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Electoral responses to the increased contestation over European integration. The European Elections of 2019 and beyond

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journals.sagepub.com/home/eup**Wouter van der Brug** 

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Abstract

This special issue focuses on the consequences of the heightened conflict between member states and increased politicization of European affairs for electoral politics in the European Union. In this introduction we begin by outlining three important developments that fuelled the politicization: (a) the common currency; (b) the increased push-back on the EU's open border policies; and (c) the inability of the EU to prevent democratic backsliding in some countries. We then discuss their consequences for EU elections, particularly campaigns, public opinion on Europe and voter behaviour, which are investigated against the backdrop of the 2019 European Parliament elections

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in the individual articles in this special issue. This introduction provides a contextual framework for these contributions and reflects upon some of its main findings.

Keywords

European elections, euroscepticism, media campaigns, parties, voters

Introduction

World politics has been constantly under stress in recent years struggling to tackle climate change, provide humanitarian aid to refugees, fight racism and social inequality, pacify wars and contest dictatorships, and more recently combat the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of the global nature of several of these issues, it seems difficult to imagine how any of these could be addressed without international collaboration. So, the European Union (EU) as an international organisation is well poised to play a major role in discussions on e.g. climate change and refugee issues. However, the EU has been jumping from one existential crisis to the next over the past decade: the financial crisis leading to bailouts from 2010 onwards, the refugee crisis in 2015 (and onwards), the outcome of the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, whose long-term consequences for European democracies and economies are not yet foreseeable.

Where European integration would require a willingness of the member states to show solidarity with other member states that are mostly affected by these crises, we have seen the opposite responses from the governments (Kuhn, 2019; Zeitlin et al., 2019). Heightened conflict in the EU can, furthermore, be understood through the lens of politicization (Hutter and Grande, 2014: 1003). While European integration is central to explaining its scope, politicization primarily takes place in domestic political contexts (Kriesi, 2016) as a consequence of handing more authority to the EU (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Empirically, politicization can be observed in three central dimensions, namely increased salience of European issues, actor expansion, particularly to non-governmental actors, and polarization of public opinion and elite stances (e.g. De Wilde et al., 2016; Hutter and Grande, 2014).

With respect to polarization, we have seen an increased emphasis on national identities, and we see strong anti-immigration sentiments (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). Eurosceptic political parties and movements benefit from these sentiments and fuel them as well (Rooduijn et al., 2016). Populist parties that challenge the existence of the EU are no longer just at the political fringes, but have been governing (either as members of a coalition or as government support parties) in member states such as Austria, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland. In the run up to the European Parliament (EP) elections of 2019 politicians like Frans Timmermans, the *Spitzenkandidat* (lead candidate)¹ of the European Socialists, and several pundits have told us that ‘the future of Europe is at stake’ at these elections – underlining the increased salience of European affairs.² From the perspective of those

who support the EU, the rise of outright Eurosceptic parties was a clear cause for concern. Moreover, nationalistic sentiments had inspired many British citizens to vote in favour of their country leaving the EU in 2016.

Amidst all of these conflicts, the results of the 2019 EP elections were in some ways remarkable. Turnout was much higher than in 2014. Despite ranking high in the polls in earlier years, radical right populists did not become substantially more important players in the EP. So, the outcome of these elections suggests that the majority of the European electorate does not want to jeopardize the European project, and perhaps realize that in order to address some of the major challenges of our time, transnational cooperation is required. Yet, when only looking at the outcome of elections, we cannot draw any such inferences. Our special issue employs data collected around the 2019 EP elections to study how voters and parties responded to the increased politicization of the EU, partially in the context of a rapidly changing media landscape. Rather than looking at the European project from the perspective of heads of state, the European Commission and other policy makers, we look at it from the perspective of the public, political parties and the media. What are the consequences of Brexit for Euroscepticism in other countries where parties propose that their country should leave the EU? To what extent does politicization of EU affairs affect electoral processes? What are the consequences of the increasing choice and importance of (social) media for election campaigns? What are the prospects for a more ‘social Europe’? What are the consequences of the (probable) abandonment of the system of *Spitzenkandidaten*?

