Party position, electoral incentives, and attention to EU issues in the 2019 European Parliament election

Nuria Font

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

ABSTRACT

Under what conditions do Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) give attention to EU issues in European Parliament (EP) election campaigns? This study examines how party positioning on European integration and individual electoral incentives affected MEPs' attention to EU issues in the 2019 EP election campaign. Based on data collected from Twitter, the findings show that pro-EU parties and individual vote-seeking incentives increased attention to EU issues. More specifically, they show that MEPs from pro-EU mainstream parties had incentives to debate about EU issues, especially when they competed for votes. The findings help to unfold the interplay between party-level and legislator-level factors and its effects on attention to EU issues and aim to contribute to research on EU issue salience and EP election campaigns.

Introduction

Under what conditions do Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) give attention to EU issues in EP election campaigns? Research on EU issue salience and European elections has often addressed the question of whether EP elections are about Europe. For decades, due to being dominated by domestic concerns instead of European issues, EP elections have been categorised as second-order national elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). This categorisation has recently been challenged by the idea that EU issues are increasingly important in EP elections (e.g. Adam and Maier 2016, Braun and Grande 2021, Braun and Schäffer 2022, Eugster et al. 2021, Hobolt and de Vries 2016). The claim that EP elections are about Europe probably found its highest expression in the 2019 election, when high levels of Europeanness of the electorates (Braun 2021), European issue salience (Braun and Grande 2021), and politicization (Braun and Schäfer 2022) were observed.

Research on European elections has shown that EU issues have become increasingly salient for parties and provided accounts of parties' emphasis on European topics. Recent studies on EU issue salience have commonly been conducted under the research umbrella of the politicization of European integration. From this broader perspective, theoretical debates on European integration's politicization were advanced by Hooghe and Marks' (2009) claim of a post-functionalist turn in European integration theory. Arguing that gradual transfers of authority to the EU in the decades following the Maastricht Treaty increased the salience of European issues, they illuminated a path to a fertile field of research. Therein, scholars have since explored the drivers of EU salience and politicization both in the domestic (e.g. Grande and Hutter 2016, Hutter and Kriesi 2019, Kriesi 2016) and European arenas (e.g. Braun et al. 2016, Braun and Grande 2021, Spoon 2012), as well as politicization's normative and empirical repercussions (e.g. Braun and Grande 2021, Vasilopoulou and Gattermann 2021). Such studies have commonly conceptualised politicization as a process through which European integration becomes more visible and contested (e.g. De Wilde et al. 2016, Hutter and Grande 2014). As such, politicization is conceived to be composed of three dimensions: EU issue salience (that is, the public visibility of EU issues), the polarisation of opinions and debates on European integration, and actor expansion (De Wilde et al. 2016, Grande and Hutter 2016, Hutter and Kriesi 2019). In our study we focus on the salience of EU issues during the 2019 EP election, examining how un under what conditions EU issues were emphasized and given visibility in the public debate. We share Grande and Hutter's (2016) assumption that salience is not the sole dimension of politicization but is the most basic one and cannot be replaced by any other dimension. They also contend that only issues raised by political actors and debated in public can be regarded as being politicised (Grande and Hutter 2016). Although we share their view that only the study of the three dimensions can provide a full picture of the politicization of European integration, we also believe that some underexplored aspects of EU issue salience in EP elections, namely the role of pro-EU mainstream parties and the link between party positioning and individual vote-seeking considerations, still need to be surveyed.

Research on EU issue salience has revealed that parties emphasize and de-emphasize EU issues to gain advantage in electoral competition (e.g. Braun and Grande 2021, Braun and Schmitt 2020). Theoretical accounts of EU issue salience have emphasised the attributes of parties and party systems, the nature of the European issues being examined, and the national and transnational campaign arenas. One of the key arguments is that Eurosceptic challenger parties have increased the salience of European issues and are the main drivers of political conflict over Europe (e.g. Hutter and Kriesi 2019, Braun and Grande 2021) and that pro-EU mainstream parties have de-emphasized and even blurred EU issues in response to Eurosceptic challengers (e.g. Koedam 2021). Relatedly, Braun and Grande (2021) show that mainstream parties de-emphasise European

