Doomed to Alienate? How European Integration Feeds Euroscepticism

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ABSTRACT

European integration has been progressing for decades without necessarily being accompanied by stable domestic political support. This is a puzzle, given that the EU is a democratic organization. Post-functionalist literature has theorized and explained how public attitudes to integration affect for the ability of the European integration to progress (bottom-up explanations). Equally puzzling though, is how European integration feeds back to shape domestic EU politics (top-down explanations). Existing literature shows that political parties affect voters' attitudes towards the EU, and point to extreme and disadvantaged parties as the main drivers of EU politicization. Yet, the mechanism in which integration enables them to do so, remained largely unexplored. We aim to fill this gap and argue that extreme parties (on the left-right scale), which are motivated to communicate EU issues to the voters, take advantage of integration events occurring close to national elections, as a substantial source of credibility to Eurosceptic electoral campaigns. We support this argument using data on all parties that contested elections in almost all of the EU member states from 1979 to 2017, and a new dataset of all substantial integration events dates. We find that integration events occurring two months before election day can boost the vote for Eurosceptic campaigns by about 25%. However, in contrast to Post-functionalist expectations, we also find that extreme parties with a Eurosceptic agenda do not gain an advantage in difficult economic times, or in member states that are net contributors to the EU budget.

Keywords: European Union; Euroscepticism; Post-Functionalist theory; Policy responsiveness

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Introduction

European integration has been progressing ever since the mid-1950s, intensifying the pooling of authority and sovereignty among the member states of the European Union (EU), even as this progress has been accompanied by severe crises. In the last 30 years, the Single Market was established, a common foreign policy, citizenship, and currency were agreed, a common diplomatic corps (EEAS) was established, fiscal constraints were formalized, and common bank supervision and resolution mechanisms established. All the while, the capacities of the European Commission and the European Parliament (EP) capacities grew, and majoritarian intergovernmental decision-making spread into ever more issue areas.

However, over the last two decades this integration process has not been accompanied by stable domestic political support. Through various historical junctures, a glaring disparity was evident between mostly unenthusiastic domestic support for European integration, and the economic and political integration that was agreed in treaties. For example, During the late 1980s and up to 1993, the EU enjoyed an overwhelming popular support, but eventually adopted the Euro at the end of the 1990s against a backdrop of popular and elite apathy. Indeed, the average rate of popular support for EU membership had dropped 20 percentage points from 1993 to 1999. Average popular support for European integration then broadly stabilized during the 2000s, admittedly with substantial temporal and national variance. Then, following the euro crisis, the average rate has sharply declined to a staggering ebb of 30 percent. Interestingly, in the last six years, popular support is on average rising, the Brexit referendum notwithstanding. Figure 1 demonstrates these trends.
Given that the EU is a democratic organization, these inconsistencies pose a two-directional puzzle. How can European integration progress without domestic popular support? Conversely, why isn’t the popular will responding positively to the integration process? While the Neo-functionalist and Liberal-Intergovernmentalist schools have traditionally argued that voters’ consent to integration is not important, the Post-functionalist school has theorized and scrutinized various explanations of the former part of the puzzle. However, the latter part remains underexplored. Hence the aim of this paper is to explain how voters in the member states respond to EU integration.

We begin by noting that since the EU arena is considered “second order politics” (Desmet, van Spanje & de Vreese 2012), in which voters are uninformed and largely uninterested, EU integration has to be communicated to the public by informational agents, if it is to have any effect on the public. We argue that extreme parties, on both the left and right are more incentivized to act as such, since they are, by definition, disadvantaged by the
mainstream issue-cleavage, and can use the EU issue to create a new cleavage that they can gain from. In order for them to reap electoral gains and establish a Eurosceptic base, they must first be credible in voters’ eyes. Credibility is won by leveraging the occurrence of integration events during electoral campaigns, which present themselves ‘on the evening news’ and can be presented as evidence corroborating a Eurosceptic message. The linkage between integration and Euroscepticism thus hinges on high-profile manifestations of integration occurring exogenously during national electoral campaigns, rather than on the actual integration progress.

We support this proposition using available data on all parties in almost all of the EU member states from 1979 to 2017, and a new dataset of all substantial integration events dates. We show that extreme parties who ran on a Eurosceptic platform were substantially more successful electorally when integration events happened to occur within the last fifth of the election cycle, and especially in the last two months. In addition, this research also shows that when elections occur during a sudden deceleration of the economy, voters tend to revert to mainstream parties, blocking extreme parties’ leverage opportunities of integration events. No substantial difference is found between the net contributing member states and the beneficiaries of the EU budget.

The paper proceeds by reviewing the contemporary Post-functionalist literature, emphasizing this paper’s theoretic contribution. The third section develops the theoretical argument, and the fourth discusses variables’ operationalization and methodology. The fifth section presents the findings and discusses their implications for the theory. The sixth section provides conclusions.

EU Integration and the Domestic Arena: A Two-Directional Puzzle
The Post-functionalist research agenda has formulated a comprehensive theory linking mass domestic politics to actual integration; it contests the ‘Permissive Consensus’ paradigm, which underpins both Neo-functionalist and Liberal Intergovernmentalist research agendas. Post-functionalist theory argues that contemporary integration dynamics must be explored within the “Constraining Dissensus” that is prevailing after the Treaty of Maastricht (Hooghe & Marks 2009). Good government performance and output legitimacy can no longer compensate for the exclusion of the public and the erosion of input legitimacy (Majon 2014, Schmidt 2013; 2015), and this understanding must become part of integration theory. According to Post-functionalists, parties frame European issues and cue the masses and the interest groups to constrain (or promote) further pooling of authority at the EU level, based on either materialistic or identity logics (Hooghe & Marks 2009).

