



The Importance of EU Issues in German Elections

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INTRODUCTION

Germany is the largest economic power in the European Union (EU) and exercises the most influence on EU policy (Busse et al., 2020; Krotz & Schramm, 2021). Nevertheless, for years Germany's European vocation and commitment to European integration made it cautious and reluctant to impose its national preferences in the EU, resulting in most of its EU policy initiatives being presented in tandem with France (Krotz & Schramm, 2021; Paterson, 2011). This way, German Europeanism could be summarized in the belief that what is good for Europe is also good

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for Germany (Paterson, 2011). For decades, the EU was not a polarizing issue in Germany, and until the turmoil of the European financial crisis, the stance of the various political parties on European integration were broadly similar (De Vries & Hobolt, 2016; Debus, 2023). Following the crisis, Germany assumed a more prominent role as the leading country defending austerity and, as in all the other creditor countries, German public opinion discussed the pros and cons of assisting EU member states that had been severely affected by the crisis, which forced the political parties to rethink their positions on European integration (Gross & Schäfer, 2020).

Despite a significant share of citizens becoming increasingly sceptical about European integration after “the Maastricht blues” (Teschner, 2000), and particularly during and after the sovereign debt crisis within the Eurozone, political parties, with the exception of Alternative for Germany (AfD—Alternative für Deutschland), tended to downplay the European issue in their campaigns and adopt more moderate positions towards the EU in their manifestos (Debus, 2023; Schmitt-Beck, 2017). AfD was founded in 2013 in reaction to the economic shock and public discontent towards the measures agreed upon in Brussels to alleviate the impact of the crisis in the Eurozone. In fact, its name appealed to an alternative for the apparent consensus of the other parties in defending the monetary union; the origin of the new party’s name was a statement by Chancellor Angela Merkel in which she said there “is not alternative” to saving the common European currency (Bebnowski, 2016: 32; Prantl, 2013), indicating the saliency of European integration policy for the AfD on the one hand and for economic and financial issues on the other. Thus, the AfD would initially have intended to fill a vacant space on the political spectrum by being the first German party with a clearly stated negative view of European integration (Arzheimer, 2015; Debus, 2023). Yet, the AfD could be considered as a “soft Eurosceptic” party because most of its critique of the EU focused on its monetary policy and the financial assistance provided to other EU states (Arzheimer, 2015; Schmitt-Beck, 2017). Moreover, the party’s subsequent electoral success during the first five years following its formation is not be so clearly tied to its contestation of EU policy, which is now mixed in with a range of other more disruptive radical right-wing propositions (Conrad, 2020; Lees, 2018; Schmitt-Beck, 2017). Furthermore, as Schmitt-Beck (2017) notes, most AfD voters in the 2013 federal elections, the 2014 European Parliament election and the subsequent regional elections chose AfD

for largely xenophobic motives, with only a minority supporting it for its position on the European currency union. In subsequent years, especially after the refugee crisis of 2015, the AfD focused almost entirely on an anti-immigrant agenda that was defended by means of a nativist rhetoric (Bräuninger et al., 2020; Schmitt-Beck et al., 2022a; Stecker & Debus, 2019).

Nevertheless, the stance on European policy is important for German voters, even if it is not a polarizing issue for political parties. While the parties may agree on their positive view of the EU—again, with the exception of the AfD—citizens pay attention to the nuances of support for the European project when deciding whom to vote for (see the chapter by Pannico and Lobo in this volume). In the federal elections of 2002 and 2005, citizen opinions on EU issues and on Turkey’s possible accession to the EU influenced voter choice in Germany (Debus, 2007: 286; Schoen, 2008). This suggests citizen concerns on matters decided at the European level are relevant in terms of their voting behaviour at the national level. Similarly, De Vries and Hobolt (2016) argue that EU issue voting in Germany is more pronounced in national elections than it is in European elections, with a plausible explanation for this Europeanization of national elections being Germany’s leading role in the EU, which leads citizens to believe their vote and the resulting governing parties will not only determine domestic policy, but that they will also be decisive—or “pivotal”, as Torcal and Rodón (2021) put it—in determining what will be implemented at the European level (Jurado & Navarrete, 2021). In this respect, because Germany is a net contributor to the EU budget, voters pay more attention to the positions of parties on EU issues simply because there are more economic costs at stake with EU policies (Jurado & Navarrete, 2021). Hence, from an economic voting perspective, voters in Germany have incentives to gather information about how decisions in Brussels affect them and, given that a significant proportion of policy is decided at the European level, will also take issues related to EU integration in general into account. For this reason, the voting behaviour of German citizens is influenced by their EU attitudes as well as by the positions parties take on EU integration, despite the lack of politicization of the European issue. Because national politicians in such an important and influential EU member state as Germany are in a better position to affect EU policy, German voters are likely to understand federal elections are also an instrument of EU accountability (Clark & Rohrschneider, 2009; Torcal & Rodón, 2021).

POLITICIZATION OF THE EU IN THE GERMAN MEDIA AND PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

Recent studies analysing public debates and press coverage suggest that, despite the prominent role of German politics for the EU and decision-making processes in Brussels, the EU is not a source of polarization in the German media (Grande & Hutter, 2016; Silva et al., 2022), which is supported by our analysis using MAPLE data.

Figure 8.1 shows the average share of news the German press devoted to the EU and the tone of those articles during the four weeks leading up to the federal elections.¹ Regarding the prominence given to the EU by German newspapers, it can be seen that the EU became significantly more important in the 2017 elections and then again in 2021. It is unclear whether the increase in the last elections was due to the use of different data sources or to the greater media attention to the EU while the Covid-19 pandemic meant a number of policies were being coordinated from Brussels. What can be said is that the data shows that during the electoral campaign the press did not devote much space to the EU.

