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ABSTRACT

Greece, Portugal, and Spain transitioned to democracy in the 1970s and joined the EEC in the 1980s, fostering positive EU attitudes through economic growth. However, the Southern European financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures deeply strained EU support, especially in Greece. This study examines how party conflict and EU politicisation influence public attitudes, finding a negative link between EU polarisation and membership support. In Portugal and Greece, polarisation impacts opinions most when EU issues are salient. The study highlights country-specific patterns and the interplay of crises, political strategies, and public opinion on the EU in the Southern European third-wave democracies.

KEYWORDS


EU attitudes; EU membership; party-system polarisation; salience; party manifestos; Eurobarometer; third-wave democracies; democratisation

Introduction

Greece, Portugal, and Spain transitioned to democracy almost simultaneously in the mid-1970s, during the third wave of democratisation, and joined the European Economic Community (EEC) within a few years of each other (Greece in 1981, Portugal and Spain in 1986). From the beginning, this path from authoritarian to democratic rule was a democratisation process clearly signposted by the EEC (Whitehead 1991, p. 261; Kornetis & Cavallaro 2019), and the success stories of democratic transition and economic development were deeply interwoven with the European project in the public sphere. As Huntington (1991) argues, the establishment of democracy in Greece, Portugal, and Spain was 'seen as necessary to secure the economic benefits of EC membership, while Community membership was in turn seen as a guarantee of the stability of democracy' (pp. 87–88). As a result, citizens in the third-wave democracies shared a fundamentally favourable view of the European Union (EU). However, this 'EUphoria' was challenged during the European debt crisis when all three countries required bailouts¹: in Greece in particular, the severe austerity measures that accompanied the bailout deeply strained the public's

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¹Greece received bailouts in 2010, 2012 and 2015, as did Portugal in 2011. Spain received a bank bailout, not a sovereign bailout, in 2012.

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trust in the EU. The Portuguese party system showed resilience despite the implementation of the austerity measures (Lisi 2019), while in Spain the 'European myth' (Cavallaro 2019) survived the 'electoral epidemic' that shook the country's party system during and after the crisis (Bosco & Verney 2012).

Despite their very similar routes to democracy and, subsequently, EEC/EU membership, public opinion on the EU in these three countries diverged after the crisis. Starting with this puzzle, we aim to understand how EU attitudes in the Southern European third-wave democracies have been shaped by partisan conflict over the EU issue. We argue that party-system polarisation on EU issues is a crucial factor in understanding the ebbs and flows of EU support in Greece, Portugal, and Spain. This article focuses on two key processes that have shaped EU party-system polarisation: first, the democratisation of Greece, Portugal, and Spain and, second, the posterior politicisation of the EU issue as the result of subsequent crises.

We argue that the politicisation of the EU issue, driven by crises and other moments of heightened contestation, has intensified partisan conflict in these Southern European democracies, and that these changes in EU polarisation have influenced public attitudes towards European integration. In this respect, our understanding of politicisation refers to the process by which an issue – in our case, the EU – becomes controversial 'in the shift from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus' (Sanz et al. 2021, pp. 62–63). Following the importance of elites for domestic contestation of the European Union, we focus on party-system polarisation, one of the conceptual dimensions of the common definition of politicisation (Grande & Hutter 2016; De Wilde 2011): namely, the 'degree of ideological differentiation among political parties' (Dalton 2008, p. 900) – in this case, the differentiation of party stances on EU issues.

The contribution of this article to the wider literature of individual-level EU attitudes is twofold: first, we test the association between party-system polarisation on the EU issue and EU attitudes on the individual level; secondly, we analyse this association within the framing of the democratisation process and the impact of the multiple crises of the 21st century in Greece, Portugal, and Spain. The article presents an overview of EU support as well as party-system polarisation on EU issues in the three Southern European third-wave democracies since their integration into the European project, providing insights into similarities and differences between them. We then move on to identifying a gap in the literature on elite polarisation as regards EU positions and formulate hypotheses on the relationship between them. We argue that elite polarisation of EU issues, in interaction with the political contextual conditions specific to each country, played a crucial role in shaping public opinion towards the European project in the three countries. At the same time, EU polarisation patterns are part of the specific democratisation history of each country and often interact with existing party-system cleavages. Moreover, despite their similar democratisation trajectories, EU attitudes in the three countries were

impacted differently by the political and economic crises of the 21st century, which served as a breaking point in Greece, but not in Portugal and Spain.

Democratisation, crises, and attitudes towards the EU

Southern Europe has long had a reputation as ‘the EU’s most pro-European’ region (Hooghe & Marks 2009), partly a consequence of the crucial role which accession to the European Community was believed to have played in helping to stabilise the new democracies of Greece, Portugal, and Spain in the 1970s (Verney 2017). The narrative around democratisation reflects the initially positive predisposition of elites and publics in these three countries towards the EEC in the days after the fall of the dictatorships and the early period of their EU membership. We call this phenomenon ‘EUphoria’. Figure 1 summarises the trend of public support for EU membership from 1981 for Greece, 1985 for Portugal and 1986 for Spain, up to the 2019 elections. EU support can have different dimensions, as Hobolt and De Vries (2016) and De Vries (2018) have argued. We can distinguish between a diffuse dimension of EU support for regime characteristics (the constitutional settlement of the EU as laid down in the various treaties), including support for EU membership in general, as well as a dimension of specific support for EU policies. While specific support is evaluative and policy oriented, diffuse support has a more affective character and can be described as an ‘emotional response to the ideals embodied in the notion of European unity’ (Boomgaarden et al. 2011). This study focuses on the affective dimension of support for EU membership, given that this is the only dimension of support we can consistently measure. In