Post-functionalists have mostly studied the effect of domestic politics on actual integration and have highlighted the popular pressures and electoral incentives of governments to pursue (dis)integration. While Liberal-intergovernmentalists focus on the importance of domestic economic interests in shaping governments’ policies and thus the prospects of integration, Post-functionalists emphasize how governments must cater to the wider electorate, and how non-economic interests are important in constraining integration. Governments tend to object to legislation that involves greater pooling of authority, when the public is more Eurosceptic or EU issues are more salient and politicized (Hagemann, Hobolt & Wratil 2016; Wratil 2018; 2019). Governments are also lukewarm about further integration when ideological extremism is rising (Schneider 2014) and when referendums are constitutionally mandated (Cheneval & Ferrín 2018). Governments attempt to secure larger shares of European budgetary allocations and other policy objectives during election years (Schneider 2013; 2019; 2020). Governmental behavior thus becomes a domestic signaling vehicle, when issues are politicized. For example, such signaling dynamics were manifested in 2010, when Chancellor Merkel
delayed urgently needed financial aid to Greece against the backdrop of local elections in Germany (Schneider & Slantchev 2018).

These contributions develop the bottom-up explanation, but do not formulate an opposite top-down causal mechanism, namely how actual (dis)integration in Brussels affects domestic popular support for the EU. This is despite a vast literature that explores how European integration is debated in national politics, under the mostly untested assumption that integration must somehow affect domestic politics (Hobolt & De Vries 2016).

Scholars attributed popular support for integration to four major factors. First, individuals’ support for integration was linked with both an egocentric and sociotropic utility calculus. Macro-economic variables like unemployment and GDP interact with socioeconomic locations. Individuals who are in the position to gain from integration, tend to side with it. Yet social location also contributes to Europhilia since it promotes political sophistication and openness to information and enables the people’s comprehension of the EU project.

Sociotropic identity concerns also affect support for integration. Individuals with stronger national affiliations or perception of inter-cultural threat, oppose integration and see it as detrimental to the nation’s sovereignty and traditional identity. Lastly, legitimacy and trust of national institutions conditions citizens’ support of the EU, since many do not distinguish it from the national political system, and identify the EU with the national government.¹

¹ Loveless & Rohrschneider 2011; Guerra & McLaren 2016; Hobolt & De Vries 2016; De Vries 2018.
Many scholars focus on parties and how they communicate with the public. EU issues are argued to polarize the vote, driving support for the political extremes and Euroscepticism. These effects are exacerbated when interacting economic concerns with extreme left party’ cues, or national identity anxiety with cues from extreme right parties (De Vries & Edwards 2007). Mainstream parties, however, tend to position themselves on Europe along the lines of historical ideological families (Marks, Wilson & Ray 2002). The literature also argues that the euro crisis contributed to Euroscepticism and the politicization of integration due to economic factors, but these are still overshadowed by identity concerns (Polyakova & Fligstein 2016; Hutter & Kerscher 2014) or the (dis)trust in the national political systems (Serricchio, Myrto & Quaglia 2013).

Much less theoretical and empirical depth have been employed to study the effect of integration on domestic support for the EU (the top-down causal mechanism). The most prominent literature on the effects of integration on public support for the EU employs the thermostatic responsiveness model (Soroka & Wlezien 2010). Franklin & Wlezien (1997) claimed to confirm the model’s expectations, that voters react negatively to growing supply of integration policy, without mediation, showing that EU legislation in politically-salient issues depresses public support for integration. However, their empirical results were later convincingly challenged (Toshokv 2011). Indeed, it is doubtful that all legislation forwards integration in a way that should elicit similar, automatic response from the public, as the thermostatic model assumes. The model is also too crude to account for complicated

supranational policy outputs, which are not necessarily felt by the public even in times of EU politicization.

Based on a sociotropic approach, Guerra & McLaren (2016) showed that member states that were net recipients of EU funds tended to feature higher rates of popular support for integration. Likewise, member states which were coerced to austerity measures by the Troika, experienced a slight drop in popular support for integration, but this was mitigated by citizens’ mistrust in national institutions (Armingeon & Ceka 2014), as well as by their perception of the strategic environment in which the bailout negotiations took place (Walter et al. 2018). More recently, migration from central and eastern Europe to western member states has curtailed public support for integration in the latter (Toshkov & Kortenska 2015; Jeannet 2018). These studies provide some preliminary evidence that European integration can promote or suppress its legitimacy among the public, but do not amount to a comprehensive theoretical and empirical framework.

Indeed, what is striking about these studies is that they seem to conflict with evidence that many voters are uninformed and uninterested in EU politics. If that is true, they cannot possibly shape their attitudes on European integration in direct connection with legislation and treaty-agreed integration, without some mediation. De Vries et al. (2011) substantiates this, by showing how sources of political information, such as media coverage or even the existing party polarization, powerfully shape voters’ attitudes in EP elections. When voting in informationally affluent contexts, voters tend to vote on an issue-by-issue basis, but much less so otherwise.

Thus, voters cannot simply react thermostatically (Soroka & Wlezien 2010) to more or less integration, as they would on domestically-salient issues, where voters can be assumed to be sufficiently informed (e.g. about security or welfare expenditure policies). Indeed, despite the evidence of Franklin & Wlezien (1997), which supports the notion of thermostatic behavior
towards EU integration, Toshkov (2011), using new data and an improved causal identification strategy, finds that the public did not demand less integration in times of growing integration and vice versa, as the model expects. Looking at specific policy sectors, rather than at EU integration as a whole, De Bruycker (2019) does find evidence for thermostatic behavior but this is conditioned on prior popular politicization (i.e. political communication of EU politics in the mass arena).