Regarding the tone in the media reports, the stability observed in the Bundestag is very different to what we can observe when analysing the newspaper articles. In the elections after the European debt crisis, the way newspapers spoke about the EU was less positive compared to 2002 and 2005. In particular, in 2013, the first election after the formation of the AfD, the average tone used in reports about the EU was more negative than positive, which could also be related to the effects and handling of the European financial crisis. Nevertheless, these results must be treated cautiously given the values of the average sentiment expressed in these reports are consistently close to zero, meaning the share of positive and negative words in articles about the EU is very similar. However, this does not tell us much about the degree of polarization on the EU, because the apparent impartiality of the press could be the result of the neutrality of German newspapers in reporting the EU, or it could be a consequence of the mutual cancellation of the messages of a polarized press. To better estimate how the German press depicted the EU, Fig. 8.2 shows the share

¹ The data corresponds to news from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for the elections running from 2002 to 2017. For the last federal elections of 2021, the news had to be collected from a different source and the newspapers considered were the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Handelsblatt* and *Die Welt*.

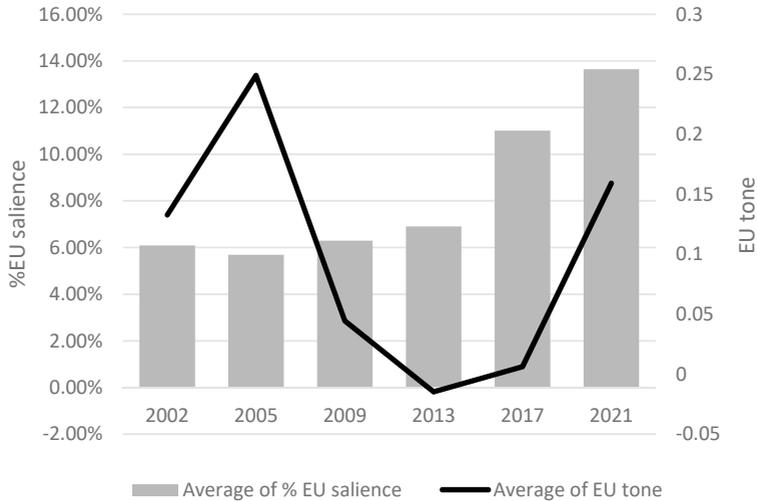


Fig. 8.1 Politicization of the EU in major German newspapers (*Note* The bars represent the percentage of news about the EU in the four weeks prior to the federal elections. The line indicates the average tone of the news referring to the EU. The tone was calculated using Rauh's [2018] sentiment dictionary for the German language. Data from 2002 to 2017 was collected from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Data for 2021 is from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Handelsblatt* and *Die Welt*)

of news about the EU by newspaper, distinguishing between positive news (black) and negative news (grey). At this point, it has to be noted that the press outlets were selected to ensure coverage of a broad ideological spectrum: from the most widely read newspapers on the centre-right and the centre-left (Schmitt-Beck & Staudt, 2022). We see that the centre-right leaning press (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Handelsblatt* and *Die Welt*) pay more attention to EU issues during the campaign compared to the centre-left newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. However, the share of negative articles about the EU is not associated with the ideological leanings of the newspaper, and in all six election campaigns the number of positive and negative news reports are well balanced. This evidence supports previous research that contends the national press in Germany is not polarized on the EU issue.

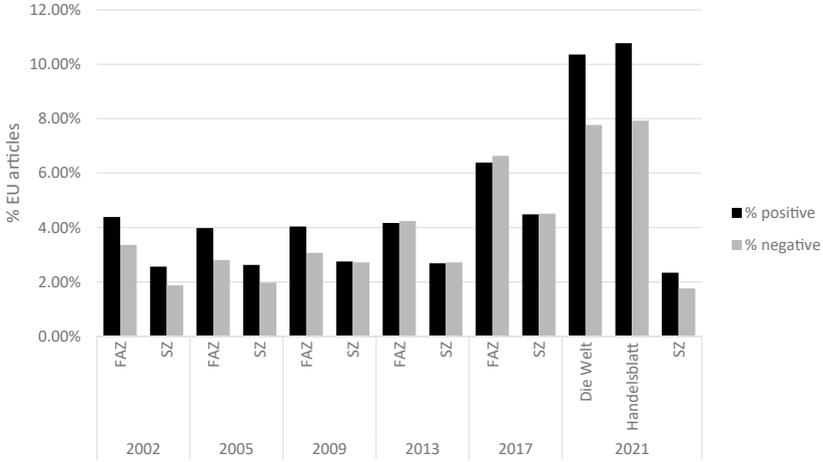


Fig. 8.2 Percentage of news about the EU and share of negative news about the EU by newspaper (*Note* The black bars represent the percentage of articles about the EU that were more positive than negative. The grey bars represent the percentage of articles about the EU that were more negative than positive. The tone was calculated using Rauh’s [2018] sentiment dictionary for the German language)

We have seen that the EU is not a polarizing issue in Germany and that political parties do not make it a major issue in their election campaigns. According to Schmitt-Beck (2017: 126), even in the 2013 elections—the first involving the AfD—party strategists considered the Eurocrisis to be a “toxic” topic, so the EU issue was avoided. It might look as if the parties decided to hide the EU topic as a way to minimize the eventual controversy around it. But what about the speeches in the Bundestag? Did the parties refer to the EU when speaking in parliament? Do they also employ moderate language when speaking about the EU in parliament?