In this article, we first discuss in more detail the politicized context in which the 2019 EP elections took place. While these conflicts tend to increase in times of crisis (the financial crisis, the refugee crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic), the politicization itself has more structural roots. In the following, we first elaborate on some of the most pressing structural conflicts that are at the heart of the politicization of the EU, before we outline some of the main insights that we learn from the contributions to this special issue.

The politicized context of the 2019 EP elections

The 2019 EP elections took place in the wake of the Brexit referendum. While countries struggling with volatile economies, relatively weak state institutions, and corruption are eager to join the EU, an economically successful established democracy is leaving the Union. This is not a good sign for the EU. When looking at the countries joining the Eurozone, we see a similar trend, where countries with large budget deficits like Italy and France and high levels of corruption, like Cyprus and Malta have joined the Eurozone, while states like Sweden and Denmark decided not to join.

With Britain leaving the Union, the EU is losing a member state that has pushed back firmly on the process of European integration. Some ‘Euro-optimists’ like Guy Verhofstadt predicted that it would now become easier to take new steps towards further European integration. Yet, there are several signs that this is not the case, because of the various conflicts between EU member states that undermine collaboration. As these conflicts play out in public, it becomes more difficult for political leaders to reach compromises and explain these to the electorate in their home countries (see

Hix, 2018). In this section we discuss three structural sources of conflict between members states, which are likely to increase the politicization of the EU. The first source of conflict are the increasing tensions caused by the Euro, the second is the increased pushback on the EU's open border policies and the third is democratic backsliding in some countries and the inability of the EU to prevent this.

Conflicts caused by the common currency

When the Euro was introduced as a common currency, the expectation was that it would lead to more integration of national economies and more equality between the economies of member states. However, as argued forcefully by Stiglitz (2016), the Euro has had the opposite effect. According to him, the Euro has increased inequalities and created new structural conflicts that jeopardize the future of the EU itself. Some of the countries that joined the Eurozone, Greece and Italy in particular, had a long history of devaluing their currency to make their economies more competitive. Moreover, creating more money was an alternative way of taxation. First with the launch of the European Monetary Union (EMU) in 1992, then with the adoption of the Euro in 1999, member countries lost their monetary policy independence. So, the only options for the governments of these countries to balance the state budget was to increase taxes, to cut spending and/or to borrow money. Obviously, the latter option was politically the most attractive in the short run, especially since the Euro had enabled countries with a high state debt to borrow money at a lower interest rate than before. As a result, the state debt increased enormously in some Eurozone countries, particularly France, Italy, Greece and Portugal.³

When the sovereign debt crisis unfolded from 2009 onwards, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Greece needed direct help preventing them from bankruptcy. These 'bailout countries' were forced to implement strict austerity measures, which had severe social consequences. Unemployment skyrocketed in the four bailout countries, especially among the youngest generations. As a result, many young people migrated to other countries, especially the better educated. This brain drain might have long term consequences for the future of these countries. If one looks at the Eurozone in its entirety, one could perhaps argue that as long as the economic benefits of the Euro outweigh the social costs, the net result might still be positive. Yet, it is questionable whether this is really the case. According to Stiglitz (2016), the austerity rules are slowing down economic growth across the Eurozone and are increasing unemployment rates across the Eurozone.

The EMU created two major political divisions in the EU. The first division is between mostly Southern Eurozone countries (including France) that previously implemented a policy of currency devaluation in order to be internationally competitive and to balance government budgets and Northern Eurozone countries with more competitive economies and more fiscal discipline. The populations in the Southern countries feel that they are being impoverished, as their economies are lagging, while their governments are forced to implement austerity measures. The populations in the Northern Eurozone countries feel that they are forced to repeatedly rescue other member states where people are considered to retire early and evade taxes. These sentiments have

played a major role also in the most recent discussions on the €750b ‘Next Generation EU recovery fund’ that aims at limiting the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. This strengthens populist parties in both groups of countries, thereby contributing to further politicizing the Euro.

