (2012) confirmed this diverging trend as parties have become less representative and have drifted further apart from citizens on the EU dimension.

Differences between party and citizen positions however tell us little about the overall structure of political competition, including the level of EU politicisation and related polarisation on both levels. Polarisation – commonly more discussed at the party level – represents the ‘degree of ideological differentiation among political parties’ (Dalton 2008: 900). Theoretically, polarisation at the party level should ideally reflect the dispersion of voters along a given dimension, i.e., citizen-level polarisation (Dalton 2008; Downs 1957). The structure of party competition thus has direct implications for voting behaviour of citizens and for the quality of representation more generally. A more diverse set of parties can represent various issue positions in a better way and add more weight to these issues (Dalton 2008). In the context of increasing EU politicisation, party systems should reflect the increasing dispersion of citizens’ EU attitudes by offering more dispersed party choices. However, since European integration traditionally has been more of an elite issue, the causal order could be also reversed, i.e., (less knowledgeable) voters base their EU positions on cues from their preferred party (cf. Pannico 2017).

### ***Dispersion and polarisation of EU attitudes***

Knowledge about the dispersion and polarisation of EU attitudes at the party and/or citizen level is very rare. Comparing European Election Study data from 2004 and 2009, Mattila and Raunio (2012) showed that dispersion on EU issues is lower among parties than among voters. The diverging trend from 2004 to 2009 between both levels thereby fits the expected increasing EU politicisation among voters. A second study by Down and Wilson (2008) is one of the few that actually examines polarisation at the citizen level. They argue that rising (public) Euroscepticism could be a direct sign of changing domestic EU contestation as it may 'be a function of a decline in consensus – that is, an increase in the dispersion of attitudes, along with a flattening or even polarization of opinion distribution' (Down and Wilson 2008: 27). Instead of a general trend of increasing polarisation, the authors found more bimodal distributions of EU attitudes, i.e., an indication of EU polarisation, in some countries and years only. These earlier findings by Down and Wilson (2008), though, require updating as the reported country-specific divisions might have developed into a more general trend of increasing citizen-level EU polarisation in the last 10–15 years.

Formerly, mainstream parties have often tried to avoid clear positioning on the EU dimension and have rather focused on competition on the more familiar left–right dimension (e.g., Mattila and Raunio 2006). Typically, EU politicisation has been driven by (smaller) Eurosceptic parties, especially from the radical right (Grande and Hutter 2016). At the voter level, however, van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) signalled a large potential for contestation on EU issues with voters being much more dispersed than the political parties on offer. In the meantime, the salience of the EU dimension has further increased, especially manifested in growing public Euroscepticism and a growing success of Eurosceptic parties (e.g., de Vries and Edwards 2009; Green-Pedersen 2012). Hence, political competition around European integration is nowadays present at both the party and voter levels and covers the full range of very positive to very negative EU positions. Generally, we therefore – *ceteris paribus* – expect a strong relationship between the two levels and assume that *stronger (weaker) EU issue polarisation at the party level is associated with stronger (weaker) polarisation at the citizen level.*

### ***Specific EU policies and the role of political sophistication***

Notwithstanding the general importance of EU issues for political competition, only few studies have delved deeper into competition about specific EU policies. In this study, we respond to Hooghe *et al.*'s (2002: 966) demand to 'disaggregate European integration into its particular policies' (see also Dalton and Eichenberg 1998). Party elites have the ability and expertise to

form clear-cut opinions about European integration in general and also about specific EU policies. In contrast, citizens' general low levels of EU political knowledge may result in particularly low knowledge for specific and partly highly technical policies. This difference in policy knowledge is known as the 'Knowledge Deficit Model' (KDM) (e.g., Stoutenborough and Vedlitz 2014). Studies such as the one by Rhodes *et al.* (2014) demonstrate the low level of citizens' policy knowledge in, e.g., the area of climate policies.