Figure 8.3 shows the average share of speeches mentioning the EU out of all the speeches delivered between 1998 and 2017. Also, the line in Fig. 8.3 represents the average tone used in parliamentary speeches referring to the EU, ranging from a negative to a positive tone in the respective speeches. The first finding to highlight is that the EU is much more salient in the Bundestag than it is in the German press. While the average share of parliamentary speeches about the EU never falls below

10 per cent after 1998 and was steadily above 15 per cent after the introduction of the Euro in 2002, the share of media news about the EU is significantly lower. This also means that with the monetary union, the EU is more important to Germany's economy and, consequently, representatives address this issue more often in their contributions to debates in the Bundestag. Since 2002, the years in which the EU was more prominent in parliamentary debates were 2004, when ten countries, including Germany's neighbours Poland and the Czech Republic, joined the EU; the election year of 2005 when Angela Merkel was first elected German Chancellor; and 2014, the year after the elections in which AfD almost achieved the electoral threshold for representation in the Bundestag.

To make their positions clearer to the electorate, parties emphasize their thematic priorities during election campaigns (Baumann et al., 2021; Jurado & Navarrete, 2021; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). The increasing salience given to one or more issue domains by party representatives in their campaign statements helps citizens make reasonable decisions by appealing to those issues that are important to them. Given that

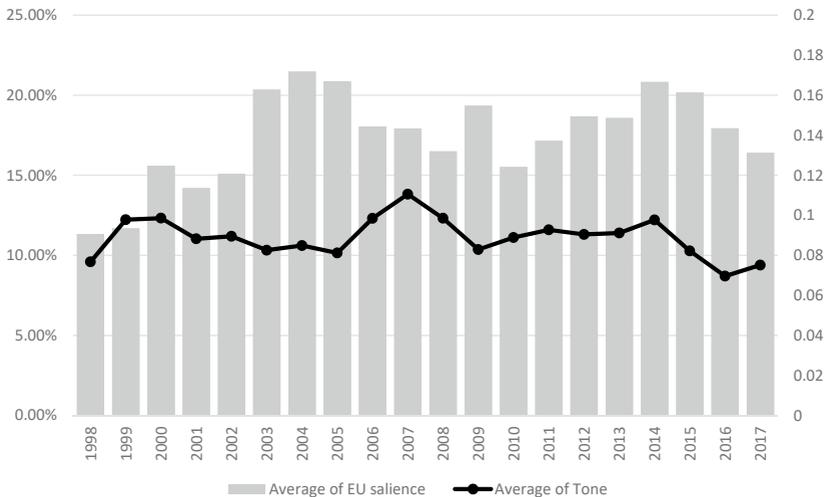


Fig. 8.3 Politicization of the EU in German Parliamentary debates (*Note* The bars represent the salience of the EU among the total number of parliamentary speeches. The line indicates the average tone of the total of the speeches mentioning the EU)

scholars have found the EU issue is important to German voters, despite most parties agreeing on EU policy, one might expect political actors in Germany could also behave strategically in the emphasis they give to questions relating to the EU and in the way they talk about it. Figures 8.4 and 8.5 show that parties indeed behave strategically in respect of the prominence they give European integration issues and in the way they talk about them in their discourses.

The first finding from Fig. 8.4 is that governing parties attach more importance than opposition parties to the EU in their contributions to parliamentary debates. In the period between 1998 and 2017, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU—Christlich-Demokratische Union) is the party that has been the longest in government and is, on average, the party with the highest share of discourses about the EU. Between 1998 and 2005, the Social Democratic Party (SPD—Sozialdemokratische