The second division is between members and non-members of the EMU. The group of EU countries that are not part of the Eurozone is very heterogeneous with diverse economies. Denmark and Sweden are among the most successful EU member states and they do not want to join the Eurozone, while an economic weaker country like Bulgaria would like to enter the Eurozone, but does not fulfil the criteria. With the UK leaving the EU, the non-Eurozone countries are losing an important partner and they are running the risk of becoming marginalized and being pressured to adopt the Euro. With the well-known problems of the design of the EMU, the populations of Denmark and Sweden will be very hesitant to do so. How that will play out cannot be predicted, yet it is clear that the Euro, and the resultant policies, will remain a source of conflict between the EU member states and heightened politicization in the foreseeable future.

Immigration and nationalism

The second source of conflict in the EU is resistance to immigration. A core aspect of European integration is the freedom to travel or migrate from one member state to another. The ambition of an ‘ever closer Union’ entails that border restrictions should be lifted and the Schengen agreement, geographically overlapping largely with the EU, plays an important role in facilitating free travel. Yet, Schengen has become under pressure, especially after the refugee crisis of 2015 when more than a million people, mostly from Syria and Afghanistan tried to cross the Mediterranean and seek asylum in EU countries. Most of them arrived in Italy and Greece, but the majority travelled towards other countries. In order to handle the refugee crisis, the European Commission proposed that each member state should welcome a number of refugees in proportion to the size of the population. This was opposed by several countries, most vehemently by some Central and Eastern European member states. As member states showed no solidarity with Greece and Italy, these countries allowed the refugees to travel onwards to the north, via several routes. This resulted in very chaotic situations, which strengthened the idea that we are ‘not in control’. ‘Take back control’ became the successful slogan of the Brexit campaign and it summarizes the critique of right-wing populist parties on the EU. As the Dutch far-right politician Wilders writes on his party’s website: ‘Democracy equals sovereignty. But through governments’ transfer of powers to Brussels, the EU institutions and other countries decide on matters that are essential for our nation: our immigration policy, our monetary policy, our trade policy and many other policies’.⁴

Germany and Sweden, the countries that took in most of the refugees, saw the rise of far-right parties that had until then been marginal: the *Alternative for Germany* (AFD) and the *Sweden Democrats*. These parties contributed to making the issue of immigration even more salient in public debates, thereby further increasing the politicization of this issue in the domestic context. In other EU countries, the radical right peaked in the polls in 2015 (e.g. France and the Netherlands). As pointed out by several scholars,

questions around immigration and national identity have become some of the most politicised issues throughout Europe (e.g. Börzel and Risse, 2018; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Kuhn, 2019; Zeitlin et al., 2019). Six countries suspended the Schengen agreement in 2015: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway and Sweden and the reinstated border controls are still in place. Some scholars even predict the end of Schengen (e.g. Fijnaut, 2016).⁵ In the spring of 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic hit Europe, most Schengen countries reintroduced border controls.

While these run counter to the EU ideal of free movement, immigration is the more contested issue. One of the holy grails of European unification is that EU citizens are allowed to migrate to another EU country. Even though some countries impose restrictions, this is the ambition of an 'ever closer Union'. If EU citizens migrate to another EU member state, they pay taxes in this country and they become immediately entitled to the same social benefits as the other citizens residing there. When Cameron tried to renegotiate this aspect in the run-up to the Brexit referendum, he was told that this part was non-negotiable. Yet, there is very little support among the public for these policies.⁶

In sum, the EU's immigration policies and the Schengen agreement are under pressure. When it comes to providing shelter for refugees, there are few signs of European solidarity. The response has been to collaborate closely with the coast guards of Turkey and Libya to prevent refugees from entering. These latter practices, as well as the lack of solidarity are seriously undermining the legitimacy of the EU (e.g. Lavenex, 2018; Murray and Longo, 2018; Scipioni, 2018). The arising conflicts overlap to some degree with the Eurozone conflicts. On the one hand, we see increasing tensions between Southern EU member states where many refugees first arrive, and the Northern EU countries where they would like to settle. On the other, we see a conflict between Central Eastern and Western EU member states. Many citizens from Central Eastern countries move to Western Europe, but the governments of these states are mostly unwilling to accept any asylum seekers. Far right parties are benefitting everywhere.