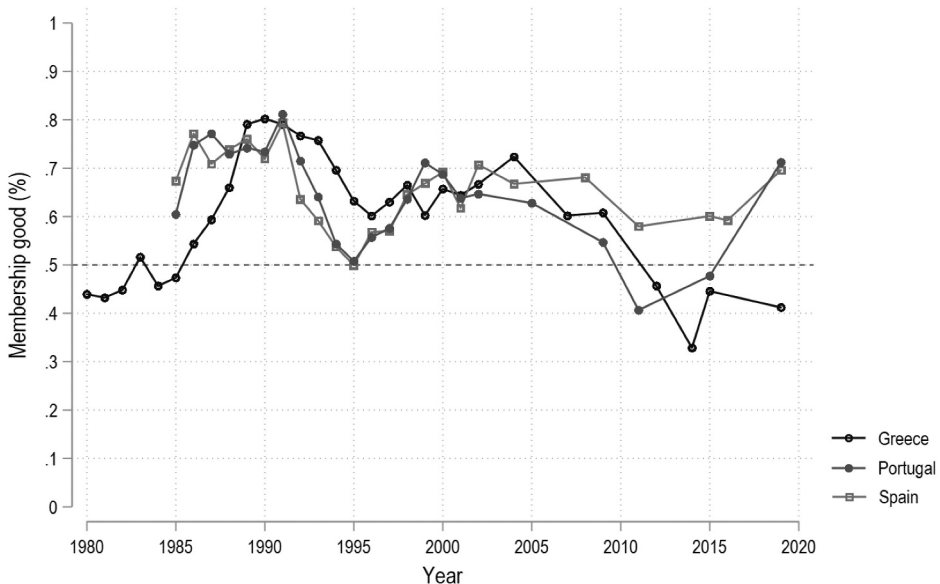


Figure 1. Support for EU membership, 1981–2019. Data: Eurobarometer.

addition, previous research has shown this to be a valid indicator, as, in Greece, Portugal, and Spain, assessment of EU membership strongly correlates with attitudes on EU integration (Verney 2017; Guinaudeau & Schnatterer 2019). Moreover, given the affective component that links polarisation to individual attitudes (Van Elsas & Fiselier 2024), we assume that this dimension of support is most strongly related to party-system polarisation.

We can identify a common pattern across the three countries, with the ebbs and flows of EU support following very similar trends. In the initial period after the democratisation of the three countries, the EU was a symbol of modernisation and democracy that helped them to successfully democratise; instigate stability and economic recovery; and modernise financial, commercial, and manufacturing structures (Royo 2007). The first common milestone these new members experienced was the signing of the Single European Act in 1986. In the early 1990s, as Southern Europe saw increasing funds coming their way to be invested in infrastructure projects, EU membership was widely seen as something good. The political discourse in Greece, Portugal, and Spain was characterised by 'a tendency to link European integration not only with economic prosperity and high levels of transfers from the EU budget, but also with democratic consolidation and good governance' (Verney 2017, p. 167). Moreover, in a region where states tended to be weak and inefficient, high levels of support for the European project have also been seen as a reflection of greater public confidence in European than in national institutions (Sanchez-Cuenca 2000). The most important milestone was passed in 1993 with the launch of the single market and the Maastricht Treaty, making EU integration 'ripe for politicisation' (Vasilopoulou 2023, p. 307) because the treaty represents a turning point whereby the EU became a multi-level polity. Disappearing border checks had more impact on Spain and Portugal than on Greece, but the effect of the EU's regulatory powers was clearly felt in all three countries: we can observe a clear decrease of EU support in all three countries from the mid-1990s, nearing 50 per cent. The 'post-Maastricht' blues across the Union emphasised the dislike of budget austerity connected to the transitional period and the fear that the promised results were not that desirable after all (Eichenberg & Dalton 2007).

The introduction of the Euro in 2002 brought EU support back to considerably higher levels. Two years later the accession of eight Central and Eastern European countries charged public debate (Engbersen et al. 2017) and led to the regulation of migration from the East. These events were much welcomed in Greece and were connected with an increase in EU support, whereas they signalled the beginning of a decline in EU support in Portugal and Spain. When the Great Recession hit, the European Commission and European Central Bank tried to contain the sovereign debt crisis by enhancing their own powers of regulation within the member states (Bauer & Becker 2014), drawing the EU into the arena of public debate and political contestation (Hutter & Kriesi 2019). The crisis had a dramatic negative impact on EU support on all three states from 2009 onwards,

especially in Portugal and Greece, which experienced a Troika-led bailout. This confirms again that, as Verney (2017) has argued, in Southern Europe the crisis has not only generated policy Euroscepticism, it also seems to be undermining regime support for the EU.

The subsequent 'refugee crisis' of 2015 created fertile ground for politicisation, especially in Greece, which struggled to recover economically, and in Spain. Greece, which was one of the most pro-European countries up until the Great Recession (Clements, Nanou & Verney 2014), remains well under the majority line of 50 per cent in 2019, while both Portugal and Spain have mostly rebounded. In Portugal, after the initial shock of the crisis and economic intervention, positive evaluations of the European integration process increased substantially when the economy recovered under Antonio Costa's Socialist Party (PS) government which took over in 2015 – despite the participation of the two Eurosceptic radical left parties, the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and the Left Bloc (BE), who supported the Socialist government from 2015 to 2019 (Fernandes, Magalhães & Santana-Pereira 2018).

In sum, we can conclude that while these third-wave democracies share a similar history of EUphoria linked to their democratisation, each country reacted slightly differently to similar external stimuli. Moreover, the 21st century has presented the three countries with partially diverging challenges and crises: the Great Recession brought a Troika intervention and bailout to Greece and Portugal, and a bank bailout to Spain, and was followed by the 'refugee crisis' that affected Greece and Spain, but not Portugal. These countries also followed different routes to economic recovery, with Portugal and Spain almost fully recovered, and Greece barely recovering at all. These recent crises have influenced public opinion towards European integration, as they have thrown into question the established narrative that connected the success of democratic consolidation with the process of EU integration.

EU polarisation and party positions in Greece, Portugal, and Spain

Traditionally, it was thought that the EU did not play a significant part in shaping national electoral competition and was neither a source of social division nor a polarising issue in most European countries. The role of the EU issue in elections and public discourse has been regulated by political parties that deliberately chose not to politicise the EU. Mainstream parties avoided making European integration a prominent issue in national elections so as not to shift the focus away from traditional left – right political dimensions and potentially harm their election chances (Green-Pedersen 2012), and parties avoided talking about the EU in their campaigns as the topic was considered 'toxic' for parties' electoral strategies (Navarrete & Debus 2023, Schmitt-Beck 2017). As a result, it was often extremist parties, with limited chances of attracting median voters, that sought to politicise European integration with negative connotations (De

Vries 2007, p. 367). Motivated by vote-maximising and office-seeking ends, established and newcomer parties have followed distinct strategies regarding how prominent they have made their support for or opposition to the EU (Hooghe & Marks 2009; Hutter & Kriesi 2019; Nezi 2023).