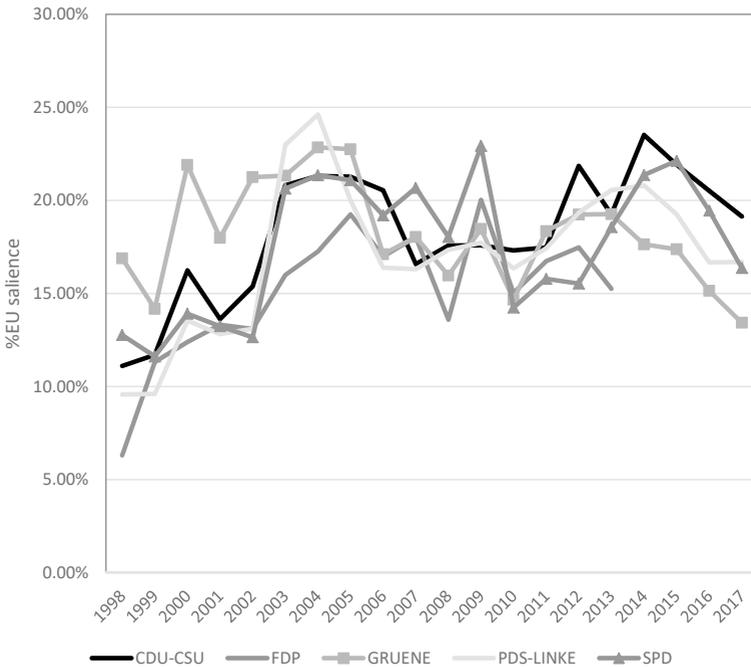


Fig. 8.4 Salience given to the EU in parliamentary speeches, by party

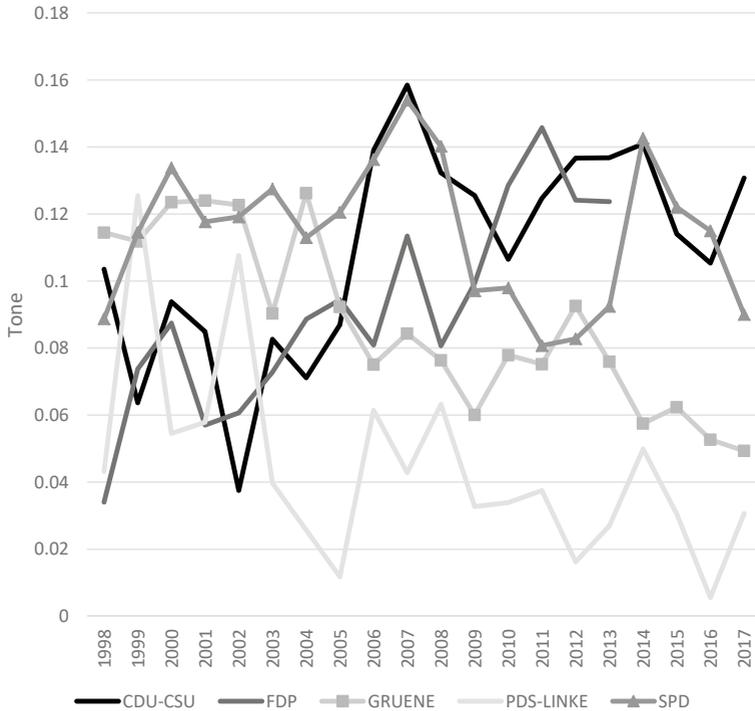


Fig. 8.5 Tone used in parliamentary speeches mentioning the EU, by party

Partei Deutschlands) and the Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) formed a coalition government under Gerhard Schröder. During those years, the Foreign Minister was the Europeanist Joschka Fischer of the Greens, who called for further European integration. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that during Schröder's two governments, the Greens made the EU more of an issue in the Bundestag (which tended to adopt less EU-friendly positions during the 1980s) (Debus, 2023). With the election of Angela Merkel in 2005, the Greens cut back on their parliamentary interventions about the EU and the CDU/CSU's coalition partner, the SPD, took over the foreign affairs portfolio to become the party that spoke most about the EU in parliament from 2005 to 2009, at which point the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP—Freie Demokratische Partei) replaced the SPD as the CDU/CSU's coalition partner. Perhaps because

of Chancellor Merkel's domination of EU issues, the FDP did not focus on EU issues in parliamentary debates, and with the beginning of the financial crisis Angela Merkel took the lead on EU relations, which is when the CDU became the party that gave more prominence to EU issues in its parliamentary contributions.

As for the tone used in parliamentary speeches that referred to the EU, it is possible to identify patterns in the behaviour of party representatives that can be summed up in three findings. First, while there is no negative tone towards the EU in the Bundestag between 1998 and 2017, there are clear differences between government and opposition parties. As Fig. 8.5 shows, governing parties speak more positively about the EU. Second, the distance in tone between those in government and those in opposition widens after 2009, which could be the result of the European financial crisis. Finally, between 2005 and 2008, the governing parties, the CDU/CSU and SPD, used almost the same tone when talking about the EU, then became increasingly distant in the election year of 2009. While the increasingly less positive tone used when talking about the EU could be related to the outbreak of the Eurozone debt crisis, the distance between the coalition partners in 2009 could just be a part of their electoral strategy. This view is supported after the 2013 elections, following which the CDU/CSU and SPD exhibited a broadly similar tone towards the EU until the federal election year of 2017, when they both began to diverge in their tone in respect of the EU.

The evidence presented here suggests German parties make the EU more or less salient in their speeches and adopt a more or less positive framing that seems to depend both on the ideological background of the parties and on strategical reasons. However, the differences are not that large and it could be difficult for uninformed citizens to be affected by the nuances of what was discussed about the EU in the Bundestag. While parties are consistently more positive than negative when talking about the EU in parliament, the tone used to address the EU is far from enthusiastic and actually mostly neutral. This could be related to the fact that in Germany, unlike what happens in other European countries, work experience in the EU is often a stepping stone to a career in domestic politics (Edinger, 2015) and the role of the "EU policy expert" has become significant within parties represented in the Bundestag (Kropp, 2010). Consequently, some parliamentary contributions about the EU tend to be informative and lack the terminology that contributes towards polarizing

the debate around it. The EU is not—at least until 2017—an issue that sparks a great deal of dissent between the different groups in parliament.

In this respect, Schröder and Stecker (2018) note that if the public is not inclined to pay attention, voters have only a limited amount of time to follow the public debate while the media can address only a finite range of topics that are of interest to the public. Therefore, emphasising an issue on which the parliamentary parties are in broad agreement might be inefficient as it is strategically more difficult to get the media to pay attention, and without media coverage the issue can pass the electorate unnoticed. So the outstanding question is: do EU issues affect voting behaviour in national elections in Germany?

THE 2021 ELECTIONS

The 2017 federal elections seemed to inaugurate a new era of political turmoil. The main parties, the CDU/CSU and SPD, attracted only 53 per cent of the votes, and—six months after the election—both parties agreed to renew the incumbent Grand Coalition (Bräuninger et al., 2019). In one of the most fragmented parliamentary party systems in Germany's post-war history, the shadow of a premature end to the coalition threatened the stability of Angela Merkel's final cabinet (Schmitt-Beck et al., 2022b). Representatives of six different parties were elected to the Bundestag, with the new radical-right AfD, which had representatives elected to the European Parliament and all state parliaments, emerging as the main opposition. In this difficult political context, Angela Merkel announced her intention not to seek re-election as Chancellor after the state election in October 2018. This announcement set the end date to the “Merkel Era”, a period of sixteen years of only apparent stability during which the Chancellor faced several challenges at the European and national levels, as well as from within her own party, the CDU/CSU. For the first time in the history of post-war Germany and during the extraordinary circumstances imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, citizens went to the polls without the incumbent Chancellor running for re-election.