However, also for the EU context, Hurrelmann *et al.* (2015) showed that citizens' EU politicisation may be limited to fundamental questions and does not occur for specific EU-level policy-making. Earlier findings similarly showed lower positional congruence between parties and voters for specific EU policy preferences compared to overall EU attitudes (Schmitt and Thomassen 2000). These results suggest different structures of competition for general versus specific EU policy positions and related stronger differences between the elite and citizen level for given policies. In line with these findings and due to the assumed less informed and consequently less extreme positions of citizens, we expect *the association between party and citizen-level polarisation to be weaker for specific EU policies as compared to general EU positions*. We consider two specific policies linked to the two major crises of the last decade in Europe: EU authority over economic and budget policies linked to the Euro crisis, and a common EU asylum policy linked to the influx of refugees (more information about both policies follow).

In addition to this general party–voter difference in specific policy knowledge, citizens' individual differences in political sophistication may be important as well (cf. Dalton 1985). On the one hand, political sophistication may drive citizen-level EU polarisation (in general and for specific policies). Higher (EU) knowledge enables citizens to form opinions about a complex issue such as the EU. Sophistication might then equal variation, in the sense that detailed knowledge about the EU facilitates the formation of more crystallised (positive as well as negative) opinions. Although intuitively one might expect a better EU knowledge to be related to higher support of European integration (as shown by, e.g., Janssen 1991), several studies have shown that 'knowing' about the EU does not necessarily lead to 'loving' the EU (e.g., Karp *et al.* 2003; Marquart *et al.* 2019).

On the other hand, and in contrast to sophisticated persons, less sophisticated citizens might not be able to form strong opinions toward the EU, particularly not toward specific policies. As a result, less sophisticated voters may follow party cues when forming positions toward the EU. The study by Pannico (2017) shows that this cue-taking is indeed present in the EU context, and especially for less sophisticated voters. Further, in relation to the KDM for specific EU policies – compared to a comparatively easier formation of general positions towards European integration – the level of political sophistication might matter even more for the two specific EU policies

and less so for general EU attitudes. Overall, one might expect *less sophisticated citizens to follow their preferred party's EU positions more closely, which should result in more similar levels of polarisation between parties and less sophisticated voters compared to more sophisticated voters – and this should particularly be the case for specific EU policies.*

### **Cross-country differences**

Beyond the relevance of individual factors, politicisation of certain issues 'can be very time and space specific' (de Wilde 2011: 563). The issue of European integration is no exception to this as EU member states differ in the speed, level and patterns of EU politicisation (Hutter *et al.* 2016). The four countries we study vary on characteristics that may be important in this respect. This variation allows us to observe contextual differences – both in terms of the overall level of polarisation and in terms of the strength of the assumed relationships. Again, due to the low number of cases under study, the respective analyses are of a more explorative nature instead of a formal test.

One cause for differences across countries is structural. For instance, the economic crisis following the 2008 financial crisis has hit several EU members – especially in the South – much harder than others. Due to a more domesticated debate in 'debtor' countries, the crisis may have resulted in stronger EU politicisation than in 'creditor' countries (Kriesi and Grande 2016). Of the four countries under study, Spain was hit hardest by the Euro crisis,<sup>1</sup> which may have fuelled (opposing) attitudes toward the EU and resulted in a comparatively higher politicisation of economic EU policies in Spain. A more recent example of potential structural influence on EU positions is the refugee influx into Europe. Again, countries are unequally affected by this and/or have very different positions regarding the EU's handling of it. The refugee influx was particularly important for Hungary as a transit country and Germany as the largest target country,<sup>2</sup> and is thus likely to lead to higher levels of politicisation on asylum policies in these countries.

We expect that if an issue is more politicised and hence more 'mature', this will be visible in a polarisation at both levels, thus generating a better matching between the overall structure of party and voter positions. We would thus expect *the match on economic EU policies to be better in Spain, while the match on refugee policies is better in Hungary and Germany.* That said, a match can also exist if an (unpoliticised) issue is polarised neither among parties nor among voters. However, in case of low politicisation it is just as well possible that an issue is already more polarised on either of the levels – a longstanding split in the electorate may not have been picked up by parties (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004), or elites may already debate an issue while voters are unaware of or indifferent to it.