It follows that the informational and political contexts must be accounted for in theorizing responsiveness to integration. Indeed, a vast literature supports the notion that parties are potent informational agents in shaping voters’ attitudes towards the EU (Hobolt & de Vries 2016). Most prominently, using instrumental variables’ design, Gabel & Scheve (2007) convincingly establish causality between party communication and mass Eurosceptic responses, which holds regardless of voters’ level of political awareness. De Vries & Edwards (2009) show that parties on the left do so by appealing to voters’ economic concerns, while parties on the right benefit from voters’ concern for national sovereignty and identity. Party framing strategies of referendum outcomes are extremely effective and can mobilize voters to change their attitudes towards the EU in short periods of time. Hobolt (2006) demonstrated this by showing how the Danish Social Democrats mobilized Europhile voters in the referendum on the Treaty of Maastricht, by framing the No vote as an extreme vote to leave the EU entirely.

To summarize this discussion, most of the Post-functionalist literature explains how domestic politics may constrain European integration (bottom-up explanation of the puzzle). Some contributions document that public attitudes respond to integration, but do not explain this mechanism. Finally, ample literature shows that political parties affect voters’ attitudes towards the EU, but does not explain their motivation to do so. In the next section we provide the missing link in the causal chain.
Integration Shocks as Sources of Credibility for Extreme Parties’ Eurosceptic Communication

Parties may not necessarily use their capacity to mobilize voters. Parties must have political incentives to push the EU issue. This is not so straightforward, because of the limited congruence of EU issues with the prevailing domestic issue-alignment in most if not all member states (Hooghe, Marks & Wilson 2002). Issue alignments define mainstream party contestation and underpins their political support base. When government positions rotate among a few mainstream parties for decades, the issue alignment becomes institutionalized, and keeps other parties permanently out of office. Mainstream parties (i.e. parties that can potentially win a majority or form a government given the prevailing issue alignment) have no incentive to pursue politicization of new issues outside the existing issue-alignment (Carmines, 1991). Indeed, as Brexit politics amply demonstrate, the mainstream parties may be torn apart by the EU issue. Rather, it is the political incentives of the extreme parties (so defined and disadvantaged by the prevailing issue alignment) that accounts for issue evolution and change in the existing issue-alignment.

Extreme parties are those with positions aligned at the tails of the domestic distribution of votes, according to whichever political dimension may be dominant in each member state. It is conventional to think of this as a class divide, with extreme left and extreme right parties. However, while the class cleavage is a common issue alignment among many countries, it cannot exhaustively define extreme parties. West European party systems were never aligned across a single political cleavage, but around as many as three dimensions of class, religion and geography (center-periphery). Scholars agree that West European systems are becoming even more complex, and while the classic cleavages still hold theoretical relevance, a new cleavage has risen in the 1970s (Marks et al. 2006). This was dubbed GAL (Green, Alternative, Liberal) vs. TAN (Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalism), and pits “libertarian, universalistic values
against the defense of nationalism and particularism,” thus cross-cutting the historical cleavages (Hooghe & Marks 2018).

The party systems in central and eastern European member states are even less programmatically structured around the old cleavages and revolve around the new ones, alongside unique cleavages, such as the one over the Communist legacy (Marks et al. 2006; Pisciotta 2016). Therefore, when analyzing party extremism in a wide European context, it is best understood as an extreme party positioning along the lines of the dominant domestic political cleavage, rather than simply the class divide.

Amid notable exceptions, e.g. the Conservative party in the UK (Mudde 2016), powerful mainstream parties are mostly pro-EU, and have little incentive to communicate EU issues. In contrast, extreme parties can attempt to change the party alignment that disadvantages them, and empower themselves, by adopting a Eurosceptic agenda and communicating appropriate issues to the public. A case in point is the introduction of the immigration issue by the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands in 2002, which attracted voters away from both left and right mainstream large parties (Pellikaan, De Lange & Van der Meer 2007). Carmines (1991) and Carmines & Stimson (1993) make a somewhat similar point. However, they refer explicitly to parties with weak actual electoral performance (“losers”), not necessarily to non-mainstream agenda parties. Likewise, Hobolt & de Vries (2015) argue that disadvantaged parties in European countries are significantly more likely to be issue-entrepreneurs, and to strategically adopt a Eurosceptic position and enhance its salient in national politics. They show that parties that were either never in government, just lost prior elections, hold an extreme ideological position, or just find it harder to enter any coalition, tend to emphasize a Eurosceptic agenda. In contrast to these studies, we prefer to define parties by their ideology rather than by their actual electoral performance, given that the dependent variable is the public’s (dis)approval of EU integration, and electoral performance is closely related to this.
Extreme parties are also in a better position than mainstream parties to reshape the main domestic agenda. Since extreme parties are more likely to be in opposition than in government, they are not held accountable for future governmental policies, and are thus free to pursue any issue without having to weigh its policy consequences. For the same reason they are also not held accountable to the current state of affairs and can freely criticize current policy, ignoring its practical complexities (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010).

The tendency of extreme parties to act as issue entrepreneurs and use EU issues as a mobilization tool outside the prevailing domestic dimensionality is empirically evident in Figure 2. This figure shows the linear correlation between parties’ ideological extremism on the left-right divide, and the saliency of their Eurosceptic stances, assuming that party agenda is a proxy for the way it communicates issues. Crucially, the left-right divide here is not restricted to the class-cleavage, but is mostly based on how left and right are defined in each country.