The federal elections of 26 September 2021 resulted in both Grand Coalition parties hitting a new low in electoral support, with the CDU/CSU and SPD receiving less than half of all votes cast. The SPD and its candidate, Olaf Scholz, won the elections with only 25.7 per cent of the vote, seven points fewer than the CDU/CSU received in 2017 and more than fifteen less than Angela Merkel's best result in 2013. Scholz's

experience as Finance Minister during Merkel's last government may have contributed to the SPD's victory, because he was the "actual incumbent" as he was the only candidate for the position of Chancellor who had government responsibilities at the national level. This is not a minor issue. Given Merkel's popularity during her mandate and the important effects of candidate evaluations on the vote in Germany (Hansen & Olsen, 2020), the CDU/CSU result suggests that its candidate, Armin Laschet, had not successfully convinced voters that he was Merkel's heir, with the result that he did not receive the traditional advantage of representing the party that occupies the office of the Chancellor.

In a highly fragmented parliament, the SPD formed a coalition with the third- and fourth-strongest parties: the Greens and the FDP. This coalition can be seen as a logical consequence of the expressed will of the SPD to avoid a new Grand Coalition; however, it could also be seen as an agreement between the three parties that presented some of the most important issues during the electoral campaign: overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic; managing the post-pandemic economic recovery; tackling climate change and the country's digitalization deficit. That being said, however, all three parties differ on issues related to finance and the economy, ensuring conflicts between them are likely to appear during the legislative period from 2021 until 2025 (Debus, 2022).

The EU was not a salient issue during the 2021 campaign, and even less so when the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) set out by Scholz's ministry was approved by Brussels. The emphasis of the RRP lies in themes that were to be key issues during the election campaign: climate action; digitalization; growth; and jobs. So can we say that the position of citizens in the EU had an impact on the 2021 elections? In the sections below, we address this question and discuss the determinants of the votes cast in the last German elections.

DETERMINANTS OF GERMAN VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN THE 2021 ELECTIONS

Data and Methods

To identify the factors that affected vote choice in the last federal elections, we rely on data from the post-electoral Maple online survey. This data includes 2002 respondents and was collected between 11 October and 21 December 2021. Using this dataset, we are able to analyse

whether positions on European integration affected the vote for each of the parties represented in the Bundestag by considering both their socio-demographic characteristics and their positions on the main campaign issues. In doing so, we refer to voter recall as our dependent variable, which is divided into six categories that identify each of the parties elected to the German parliament in 2021, which include the CDU/CSU, SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP and AfD.

As our interest lies on the impact of EU attitudes on voter choice, our main independent variable is “support for the EU” which in this case is conceptualized as a desire for EU integration. This is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from “The EU should be dissolved” to “The EU should move towards a United States of Europe”.

We also include explanatory variables better associated with the German context and being central during the election campaign. These contain a variable to indicate respondents’ views on whether immigration policy should be more restricted because of the significance of the anti-immigration agenda in the vote for the AfD. This variable is measured on a five-point scale, ranging from whether the respondents “strongly agree” or “strongly disagree” with the statement “Germany should implement a more restrictive immigration policy”,² with higher values on this scale indicating a more pro-immigration position. The climate crisis was another key issue in the campaign, so we include a variable designed to capture attitudes towards climate change on an 11-point scale ranging from “We should prioritize economic growth, even if it makes it more difficult to combat climate change” to “We should prioritize combating climate change, even if it hurts economic growth”.³

Also, since the assessment of candidates is an important factor in terms of voting behaviour in Germany (as elsewhere), we also consider the popularity of the four major candidates, three of whom—Armin Laschet (CDU/CSU), Olaf Scholz (SPD) and Annalena Baerbock (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen)—were running as their parties’ official candidates for

² For the sake of an easier interpretation, we reversed the scale of the variable (Q24_4_w4) which originally runs from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

³ The original variable in the dataset (Q75_ger_w4) runs from “We should prioritize combating climate change, even if it damages economic growth” to “We should prioritize economic growth, even if it makes it more difficult to combat climate change”. We decided to reverse the scale to ease interpretation of results when assessing the impact of pro-climate attitudes.

the office of Chancellor (the FDP did not nominate a candidate for Chancellor, with FDP chairman Christian Lindner being the party's leading candidate [*Spitzenkandidat*]). The popularity of these leaders is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from "strongly dislike" to "strongly like".

Because the German media is not divided on the EU issue, it could be that citizens using other sources for their information during the campaign are exposed to more polarizing content. In the case of social media, in the absence of a gatekeeper, misinformation is more easily spread. Even more, citizens often choose to engage only with content that reaffirms their pre-established beliefs or which is even more radical (Engesser et al., 2017; Nir, 2017). For this reason, we include a variable to measure the use of social media as a source of political information during the campaign as a way to consider how some polarizing issues on social media affect citizens' decisions without generating contestation by the main political actors nor attracting the attention of the traditional media. This variable captures how frequently respondents use social media networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, to obtain political information and is measured on a four-point scale ranging from "never" to "frequently".⁴ The higher the score on this variable, the greater the use of social media for campaign information.

Finally, as control variables we include a set of socio-demographic variables and one that refers to general political attitudes. These are gender (dichotomous), age, education (from low to high), household trade union membership (dichotomous), religiosity (four-point scale from "not at all religious" to "very religious") and left-right self-placement (11-point scale). To better interpret the magnitude of their effects, these and the previous independent variables have been re-coded on a scale of 0 to 1.

Given the nominal nature of our dependent variable, we use multi-level logistic regression models with the incumbent CDU/CSU as the baseline category. We run two models: the first includes all the variables described above; while the second contains an interaction on the EU issue with pro-immigration opinion as a way of capturing the actual net effect of our main independent variable and to test whether less favourable opinions towards immigrants made voters take the EU issue into greater consideration while voting.

⁴ The original variable in the dataset (Q93_5_w4) had the following options: (1) Frequently, (2) Occasionally, (3) Rarely, (4) Never. The order of these items was reversed to ease the interpretation of results.