A second reason for different levels of EU politicisation – and partially related to structural reasons – are different dynamics on the supply side, i.e., the availability of parties. Although there have always been cross-country differences in the presence and strength of anti- or pro-EU parties, the last years have shown dramatic shifts in party supply across the EU (cf. Hooghe and Marks 2018). In several cases, this has resulted in significant transformations of national party systems, especially due to strong electoral gains of Eurosceptic parties. On the one hand, these shifts on the supply side may be an answer to increasing public Euroscepticism (e.g., Hobolt 2009). On the other hand, the rise of Eurosceptic parties may further fuel Euroscepticism among citizens. In general, the electoral gains of Eurosceptic parties indicate a decreasing contrast between the former pro-EU consensus at the elite level and widespread public Euroscepticism.

From the four countries under study, Eurosceptic parties have been especially strong in the last couple of elections in the Netherlands (PVV) and Hungary (Fidesz). In Germany, the AfD has only in the last years modestly gained in electoral strength. Similarly, Vox, a potentially significant right populist anti-EU party in Spain, has only recently entered the electoral arena.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in older member states parties have usually tried to avoid a clear positioning on the EU dimensions. This is different in the newer Eastern member states, where the EU in general has been more central on the political agenda (Mattila and Raunio 2006). Moreover, Hooghe and Marks (2009) showed that because (economic) left–right positions and positions on the GAL–TAN dimension (Green-Alternative-Libertarian to Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) reinforced each other in Eastern Europe, party conflict on the EU has been simpler and more polarised there. However, as authors such as Bakker *et al.* (2015) show, the formerly typical TAN–left Eurosceptic combination in Eastern Europe may slowly weaken, resulting in more similar party systems in Eastern and Western Europe with the common inverted U-curve (opposition to integration among extreme left and radical right). Hungary is one such example with both Fidesz and Jobbik being clearly Eurosceptic, but combining TAN with generally rather right attitudes (not necessarily in terms of economy). Given this potential convergence of party systems and due to strong populist right parties in both Hungary and the Netherlands, we expect *overall higher levels of EU polarisation, as well as a better match between levels of polarisation among parties and citizens, in the Netherlands and Hungary.*

## Data and methods

We use two data sources, one for the party and one for the citizen level. At the party level we rely on the 2017 Chapel Hill Expert FLASH Survey (CHES), which

was carried out in January and February 2018, and asked about party positions in 2017 (Polk *et al.* 2017). This reduced survey – in terms of length and geographical scope – includes party positions toward European integration in general and toward more specific policies regarding EU budget and economic authority, and a common EU asylum policy.

At the citizen level we collected original survey data in December 2018/January 2019 across four EU member states (DE, ES, HU & NL), which are also part of the CHES data (Goldberg *et al.* 2019). The four countries represent smaller and bigger EU member states, geographically spread across Europe, with different party systems and different experiences regarding the Euro crisis and refugee influx. All surveys were conducted by the company Kantar using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). The Dutch sample was drawn from the TNS NIPO database and the other three samples stem from Lightspeed and country-specific partner panels. Quotas (on age, gender, region and education) were enforced in sampling from these databases. Whereas the Dutch survey data ( $N_{NL} = 1942$ ) stems from the fourth wave from an ongoing panel-study (started in September 2017 with initial  $N=3026$ ), data from Germany, Spain and Hungary represent the first panel-wave ( $N_{DE} = 2895$ ,  $N_{ES} = 2867$ ,  $N_{HU} = 2746$ ).

### **Operationalisation**

We use three measures of opinions/positions toward the EU. At the party level, CHES experts were first asked about the general position on European integration that the party leaderships of the respective national parties took in 2017. Two policy-specific questions asked for the parties' leadership positions toward the development of a common policy on asylum seekers across EU member states and similarly toward greater EU authority over member states' economic and budgetary policies. Answers were measured on 7-point scales ranging from *strongly opposed* (1) to *strongly in favour* (7).

In order to compare the party and citizen level, we have replicated and slightly adapted these three questions in our surveys by asking for respondents' personal opinions/positions. The exact wordings for both the party- and citizen-level questions are displayed in Table A1 in the appendix. Using basically the same wording and identical answer scales avoids common validity concerns for linking survey and expert data (Golder and Stramski 2010). Further, a second common problem – the asking at different points in time – is less problematic given the relatively short time difference between collecting the expert and survey data.