**Figure 2: Extreme parties and Euroscepticism**

![Figure 2](image)

**Notes:** Linear correlation of ideological extremism and salient Euroscepticism in all EU member states since 1979. Blue and red tones represent left right parties respectively, labeled as such by experts. Darker tones represent
stronger left-right positions. High values on the horizontal axis reflect a combination of anti-EU party position and high salience for such position in the party’s agenda. See description of variable EuExSalience in the data and methods section below.

We argue above that integration cannot directly inform and interest voters, but that extreme parties have the incentive to remodel voters’ attitudes regarding the EU. Many EU issues may seem very remote to many people, as their important effects on daily lives are mediated and obfuscated by many layers of governance and multiple actors. Thus, for EU issues to become politically potent, substantial integration shocks must occur that parties can leverage. We argue that EU events (shocks) provide extreme parties with an opportunity to weaken mainstream issue-alignment and reap political gains. In other words, integration affects popular Euroscepticism primarily via the domestic political system, carried and framed by strategic party communication, taking advantage of important integration events.

Integration events give these parties credibility, by enabling them to present the events as evidence of the erosion of the EU’s input legitimacy (Schmidt 2013) and mobilize voters to attack its input legitimacy in the national polls. It is expected that this dynamic should be especially typical to the post-Maastricht era, in which the politicization of EU integration was driven mainly by new parties (Hooghe & Marks 2009; 2018). Yet, there is no theoretical reason to limit the argument categorically to newly formed parties. Old extreme parties can also be incentivized to emphasize new issues.

Parties that hold an incentive to politicize the EU and promote Euroscepticism would be in a better strategic position to do so effectively in national elections that occur closely after
integration events.³ In order to ensure that such events are not actually the product of domestic politics (as some of the literature reviewed above suggests), we focus on EU-related political events that are exogenous to the domestic political system. These events are defined as originating from the EU institutional system (i.e. beyond the ability of any single party in any particular member state to initiate) and having the potential to reach the general domestic public even regardless of party communication.⁴ This means that party communication of these events is about highlighting and framing information that the public may or may not already be aware of. These events can relate to any one or more of the following three aspects of integration:⁵

- Depth of integration – the extent of centralization of authority in EU institutions vis-à-vis member states’ governments.

³ Arguably, events that are scheduled before the election to occur after the election may be important too, but we assume that they do not attract the voters’ attention as much as events that actually occur during the election campaign.

⁴ Mainstream parties, especially in the more powerful member states, may wish to avoid such EU events ahead of national elections, making these events endogenous to the process. However, such opportunistic motivation should mostly be frustrated by the lack of a single European electoral cycle, the autonomy of supranational bodies, constitutional constraints, and commitments undertaken by previous governments. Thus, while we acknowledge that EU events are not perfectly exogenous to domestic political systems, we assume that they are not significantly endogenous to them either.

⁵ De Wilde & Zurn 2012; Leuffen, Rittberger & Schimmelfennig 2013; Hagemann, Hobolt & Wratil 2016; Schneider 2019, 30.
• Scope or breadth of integration – the number of policy fields in which the EU institutions have decision making power.

• Inclusiveness of integration – EU’s geographical inclusiveness – harmonizing regulations over all the member states (by either accession or elimination of differentiation – see Schimmelfennig & Winzen 2014).

Concerning both the depth and scope of integration, relevant EU-related political events pertain mainly to the EU treaties. These include signing of treaties and holding national referendums on EU treaties. All treaties extended the supranational or majoritarian authorities of EU institutions, and expanded their powers to new policy areas. Likewise, various actions implementing treaty provisions, sometime after a significant delay (such as the launch of the single currency in 1999, seven years after the Maastricht Treaty was signed) could also become EU-related political events.

Accession to the EU, as well as accession of other member states and the granting of permanent or transitory opt-outs from various Treaty stipulations to some member states, can be utilized politically too, as they affect the inclusiveness of EU integration. Specifically, this relates to the four enlargement treaties since 1991 (including the various temporary opt-outs and transition periods agreed in them), as well as to permanent opt-out events such as the British (and Irish) opt-outs of the Schengen Agreement formalized in the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam or the Danish opt-out from the euro area. EU-related political events could also be derived from the routine work of EU bodies. Such events may include for example elections to the EP and initiating a new Council presidency.

While it is conceivable that some events are more helpful than others for extreme parties interested in communicating a Eurosceptic message, we are not making any theoretical claims about particular types of events. However, the distance of events from elections is a crucial part
of this independent variable. Hence, assuming that party agenda is a proxy for the way in which issues are communicated, our first hypothesis is that:

**H1:** Since 1991, the closer EU-related political events occur before national elections (independent variable), and the more Eurosceptic is the agenda that extreme parties adopt (independent variable), the greater are their electoral gains (dependent variable).

However, integration shocks are not the only source of credibility for Eurosceptic cueing. Poor economic performance, stagnation, unemployment and/or low pay that are experienced by individual voters may make extreme parties more credible in arguing against integration, demonstrating low output legitimacy, as discussed in the literature review above. Since it is harder to argue against the EU when the economy is doing well, it is expected that shocks would be *more* beneficial for Eurosceptic parties against the backdrop of economic hardship, relative to shocks occurring during times of prosperity. Hence:

**H2:** Since 1991, the closer EU-related political events occur before national elections (independent variable), and the more Eurosceptic is the agenda that extreme parties adopt (independent variable), the greater are their electoral gains (dependent variable), especially the slower is economic growth during the electoral cycle (intervening variable).