Findings

Did the EU issue affect voter choice in the 2021 German elections? Based on the results presented in Fig. 8.6, German citizens take European integration preferences into account when deciding how to cast their vote. The average marginal effects of the main explanatory variables included in the first multinomial model (see Table 8.1 in the Appendix) show that support for European integration is the variable that affects the likelihood of voting for three out of the six parties being studied. As Fig. 8.6 shows, a pro-EU position increases the probability of supporting the CDU almost as much as supporting the environment over economic growth raises the likelihood of voting for the Greens. However, being in favour of greater European integration reduces the probability of voting for the FDP or AfD. While these results are not surprising in respect of the AfD, the negative association between pro-EU opinions and voting for the German liberals is striking, because the FDP's election manifesto advocated a new constitution that promoted a move towards a more federal EU.⁵ According to our results, this ambitious goal for the EU clashes with FDP voter preferences.

Going more into detail with regard to the AfD, we see that the effect of being against the EU on the probability of voting AfD is similar to that of being in favour of a more restrictive immigration policy. Moreover, opinion on immigration is a predictor of vote only for the AfD, because the likelihood of voting for any of the other five parties is not affected by an individual's stance on immigration policy. Our analysis also offers valuable information for creating a profile of the typical AfD voter, since all the main explanatory variables are in this case statistically significant. According to our results, AfD voters are significantly more right-wing, more anti-EU integration, more supportive of more restrictive immigration policies, more likely to prioritize the economy over protecting the environment and tend to use social media for their political information. In respect of this latter conclusion, we explained above that the inclusion of the variable measuring social media use was motivated because citizens could be exposed to more polarizing and engaging content on social

⁵ As explicitly mentioned in the FDP's manifesto: "*Wir Freie Demokraten wollen nach Abschluss der Konferenz zur Zukunft Europas einen Verfassungskonvent einberufen. Dieser Konvent sollte einer dezentral und föderal verfassten Union eine rechtsverbindliche Verfassung mit einem Grundrechtekatalog und starken Institutionen geben*". <https://www.fdp.de/nie-gab-es-mehr-zu-tun>.

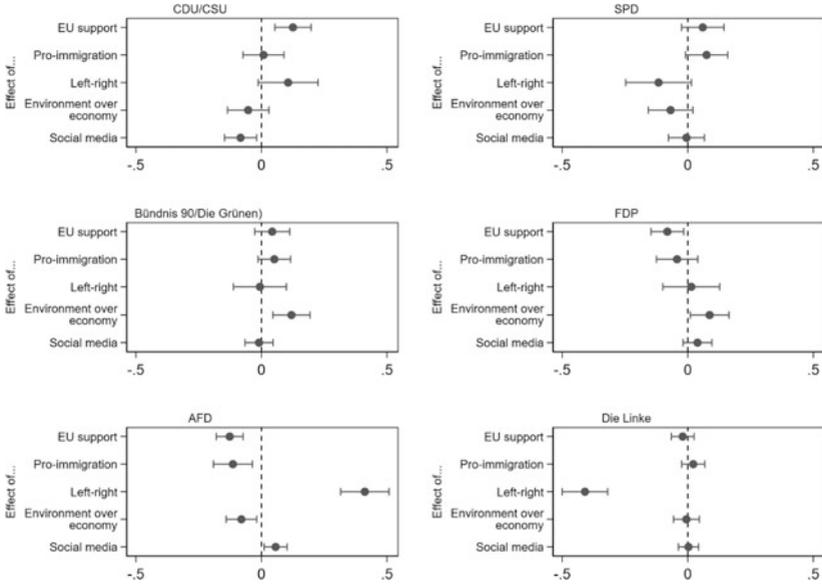


Fig. 8.6 Explaining the vote in Germany (*Note* Average marginal effects and 95 per cent confidence intervals, based on the results reported in Table 8.1)

media, given that EU issues are not particularly salient in the German media which is not itself polarized on the EU.

Holding a pro-EU opinion increases the probability of voting for the CDU which was the incumbent party in the 2021 elections and the one that made the EU more salient in its parliamentary speeches. Nevertheless, being informed about politics via social media has a negative effect on the likelihood of voting for the CDU. Of course, this does not allow us to establish a clear link between Eurosceptic leanings and the use of social media, but indicates that the average AfD voter is less willing to support further advances on European integration and uses social media for campaign information more often than the average CDU voter.⁶

⁶ We replicated our analysis, including the interaction between the use of social media to gather political information and the support for the EU (see Fig. 8.8). For the CDU and AfD, the use of social media slightly affects the magnitude of the effect of the EU issue in the likelihood of voting for any of these parties, but it does not change the direction of the effect. This means the negative association between support for the EU

Concerning opinion on protecting the environment, as expected this is an issue that significantly affects the Green vote because more pro-environment positions increase the probability of casting a vote for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. However, it is interesting to see that the vote for the FDP is also positively affected by positions in favour of prioritizing the environment over economic growth. This is an important finding, because having an electorate that coincides with that of the Greens in the issue the latter emphasizes most may have contributed to easing negotiations between the two minority partners in the governing coalition.

Finally, left–right self-placement is an important factor in explaining the vote for the parties on the opposite ends of the ideological scale: Die Linke on the left and the AfD on the right. For all the other parties with more mainstream views with regard to ideology, the left–right self-placement of individuals does not affect the voting probability.

The analysis, including the interaction between opinion on immigration policy and support for the EU, does not present significant changes but offers a more fine-grained assessment of the effect of opinions on EU integration on vote choice. As shown in Fig. 8.7, opinions about immigration moderate the effect of issue voting for the CDU, FDP and AfD. The positive effect of supporting EU integration on the vote for the CDU is statistically significant only for those voters with a less favourable opinion of immigration. Surprisingly, the opposite is true for the FDP, where the negative effect of support for the EU on their vote affects only those individuals who support more restricted immigration policies. The same can be observed with the AfD whose voters are more likely to be critical of the EU, with the exception of those with more pro-immigration views.