However, the European debt crisis changed this dynamic. Even mainstream parties that had traditionally avoided making the EU a central issue in their political programmes were forced to respond to the new reality, whereby the EU had become a key factor in party competition (Hobolt & Rodon 2020). In a context of EU-imposed austerity measures, mainstream parties are incentivised to be responsive to citizens' growing discontent, especially in those countries hit hardest by the economic turmoil. Thus, some European party systems, and associated public opinion, became more Eurosceptical (Gross & Schäfer 2020). However, most mainstream parties did not alter their stance on EU integration, nor did they become significantly more Eurocritical² (Rohrschneider & Whitefield 2016). In Greece, Portugal, and Spain, scholars agree that the EU issue has become increasingly prominent in national elections (Lobo 2023b; Marcos Marne 2023; Nezi 2023), indicating that the EU might no longer be a 'sleeping giant' (De Vries 2007; Jurado & Navarrete 2021). Especially in countries severely impacted by the economic crisis, parties with more defined positions on the European dimension – often anti-EU parties – were able to gain electoral support (Giuliani & Massari 2019).

We argue that to better understand developments in citizens' EU support, it is crucial to explore how party-system polarisation on EU issues evolved in these three Southern European third-wave democracies since their integration into the European project in the 1980s. To this end, we focus on conflict on the EU issue and calculate the EU polarisation for Greece, Portugal, and Spain by adapting the formula used by Dalton (2008) to estimate left – right polarisation and examine its evolution since these countries joined the EU. To cover the whole period of EU membership for all the three countries, we use MARPOR/CMP data (Lehmann et al. 2023) to estimate parties' positions on EU integration, calculated as the logged ratio of positive versus negative statements on European integration following the logit scale proposed by Lowe et al. (2011).³ We summarise the polarisation trends of the three countries in Figure A1 in the Appendix.

Figure 2 presents an overview of the position of political parties in Greece on the EU issue, their vote share in each election, and the polarisation among political parties on the EU issue at each election point in the period from 1974 to 2019. Overall, the Greek party system is consistently above the zero line,

²By 'Eurocritical', we mean a political stance that criticises certain policies, decisions, or structures of the EU and advocates for reforms, but without opposing its existence or integration goals outright.

³Despite the possible inaccuracies derived from choosing manifesto data to estimate parties' positions (see Braun 2023), it should be noted that, according to Ecker et al. (2022), expert and party elite surveys did not provide more valid approximations of parties' positions on European integration when compared to political texts.

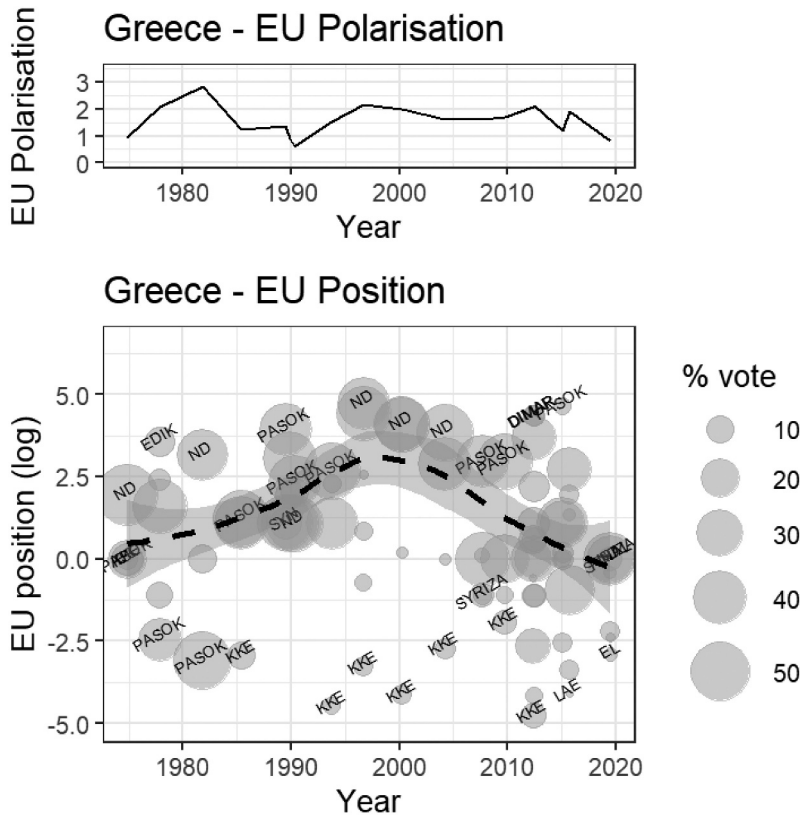


Figure 2. EU polarisation and parties' vote share in Greece. Data: Parties' EU positions are calculated using data from the MARPOR2023a dataset, applying the logged scale method of Lowe et al. (2011). Vote share information is also sourced from the MARPOR2023a dataset. Note: The upper plot shows the evolution of EU polarisation, calculated following Dalton's (2008) method, based on party positions and vote shares. The lower plot displays party positions on the EU, with the dashed line indicating the predicted EU position of the party system. See party names and acronyms in Table A2 in the Appendix.

showing a mildly positive stance over time. This positive picture only changes in the final crisis and post-crisis period after 2015, though there are also fluctuations in the rest of the period. The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) took a clear anti-European stance in the early days after the democratic transition and up until its second term in power in 1984. This position remained at the discursive level and never materialised either as policy or as wider public opinion. PASOK softened its position after becoming a governing party. Polarisation spiked again in the late 1990s – corresponding to slightly more negative EU attitudes at that time (see Figure 1), as the country felt the Maastricht blues – and reached low levels by 2009. This was due to a clear polarisation at the elite level, where New Democracy (ND) represented a clear pro-EU stance, and the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) a clear anti-EU position.

As the country entered the sovereign debt crisis in 2009, EU polarisation reached new heights as political parties started positioning themselves at distinct poles of the EU dimension. Greek politicians were reluctant to accept compliance to fiscal retrenchment as urged by the EU due to their reliance on the selective distribution of state resources for the survival of clientelist linkages that, until then, had ensured electoral survival (Afonso, Zartaloudis & Papadopoulos 2014). The mark of the crisis on the party system was remarkable. Greek politicians made a link between economic issues and EU integration, and traditional pro-European centre-left and centre-right political forces formed a pole that accepted EU support while the extremes of the party system (both left and right) formed the opposing pole that fiercely rejected EU support and intervention (Katsanidou & Otjes 2016). The crisis resulted in the dramatic events of the EU referendum in 2015, whereby the connection between staying in the EU and adopting an economically right-wing agenda presented the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) government with a fateful decision. The 2012 polarisation spike is reflected in the data, while the low of 2015 reflects the prioritisation of staying within the EU and the Eurozone, which forced the government to sacrifice its left-wing agenda and adopt a full-fledged right-wing economic policy. In 2019, EU polarisation in Greece was at the lowest point of the whole period. In this post-crisis phase it was clear that the country preferred to stay within the EU, and electoral strategists made a conscious decision not to include the issue in the campaigning at all.