It is also likely that the public will be more receptive to Eurosceptic communication from extreme parties if it comes against the backdrop of rapid pace of treaty-agreed integration, in any one or more of the three aspects of integration noted above. This is true to the extent that, although the common voter is assumed to be poorly informed or uninterested in integration processes, at least some voters are better informed.
**H3**: Since 1991, the closer EU-related political events occur before national elections (independent variable), and the more Eurosceptic is the agenda that extreme parties adopt (independent variable), the greater are their electoral gains (dependent variable), especially the faster treaty-agreed integration has advanced during the electoral cycle (intervening variable).

Finally, Eurosceptic communication should be especially effective in member states that are net contributors to the EU budget, i.e. those with a negative Operating Budgetary Balance (OBB), via agricultural or cohesion funds, where it is easier to view the EU as detrimental to the budgetary national interest. Although these funds are fiscally trivial in many (but not all) member states, they are perceived by both the public and governments as politically (or symbolically) important. Schneider (2013, 2018) substantiates this, by showing that governments attempt to leverage on their successes in the EU budget allocation negotiations to reap electoral gains in election years. This was also evident in the political rhetoric of the highly politicized rebate debate and the 2016 Leave campaign in the UK. Thus:

**H4**: Since 1991, the closer EU-related political events occur before national elections (independent variable), and the more Eurosceptic is the agenda that extreme parties adopt (independent variable), the greater are their electoral gains (dependent variable), especially the larger are the national net contribution to the EU budget (intervening variable).

**Data and Research Design**

Since the dependent variables in our hypotheses are the electoral gains of parties, the dataset is based on a country-election-party level of observation (defined as panel data with election-party observations clustered by states). Due to coverage limitations, the data period starts in
1979 and ends in 2017, in 27 EU member states (all excluding Malta) and potentially has 1,201 observations. These include 176 national elections, ranging from 3 to 14 elections (6.5 on average) per member state. A total of 288 parties were accounted for, ranging from 2 to 13 (6.8 on average) per election. In most countries this includes the last election cycle before entering the EU, in order to observe the effect of EU accession, as an integration event.

The dependent variable – \textit{Gains} – is the electoral success of parties. Since none of the EU member states is a fully presidential democracy, electoral success is uniformly measured as the percent change in the party’s share of the vote to (the lower house of) the legislature compared with the previous election, based on CHES (Chapel Hill Expert Survey) data (Bakker \textit{et al.} 2015, Polk \textit{et al.} 2017). Only parties that contested at least two consecutive elections are included, regardless of whether they entered the legislature.\footnote{Note that we are measuring the change relative to the party’s previous share of the vote, not in percent of total votes cast in the election. Thus, a rise in the party’s share of the vote from 20 percent to 30 percent is a 50 percent increase. This reduces the dependency among observations in a single election, although does not eliminate it entirely (the share of the vote cannot simultaneously increase for all parties). We follow the CHES party coding in identifying and matching parties contesting two consecutive elections (or more).}
The design operationalizes two main independent variables. The first is – *ExEuSalience* – an index of the Eurosceptic agenda of an extreme party during the election campaign, ranging from 0 (a moderate party with a low-salience Europhile agenda) to 1 (an extreme party with a highly salient Eurosceptic agenda). As discussed above, extreme parties are defined by the national main issue cleavage, the class cleavage being only one among a few possible such cleavages. Conveniently, CHES party position scores do not necessarily reflect the class divide, but rather are based on expert judgement on parties’ right and left inclinations along the main issue cleavage in each country. However, we complete missing left-right data from CMP’s (Comparative Manifesto Project) standard RILE measure (see RILE operationalization in the CMP codebook, at Volkens *et al.* 2019), which is based mostly on the class divide. This method for completing missing data is based on the CHES validity tests (Bakker *et al.*, 2015), showing substantial positive correlations between CMP and CHES measures (which suggests that the main cleavage in many countries is class after all). We calculate an ideological extremity score as the absolute difference between the party’s position score on the left-right spectrum and the

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Obs.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Unit and potential range</th>
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<td>Percent points (-100→∞)</td>
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<td>.82</td>
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<td>30.4</td>
<td>49.9</td>
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<td>377</td>
<td>Index (0→∞)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDPPC</td>
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mid-point of the spectrum, rescaled from 0 (center party) to 1 (most extreme party on either side).

This ideological extremity score is multiplied by the party’s Euroscepticism score, ranging from 0 (extreme Europhilia) to 1 (extreme Euroscepticism), and by a score of the saliency of EU issues in its agenda, ranging from 0 (no mention of EU issues) to 1 (top priority). Again, the data are based on CHES as a first resort, while missing data are completed based on CMP.

CMP-based Euroscepticism scores are calculated by subtracting the percent of positive EU statements from the percent of negative statements in a party’s manifesto, and rescaling the difference, such that its lowest value is converted to 0 and its highest value to 1. This measure is chosen since it is more strongly correlated with the CHES measure, relative to other methods (Bakker et al. 2015). The CMP-based EU salience scores are computed by adding up the percentages of the positive and the negative manifesto statements, as Netjes & Binnema (2007) suggest. To ensure consistency, data for all parties in a given country-election cycle are based on a single source.