Democratic backsliding

A third source of conflict is democratic backsliding, particularly in some of the member states that joined since 2004 (e.g. Kelemen and Blauburger, 2017). Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union starts as follows: 'The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.' When countries want to join the EU, the European Commission has much leverage to make sure that these countries live up to the EU's principles. Candidate countries have to strengthen their democratic institutions, make sure that the rule of law is exercised effectively, have a competitive market economy and take measures to fight corruption. In the run up to become a full member of the EU, the formerly communist countries in Central Eastern Europe have increased their ranking on all kinds of indices measuring liberal democracy, such as Freedom House and Polity IV. However, once a country is an EU member, the European Commission has only limited leverage to guarantee that member states respect

the values laid down in Article 2, even though it is not completely powerless (Sedelmeier, 2014).

Recently, the governments of two EU member states, Hungary and Poland, have taken several measures to increase the control of the executive over the judicial branch. In the 2020 edition of the Freedom House indicators, the original 15 member states of the EU (except Greece) get a score of 90 or higher on a 100-point scale measuring (liberal) democracy. Some of the new member states perform less well, in particular Bulgaria (scoring 78), Poland (82) and Hungary (69). Hungary is classified as only ‘partly free’ and if it would now apply for EU-membership it would not be admitted. Democratic backsliding is deeply problematic, because it undermines the core values of the EU. It is therefore not surprising that the European Commission and the EP have taken steps against these countries. The European Commission launched an infringement procedure in 2017 to safeguard the independence of judges in Poland, and a similar procedure in 2019 to prevent Hungary from outlawing the activities of certain NGO’s. In 2018 already, the EP had called for sanctions against Hungary for undermining the rule of law. The latest step in this process is that a new mechanism is introduced, which allows the European Commission to cut EU funds for member countries that are violating rule-of-law principles.

In response to the criticism from EU institutions, Hungarian prime minister Victor Orban accused the EU of ‘colonial’ interference in Hungary’s affairs and compared the EU to the Soviet Union (e.g. Innes, 2012). Moreover, in November 2020 Poland and Hungary vetoed the new seven-year EU budget as well as the ‘Next Generation EU recovery fund’, in response to the new measures. It is clear that these types of interactions will hinder collaboration between member states, fuel politicization and reduce the likelihood that citizens will accept the outcomes of EU-negotiations.

Other potential sources of conflict

We believe that the three topics discussed in this section are the most evident ones leading to structural conflicts between groups of countries. By extension, these undermine public support for further European integration, at both sides of each divide. Of course, there are other potential sources of conflict, such as the climate crisis and the ambitious Green Deal, that challenge collaboration further. Climate change nowadays represents a key policy issue at the supranational level. Between members states, it can generate greater rivalry with respect to the allocation of the budget aiming at the implementation of measures to mitigate climate change. Several countries are still using coal (even ignite) as an important source of energy. Making a transition to more sustainable sources of energy will be costly, so these countries will expect the EU to compensate them. At the same time, other member states are also looking at the costs of such transitions and are not eager to subsidize affected countries. So, this will become a more divisive issue between EU member states.

As the implementation of tighter measures generates additional costs for member states, issues related to climate change are politicized in domestic politics. There has been a rise of popular movements against such measures across Europe, for example

the Yellow Vests Movement that originated in France at the end of 2018 or the Farmers Defence Force that began protesting in the Netherlands in autumn 2019. Far right populists exploit these issues and position themselves at the opposite pole to Green parties on the GAL-TAN dimension (see Hooghe and Marks, 2018), while the latter have received support from the transnational Fridays for Future Movements from 2018 onwards.

Corruption is another potential source of deep conflict. There are several EU member states with a problematic ranking on the Corruption Perception Index, which is collected by Transparency International. Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria are particularly problematic cases. Corruption is not only a problem because EU resources are not used for the right purposes, there are also strong indications that EU funds increase the risk of corruption (Fazekas et al., 2013). In several countries there are close connections between high-ranking government officials and organised crime. Investigative journalists who exposed corruption scandals were murdered: Daphne Galizia in Malta in 2017 and Ján Kuciak in Slovakia in 2018. When corrupt politicians conspire with organized crime to use EU funds for personal benefits, this severely undermines the legitimacy of the European Union. Until now, there has been surprisingly little politicization around the issue of corruption. Yet, it seems likely that corruption will undermine the support for EU funding of projects, particularly among citizens in the net-contributing countries.