issues in EP election campaigns in response to the intensification of political conflict over Europe by radical Eurosceptic parties. They also observe this trend in the 2019 elections, when mainstream parties were forced to open the debate around European issues only in countries with high levels of politicization (Braun and Grande 2021). Likewise, Adam and Maier (2011) observe that EU issues are more prominent on the EP campaign agenda in party systems with many Eurosceptic parties. Spoon (2012) describes variation in the salience of European issues across parties and over time and demonstrates that domestic politics, namely parties and party systems, influence the salience of European issues in parties' Euromanifestos. With a different focus, Adam and Maier (2016) and Eugster et al. (2021) find that parties with internal dissent about the EU avoid European issues. Focusing on a polity-policy perspective, Braun et al. (2016) argue that European issue salience is affected by party position and party system polarisation, with parties' emphasis on Europe focused on policies more than on fundamental EU issues or domestic topics. Approaching the issue differently, Nai et al. (2022) show that Eurosceptic parties are more likely than Europhile ones to campaign in harsh ways and to benefit electorally from it. Last, taking a multilevel election system perspective, Braun and Schmitt (2020) show that parties put less emphasis on EU issues in national elections than in EP elections, although they take similar positions on the EU in both electoral contests. Our study engages with those theoretical debates by investigating how pro-EU mainstream parties were more incentivized to emphasize EU issues than Eurosceptic ones in the 2019 election. Our study also connects with studies on both the polity-policy dimension of EU issue emphasis and political elites' communication tone.

Our study focuses on MEPs in their capacity as national party members and representatives in the EP (e.g. Obholzer and Daniel 2016). This approach enables us to explore how party-level and individual-level incentives influence EU issue salience. This is relevant because it is unclear whether the MEPs' emphasis on EU issues in EP election campaigns is primarily driven by their parties' orientation towards European integration or also influenced by individual vote-seeking incentives. Previous research shows that Eurosceptic parties emphasise European issues (Braun and Grande 2021, Hooghe and Marks 2009), that individual vote-seeking motivations influence legislators' behaviour in the parliamentary and electoral arenas (Müller and Strøm 1999), and that electoral systems impact parties' and political elites' behaviour and campaigns in the European context (Farrell and Scully 2010, Hermansen and Pegan 2023). We investigate attention to EU issues from the perspective of MEPs' role in election campaigns to better understand the interplay between party and individual electoral drivers of attention to EU issues in EP elections. We put the spotlight on MEPs for two main reasons. First, as party members, MEPs are expected to align with their party position on EU issues. Second, because not all MEPs stand for re-election, their individual electoral incentives differ. Such differential status raises the underexplored question of how MEPs' attention to EU issues in EP election campaigns is driven by party considerations as

well as by individual, vote-seeking incentives. By investigating the effect of the interplay between party and electoral considerations on attention to EU issues through the lenses of MEPs, we aim to contribute to debates on EU issue salience and EP election campaigns.

Our study is based on Twitter content published by MEPs during the 2019 EP pre-election period. Relying on Twitter data is justified, as prior research on EU issue salience—and more generally on politicization—and EP election campaigns has primarily relied on sources such as Euromanifestos (Braun et al. 2016, Braun and Schmitt 2020, Spoon 2012), mass media coverage (Braun and Grande 2021, Grande and Hutter 2016, Hutter and Kriesi 2019), party communications (Eugster et al. 2021), or a combination of these sources (e.g. Koedam 2021, Maier et al. 2019). However, digital innovation has led parties and political elites to increasingly use social media, especially Twitter, as a key communication tool in election campaigns. These platforms enable political elites to provide personalised content (Nulty et al. 2016) and emphasise (or de-emphasise) policy issues (Fazekas et al. 2021). Research has explored several dimensions of candidates' and MEPs' usage of social media in the EP (e.g. Daniel et al. 2019). More specifically, Fazekas et al. (2021) find that politicians adopt a less engaging style when discussing EU issues on Twitter during EP election campaigns, while Stier et al. (2020) highlight national rather than transnational linkages among EP candidates on Twitter in the 2019 election. Our study also contributes to research on social media campaigns by analysing attention to EU issues on Twitter during the EP campaign.

Building on theoretical debates on EU issue salience and EP campaigns, we aim to elucidate how party EU position, standing for re-election, and the ballot system affect MEPs' attention to EU issues. Our study is based on a dataset of 61,648 tweets from MEPs from all member states during the four weeks preceding the 2019 election. Our study shows that pro-EU mainstream parties did not avoid discussing about EU issues and that, among MEPs from pro-EU parties, those competing for votes were more inclined to emphasize EU issues. Our study also shows that MEPs from EU-friendly parties focus on specific policy issues and that Eurosceptics employ a more negative tone when talking about Europe. Our findings contribute to research on EU issue salience and on EP elections and aim to shed light on the interplay between party-level and legislator-level factors in shaping EU issue attention.