Figure 3 shows the same information for Portugal, depicting political parties' EU positions and their vote share in each election, as well as the EU polarisation among political parties for each election point in the period from 1975 to 2019. First, levels of EU polarisation have followed a clear upward trend since the constituent elections of 1975, with a first peak in 1980, when EU issues became relevant for the young Portuguese democracy for the first time, and a global peak in 2015 at the first elections after the end of the 2011–2014 intervention following the Great Recession. Since 2019, polarisation has decreased again. Generally, the Portuguese party system shows a pro-European tendency for the entire time period, with Euroscepticism being politicised and used as a concept almost exclusively by the left. Since the Carnation revolution of 1974 and the subsequent democratisation, the European cleavage was squarely contained within a larger regime cleavage and served mainly to distinguish the Communist Party (PCP) – which opposed liberal democracy as well as Portuguese membership in NATO and the EU – from all the other parties (Sanchez & Santana Pereira 2010; Lobo 2023b). In the 1980s, smaller Marxist and Leninist parties (such as the Portuguese Democratic Movement (MDP) and the Popular Democratic Union (UDP)) were in line with PCP in their Euroscepticism. In the 1990s, the Left Bloc (BE) joined the Portuguese parliament with a more moderate Eurosceptical stance (Lobo & Magalhães 2011). The most pro-European stance of the Portuguese party system can be observed

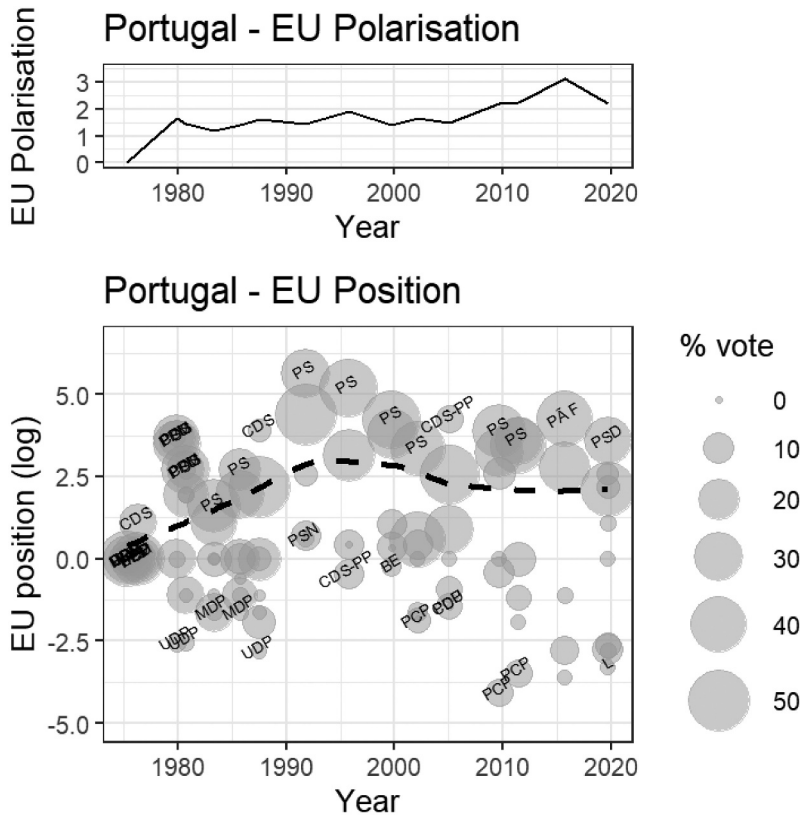


Figure 3. EU polarisation and parties' vote share in Portugal. Data: Parties' EU positions are calculated using data from the MARPOR2023a dataset, applying the logged scale method by Lowe et al. (2011). Vote share information is also sourced from the MARPOR2023a dataset. Note: The upper plot shows the evolution of EU polarisation, calculated following Dalton's (2008) method, based on party positions and vote shares. The lower plot displays party positions on the EU, with the dashed line indicating the predicted EU position of the party system. See party names and acronyms in Table A2 in the Appendix.

from the early 1990s, in line with the high levels of 'EUphoria' among the population that Figure 1 shows.

From the 2000s onwards, the stronger anti-European positions of the radical left, as well as the Great Recession, have increased conflict over European issues in the Portuguese parliament. The Eurozone crisis intensified the opposition between the Eurosceptic radical left and the pro-European stances of moderate and liberal parties, leading to substantial stability in party – voter alignment on European issues (Lisi 2020). However, the Great Recession does not seem to have been a 'game changer' for the Portuguese party system, as Verney (2017) noted. While the bailout clearly intensified previous trends, it did not abruptly alter attitudinal stances or party positions (Jalali 2019). Lisi (2020) has argued that in Portugal, the European divide never constituted an autonomous

dimension of party competition; it always remained subordinated to the main socio-economic cleavage that has shaped the Portuguese party system since democratisation (Lobo 2024). Contrary to Greece and Spain, the Great Recession and the associated increase in negative attitudes towards the EU has not triggered any substantial changes in the Portuguese party system, nor given rise to any new (populist) actors (Jalali 2019).⁴ As our data shows, EU polarisation has significantly decreased since the end of the crisis, which confirms that Portuguese left-wing parties have strategically depoliticised the EU issue in order to prioritise government collaboration and political stability from 2015 onwards. While the European issue is traditionally the main challenge for cooperation between the centre left and the radical left, all involved actors decided to strategically downplay the differences in order to be able to form the so-called 'geringonça': a socialist minority government with tolerance by the radical left, following the first post-crisis election of 2015 (Lisi 2020).

Regarding Spain, Figure 4 shows that, of the three countries studied, its party system is the most pro-European and the least polarised on the EU issue. As seen in the upper plot of Figure 4, EU polarisation remained low throughout the first twenty years of Spanish democracy. These early years were marked by the absence of political parties critical of the EU, with most parties (and the public) viewing the EU as a positive force for Spanish democracy and a means of improving living standards (Royo 2007). After Spain joined the EEC in 1986, the governing parties continued to express highly positive views of the EU in their manifestos. Even during the most challenging years of the debt crisis, the mainstream Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and People's Party (PP) remained firmly supportive of the EU, despite a cooling of enthusiasm among the public (see Figure 1).