Finally, in the context of these large current and potential sources of conflict, there are still good reasons for the EU to become a stronger and more assertive player in a world that is governed increasingly by economic and military force, rather than by international law. Yet, this would require more collaboration between the member states, and thus more European integration. In this section we discussed three crucial issues that are structural sources of conflict between the EU member states and that undermine the potential for further integration. This special issue deals with the ways in which citizens and parties have responded to this increased politicization.

Consequences for EU electoral politics

This special issue focuses on the responses of voters and parties to the heightened politicization largely resulting from the issues identified above. Yet, politicization has not taken place in a vacuum. It has gone hand in hand with fundamental changes in the political information ecology, which is now a 'high choice environment', posing significant challenges to democratic processes. Hence, before discussing the responses of parties and voters to politicization, we will elaborate on the changes in the media and campaign environment.

Changes in the campaign and media landscape

In a recent overview piece of political communication trends, Van Aelst et al. (2017) identified a range of major developments in the information environment. These pertain both to the broader context within which political parties and other actors operate and particularly to the changing media ecology. We focus in particular on the increasing fragmentation and polarization. The general argument is that societies face

growing political divides and that these are fed and reinforced by campaign messages and media content. In both cases the activities and messages are to a large extent enabled and amplified by new communication technologies and platforms. It is important to say that there is little evidence in the literature of a linear development showing that campaign messages or media content lead directly to more public polarization. These relationships seem at best, partial and conditional.

How campaigns and media use feed into citizens' attitudes towards the EU is still not fully known. There is some evidence that political pre-dispositions can affect media usage, but since EU attitudes are not aligned with clear left-right positions (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996), it is harder for citizens to let their EU attitudes guide media usage. Other studies provide support for the notion that Eurosceptic citizens have different media diets compared to individuals holding positive attitudes towards the EU: Leruth et al. (2017) discuss that voters in the Netherlands and the UK turn to likeminded outlets that mirror their own attitudes towards the EU. Even though the authors rely on cross-sectional data, these findings offer a glimpse at possible selection effects in the EU context.

Hallmarks of the changing media and campaign landscape are the increased ability for campaigns to strategize and to target specific subsets of the electorate. This is largely happening via social media platforms. Media use in Europe is fragmenting (Kleis Nielsen et al., 2020): a large size of Europeans opt out of traditional news media usage and/or resort to news media consumption via social media platforms. This affects the strategies for political campaigns which can rely less on media coverage and therefore must rethink their campaign strategies. One important part of this mix is the role of social media platforms. These have become the key venue for political campaigning. The centrality of these platforms makes it pertinent for research to study the information they provide about the EU.

Two of the papers in the special issue elaborate further on these issues. One paper by Nai et al. (2022) focuses on negative campaigning, while the other by Kruschinski and Bene (2022) deals with ads in the social media environment. Nai et al. (2022) use expert survey data to study how Eurosceptic parties are rewriting party campaign communication with harsh and negative campaigning. They conclude that negative campaigning benefits Eurosceptic parties. So, it seems rational for them to follow this campaign strategy in the future, thus further contributing to the politicization of European integration. Kruschinski and Bene (2022) expand the scope to include social media, more specifically an analysis of parties' Facebook posts and ads. They show that campaign strategies on social media differ, but they also suggest that parties have limited capacity to engage citizens through their social media campaigns.

Consequences for public opinion

The politicization of European affairs provides the context in which public opinion about and support for the EU develops. Public opinion about the EU has both shown signs of stability (at the aggregate level) and volatility (at the individual level). It seems evident that public opinion is an important factor in the increased politicization of the EU.

The economic crisis has sparked renewed interest in the linkage between real economic developments, economic expectations, and economic altruism on the one hand, and support for the EU on the other. The financial crisis, the refugee crisis and the Covid-19 crisis affected some EU member states more than others, and this has deepened some of the structural conflicts that we discussed earlier in this article. Italy, Greece and Spain have been hit particularly hard by these crises. Other member states showed little willingness to help, especially with the redistribution of refugees who arrived at their shores. This raises several questions pertaining to solidarity, a topic that is addressed by Katsanidou et al. (2022) as well as by Pellegata and Visconti (2022) in this special issue. Both papers demonstrate that attitudes towards European solidarity have an effect on voters' party choice. Yet, in the most likely 'donor countries' like Germany the willingness to show solidarity is not particularly high. So, if parties in those countries would show greater solidarity, they run the risk of being punished by their voters.