The second independent variable is the occurrence of an integration event close to election day. It is hypothesized that an event would be more beneficial to the credibility of party communication, if it occurs closer (in relative terms) to election day, and hence fresher in voters’ minds. To operationalize this independent variable, a dataset of events’ dates was coded, based on the definition of an integration event as detailed in the previous section. It includes signing dates and entry-into-force dates of all EU and EU-affiliated treaties, including accession treaties; Euro adoption date, per euro area member state only; EU-related referendums dates per each member states individually; date of Council presidency initiation; own member states’ accession date to the EU; and EP election dates, per each member states individually.
We measure the occurrence of an event in terms of days from the next election, taking the closest event to election day, based on the ParlGov election database (Döring & Manow 2019). The number of days is divided by the length (in days) of the election cycle and multiplied by 100, to produce Proximity – an index of proximity of EU-related events in shares of election cycles (0 for events occurring on election day, 100 for events occurring on the prior election day, and greater values for earlier events). This allows to control for different electoral systems, mandating different election cycles, as well as for coalition breakdowns and early elections. Figure 3 shows the mean values of Proximity in each year and reveals that except for election cycles ending in 1982-1984, where integration events were much less common, the distribution of the measure is largely uncorrelated with time, which is thus unlikely to bias the results.

Figure 3: Proximity of EU events to national elections

Notes: Cross-country average values of the proximity index by year. Each data point is based on all member states in that year (Malta excluded due to data coverage), plus candidate countries in the midst of their last pre-accession election cycle.

Economic hardship is operationalized with growth of GDP per capita in the calendar year preceding the election year (GDPPC), based on World Bank and OECD data. Alternatively, the measure is operationalized as an ordinal variable (OrdGDPPC), coding 1 all
observations below the annual mean growth among economically-contracting member states (those which experienced negative growth), 2 for other observations with negative growth, and 3 for observations with positive growth. This measure gives more weight to deep recessions, compared with \textit{GDPPC}, which may be important if voters respond more strongly to bad times than to good ones.

The pace of treaty-agreed integration is operationalized with Leuffen, Rittberger & Schimmelfennig’s (2013) index of integration. Their index increases with the breadth (or scope) of integration (the number of integrated policy areas), the depth of integration (the level of authority pooling within each policy area) and the width of integration (the number of member states). \textit{Integration} is a dummy coded 1 if this integration index increased in the pre-election calendar year relative to the earlier year.

The OBB measure is computed using the Commission’s guidelines and raw data found in the official 2008 financial report of the EU (from 1979 to 1999) and based on the Commission’s official calculations (from 2000 to 2017). The measure deducts the member states’ contribution to the EU budget from its EU budget gains, in order to account for each member states net contribution to the supranational budget. \textit{Contributor} is a dummy coded 1 for member states that are net contributors during the election year (excluding administrative expenditure).

Finally, two dummies control for the 1993-2003 (Treaty of Maastricht) and 2004-17 (Eastern enlargement) distinct periods of integration according to Leuffen, Rittberger & Schimmelfennig’s (2013) index, as depicted in Figure 4.
To test the primary hypothesis (H1), the research design employs a country fixed effects regression, to control for the electoral system and other structural characteristics affecting electoral outcomes. Standard errors are clustered on the country level, to limit the effect of dependency among observations of the dependent variable within countries. The regression’s specification is:

\[
Gains_{m,c,p} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times ExEuSalience_{m,c,p} + \beta_2 \times Proximity_{m,c} + \beta_3 \times (ExEuSalience_{m,c,p} \times Proximity_{m,c}) \\
+ \beta_4 \times Integration_{m,c} + \beta_5 \times Contributor_{m,c} + \beta_6 \times GDPPC_{m,c} + \omega \times Periods_{m,c} + \alpha_m \\
+ \epsilon_{m,c,p}
\]

Whereas \( m \) denotes the member states, \( c \) denotes the election cycle and \( p \) denotes the party. \( Periods \) are a vector of two period dummies (\( \omega \) being their OLS coefficients); \( \alpha \) are country fixed effects. As discussed above, Integration, Contributor, GDPPC and Periods are all potential confounders affecting the electoral success of parties with a Eurosceptic agenda, and have therefore been included as controls.
A negative coefficient to the interacted term ($\beta_{3<0}$) would support H1. To test hypotheses H2-H4, three-way interactions are added to the above specification, alternatively interacting ExEuSalience and Proximity with respectively, OrdGDPPC, Integration and Contributor. A positive coefficient to the relevant three-way interacted term would support H2; negative coefficients would support H3 or H4. Marginal effect analyses are then used for further hypothesis testing.

**Findings and Discussion**

Table 2 reports the results of the fixed effects regression specified above. As hypothesized, the coefficient of the interaction term is significantly negative ($\alpha = 99\%$), with (Model 2) or without controls (Model 1). We interpret this to imply that, all else being equal, Eurosceptic communication of extreme parties is more effective when an integration event occurs closer to election day. This is not substantially affected by controlling for the economic growth, the OBB position of the member state or progress made in integration, in the background of the campaigns. The results also hold regardless of the integration period outlined above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Determinants of Relative Electoral Gains</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ExEuSalience</td>
<td>34.0*</td>
<td>30.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(12.3)</td>
<td>(12.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>(0.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ExEuSalience$x$Proximity</td>
<td>-0.52**</td>
<td>-0.48**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>-1.23</td>
<td>(3.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributor</td>
<td>-10.7</td>
<td>(6.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDPPC</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>(0.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-2003</td>
<td>-2.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2004-2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(4.60)</th>
<th>7.39*</th>
<th>(3.42)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.56**</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>(4.83)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prob > F 4.44* 5.38***
N 1,134 1,095

Notes: Results from fixed effects regressions, standard errors clustered on the country level in parentheses. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. Dark-green shades indicate expected results. The dependent variable is the increase in the party’s share of the vote from the previous election, in percent points, such that a rise in the party’s share of the vote from 20 percent to 30 percent is a 50 percent increase. ExEuSalience is an index ranging from 0 (a moderate party with a low-salience Europhile agenda) to 1 (an extreme party with a highly salient Eurosceptic agenda). Proximity is an index of proximity of EU-related events to the election day (0 for events occurring on election day, 100 for events occurring on the prior election day, and greater values for earlier events). Integration is a dummy for an increase in Leuffen, Rittberger and Schimmelfennig’s (2013) integration index during the pre-election calendar year. Contributor is a dummy for member states that are net contributors to the EU budget during the election year. GDPPC is the growth in GDP per capita (in percent points) during the calendar year preceding the election year. 1993-2003 and 2004-2017 are period dummies.