Attention to EU issues and EP elections

This study addresses some underexplored aspects of EU issue salience in EP elections, namely the role of pro-EU mainstream parties in the 2019 EP elections and the link between party positioning and individual vote-seeking considerations. It bridges two strands of research. On the one hand, literature on EU salience shows that emphasis on EU issues varies over time (Braun

and Grande 2021) and across parties (Braun and Schmitt 2020, Braun et al. 2016, Eugster et al. 2021, Spoon 2012). A common assumption in related research is that parties and partisan entrepreneurship, most notably within national party competition but also in the EU contest, are the main drivers of EU salience and politicization (Braun and Grande 2021, Kriesi 2016). On the other hand, comparative research on social media campaigns shows that campaigns are not exclusively centralised in party leadership but also decentralised in individual candidates (e.g. Balmas et al. 2014). This trend raises the question of whether MEPs, beyond party lines, have individual vote-seeking motivations when deciding to emphasize or de-emphasize EU issues in EP campaigns. Our interest is investigating attention to EU issues in the 2019 EP election focusing on MEPs in order to unfold the effects of the interplay between party-level and individual-level electoral considerations on attention to EU issues. Ultimately, our findings aim to contribute to understanding better the drivers of EU issue salience in European election campaigns.

Theoretical framework

Theories on issue salience argue that parties strategically emphasise certain issues and de-emphasise others to maximise their electoral prospects (Koedam 2021, Spoon 2012). Building on research on EU issue salience and EP campaigns, we present arguments based on party positions on European integration, individual vote-seeking goals, and the ballot structure. Hypotheses at the party, individual, and electoral system levels are proposed.

Party position on European integration

Research on EU issue salience and, more generally, on the domestic politicization of European integration, has commonly shown that extreme ideological parties are more incentivised than mainstream moderate ones to politicise the EU in national electoral contests (e.g. Hobolt and De Vries 2015, Hooghe and Marks 2009, Hutter and Kriesi 2019). Similarly, research focused on the European context has also suggested that emphasizing EU issues is strategically advantageous for Eurosceptic parties (e.g. Braun and Grande 2021, Braun et al. 2016, Spoon 2012). Along those lines, Braun and Grande (2021) argue that mainstream parties de-emphasize European issues in response to Eurosceptics' mobilization. They also observe that trend in the 2019 elections and show that mainstream parties were forced to open the debate about Europe only in countries with high levels of politicization (France and United Kingdom). We engage with these theoretical debates by hypothesizing that, in the 2019 EP election, MEPs from Europhile parties did not avoid EU issues and were more incentivized to pay attention to EU issues than MEPs from Eurocritical ones. The underlying argument brings into consideration differences in the type and intensity of

preferences on European integration between pro-EU mainstream parties, and anti-EU challenger parties.

Regarding pro-EU mainstream parties, electoral projections in the run-up to the election predicting a surge of radical right parties and a close election nourished the perception among mainstream pro-EU parties that the 2019 election was decisive because the future of Europe was at stake (Braun and Schäfer 2022). Borrowing from van Middelaar (2016, p. 495), we assume that mainstream, pro-EU political forces perceived the EP election as a 'moment of truth'. Beyond country variations, mainstream parties were incentivised to engage in efforts of pro-European mobilisation (Braun and Grande 2021, Braun and Schäfer 2022), also by appealing to relevant transnational policy issues to which voters attribute greater importance (Braun and Schäfer 2022).

On the Eurosceptic side, anti-EU parties have been weak in increasing the salience of EU issues in EP election debates over the past elections (Braun and Grande 2021). Arguably, anti-EU parties' motivations to give attention to EU issues might have been of a different nature in the 2019 campaign. Recent work by Braun et al. (2016) on EU salience based on Euromanifestos can help to tailor our expectation, particularly their argument that Eurosceptic parties highlight constitutive, polity issues instead of issues concerning EU policy (Braun et al. 2016). We assume that Eurosceptic parties, at least from the EU27, might have had reasons to lessen the visibility of (primarily constitutive) issues in the 2019 campaign. If a country's EU membership was a primary constitutive concern (Hutter et al. 2016) for anti-EU parties, then their campaign strategies might have been influenced by the potential repercussions of Brexit negotiations. Although the result of the Brexit referendum initially led Eurosceptics in other member states to call for membership referendums in their own countries, Brexit acted as a deterrent for other member states during the prolonged negotiations (Hobolt et al. 2022). Because the uncertainty associated with leaving the EU increased support for European integration, EU membership began to look relatively favourable (De Vries 2017). Moreover, the unity among the 27 member states throughout Brexit negotiations allowed the EU to maintain a firm position vis-à-vis the UK government (Dooley 2022), highlighting the arduous path towards withdrawal. Therefore, if the idea of one's country leaving the EU became increasingly unattractive to citizens and possibly less beneficial for Eurosceptic parties (in EU27) during the 2019 election, it is reasonable to expect that MEPs from anti-EU parties found emphasising (typically constitutive) EU issues less electorally advantageous.