The globalisation of world markets and the increased mobility of people from within and outside the EU has produced new political conflicts, which have been coined the conflict between winners and losers of globalisation (Kriesi et al., 2008). The 'losers' are those who mainly experience disadvantages from globalisation as their jobs are relocated to low income countries and they compete with immigrants for the scarcer remaining jobs. The winners are socio-cultural specialists whose jobs are not easily transferable to low income countries and who experience the benefits of open borders (see also Hooghe and Marks, 2018). Since the EU aims at opening the borders and promoting international competition, radical right populist parties oppose the EU as one of the main advocates of globalisation and immigration.

Immigration was an important theme for UK Independence Party and it played a central role in the Brexit campaign. The slogan 'take back control' was not just directed against Brussels, but was also a call for more restrictive border policies. In this special issue, Hobolt et al. (2022) focus on the consequences of Brexit for other countries. Because of the chaos created by the Brexiteers, the decision to leave the Union currently functions as a deterrent for other countries that may consider leaving. Yet, if Britain would become economically successful after Brexit, this would most likely motivate radical right populists in other countries to campaign for leaving the EU.

As the Brexit saga shows, public support for the EU can no longer be taken for granted. It will take significant leadership to provide guidance to public discussions about the EU and its policies without reducing the public debate to a simplified 'for or against' the EU. This reduction also does injustice to the more nuanced nature of public opinion about the EU. Scholarly work acknowledges that EU attitudes are multi-dimensional in nature (e.g. De Vreese et al., 2019; Hobolt and Brouard, 2011). They include various aspects of citizens' cognitive and affective evaluations of the EU, like EU *performance* evaluations, *utilitarian* attitudes, European *identity*, and *strengthening* of the Union. It will be in this context of more multi-dimensional EU attitudes, a nascent alignment between anti-immigration, anti-establishment, and anti-EU sentiments that both future political developments as well as research on public opinion about the EU will take place.

Consequences for voter behaviour

How might the politicization of EU affairs affect electoral processes and voting behaviour? While conflicts around the Euro and the EU's open border policies may underlie new developments in this respect, democratic backsliding can already be considered a consequence of changes in voter behaviour; it is reasonable to assume that there will be further consequences for political behaviour in the long run (see Meijers and Van der Veer, 2019; Schlipphak and Treib, 2017). With respect to the economy, economic voting has increased in crisis-ridden countries (Lobo and Pannico, 2020). At the same time, research suggests that populist attitudes of voters rather than economic voting are the main drivers of the increased support for populist parties during the European sovereign debt crisis in national elections (e.g. Katsanidou and Reinl, 2020; Marcos-Marne et al., 2020).

Likewise, research suggests that electoral support for radical right parties is mainly driven by substantive considerations, such as anti-immigrant sentiments, but also ideological positions more generally (e.g. Van der Brug et al., 2000). While anti-immigrant sentiments are strong predictors of support for radical right parties, these anti-immigration sentiments are not clearly linked to the presence of immigrants (Stockemer et al., 2020). Moreover, local exposure to refugees does not necessarily lead voters to support radical right parties (Schaub et al., 2021), although immigration can affect attitudes, which in turn drive support for the populist radical right (Evans and Ivaldi, 2021).

In this special issue we start from the assumption that, as attitudes towards European integration and assessments of political performances have become more multi-dimensional over time (e.g. De Vreese et al., 2019; Hobolt and Brouard, 2011), motivations underlying electoral behaviour have become more diverse as well. The second-order elections phenomenon (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), whereby EP elections are dominated by domestic considerations among parties, media and voters, is still present (e.g. Van der Brug and De Vreese, 2016; Van der Brug et al., 2016). However, in addition to the politicization of European integration (e.g. De Wilde and Zürn, 2012; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019), there have been further developments in EU politics that suggest that European elections have the potential to become more first-order in the future, most notably the lead candidates (*Spitzenkandidaten*) initiative that was introduced in 2014.