The EU was not a politically attractive issue for Spanish parties in terms of electoral strategy, which helps to explain the relatively low polarisation on EU matters even during times of economic crisis. The peak in EU polarisation in 1996 was not driven by strong Euroscepticism, but rather by the enthusiasm towards the EU displayed in the manifesto of the election-winning party. In that year, the PP sought to present a more modern image, distancing itself from its authoritarian past, and highlighting Europe likely formed part of this strategy. However, despite this pro-European stance, the PP's leader at the time, Jose María Aznar, was later described as 'vaguely Eurosceptical' (Powell 2003). The regional party BNG (Galician Nationalist Bloc) was the only party that consistently expressed views critical of the EU, starting in the mid-1990s.

No clear Eurosceptic party emerged given that Eurosceptic attitudes in Spain (as well as in Portugal) are rather conjunctural (Teperoglou & Belchior 2020). Following the economic and political representation crises,⁵ the Spanish party

⁴While the populist radical right party Chega achieved an electoral breakthrough in 2019, Euroscepticism is not a strong component of their political agenda (Lobo, Heyne & Manucci 2024).

⁵In 2012, satisfaction with democracy reached its lowest point since records began: Estudio 2966 – Barómetro de noviembre 2012. Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas.

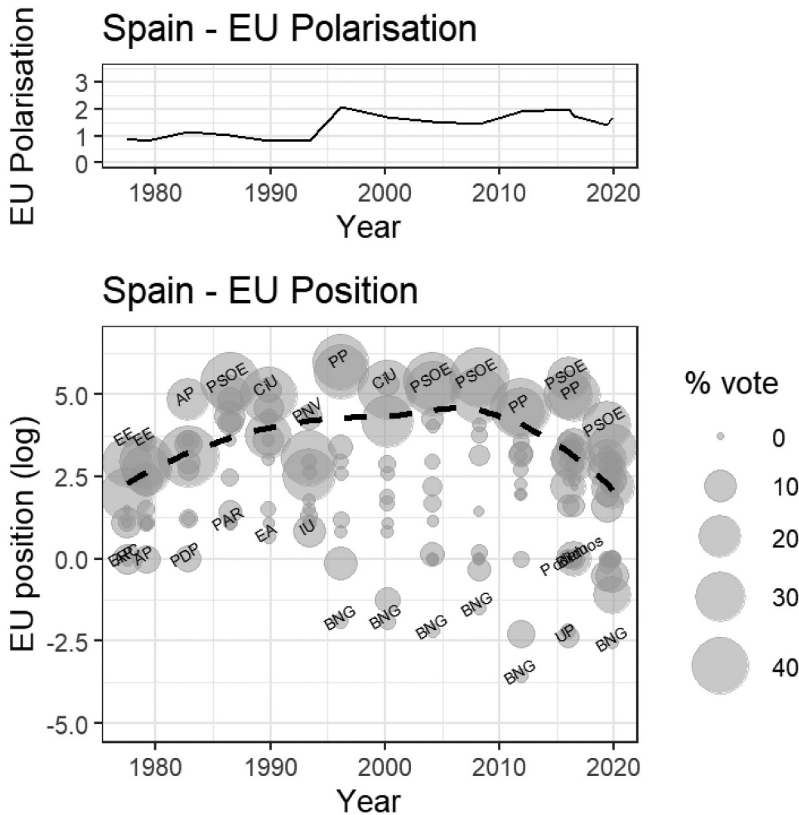


Figure 4. EU polarisation and parties' vote share in Spain. Data: Parties' EU positions are calculated using data from the MARPOR2023a dataset, applying the logged scale method by Lowe et al. (2011). Vote share information is also sourced from the MARPOR2023a dataset. Note: The upper plot shows the evolution of EU polarisation, calculated following Dalton's (2008) method, based on party positions and vote shares. The lower plot displays party positions on the EU, with the dashed line indicating the predicted EU position of the party system. See party names and acronyms in Table A2 in the Appendix.

system underwent a radical change as a reaction to bipartisan politics (Rama, Cordero & Zagórski 2021). In this context, EU membership was less contested than the memory of the transition to democracy and the consensus surrounding the 1978 constitution. By the time of the most recent elections studied (November 2019), only a few parties had taken a more anti-EU position in their manifestos. These included the BNG, as well as two national-level parties: the radical-right VOX and the leftist Podemos (We Can). Although neither held a clear opposition to the EU, both expressed criticism of specific policies. Podemos criticised the austerity measures and economic policies enacted during the financial crisis and advocated for a more ambitious environmental policy. VOX suggested suspending the Schengen Treaty,⁶ demanded more

⁶This was explicitly mentioned in its electoral programme for the November 2019 elections. See <https://www.newtral.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Programa-electoral-VOX.pdf> (accessed 13.01.2025).

national sovereignty, and criticised various aspects of the Common Agricultural Policy. Both parties became significant players in Spanish politics, each eventually forming coalitions with the mainstream party on their ideological side. While developments after the November 2019 elections are beyond the scope of this study, we acknowledge that the mainstreaming of parties with more critical views of the EU may have consequences for public support of the EU.

The impact of polarisation on EU attitudes

Party politicisation of the EU issue, driven by crises and other moments of heightened contestation, has intensified partisan conflict in these three Southern European third-wave democracies. This article argues that such changes in EU polarisation have an impact on public attitudes towards European integration. The literature on EU attitudes has produced a series of theories that explain the factors that shape and influence individual attitudes towards membership of the EU. Apart from the well-studied individual-level factors that form individual EU support (see, for example, Hobolt & De Vries 2016; Abts, Heerwegh & Swyngedouw 2009; De Vreese & Boomgaarden 2005), there are systemic factors that shape individual EU positions. Amongst those factors, politicisation of the EU by political elites and the media plays a significant role in individual attitudes. On the one hand, in the context of increasing EU politicisation, party systems should reflect the increasing diversity of citizens' EU attitudes by offering more varied party choices (Goldberg, van Elsas & de Vreese 2020). However, since European integration traditionally has been more of an elite issue, we argue that this causality could be also reversed, such that voters base their EU positions on cues from their preferred party (Pannico 2017). EU integration is often seen as a complex and abstract issue wherein political elites play a key role in teaching the public what to think (Janssen 1991). De Vries and Steenbergen (2013) conceptualise public opinion formation on issues relating to the EU as a cueing process whereby citizens rely on cues from the media and the political elites to form their opinion. Stoeckel (2013) finds that EU politicisation and party polarisation increase ambivalence in public opinion, having a negative effect on EU approval.