To distinguish respondents' level of sophistication, we rely on three EU-related knowledge questions (see Table A1 for exact wordings). We recoded these questions into binary variables (correct vs. wrong & DK) and

summed them up to create a 4-point scale (0–3). Afterwards we split the sample into respondents with high political sophistication, two or all three knowledge questions correct (54%), and respondents with low sophistication, none or only one correct answer (46%).

### **Polarisation**

To measure polarisation we use a slightly adapted version of the polarisation index from Dalton (2008):

$$PI = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^N v_i \left( \frac{p_i - \bar{p}}{3} \right)^2}$$

with  $v$  = vote share,  $p$  = party position,  $\bar{p}$  = party system average position and  $N$  = number of parties.

In order to standardise the polarisation values to a min/max range between 0 and 10 as in Dalton's original index, we use a denominator of 3 (instead of 5) in the party position fraction (for a 7-point scale). The advantage of Dalton's index is that it includes both the relative position/extremity of each party (by subtracting the average position of all parties  $\bar{p}$  from the respective party's position  $p_i$ ) and the size of each party (by weighting it according to its received vote share  $v$ ). As a result, the more dispersed parties are along the 7-point scale, the higher the polarisation index becomes. This is particularly the case when more extreme positions are taken up by larger instead of smaller parties.

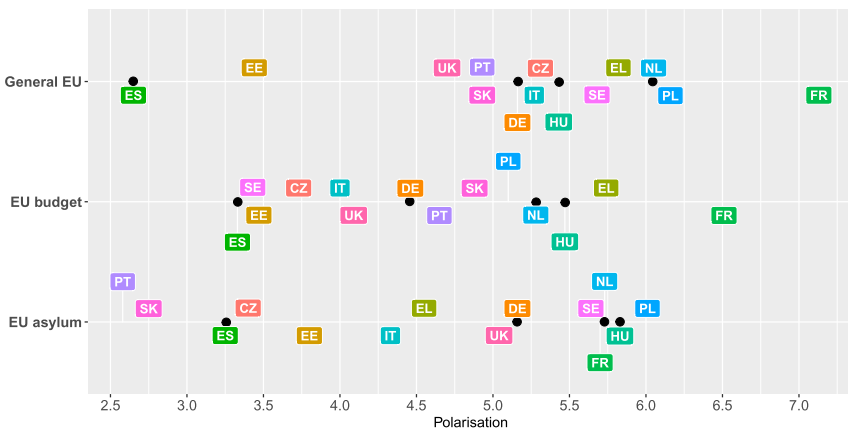
For a straightforward comparison between the party and citizen level, we need the same polarisation index to also measure citizens' polarisation. For this, we simply give an equal weight ( $v$  = vote share in original equation) of  $100/n$  (with  $n$  = number of respondents) to each individual citizen position to calculate polarisation at the citizen level. Alternatively, one can think about this adaptation as if we would have seven parties, one for each answer category on the 7-point scale with the party electorate being all respondents having answered the respective number between 1 and 7. We then assign a 'vote share' to each of the seven parties based on how many respondents answered the respective category.

As a robustness check for resulting differences in polarisation we use the (vote-weighted) compactness measure by Alvarez and Nagler (2004). Instead of absolute levels of polarisation, this measure provides information about the dispersion of citizens *relative* to the dispersion of parties. Comparing the compactness across variables and/or across countries enables us to validate the differences between citizens and parties in the respective absolute polarisation levels.