H1.   MEPs from pro-EU parties give more attention to EU issues in the EP election campaign than MEPs from anti-EU parties

Vote-seeking incentives

Previous research has extensively examined strategies employed by parties with opposing views on European integration and has shown that parties play a crucial role in giving saliency and politicizing European issues. Relatedly, the role of party elites, specifically MEPs, in adopting their parties' strategies on EU issues is also worth exploring. MEPs seeking re-election may emphasize certain issues in order to gain votes, while non-candidates may also emphasize them to campaign for their national party in pursuit of office benefits (Müller and Strøm 1999). However, the latter may also distinguish themselves in the absence of individual vote-seeking goals or under distinct career incentives. We assume that attention to EU issues is affected not only by the party, but also by individual vote-seeking incentives. If, as hypothesized, MEPs competing for votes are more incentivized to emphasize European issues, then talking about Europe is meant to mobilize European voters.

Our argument partly builds on the theoretical framework elaborated by Müller and Strøm (1999) concerning parties' and politicians' political behaviour. They distinguish between office-seeking, policy-seeking, and vote-seeking behaviours (Müller and Strøm 1999). As we seek to discern whether individual electoral incentives affect attention to EU issues in European elections, vote-seeking objectives are at the centre of our argument. Relatedly, previous research shows that the EP election cycle affects parties and MEPs' behaviour (e.g. Koop et al. 2018) and that, when MEPs campaign in highly politicised contexts, national parties tend to exert control over their MEPs (Koop et al. 2018). At the same time, MEPs standing for re-election might not only emphasise their party brand but also, as comparative studies show, adopt a personalised campaign (Balmas et al. 2014). As candidate MEP's future office is directly affected by EP elections (Koop et al. 2018), they may have motivations to pay more attention to EU issues as a way to place value on and give visibility to their legislative work within the EU arena, call for votes in the EP election, and try to improve their re-election prospects. By contrast, MEPs not participating in the election may have weaker incentives to campaign for their party. Thus, we expect that MEPs with re-election goals have higher incentives to emphasize EU issues than non-candidate MEPs. Moreover, we expect that the effect of EU positioning on attention to EU issues varies depending on whether MEPs stand for re-election. MEPs from pro-EU parties are expected to devote more attention to EU issues when standing for re-election than when not. While giving attention to EU issues may be strategically advantageous for pro-EU parties in an election viewed as being decisive, standing for re-election provides additional incentives to emphasise European topics. In essence, emphasizing the benefits of European integration in an election considered to be critical may be particularly advantageous for MEPs from pro-EU parties who try to secure re-election.

H2.   MEPs standing for re-election give more attention to EU issues in the EP election campaign than MEPs not standing for re-election

H3. MEPs from pro-European parties give more attention to EU issues in the EP election campaign when they stand for re-election

Electoral list systems

Research has extensively investigated the effects of electoral list systems on political elites' behaviour during election campaigns (Hix and Hagemann 2009, Obholzer and Daniel 2016) as well as on legislative behaviour and activity within the EU (Farrell and Scully 2010, Däubler and Hix 2018). As comparative literature addressing the effects of electoral systems on legislators' behaviour shows, open list systems, usually known as 'candidate-centred', allow voters to express preferences among candidates, whereas closed lists, usually known as 'party-centred', have voters cast their votes for a party list (Carey 2007). In the EP context, electoral rules, although based on proportional representation, present variations in the ballot structure (Farrell and Scully 2010). In candidate-centred system, candidates have incentives to perform personalised campaigns (Farrell and Scully 2010, Hermansen and Pegan 2023) and emphasise issues relevant to their local constituencies. MEPs from candidate-centred systems face fewer party constraints and tend to prioritise issues that are important for their local constituency over EU topics. Conversely, in party-centred systems, candidates align with their national parties due to party leadership's controls of legislators' re-selection. Thus, they have fewer incentives for personalised, locally oriented campaigns, and may more readily reflect their party's position on EU topics.

H4. MEPs from party-centred systems give more attention to EU issues in the EP election campaign than MEPs from candidate-centred systems

Data and methods

Our analysis is based on an original dataset including Twitter content posted by MEPs from national parties during the 2019 EP campaign, covering the period from 29 April to 26 May 2019. Tweets were extracted from MEP's Twitter during the week following the election and translated into English using Google Translate. The dataset ultimately includes 61,648 tweets published by 379 MEPs from 150 parties in all 28 member states. It includes tweets (32.7%), retweets (53.8%), and replies (13.5%). In line with previous Twitter-based research (Fazekas et al. 2021), individual tweets (covering the three types) are our unit of analysis.