Politicisation of the EU is expected to respond to parties' electoral strategies and might affect not only the vote for certain parties but also the salience and the extremity of citizens' attitudes towards the EU (Grande & Hutter 2016). We argue that as the EU issue becomes more prominent, citizens will be more likely to reflect on their stance towards EU integration. This argument is in line with research on ideological polarisation by Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus (2013), who find that polarised environments fundamentally change how citizens make decisions. They argue that polarisation intensifies the impact of party endorsements on opinions and

even decreases the willingness of voters to consider alternative perspectives. Indeed, the literature on ideological polarisation predominantly takes a ‘polarisation as conflict’ approach, expecting that visible disagreement and political debate make citizens wary of politics, and that higher polarisation decreases the quality of fruitful democratic deliberation, thus triggering negative evaluations of the political process (Van Elsas & Fiselier 2024).

When it comes to EU polarisation, such an effect could take place in two distinct manners: on the one hand, citizens who hold Eurocritical opinions might be even less inclined to support European integration in a highly polarised context. Disagreement among political actors regarding the EU may also encourage more Eurosceptical attitudes to form. As Ares, Ceka and Kriesi (2016) show, in domestic arenas where European integration is successfully politicised, increased politicisation undermines both specific and diffuse EU support. Similarly, Beaudonnet and Gomez (2024) find that the diffusion of conflict over European integration in electoral campaigns tends to normalise the views of Eurosceptic parties and provides them with a popularity boost, thus reinforcing Eurosceptic tendencies in the electorate. From this reasoning, we derive the following hypothesis:

H1: Citizens are less likely to support the EU when the party system is highly polarised on EU issues.

Furthermore, EU polarisation is also different to EU salience, as the lack of polarisation does not imply that parties talk less about the EU: it might indicate that all political parties share similar views on the EU regardless of how much prominence they give to these within their programmatic stances. It is for this reason that several scholars have used issue salience in electoral manifestos as a way to measure the politicisation of EU issues (among others, Braun, Hutter & Kerschler 2016; Sanz et al. 2021). The reasoning behind considering the prominence parties give to the EU issue and not only their position is that politicisation implies visibility, and polarisation will be more relevant the more salient parties’ positions are.

In the case of the three countries under study here, [Figures 1–3](#) show that in Greece, Portugal, and Spain larger parties tend to present a more positive view of the EU and, consequently, spikes on polarisation are often the result of mainstream parties deciding to make the EU more salient in their electoral strategy, and not necessarily because there is a major conflict between parties. Moreover, as Jiménez and de Haro (2011) point out, national contexts may play a more relevant role than ideology in parties’ discourses and preferences regarding the EU. This means that ‘popular Euroscepticism is to be expected if and when parties decide to mobilise it’ (Jiménez & de Haro 2011).

Accordingly, we can expect that the effect of polarisation may depend on the degree of importance that parties attribute to the issue: changes in citizens' attitudes are more likely if parties consider EU issues as important and give them higher salience. Thus, we hypothesise that:

H2: The effect of EU party-system polarisation on EU support is moderated by the salience that parties give to EU issues in the respective elections.

Finally, political parties certainly have a degree of control over the salience they attribute to EU issues as part of their electoral strategy. Some topics, however, may not be prominent in party manifestos but are already politicised and can still influence individual attitudes. As EU integration deepens and public consciousness of the EU grows, including awareness of its shaping power regarding domestic economic conditions, we expect that the relationship between political polarisation and EU support will intensify over time. Initially, despite any political polarisation of the issue, the EU was a symbol of democratisation and the promise of economic prosperity. The implementation of the Maastricht Treaty and the launching of the Single Market made clear that said economic prosperity would not come without sometimes painful structural changes, which also met with political resistance. But it was the European sovereign debt crisis that constituted a transformative moment for EU integration, bringing the EU centre stage in public debate and political contestation (Hutter & Kriesi 2019). Bailouts came with strict austerity agreements coupled with clauses on privatisation and reforms. With the involvement of the Commission in national economic policies, it became impossible to opt for alternative economic policies without contesting membership of the Eurozone (Otjes & Katsanidou 2017).

Indeed, the sharpest decline in EU attitudes occurred during the time of the Eurozone crisis, and not at the time of the financial crises that preceded it, which suggests that it might not be simple economic evaluation at play, but something more related to the nature of that specific crisis (Braun & Tausendpfund 2014, p. 242). The results of this intensification of EU integration made it impossible to conceive of expansionary EU budgetary policies without contesting the notion of Eurozone membership (Katsanidou & Otjes 2016). This came with the political cost of creating polarisation on the EU issue, refashioning the Eurosceptic elites in the form of far-right and radical-left parties (Hooghe & Marks 2018). Moreover, as a result of economic crises increasing the visibility and salience of the EU's influence on economic policies, citizens increasingly hold the EU responsible for economic performance, creating discontent with the EU when economic outputs are lacking (Ares, Ceka & Kriesi 2016).

In sum, the intensification of EU integration over time, as well as crucial moments of contestation such as the European debt crisis, have given political parties incentives to politicise the EU issue and to take up positions that are

more visible in the media (Lobo 2023a). Bressanelli, Koop and Reh (2020) have argued that ‘the choices actors make “under stress” at the EU-level – ranging from “restrained depoliticisation” to “assertive politicisation” – are conditional on the contextual pressures they face. Thus, polarisation around the role of the EU in these three countries is an example of how contextual factors, such as broader political conflict on EU issues, can impact citizens’ assessments of the EU. We argue that, beyond party strategies, contextual factors are crucial in shaping EU contestation and have a strong influence on the way party-system polarisation affects citizens’ assessments of the EU. As a result, the relevance of party-system polarisation on EU issues in shaping public attitudes may change over time, depending on the political context of each election. Thus:

H3: The effect of EU party-system polarisation on EU support is moderated by the contextual factors in the respective election and may vary over time.

Data and analysis

In order to analyse the effects of individual- and country-level factors on citizens’ support for the EU in Portugal, Spain, and Greece, we use individual-level data from the Eurobarometer (EB). The Eurobarometer offers data on EU attitudes for all three countries since they joined the EU (1981 for Greece, 1986 for Portugal and Spain). We combine the Mannheim trend file (Schmitt et al. 2008) covering the years from 1981 to 2004, with a new harmonised data set for the years from 2004 to 2019 (Russo & Bräutigam 2023). Given that we are interested in election-effects, we match each election that took place in the three countries since joining the EU with the closest EB round (see Table A1 in the Appendix for an overview of all elections). In addition, we use country-level data from the Comparative Manifesto’s project (MARPOR/CMP) to calculate the measure of EU polarisation for each election year and the weighted salience of the EU in parties’ manifestos.⁷ To control for the effect of economic development across countries and over time, we add Eurostat data on economic indicators (GDP growth and unemployment).