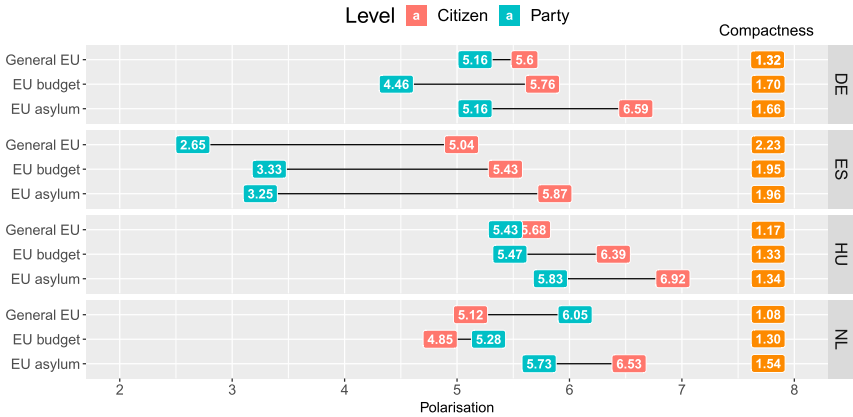
## Results

Before comparing the party and citizen level, we put the four countries in a wider, comparative context. [Figure 1](#) displays party polarisation for the general and two policy-specific EU positions across all 14 EU member states included in the CHES 2017 data. Party-level polarisation strongly varies with values ranging from 2.5 for EU asylum in Portugal to 7 for general EU positions in France (on a 0–10 scale). Our four countries under study reflect this variation as well (see black dots). Whereas Spain has very low polarisation across all three measures, the Netherlands and Hungary display comparatively high levels of polarisation with Germany located in between.<sup>4</sup> Spain and Hungary further display (very) coherent and similar values across the three measures. This coherence is less strong for Germany and the Netherlands. Still, these intra-country differences are much smaller than in other countries such as Sweden (SE) or Portugal (PT). Overall, the four countries under study nicely represent variation in overall levels of polarisation, while at the same time demonstrating reasonable variation between the different types of EU variables.

Turning to the comparison between parties and citizens, [Figure 2](#) displays the polarisation for all three EU variables across our four countries. Keeping in mind that the polarisation scale ranges from 0 to 10 (note the figure's shortened x-axis), the overall association of polarisation levels between citizens and parties is rather strong, which supports our general expectation. For instance, the general EU measure in Hungary or EU budget policy in the Netherlands shows an almost perfect party–citizen match. However, most other party–citizen differences are also less than two points, with only Spain showing systematically larger differences. This relatively poor



**Figure 1.** Party-level polarisation across 14 EU member states (CHES data, own calculations).

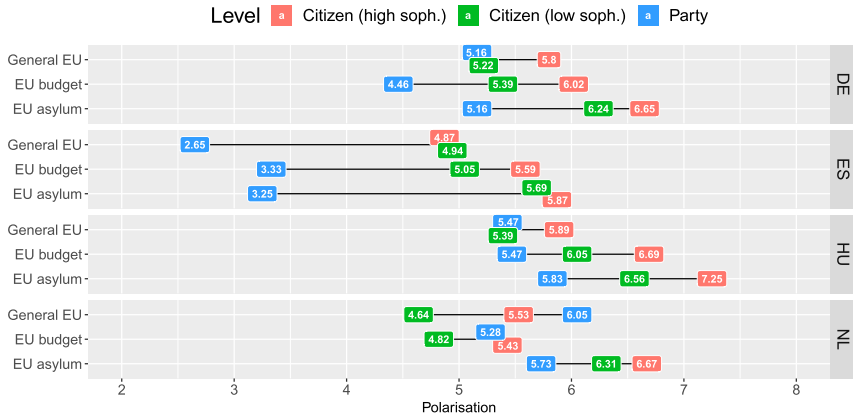


**Figure 2.** Citizen and party-level EU polarisation across four countries.

association in Spain is surprising in light of previous congruence studies reporting a good party–voter matching of EU positions in Spain – and a rather bad one in Hungary (Mattila and Raunio 2012). However, it is less surprising when considering the Spanish party system which until the recent rise of the Vox party has lacked a prominent anti-EU party. Focusing on the two specific policies, the party-level pattern of a stronger polarisation of EU asylum – compared to EU budget – is mostly present among citizens as well, again supporting the expected association between party and citizen polarisation.

We then compare the party–citizen association in the general European integration item with the associations in the two policies. In line with our expectations, for Germany, Hungary and partly Spain (only EU asylum), the association is indeed weaker for specific EU policies, i.e., the differences in polarisation between parties and citizens are larger, than for the general EU measure. Although this fits our expectations, we expected this larger difference because of a weaker politicisation – and polarisation – of specific EU policies among citizens. Interestingly, the results suggest the opposite, with citizens being more polarised than parties on both the budget and asylum policies (one exception is budget policy in the Netherlands). The displayed compactness measures mostly confirm the overall weaker party–citizen association for the specific EU policies. As a reminder, higher compactness means that citizens are relatively more dispersed than parties. Except for Spain, the numbers prove that citizens are relatively more dispersed (polarised) in their positions toward specific EU policies than in their general EU opinions.<sup>5</sup>

Next, we analyse the role of respondents’ level of sophistication for polarisation levels and related party–citizen matching. Figure 3 shows that in



**Figure 3.** Citizen and party-level EU polarisation according to level of sophistication.

Note: Share of highly sophisticated citizens per country is: DE 57.6%; ES 56.5%; HU 49.0%; NL 49.5%.