We use MEPs' Twitter handles that appeared in their profiles on the EP website. This strategy may have limitations as MEPs may use other Twitter handles—for instance, a party and/or a private one—either alternatively or in complement to the official EP one. By relying on the officially published handles, we can be certain that the results of our analysis are not biased due to the potential over- or underrepresentation of certain parties and MEPs.

Our data show that MEPs' tweeting activity varies considerably. The most active MEPs on Twitter are Inés Ayala Sender (PSOE, Spain, 2,344 tweets) and Molly Scott Cato (Green Party, UK, 2,273 tweets), whereas the least active are Kay Swinburne (Conservative Party, UK, 2 tweets) and Edouard Martin (Parti socialiste, France, 2 tweets). To ensure that the results are not driven by the most active users, we perform robustness checks removing their tweets. Table A1 in the Appendix lists the most active tweeting MEPs.

Given that tweets are short texts and that our aim is to investigate the conditions under which MEPs give attention to EU issues, we operationalise the dependent variable, attention to EU issues, as a binary variable indicating whether the tweet includes EU content or not. Tweets coded as having EU content contain both general references to the EU and Europe, EU institutions and bodies, and top positions. To facilitate coding, we elaborated a dictionary of keywords that unequivocally refer to those topics (see Table A2 in the Appendix). We assume that giving attention to EU issues is not incompatible with giving attention to member states. Thus, tweets referring to both the EU and the MEP's country or nationality are coded as having EU content. Our coding does not discern between political and non-political content, in contrast to Fazekas et al. (2021). We assume that when MEPs use the Twitter handle published in their official EP profile, they inherently engage in communication of a political nature with their audience. Tweets containing at least one keyword in the dictionary take the value of 1, and 0 otherwise. Coding was performed automatically. To check the validity of automatic coding, a reliability test consisted of manually coding a randomly selected sample of 500 tweets. The percent agreement between the automatic and manual coding was .92 (Krippendorff's alpha = .84). In descriptive terms, 49.4% of the tweets mentioned EU issues. Figure A1 in the Appendix displaying the means by country shows that attention to EU issues is higher in Estonia (.79), Croatia (.70), and Germany (.66), and lower in Slovakia (.18), Hungary (.26), and Austria (.29). Attention to EU issues in France (.56) and the United Kingdom (.53) is slightly higher than the EU average. Table A3 in the Appendix presents the percentage of tweets with EU content in relation to those mentioning MEPs' own country or nationality. As a robustness check, we operationalise attention to EU issues restrictively by assigning the value 1 only when tweets make direct reference to Europe and the EU, and 0 otherwise.

To better describe our dependent variable, and partly building on previous research on the polity-policy dimensions of EU issues and the tone of EP campaigns, we examine whether MEPs from EU-friendly parties, when talking about Europe, focus on specific policy issues (Braun et al. 2016) and whether Eurosceptics employ a harsher tone (Nai et al. 2022). To that end, we first created three dictionaries of keywords related to the most important policy issues for Europeans, namely economy, climate change and environment, and immigration, respectively. The selection of issues was based on Eurobarometer data (EB 91, spring 2019) and previous research on issue salience

(e.g. Abou-Chadi et al. 2020, Braun et al. 2016). The dictionaries can be found in Table A4 in the Appendix. We then checked whether tweets with EU content referred to any of these three major policy issues. Although the results need to be interpreted cautiously, they suggest that, when talking about Europe, MEPs from pro-EU parties pay more attention than Eurosceptics to specific policy issues. Second, a sentiment analysis based on the well-known Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count database dictionary (Boyd et al. 2022) shows that MEPs from Eurosceptic parties employ a more negative tone than pro-EU ones when talking about EU. In both analyses, the differences are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Independent variables are operationalised as follows. For party position on European integration, we use data from the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al. 2020), that provide scores on party position on European integration based on expert judgement, with scores ranging from 1 (strongly opposed to European integration) to 7 (strongly in favour of European integration). We use MEPs' party affiliation at the end of the 2014-2019 legislature. For parties not covered in the 2019 wave, we alternatively use scores from the 2014 CHES (Polk et al. 2017). For parties not coded in either CHES wave due to party splits or subnational versions of national parties, we assign the value of the original or national party, respectively (see Table A5 in the Appendix). Consistent with established research practice, we exclude MEPs from the remaining 23 parties not included in CHES data and those without party affiliation. As prior research highlights that extreme parties on the left and right are drivers of the politicization of EU issues, we perform robustness checks to assess whether attention to EU issues is affected by ideological extremism.