Our main dependent variable is support for EU membership from the Eurobarometer (‘Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY’S) membership of the European Union (European Community) is ...?’), which has three answer options (‘A good thing’ ‘A bad thing’ ‘Neither good nor bad’). We recoded these as a binary variable, where 1 means ‘A good thing’ and 0

⁷In robustness checks, we replicate our analysis using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Jolly et al. 2022). However, we chose to primarily use MARPOR/CMP data because it covers a broader time frame, beginning with the first democratic elections. In contrast, CHES data is only available for elections after 1996 in Greece and Spain, and after 1999 in Portugal. A significant change in trends observed in all three countries after the mid-1990s might not have been captured if we had relied solely on CHES data.

means ‘A bad thing’ as well as ‘Neither good nor bad’, to capture strong EU support. As a robustness test, we use a second variable that is available throughout the whole time period, measuring benefit from EU membership (‘Taking everything into account, would you say that (OUR COUNTRY) has on balance benefitted or not from being a member of the EU/EC?’), coded as 1 ‘Benefitted’ and 0 ‘Not benefitted’ (see Tables A4a–A4c in the Appendix). While we would have liked to include other dimensions of EU attitudes that measure a softer version of Euroscepticism, and specific rather than diffuse support for the EU – for example, a policy-related dimension, or the overall image of the EU – there are no other appropriate variables that are available from the 1980s to the 2010s. As individual-level control variables, we use the most important predictors that are available throughout the years in all the EB rounds: gender, age, education, and left – right self-placement. We also include squared terms for age and left – right placement to account for non-linear effects. Unfortunately, other key control variables – such as political knowledge, economic perceptions, and trust in national and European institutions – are not available for the full time frame of our analysis and thus could not be included. On the country level, we use GDP growth and unemployment from Eurostat (both coded as % change from $t-1$ to t) as control variables.

Our main independent variable is EU polarisation, measured with CMP data. To obtain the scores for this variable, we first calculate the pro- or anti-EU position of each party with representation in the national parliament based on the logged ratio of positive versus negative statements, developed by Lowe et al. (2011) and implemented to calculate position on EU integration by Ecker et al. (2022):

$$EU\ position_i = \log \frac{proEU_i + 0.5}{antiEU_i + 0.5}$$

Thus, the position of party i on the EU issue is logged ratio of positive versus negative statements on the EU (Ecker et al. 2022). Here, more positive values indicate a most Europhile stance. Then, we use the formula developed by Dalton (2008) to calculate his left – right polarisation index and adapt it to the EU issue, just as others have done to calculate polarisation on other relevant political issues such as religiosity (see, among others, Navarrete, Cordero & Balaguer 2023). Then, EU polarisation is measured as follows:

$$wmean = \sum_{i=1}^n \left(\frac{V_i}{T} \cdot EU\ position_i \right)$$

Where V_i = Vote share of the party and T = Total share of votes. So that:

$$EU \text{ polarisation} = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n \frac{(EU \text{ position}_i - wmean)^2}{100}} \cdot V_i$$

According to this formula, higher values indicate greater polarisation, meaning more political conflict and disagreement among parties regarding the EU issue. In contrast, lower values suggest that parties are relatively aligned or do not show significant divisions on the EU issue.

Since our measure of EU position is calculated as a logged ratio of positive and negative quasi-sentences, if parties do not mention the EU in their manifestos, meaning they have neither positive nor negative statements, or they have an equal number of both, their EU position score would be 0. This indicates that these parties are essentially neutral on EU integration or they do not address this topic in their manifestos. For this reason, and to test our second hypothesis, we also include the weighted average EU salience in the analysis. This helps account for situations where polarisation might be skewed by some parties not giving any attention to the EU issue, while others do take clear stances. Therefore, we adapted the formula suggested by Lowe et al. (2011) to calculate policy importance and used it to determine EU salience for each party:

$$EUsalience_i = \log \frac{proEU_i + antiEU_i + 1}{N_i}$$

Where:

i = a given party

proEU = number of positive statements (quasi-sentences) on EU integration in the manifesto

antiEU = number of negative statements (quasi-sentences) on EU integration in the manifesto.

N = total number of quasi-sentences of the manifesto.

This formula accounts for manifesto length, but raw scores can be hard to interpret due to negative values. To simplify, we adjusted the scores to make them positive, with 0 indicating the lowest EU salience. We then calculated the weighted average EU salience for each country based on party votes and use Chapel Hill Expert Survey data for robustness checks (see Table A4 in the Appendix).

To test for time-variance effects of political context in different elections, we take an exploratory empirical approach, using election years as an independent variable that we interact with EU polarisation. This approach allows us to determine whether the effect of polarisation on EU support differs in each of the elections that took place over almost three decades of deepening European integration and democratisation, and to understand whether moments of high political contestation around EU issues such as the launch of the single market or the sovereign debt crisis magnify the effect of polarisation. Lastly, we create

a dummy variable that measures the intensity of the Eurozone crisis: all pre-crisis elections before 2011 are coded as 0; the peak-crisis elections of 2011 in Portugal and Spain, and 2012 and 2015 in Greece, are coded as 1; and the post-crisis elections (from 2015 in Spain and Portugal, and from 2019 in Greece) are coded as 2. This variable serves as a control to account for the known direct negative impact of the Great Recession on EU support in Greece, Portugal, and Spain. We also test for the effect of crisis intensity in interaction with EU party-system polarisation.

We apply country-wise logistic models, most of them hierarchical models with individuals on the first level nested in elections on the second level, and random intercepts on the election-level. The models that include election years as an independent variable are logistic regression models with clustered standard errors. We calculate four different models with different election-level variables: in the first, we only include the direct effects of our election-level variables, including party polarisation on and salience of the EU; in the second we include an interaction term between party polarisation on and salience of the EU; in the third we include an interaction term between party polarisation on EU issues and election year, and in the fourth we include an interaction term for party polarisation on EU issues and crisis intensity. All models retain the same control variables on the individual level, including squared terms for age and left – right position, as well as country-level control variables.