Among the core challenges identified above, the Euro and the issues related to migration have become some of the core topics subject to increasing politicization in European politics (e.g. Börzel and Risse, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Rauh et al., 2020). Although environmental issues have had an important standing on the European agenda for a long time, which is not least due to the electoral success of Green parties across Europe since the 1980s, problems related to climate change have gained additional popularity through the Fridays for Future Movement that first came into action in 2018. During the campaigns, it was not only the European Green Party, but also Frans Timmermans, the lead candidate of the Party of European Socialists, who prominently advocated these issues. Taken together, both long-standing challenges related to the

Euro and migration and highly topical climate change issues are therefore expected to mobilize European voters.

Braun and Schäfer (2022) in their contribution to this special issue address precisely that question. They argue that individuals who regard certain policy issues, such as climate change and environment, economy and growth, as well as immigration, as one of the most important problems to solve, are also more likely to take part in EP elections. They expect this relationship to be stronger in those contexts where these issues are highly salient in the public realm. This hypothesis is supported, particularly on issues related to climate change and immigration. This suggests that these topics are likely to dominate European politics in the future. Climate change is still pressing; and it is yet unforeseen how Brexit will impact the long-term plans to tackle climate change in Europe. Likewise, refugees continue to risk their lives to reach European soil and the humanitarian crisis is not solved. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic poses a new threat to European economies, which requires joint efforts and solidarity at the European level in the next years.

This also means that, in times of perpetual crisis and several politicized issues that the EU currently deals with, the question of leadership becomes crucial. EU leadership is divided between several EU institutions and their Presidents, but the EP has introduced the lead candidates procedure in 2014 with the intention that voters have more influence over the composition of the executive as far as the European Commission is concerned. The hope was that the campaigns of the pan-European lead candidates ultimately increase the democratic legitimacy of both the EP and the Commission. However, scholars doubt whether this goal can be achieved given the power of the European Council to nominate the candidate for Commission President (Christiansen, 2016; Hobolt, 2014).

Indeed, while Jean-Claude Juncker, the lead candidate of the winning European People's Party, was nominated by the Council in 2014, his successor Manfred Weber was not put forward following the 2019 EP elections. Instead, the Heads of State nominated Ursula von der Leyen, who was eventually elected by the EP. Since she had not been a lead candidate during the campaigns, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure was suspended and it remains questionable whether it will be revived in the future.

Regardless of the outcome and future evolution of this procedure, the question of EU leadership remains important. Gattermann and De Vreese (2022) in this special issue argue that examining the extent to which voters consider European leaders 'fit for office' is a crucial question in times of crisis. Specifically, they analyse leader evaluations and find that they are unidimensional, that is, voters do not distinguish between different kinds of leader attributes. This finding underlines that European voters only have a vague image of European leaders. As such, the electoral consequences of leader evaluations are not yet far-reaching.

Conclusion

What are the implications of the special issue's findings for European politics and research in the long run? As policy issues related to the economy, migration and climate change will continue to dominate European politics in the future, the implications

for representation, accountability and responsiveness remain imperative to study. These issues are likely to mobilize the European electorate in future European and national elections as the findings of Braun and Schäfer (2022) suggest citizens of the EU will look at Britain as a ‘benchmark’ of how a country might develop outside the EU (Hobolt et al., 2022). On the one hand, the Brexit negotiations were chaotic and the British economy will be affected negatively, making the prospects of countries leaving the EU less appealing. On the other hand, in terms of the vaccination program against Covid-19, the EU has been outperformed by all other established democracies, including Britain. This may well harm the EU’s reputation.

As pointed out by De Vries (2022), the history of the EU is crisis-ridden and steps towards further European integration are often taken during these crises. We have focused on the increased politicization of the EU, which is rooted in some structural conflicts. Yet, these conflicts often become most virulent during crisis. The contribution by De Vries (2022) nicely complements this special issue as she addresses the question how we might in the future study the specific roles of these crises to processes of European unification. Specifically, questions around pan-European solidarity are likely to become increasingly politicized during these crises, as a result of immigration, the common currency and Covid-19. The issue of solidarity does play a role in citizens’ voting behaviour, while there is little support among the public in the countries that are likely to be net contributors (Katsanidou et al., 2022; Pellegata and Visconti, 2022). It is reasonable to assume that governments of these countries risk electoral punishment if they would agree to European demands for more solidarity. While rising voter volatility contributes to political fragmentation (see De Vries and Hobolt, 2020), politicization does not necessarily have negative consequences for the representative relationship between parties and voters (Vasilopoulou and Gattermann, 2021) as opinion congruence on the left-right dimension has been rather stable at a high level (e.g. Costello et al., 2012; Mattila and Raunio, 2006). In other words, European citizens are probably well represented on salient issues that are distributed along traditional political dimensions.