Substantively, Figure 5 shows that party agenda had a significant effect on electoral gains, when integration events occurred in roughly the last fifth of the election cycle, which translates to roughly 262 days (or about 8.5 months) in this sample’s average election cycle of 1,314 days. In terms of effect’s size, the estimated marginal effect for a Proximity level of 15 percent of the election cycle is around 23. This means that if a moderate party on the main issue cleavage in national politics, that had no EU agenda or had an extremely Europhilic position, became most extreme on the main issue cleavage, with highly salient extreme Euroscepticism, it would potentially increase its share of the vote by 19 percent. The agenda’s estimated marginal effect, under integration events taking place in the last 5 percent of the election cycle (some two months ahead of elections on average) is even higher – an increase of 23 percent in the share of the vote of extreme Eurosceptic parties relative to the counterfactual mainstream Europhile parties. Interestingly, the effect loses significance (α = 95%) from the first quarter of the electoral cycle and backwards towards the prior election day. This means that the occurrence of integration events makes little difference roughly a year before election day, often before official campaigns even starts. These results conform to findings on voters’
extreme sensitivity to events occurring shortly before making electoral decision in the polls, even regardless of strategic party communication (Achen & Bartels 2016, Ch. 5).

**Figure 5: marginal effects of salient Eurosceptic agenda of extreme parties on their electoral gains trends**

![Graph showing marginal effects](image)

*Note:* The marginal effects are moderated by the proximity of integration events to election day. 95% confidence intervals are shown in dashed gray, based on estimates from Regression (2).

As discussed above, Post-functionalist theory argues that the dynamic of the “constraining dissensus” should be limited to the post-Maastricht period (Hooghe & Marks 2009). This entails that we should not observe Eurosceptic parties successfully mobilizing voters before 1993, integration events notwithstanding. To test that, three-way interaction including the period dummies is added to the specification in Regression (2) (not reported).
Figure 6 presents the estimated marginal effects of party agenda on electoral gains, as in Figure 5, but split into the two periods of time, before and after Maastricht. Although we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the marginal effects are equal (since the triple interaction term turns out to be insignificant), it is clear that for the last fifth of the election cycles, the effects of party agenda are significant and substantial after Maastricht, while prior to it, they are not. This lends some support to restriction of Post-functionalist dynamic to the post-Maastricht period.

Figure 6: marginal effects of party agenda on electoral gains, by period

Note: See note to Figure 5. Estimates are based a variant of Regression (2) with three-way interactions (not reported).
The second hypothesis expects that economic hardships would lend more credibility to Eurosceptic messages arguing against the EU. Hence, during hardship, Eurosceptic parties should benefit more from events closer to elections, relative to times of growth, where credibility of Eurosceptic messages is lower. Table 3 reports the results of the fixed effects regression (with or without controls, in models 3 and 4 respectively), interacting the baseline interaction with the categorical version of GDP per capita growth described in the data section above. In accordance with H2, the triple interaction is significant ($\alpha = 95\%$), implying that the null hypothesis, that the two-way interaction’s ($ExEuSalience \times Proximity$) gradient is identical for all categories of hardship, can be rejected. Put differently, the mediating effect of events’ proximity (explored above) is different, when comparing across three different economic contexts.

Table 3: Determinants of Relative Electoral Gains, by economic hardship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$ExEuSalience$</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>-28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(59.6)</td>
<td>(60.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Proximity$</td>
<td>-0.022</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.062)</td>
<td>(0.057)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ExEuSalience \times Proximity$</td>
<td>0.094</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.183)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$OrdGDPPC$</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.72)</td>
<td>(4.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ExEuSalience \times OrdGDPPC$</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(21.0)</td>
<td>(22.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Proximity \times OrdGDPPC$</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ExEuSalience \times Proximity \times OrdGDPPC$</td>
<td>-0.30*</td>
<td>-0.30*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Contributor$</td>
<td>-10.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.32)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Integration$</td>
<td>-1.52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.38)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1993-2003$</td>
<td>-2.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.76)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, the directionality of the economic effect goes in the direct opposite of H2 expectations. As shown in Figure 7, in times of economic growth (square markers) the effect of party agenda, when events do occur in the last fifth of the election cycle are significant ($\alpha = 95\%$) and substantial in terms of effect size. In substantive terms, going from the minimum to the maximum value of the $\text{ExEuSalience}$ index would produce a 25 percent increase in the vote share when events occur after 85 percent of the election cycle, and a staggering 31 percent increase for occurrence in the last 5 percent of the cycle (all else being equal). However, extreme parties’ Eurosceptic agenda is not more effective than other agendas, when voters experience economic hardship (Diamond or round markers in Figure 7). These results weaken the theoretic proposition, that the credibility provided by the (poor) economic context is indeed beneficial to Eurosceptic communication effectiveness.