As for the other independent variables, a binary variable indicates whether MEPs stand for re-election (=1) or not (=0). For the electoral list system, our operationalisation is based on Däubler and Hix (2018). Party-centred systems (closed lists) take the value of 1, whereas candidate-centred systems (open lists and single transferable vote) take the value of 0.

Several controls are included. As being in government limits the extent to which parties can obfuscate their position on European integration (Koedam 2021), we control for whether the party was in the national government when the tweet was published (=1) or not (=0). Data were taken from ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2019). Following Spoon (2012) and Braun et al. (2016), we also control for intra-party dissent over European integration. Data were taken from the CHES question on intra-party dissent on European integration, with values ranging from 0 (party completely united) to 10 (party extremely divided). As a curvilinear relationship between intra-party dissent and EU issue salience could be assumed, we also take the squared term (e.g. Braun et al. 2016). The national economic situation is also controlled for by including the relative GDP *per capita* and unemployment rate in 2019, with data taken from Eurostat. We also control for

MEPs' gender (female=1) and age, with data taken from each MEP's profile on the EP website. Because tweets, replies, and retweets may reflect different communication strategies in EP campaigns (Fazekas et al. 2021), we control for the type of tweet. As research on communication strategies on Twitter in EP campaigns may assume that original content (tweets and replies) matters more than an endorsement (retweets) (Fazekas et al. 2021), we perform robustness checks without retweets. Table A6 in the Appendix summarises the descriptive statistics of the dependent, independent, and control variables.

Analysis

Our dataset is hierarchically structured, as tweets are nested in MEPs, who are nested in national parties, which in turn are nested in countries. To avoid violating the assumption of the independence of observations, multi-level regression models with MEP, party, and country levels are performed. As the dependent variable is dichotomous, multi-level mixed effects logistic regression is the most adequate model. The results are reported in Table 1 as odd ratios (Table A7 in the Appendix reports the *p*-values). We estimate four models. Model 1 includes all independent variables, to which Model 2 adds controls. Model 3 includes the independent variables and the interaction and Model 4 adds controls.

The results corroborate H1 on the effect of EU position on attention to EU issues. MEPs from parties with pro-EU positions are significantly more likely to pay attention to EU issues than those from Eurosceptic parties. Based on Model 1, we calculate the predicted probability of attention to EU issues at 95% CIs, keeping continuous variables at their means and categorical variables at their modes. The probability of giving attention to EU issues increases from .41 to .58 at the minimum and maximum values of EU position, respectively (see Figure A2 in the Appendix). Statistically significant differences are observed at the 95% CIs when comparing values ≤ 2 and those ≥ 6 on a 1-7 scale. The results suggest that for parties with a pro-EU stance, highlighting EU issues in an election viewed as being decisive was advantageous, whereas Eurosceptic parties, faced with the uncertainty of Brexit, preferred to downplay EU issues. Complementing the analysis, Figure A3 in the Appendix graphs the relationship between EU position and attention to EU issues, by country. The association is strong and positive for most countries with parties that, on average, have high pro-EU positions (e.g. Germany, Croatia, Belgium, Estonia) and negative for the one with the strongest Euro-critical stance (Hungary).

H2 concerning how standing for re-election affects giving attention to EU issues also finds support. MEPs running for re-election are more likely to emphasize EU issues than those not running. Based on Model 1, the probability of giving attention to EU issues increases from .41 for non-candidates to .58 for candidates at 95% CIs (see Figure A2 in the Appendix). The results

confirm the expectation that MEPs from pro-European parties give more attention to EU issues in the EP election campaign when they stand for re-election (H3). We calculate the predicted probabilities based on Model 3 at 95% CIs. Although no significant difference is found for parties strongly opposed to European integration, differences are significant for parties with scores of 3.5 or more on a 7-point scale (see Figure 1). For parties strongly in favour of European integration, the probability of giving attention to EU issues increases from .45 when MEPs do not stand for re-election to .66 when they do. That is, for MEPs from pro-EU parties, giving attention to EU topics is particularly advantageous when they have vote-seeking motivations. By contrast, individual electoral incentives do not matter for Eurosceptics' attention to EU issues. Note that the non-significance of party EU position in the presence of the interaction term suggests that the relationship between EU position and attention to EU issues is not uniform across different ideological stances. This relationship is contingent on whether MEPs hold critical or pro-EU positions, which possibly indicates that standing for re-election does not allow the effect of EU positioning to manifest in a significant way. This suggests that the moderating role of standing for re-election is more pronounced for Europhile parties.