It is important to underline that a certain condition must be met for this to be the case, namely that information is available to citizens to enable them to vote for those who they deem best to represent their interests. Fulfilling this condition is an increasingly challenging task in a rapidly changing information ecology. This is true both for political parties that have to navigate the social media space (e.g. Kruschinski and Bene, 2022) and unfold their campaign strategies in this changing environment (Nai et al., 2022). Today, information sources beyond traditional media play an increasingly important role and novel actors contribute with both new information and misinformation.


Ultimately, the changing media environment has implications for one of the remaining key questions, namely whether voters are able to hold European decision-makers accountable with respect to the key issues identified above (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). For example, the European Commission placed the environment and climate change high on their agenda. Frans Timmermans is responsible for the European Green Deal as Vice President of the European Commission. So, if Frans Timmermans were to be the *Spitzenkandidat* for the social democrats again in the 2024 EP elections, voters

would be able to take into account to what extent his Green Deal has been successful in the current EP legislative term. The appointment of Ursula von der Leyen as President of European Commission without being a candidate at the election, however, makes it impossible for this mechanism to work. Moreover, the information ecology is crucial. Whether information stemming from traditional media, from social media, from fringe media, from political actors themselves or from activists: if citizens continue to only have a vague image of political leaders in the EU as Gattermann and De Vreese (2022) show, they may not be able to hold them accountable in the next elections.

Taken together, this special issue also provides an outlook for the 2024 EP elections. These will be held against the backdrop of Brexit, of which the consequences will be clearer by then. If Britain is economically successful after Brexit, it may inspire forces that want to leave the EU in some member states, such as the Netherlands, France and Italy (see De Vries, 2018). Likewise, the 2024 EP elections are likely to be again influenced by persistent issues related to migration and refugees; and the Covid-19 pandemic has fuelled already existing tensions among EU member states regarding the lack of solidarity. Moreover, it has exacerbated threats to democracy and the rule of law within the EU and has laid open member states disputes over matters related to national sovereignty and Schengen. All of these issues are likely to play a role for the future of Europe and hence this special issue provides important implications with respect to studying future elections and politics in the EU.

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Notes

1. The system of *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidates) was introduced before the EP elections of 2014. The EP considered the lead candidates of the European parties to be the prime candidates for the presidency of the European Commission. The main parties in the Parliament agreed that they would all support the candidate of the largest party group in order to make the EP elections more consequential.
2. Available at, e.g.: <https://events.euractiv.com/event/info/ep-elections-2019-europes-future-at-stake> (accessed 12 July 2021).
3. From 2002 (when the Euro was introduced among the public) to 2009 (when the Eurozone crisis began) to 2019 (the most recent year for which statistics are available at the time of writing), the state debt went up from 61, to 79 to 97 percent of GDP in France, from 105 to 127 to 176 in Greece (although the figures from 2002 may be too optimistic), from 102 to 113 to 135 in Italy and from 54 to 84 to 118 in Portugal. In Spain, the situation was different: there the Spanish government had to rescue several banks that had invested recklessly in a real estate bubble. This was the main reason the national debt rose from 53 percent in 2009 to 95 percent in 2019.
4. Available at: <https://www.pvv.nl/36-fj-related/geert-wilders/9601-heteuropadatwijwillen.html> (accessed 12 December 2020).

5. Most scholars think that ‘the end of Schengen’ is exaggerated (e.g. Votoupalová, 2019; Wassenberg, 2020).
6. In round 4 of the European Social Survey in 2008, the question was asked when people thought immigrants should be granted access to the social welfare arrangements of a country. The option ‘immediately upon arrival’ was selected by an average of only 8 percent of the respondents, ranging from 1.6 percent in Hungary to 19.6 percent in Sweden.

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