CONCLUSION

The new government coalition that emerged from the September 2021 election brought together three parties—SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and the FDP—with different political views and issue priorities. However, they share an ambitious view of the future of Europe, which was reflected

and vote for the AfD is stable for all individuals, irrespective of how much they depend on social media for their political information. Similarly, the positive association between EU support and voting for the CDU does not change as a result of the use of social media.

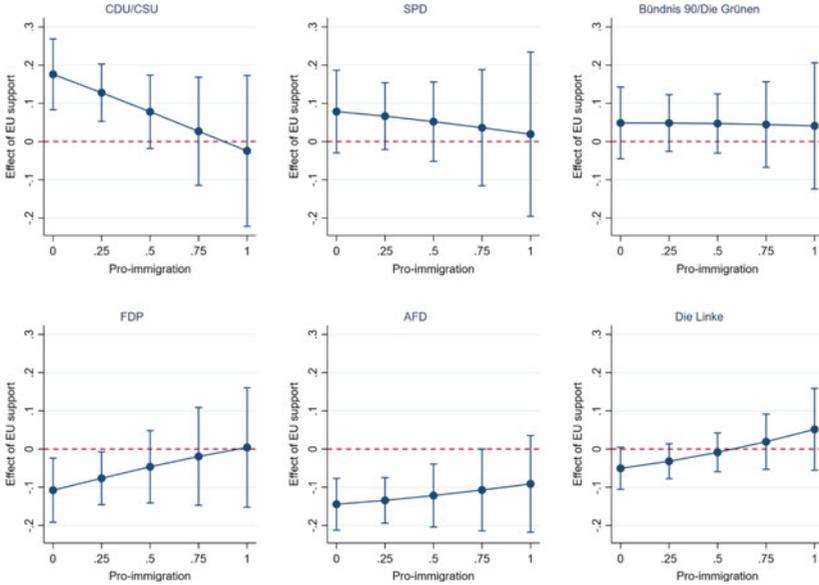


Fig. 8.7 Average marginal effects of the EU issue at different opinions about immigration (*Note* Average marginal effects and 95 per cent confidence intervals, based on the results reported in Table 8.2)

in the coalition agreement and welcomed by Europhiles. This public political consensus about the EU does not make the EU issue irrelevant in voter choice at the national level and, as shown here, the position of citizens in respect of European integration is an important predictor of the vote in federal elections, despite the issue not being one that polarizes opinion.

We have shown that parties behave strategically when talking about the EU in parliament. While they are in government, German political actors make the EU more salient and depict it more positively than they do while they are in the opposition. This suggests that parties understand that, while there are no major differences between them on European policy, the EU is an important issue for citizens. When German voters select a party, they are choosing it by considering who will represent their national interests in Brussels and who will influence policy-making on

the EU level. It is therefore important for citizens to envision a political party negotiating at different levels of the European political system. Thus, even as the media is not divided on the EU issue and this topic is often “de-thematized”, even during election campaigns, citizens take their preferences with regard to EU integration into account when casting their votes in national elections. This supports what other scholars have found when analysing the impact of EU issue voting in German elections (De Vries & Hobolt, 2016; Jurado & Navarrete, 2021).

However, our analysis presents some limitations. The exceptional circumstances of the 2021 elections deserve more consideration and research. First, voters went to the polls after 18 months of the Covid-19 pandemic during which several of the government measures to control the spread of the virus faced popular opposition. In this context, the EU vaccination strategy and the coordinated purchase of medical equipment might have affected the way in which citizens viewed the EU. Unfortunately, we have no data on the parliamentary interventions during the last legislative period so we are unable to determine if these controversies were evident in the parliamentary debates.

Also, the speed at which German politics was changing may have had an impact on the answers respondents gave to the survey. The data used in this research was collected between 11 October and 21 December 2021, which means respondents were completing the survey as Armin Laschet resigned as leader of the CDU/CSU, the coalition deal between the SPD, Greens and Liberals was agreed and the new federal government took office. It would be disingenuous to state that respondents’ perceptions, especially those concerning the popularity of candidates, could not have been influenced by subsequent events when the respondents completed the survey. Future research, undertaken in a less hectic political context and using more sophisticated panel data, should allow for testing the extent to which our findings on EU issue voting in Germany are correct.

APPENDIX

See Tables 8.1 and 8.2. See Fig. 8.8.

Table 8.1 Determinants of vote choice in the 2021 elections

	<i>SPD</i>	<i>Grüne</i>	<i>FDP</i>	<i>AfD</i>	<i>Die Linke</i>
EU support	-0.328 (0.433)	-0.178 (0.543)	-1.672*** (0.457)	-2.627*** (0.506)	-0.994+ (0.601)
Left-right self-placement	-2.521*** (0.757)	-2.708** (0.931)	-0.320 (0.860)	4.955*** (0.966)	-10.238*** (1.213)
Climate change over economy	0.214 (0.462)	1.749** (0.590)	1.092* (0.528)	-0.658 (0.561)	0.555 (0.675)
Social media during campaign	0.474 (0.371)	0.409 (0.448)	0.948* (0.395)	1.344** (0.428)	0.562 (0.528)
Olaf Scholz	5.844*** (0.620)	1.135 (0.741)	-0.855 (0.618)	-0.738 (0.670)	0.905 (0.844)
Armin Laschet	-3.347*** (0.513)	-3.560*** (0.647)	-2.777*** (0.561)	-3.745*** (0.708)	-4.082*** (0.882)
Annalena Bärbock	1.536** (0.527)	6.184*** (0.686)	0.439 (0.588)	0.794 (0.716)	1.065 (0.785)
Christian Lindner	-2.408*** (0.571)	-2.481*** (0.705)	4.466*** (0.641)	-0.956 (0.639)	-1.081 (0.825)
Age	-0.743 (0.710)	-1.956* (0.884)	-1.651* (0.817)	-0.807 (0.917)	1.704 (1.082)
Gender	0.383 (0.256)	0.308 (0.311)	0.510+ (0.286)	0.386 (0.314)	0.466 (0.377)
Education	-0.230 (0.354)	0.527 (0.442)	0.179 (0.422)	-0.518 (0.465)	1.370* (0.584)
Religiosity	-0.443 (0.381)	-1.034* (0.480)	-0.996* (0.428)	-1.433** (0.476)	-1.172* (0.586)
Trade union membership	0.490 (0.318)	-0.306 (0.408)	-0.243 (0.372)	-0.238 (0.447)	-0.323 (0.535)
Pro-immigration	0.652 (0.445)	0.900+ (0.532)	-0.523 (0.532)	-1.668* (0.668)	0.792 (0.617)
Constant	-0.087 (0.756)	-1.024 (0.929)	-0.704 (0.835)	0.410 (0.911)	2.366* (1.015)
Observations	915				
Pseudo R^2	0.400				