Table 1. Attention to EU issues in the 2019 EP election (odds ratio)

H4 on the effects of electoral list systems on attention to EU issues is not corroborated. Although the coefficient suggests that MEPs from party-centred systems are more likely to talk about EU issues than those from candidate-centred systems, the difference is not statistically significant (see Figure A2 in the Appendix).

Regarding controls, MEPs' age significantly increases attention to EU issues, although the effect's magnitude is quite low. Last, when MEPs post tweets or retweets, they are more likely to pay attention to EU issues, compared with replies.

Figure 1. Predicted probability of attention to EU issues, 95% CIs

Robustness checks

We perform robustness checks on the sample, the dependent variable, and the model. To check that the results are not driven by the most active MEPs on Twitter, we exclude tweets posted by the two MEPs with the most tweets (N=57,031) as well as without the 10% most active ones (N=55,303). Given the exceptional circumstances of the EP election in the UK due to Brexit, we

perform all models without United Kingdom MEPs (N=49,972). The analysis is also conducted without retweets (N=28,500). Results remain largely unchanged in all cases. We run all models with a restrictive operationalisation of the dependent variable. Partly based on Lehmann's (2022) approach, it takes the value 1 only when tweets make direct reference to Europe or the EU. Another restrictive operationalisation of the dependent variable takes the value 1 when tweets mention EU issues (based on our dictionary) but do not mention MEPs' country or nationality. In both cases, the results remain almost the same. We also check whether MEPs' attention to EU issues is affected by ideological extremism. Using data from the CHES, and following Maier et al. (2019), a binary variable takes the value 1 if the party position on the left–right spectrum is between 0 and 2 or between 8 and 10 on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). As ideological extremism and EU position are strongly correlated, models 1 and 2 are run without EU position. Extremism significantly decreases attention to EU issues in Model 1 ($p < .05$) and Model 2 ($p < .1$). Considering that Eurosceptic parties are placed at both ends of the ideological spectrum, the results are consistent with our main findings. Last, all models are performed including random effects for parties and MEPs and fixed effects for countries. Overall, the results remain unaffected.

Conclusion

Our study explores MEPs' emphasis on EU issues in EP elections. Using their communication on Twitter during the 2019 election campaign, we analyse party positions on European integration and individual electoral incentives. Drawing from research on European issue salience and EP election campaigns, we show that pro-EU mainstream parties emphasized EU issues and that MEPs from those parties pay more attention to EU issues when running for re-election. We test our hypotheses with a novel dataset of MEPs' tweets posted in the four weeks before the day of the election. Results contribute to research on EU issue salience and EP campaigns and more indirectly on political elites' social media campaigning.

Our findings show that MEPs from pro-EU parties were incentivized to emphasize EU issues, whereas Eurosceptic parties did not appear to benefit the most from highlighting them. Our interpretation of the results relies on the different type and intensity of the preferences of pro- and anti-EU parties. Mainstream, pro-European parties' perception that the 2019 election was a fundamental moment motivated MEPs from those parties to make claims about Europe to mobilise voters. By contrast, Eurosceptic parties' motivations to emphasise EU issues were toned down considering that Brexit negotiations, as noted by Hobolt et al. (2022), functioned as a deterrent for other member states. Our findings contribute to debates on the relationship between party orientation towards European integration and EU issue salience. They contrast with Braun

and Grande's (2021) findings that, in the 2019 election, mainstream parties responded to Eurosceptic challengers by de-emphasizing European issues and were forced to open a debate only in countries with high levels of EU politicization. Our findings, based on Twitter communication by MEPs from 150 parties in all member states, demonstrate that pro-EU mainstream parties did not avoid EU issues and had greater motivations than Eurosceptic parties to emphasize EU issues. While our analysis does not perform a country-level analysis of politicization, the results are robust in showing that pro-EU mainstream expected to gain more benefits than Eurosceptics by emphasizing EU issues. The results also show that, when talking about European issues, pro-EU parties were more focused on specific policy issues, as suggested by Braun et al. (2016), while Euro-critical parties employed a harsher tone, as shown by Nai et al. (2022).

Our analysis also reveals that electoral incentives derived from MEPs' re-election aspirations matter for attention to EU issues in EP elections. MEPs competing for votes are more incentivised to talk about EU issues than those not seeking re-election. For candidate MEPs, emphasizing EU issues can serve as a way to enhance their parliamentary activity, call for votes in the European campaign, and increase re-election prospects. Moreover, MEPs pro-EU parties are more inclined to emphasize EU issues when seeking re-election. These results have several implications: pro-EU party MEPs' considerations may vary depending on individual electoral incentives, and emphasizing EU issues is meant to mobilize voters.