Even though extreme parties can leverage economic crises, as demonstrated in the 2008 crisis (Hernández & Kriesi 2016), it is evident that voters tended not to reward non status quo parties in the midst of the slowdown. Even when extreme parties do have the opportunity to leverage their Eurosceptic message, utilizing a timely integration event, they fail to stand out electorally in times of immediate economic threat. Although much more research is needed, this may hint that voters tend to be more status quo biased (i.e. tend to vote more for mainstream parties) under economic strain. This does not weaken arguments linking economic crisis to
polarization and change in political systems, it just hints that during the deceleration phase of the economy, voters might tend to halt their radicalization.

Figure 7: marginal effects of party agenda on electoral gains, by economic hardship

![Graph showing marginal effects of party agenda on electoral gains, by economic hardship.](image)

Note: See note to Figure 5. Based on estimates from Regression (4). Square markers relate to times of income growth; diamond markers refer to periods of mild recession; round markers indicate deep recessions.

Lastly, Table 4 shows the results for two models including triple interactions testing H3 (model 5) and H4 (model 6). Neither the triple interaction within model 5, nor the triple interaction in model 6 are significant. This makes marginal analysis of the baseline interaction across these subsets irrelevant, as the gradients are not significantly different from each other. Substantively this means that we are unable to support H3-H4, proposing that parties will be
in a better position to communicate Eurosceptic messages when integration has recently progressed, or in net contributing member states, like France or Germany.

As for H3, it is concluded that sustained integration trends, that are not manifested as substantial events “on the evening news”, are simply independent of the main mechanism and do not lend more or less credibility to the Eurosceptic message of extremists. This does conform with the nature of the EU arena, as second order politics, at least for a substantial number of voters. Per H4, juxtaposing the political systems of the net contributors and the net benefactors from the EU budget, does not lead to substantial differences in the effectiveness of leveraging integration events. This, however, does not mean that the mechanism works for the same reasons on the both sides of the budget stream, as the justification behind the Eurosceptic communication can be entirely different.

Table 4: Determinants of Relative Electoral Gains, by pace of integration or by net contribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ExEuSalience</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.073)</td>
<td>(0.071)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ExEuSalience × Proximity</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.87)</td>
<td>(0.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration × ExEuSalience</td>
<td>74.6**</td>
<td>-0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(20.4)</td>
<td>(51.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration × Proximity</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>0.078*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.071)</td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration × ExEuSalience × Proximity</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.86)</td>
<td>(1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributor × ExEuSalience</td>
<td>0.078*</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
<td>(0.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributor × Proximity</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.25)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributor × ExEuSalience × Proximity</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.25)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDPPC</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.68)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1: Regression Analysis Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OrdGDPPC</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>(3.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributor</td>
<td>-9.93</td>
<td>(5.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>-6.58</td>
<td>(4.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-2003</td>
<td>-1.65</td>
<td>(4.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2017</td>
<td>8.09*</td>
<td>(3.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>(11.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Conclusions

European integration has been progressing ever since the mid-1950s, accompanied by severe crises, without necessarily being accompanied by stable domestic political support. This is a puzzle, given that the EU is a democratic organization. While the Neo-functionalist and Liberal-Intergovernmentalist schools have traditionally argued that voters’ consent to integration is not important, the Post-functionalist school has theorized and explained how public attitudes to integration affect for the ability of the European integration to progress (bottom-up explanations). Equally puzzling though, is the seeming lack of positive popular response to the integration process. Some contributions document that public attitudes respond to integration, but do not explain the mechanism behind this. Ample literature shows that political parties affect voters’ attitudes towards the EU but does not explain their motivation to do so. Hence the aim of this paper is to explain the causal mechanism that motivates political parties to shape voters’ response to EU integration.
We assume that voters are largely uninformed and uninterested in EU affairs, which therefore must be communicated to them by informational agents, if integration is to have any effect on the public. We argue that extreme parties, on both the left and right are more incentivized to act as such, since they are, by definition, disadvantaged by the mainstream issue-cleavage. They use the EU issue to create a new cleavage that they can gain from, and leverage integration events to gain credibility. Integration events occurring close to national elections give them the opportunity to do so.

We hypothesize that since 1991, the closer EU-related political events occur before national elections, and the more Eurosceptic is the agenda that extreme parties adopt, the greater are their electoral gains. We also hypothesize that this is especially true in times of slow economic growth, accelerating integration, or when the national net contribution to the EU budget is large.

We test our hypotheses using regression analysis of available data on all parties that contested elections in almost all of the EU member states from 1979 to 2017, and a new dataset of all substantial integration events dates. We show that extreme parties who ran on a Eurosceptic platform were substantially more successful electorally when integration events happened to occur within the last fifth of the election cycle, and especially in the last two months. In the extreme scenario, if a moderate party on the main issue cleavage in national politics, that had no EU agenda or had an extremely Europhilic position, became most extreme on the main issue cleavage, with highly salient extreme Euroscepticism, it would potentially increase its share of the vote by about a quarter of its previous share. The occurrence of integration events makes little difference roughly a year before election day. Our results also confirm that these dynamics are less significant in the pre-Maastricht period, as the Post-functionalist literature suggests.
However, in contrast to Post-functionalist expectations and our own hypothesis, this research also shows that when elections occur during a deep deceleration of the economy, voters do not respond to Eurosceptic messages. It seems as if voting for Eurosceptic parties is an indulgence affordable in good times. Also, in contrast to Post-functionalist literature, no substantial difference is found between the net contributing member states and the beneficiaries of the EU budget.
References


Schmidt, V. A. (2015). The forgotten problem of democratic legitimacy: “Governing by the rules” and “Ruling by the numbers”. In M. Matthijs, & M. Blyth (Eds.), *The future of the euro* (pp. 91-115). Oxford: Oxford University Press.