Germany, Spain and Hungary, the expected match of polarisation levels is indeed better between parties and less sophisticated respondents than between parties and more sophisticated persons (exception general EU positions in Spain). This speaks for the suggested cue-taking approach of less sophisticated persons to simply adopt party positions for complex issues such as the EU. However, two findings contradict this interpretation. First, the levels of polarisation are especially similar for the general EU item in Germany and Hungary. We, in contrast, expected that cue-taking is more relevant for the more complex policy issues. For the latter, the differences in polarisation between parties and citizens are comparatively larger, though. Second, looking at the patterns in the Netherlands does neither support the expected cue-taking. Here, for two of the three measures, the polarisation levels of less sophisticated citizens are further away from parties compared to polarisation levels of better sophisticated people. It should have been the exact opposite, that is larger differences in polarisation between parties and highly sophisticated respondents.

Instead of the expected cue-taking, we observe a general tendency of sophisticated respondents to have more extreme positions on both general and policy-specific EU items, irrespective of where parties stand. This points to a linear effect of EU knowledge on citizen polarisation. Persons with less knowledge might have no opinions on the three measures or at least are less confident in them and hence form less strong opinions.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, this lack of knowledge does not result in a systematic adoption of parties' positions by less sophisticated people. In contrast, highly sophisticated citizens use their knowledge to form strong and crystallised opinions toward the EU, and this in both a positive and negative way.

Overall, citizens are in general more polarised than parties when it comes to the EU (see [Figure 2](#)). This is in line with the trend of increasing citizen polarisation toward the EU shown by Down and Wilson (2008). With the partly exception of the Netherlands, citizens are least polarised on general European integration followed by EU budget and EU asylum. This relatively coherent citizen pattern across countries is interesting, as such an order is not present at the party level. Citizens are thus more similar across countries than the respective national party systems are. These cross-national similarities among citizens, though, contradict our country-specific expectations regarding the influence of the economic crisis and refugee influx. First, there is no relatively higher polarisation on EU budget policy in Spain (though parties are indeed slightly more polarised). Second, although we observe the expected relatively higher polarisation on EU asylum policy in Germany and Hungary, this pattern is not unique and thus not directly related to the higher refugee influx into these two countries. There may be another, more general mechanism which results in higher polarisation in asylum questions across all countries.

Our second country-specific expectation – related to supply-side effects – is mostly supported by the results. The strong presence of populist right parties results in high party-level polarisation in the Netherlands and Hungary, also in a EU-wide perspective (see [Figure 1](#)). Hungarian citizens mirror these high levels of polarisation on all three measures, which might be a sign of the still higher relevance and politicisation of the EU in Eastern Europe. Dutch citizens are less polarised than expected. Still, in terms of matching, the compactness values in [Figure 2](#) clearly display the expected higher similarities of party–citizen polarisation in the Netherlands and Hungary (smaller values than in Germany and Spain across the three EU measures).

## Discussion

Research has taken different approaches to study the increasing politicisation of the EU at the level of citizens and elites. Surprisingly, the overall structure of domestic contestation of the EU in terms of polarisation at these two levels has not been addressed in detail, despite its relevance for the functioning of the political system (e.g., Dalton 2008). As good news, one main finding of our study is a relatively strong association between degrees of polarisation among citizens and parties. Generally, citizens are more polarised than parties across EU member states and across different issues. In detail we found these patterns for general attitudes toward European integration, but also for more specific EU policies such as EU budget authority or common EU asylum policies. This clearly confirms actor expansion and a nowadays higher EU politicisation among citizens, in contrast to the EU being formerly more of an elite issue. This result is further strengthened as the formation of citizen

attitudes seem to happen based on citizens' own EU knowledge and not because they follow party cues in complex questions such as the EU. The finding that highly sophisticated citizens are consistently most polarised points to citizens' ability to form clear opinions on (complex) EU matters.