Multinomial regression models (Base category CDU/CSU); Standard errors in parentheses

Data source Maple online survey, wave 4

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 8.2 Determinants of vote choice in the 2021 elections including the interaction between opinion on immigration and support for the EU

	<i>SPD</i>	<i>GRÜNE</i>	<i>FDP</i>	<i>AfD</i>	<i>Die Linke</i>
EU support	-0.575 (0.565)	-0.470 (0.778)	-2.168*** (0.561)	-2.883*** (0.599)	-2.173** (0.839)
Pro-immigration	-0.037 (0.941)	0.091 (1.177)	-1.954+ (1.075)	-2.277* (1.011)	-1.355 (1.210)
EU support * Pro-immigration	1.149 (1.326)	1.398 (1.611)	2.402 (1.564)	0.882 (1.909)	3.595* (1.736)
Left-right self-placement	-2.549*** (0.761)	-2.779** (0.937)	-0.403 (0.864)	4.917*** (0.973)	-10.283*** (1.217)
Climate change over economy	0.190 (0.466)	1.718** (0.594)	1.061* (0.531)	-0.689 (0.568)	0.448 (0.676)
Social media during campaign	0.483 (0.372)	0.412 (0.450)	0.956* (0.396)	1.353** (0.429)	0.515 (0.529)
Olaf Scholz	5.862*** (0.621)	1.149 (0.742)	-0.796 (0.620)	-0.725 (0.673)	0.879 (0.844)
Armin Laschet	-3.399*** (0.518)	-3.611*** (0.651)	-2.778*** (0.564)	-3.783*** (0.712)	-4.039*** (0.874)
Annalena Bärbock	1.585** (0.530)	6.230*** (0.689)	0.470 (0.590)	0.818 (0.719)	1.098 (0.790)
Christian Lindner	-2.413*** (0.572)	-2.468*** (0.707)	4.431*** (0.642)	-0.956 (0.644)	-0.969 (0.827)
Age	-0.841 (0.714)	-2.097* (0.888)	-1.792* (0.821)	-0.865 (0.919)	1.405 (1.080)
Gender	0.404 (0.258)	0.320 (0.312)	0.537+ (0.287)	0.408 (0.315)	0.536 (0.379)
Education	-0.256 (0.355)	0.508 (0.443)	0.159 (0.423)	-0.532 (0.468)	1.232* (0.584)
Religiosity	-0.457 (0.384)	-1.051* (0.484)	-1.005* (0.429)	-1.443** (0.479)	-1.155* (0.583)
Trade union membership	0.472 (0.318)	-0.329 (0.408)	-0.258 (0.371)	-0.248 (0.448)	-0.314 (0.527)
Constant	0.118 (0.809)	-0.776 (1.032)	-0.341 (0.868)	0.626 (0.942)	3.216** (1.091)
Observations				915	
Pseudo R^2				0.402	

Multinomial regression models (Base category CDU/CSU); Standard errors in parentheses

Data source Maple online survey, wave 4

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

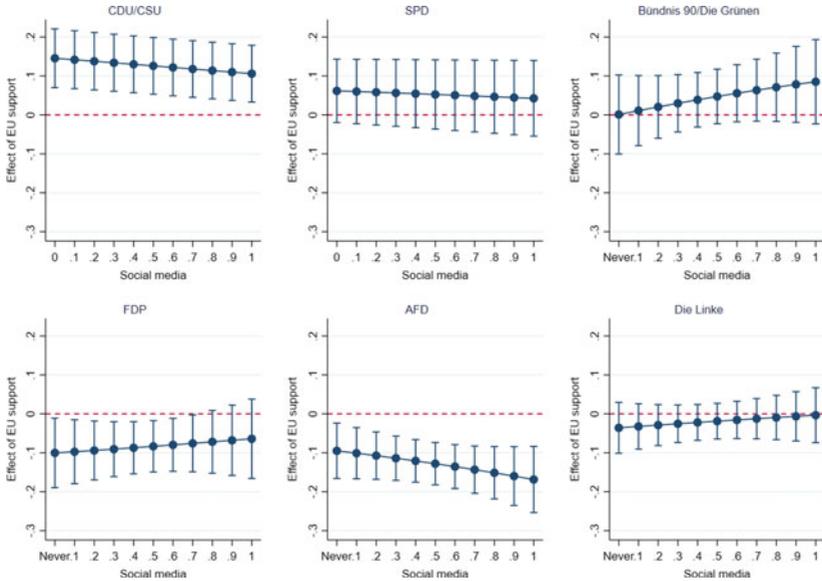


Fig. 8.8 Average marginal effects of the EU issue at different levels of media use

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