Our findings unfold the interplay between party-level and legislator-level factors and its effects on attention to EU issues in EP elections. More generally, they demonstrate that analysing attention to EU issues through the lenses of MEPs has methodological advantages. Focusing on MEPs allows examining EU issue attention in EP elections via party members from all member states who simultaneously serve as representatives in the EP. Moreover, focusing on MEPs does not take individual re-election incentives for granted and helps to unveil how party- and individual-level factors matter for attention to EU issues. Beyond that, by putting the spotlight on MEPs, our contribution complements previous research based on Euromanifestos and party communication.

Our study is not without its limitations. Analysing an EP election considered to be the most politicised ever raises concerns about the extent to which the results are context-driven. Future research would benefit from comparing the 2019 election with other elections and verifying whether our results suggest relatively stable trends. Second, although party members are assumed to share positions on the key dimensions structuring political conflict, it might be that party members who are MEPs are more inclined to emphasise EU issues than those operating in domestic politics. Further studies could explore EU issue attention on social media platforms in

EP elections by both national and EU-level actors. Additionally, our study is about EU issue salience—the most basic dimension of politicization—but disregards polarisation and actors' engagement. Developing expectations about how the interplay between party and individual electoral incentives affect other dimensions of politicization may be a fruitful line of research. Furthermore, bridging the study of these dimensions with research on legislative behaviour and activity throughout the EP legislature also merits in-depth study.

More generally, our study engages with broader debates on the nature of EP elections. Our findings add to recent literature challenging arguments about the second-order election contest and emphasising the idea that Europe matters in EP elections. First, EU issues received attention in roughly half of the tweets posted by MEPs in their communication strategies in the 2019 campaign, reflecting the salience of European issues in the public conversation. Second, MEPs from pro-EU parties considered that talking about the EU was advantageous, whereas those from Eurosceptic parties downplayed the European card. Third, as mainstream parties treated the EU as a natural venue for relevant policies, they potentially contributed to reinforcing EU legitimacy. Finally, MEPs from pro-EU parties perceived that giving visibility to EU issues was especially advantageous when seeking re-election. The findings provide novel evidence suggesting that a European electoral logic was at work in the 2019 EP election and align with the claim that EP elections are about Europe.

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Table 1. Attention to EU issues in the EP19 campaign (odds ratio)

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Independent Variables				
EU position (H1)	1.15***	1.14***	1.13**	1.1
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Candidate (H2)	2.22***	2.41***	1.97*	1.76
	(0.24)	(0.26)	(0.81)	(0.73)
EU position * candidate (H3)			1.02	1.06
			(0.07)	(0.08)
Electoral list system (H4)	1.34*	1.27	1.34	1.26
	(0.24)	(0.22)	(0.24)	(0.22)
Controls				
National government		1.18		1.19
		(0.14)		(0.14)
Intra-party dissent		0.99		0.97
		(0.13)		(0.13)
Intra-party dissent^2		1.01		1.01
		(0.02)		(0.02)
GDP *per capita*		1.01		1.01
		(0.01)		(0.01)
Unemployment rate		0.99		0.99
		(0.02)		(0.02)
Gender (female)		1.05		1.05
		(0.1)		(0.1)
Age		1.01**		1.01**
		(0.01)		(0.01)
Tweet type (ref. = Reply)				
Tweet		2.28***		2.28***
		(0.07)		(0.07)
Retweet		3.06***		3.06***
		(0.09)		(0.09)
Random effects				
Country	0.09	0.07	0.09	0.07
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Party	0.04	0.07	0.04	0.07
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)
MEP	0.59	0.56	0.59	0.55
	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)
Constant	0.27***	0.06***	0.29***	0.07***
	(0.07)	(0.03)	(0.11)	(0.11)
N	61,648	61,648	61,648	61,648

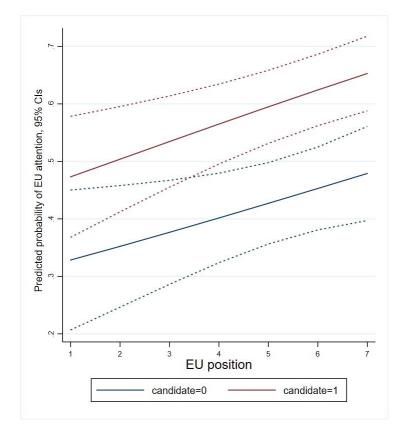***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1; standard errors in parentheses

Figure 1. Figure 1. Predicted probability of attention to EU issues, 95% CIs