A second key finding are systematic differences between general EU attitudes and specific policy positions. EU asylum policy is consistently the most polarised opinion dimension for citizens. This is in line with recent studies showing an increasing salience of cultural issues as opposed to the traditional economic dimension of competition (Kriesi *et al.* 2012). Combining these two key findings, this suggests the existence of a well-structured electoral potential for political competition on cultural, immigration-related EU positions. High polarisation implies that both crystallised pro- and anti-EU positions exist among citizens. Electoral potential is thus available not only for nationalist Eurosceptic parties, but also for culturally progressive pro-EU parties that propagate a more integrated Europe.

The overall strongest polarisation of asylum positions implies that structural developments of the last decade, such as the economic crisis and the refugee influx into Europe, did not result in country-specific patterns with higher polarisation in countries more affected by the respective developments. Quite contrarily, polarisation patterns at the citizen level show strong similarities across countries, suggesting that citizens' opinions are less driven by country-specific political developments. In the absence of longitudinal data, though, we cannot assess to what extent the structural developments have impacted the overall level of polarisation across countries over time.

In contrast, the degree and matching of EU polarisation depends on supply-side differences between countries. The strength of populist right parties in the Netherlands and Hungary results in more equal levels of polarisation between citizens and parties. Furthermore, and potentially due to Hungary being a newer Eastern European member state with a typically higher relevance of the EU on the political agenda, polarisation levels are generally highest in Hungary. In contrast, as one of the last EU countries without a significant right-wing Eurosceptic party, the Spanish party system shows the lowest level of polarisation. Recently, though, the new party Vox may fill a clear anti-EU position and soon increase party-level polarisation in Spain as well. Such a development would support the idea that party-level polarisation tends to match the dispersion of citizens' attitudes (Dalton 2008), and in this particular case would constitute evidence of party polarisation following citizen polarisation rather than vice versa.

The results have to be interpreted in perspective. Notwithstanding our attempt to represent the diversity of EU countries, the small number of countries does not allow for generalisability across the whole European Union. Similarly, the actual effect of structural developments is impossible to estimate without longitudinal data. In future research, we would like to

tackle these shortcomings by enlarging the geographical scope, but also the timely component, e.g., monitor the development of the Spanish case. A third potential line of research may consider other EU policies that are more technical in nature and more distant from citizens' everyday life. Both policies under study here are linked to major structural developments and were thus more prominent on the political agenda and covered by the media. For other, less prominent policies the non-found cue-taking could be more relevant, especially for less knowledgeable persons. In sum, our paper opens several avenues for future research on the dynamics, and contingencies of politicisation of the EU.

## Notes

1. See for instance GDP (growth) figures from Eurostat: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>
2. See for instance figures from Eurostat's *asylum quarterly reports*: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum\\_quarterly\\_report](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report)
3. Evidence of EU positions and size of the mentioned parties can be seen in Figure A1 in the appendix. Data stems from the CHES 2017 flash survey, and hence do not yet include the Spanish Vox party (size of the labels representing vote share of parties).
4. See again Figure A1 in the appendix presenting the underlying party positions (and party sizes in terms of vote share) in the four countries that result in the displayed levels of polarisation.
5. Generally, the two approaches of comparing differences in the polarisation indices or comparing the compactness measure across countries and variables leads to very similar results. The correlation between the differences in party-citizen polarisation and the compactness values is  $r=0.91$ .
6. As our surveys did not offer an explicit 'don't know' option, answering the middle option (4) might represent a lack of knowledge instead of a true middle position (Rodon 2015). This could underestimate the citizens' polarisation level. Yet, deleting all respondents having answered the middle option does confirm the overall pattern (see Figure A2 in the appendix). The deletion does, if at all, further decrease – and not increase – the level of polarisation, e.g., for general EU in Spain or EU budget in the Netherlands.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the participants of the preparatory workshop for this special issue and especially the organisers and special issue editors Toni Rodon and Sara Hobolt for their helpful feedback. We further thank Pirmin Bundi and the two anonymous reviewers for thoughtful comments and efforts towards improving our manuscript.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

The study was funded by the ERC-H2020 European Research Council grant EUROPINIONS, PI Claes de Vreese, grant #647316.

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