Results

Figure 5 shows the direct effects of our individual and country-level predictors on individual support for the EU, as calculated in Model 1. On the individual-level, we see that being female has a negative impact on EU support in all three countries, while education positively affects citizens' views of the EU. Age is positively associated with EU support in Greece and Spain but has no effect in Portugal. EU support tends to be generally higher amongst educated older men. Left – right self-placement has a significant positive effect across all countries, with right-leaning citizens being more supportive of the EU, especially in Greece. Additionally, Figures A2 and A3 in the Appendix show the marginal effects of the squared terms for age and left – right self-placement. We can see that age has a clear, bell-shaped effect in Spain, with both older and younger citizens being more Eurosceptical, while effects in the other two countries are more linear. The same is true for left – right position, which has a curvilinear effect in Spain, but an almost linear effect in Greece and Portugal, where Euroscepticism is located mostly on the ideological left. In Spain, both the extreme left and the extreme right are more negative in their assessment of the EU than more politically central citizens. The fact that VOX and Podemos, which are situated on two different poles of the ideological dimension, hold

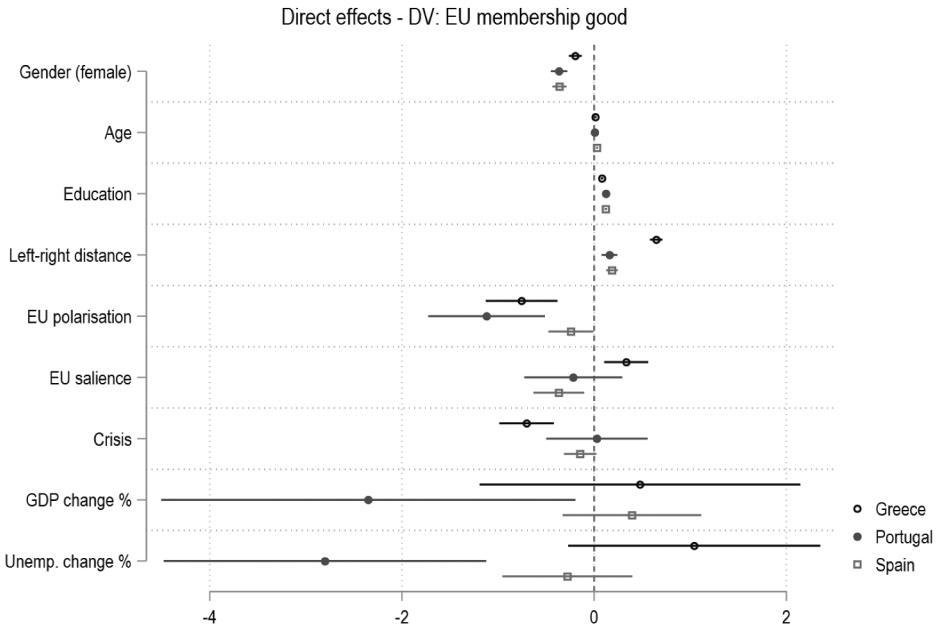


Figure 5. Explaining EU support in Greece, Portugal, and Spain (1981–2019). Coefficients from country-wise hierarchical logistic regression, with 95 per cent CIs. Full results are in Tables A3a–A3c in the Appendix (Model 1).

a more critical view of the EU when compared to more moderate parties might be associated with this distinctive effect of ideology on EU support.

On the election-level, looking at our economic control variables, we observe that GDP change and unemployment change have a significant negative effect only in Portugal. This is interesting as it implies that changes in economic situation do not generally affect EU support to a relevant degree in Greece and Spain, despite the strong link between EU membership, democratisation, and economic growth in the third-wave democracies, and despite the considerable economic impact of the Eurozone crisis on citizens in Southern Europe. We also observe a significant negative effect of the crisis-intensity control variable on EU support in Greece, which is negative; this is not significant in Spain and not relevant in Portugal. EU polarisation is the only election-level variable that has a consistently significant effect on EU support in all three countries: we see a substantial negative effect, hence the higher the EU polarisation of the party system in a given election, the less likely citizens are to support EU membership. This confirms hypothesis H1. Conversely, EU issue salience does not have a consistent effect in all three countries: it is negatively related to EU support in Spain, not significant in Portugal, and has a positive effect in Greece.

To illustrate the election-level effects, we plot the marginal effects both of party-system EU polarisation and salience on EU support. Figure 6 shows marginal predicted means of EU support at different levels of EU polarisation

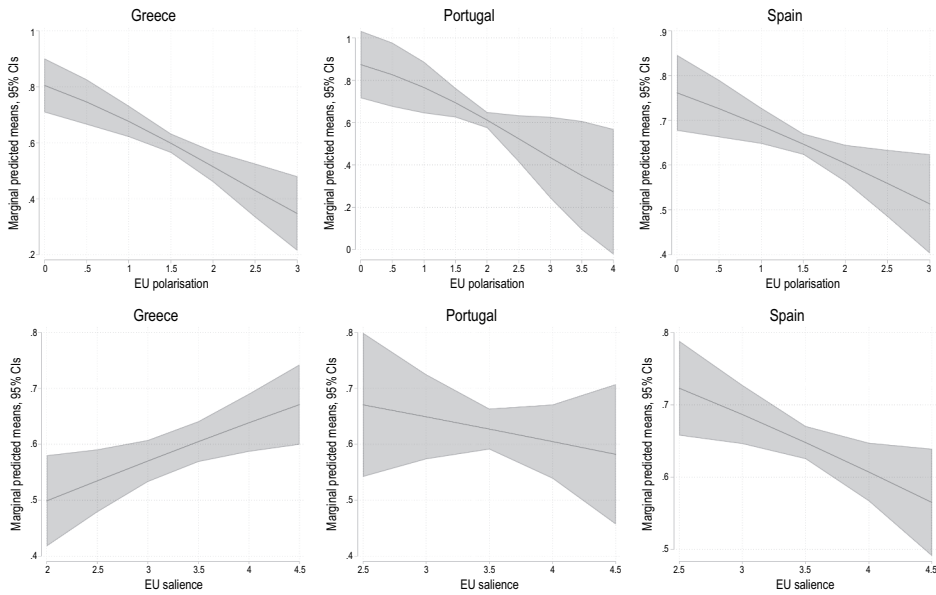


Figure 6. Marginal effects of polarisation and salience on EU support in Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Marginal effects from country-wise hierarchical logistic regression, with 95 per cent CIs. Full results are in Tables A3a–A3c in the Appendix (Model 1).

(0 = no polarisation) and of EU salience (0 = no party mentioned the EU in their manifesto) in the three countries. We can confirm that in all three countries, EU support is strongly affected by party-level polarisation: the more polarised on the EU an election is, the less supportive citizens are of EU membership. Party-system salience on the EU is negatively associated with EU support in Spain and Portugal but has a positive association in Greece. While we are not testing for a causal relationship, a possible interpretation is that when parties in the Iberian Peninsula talk more about the EU, citizens are more likely to see EU membership as something negative, while the opposite occurs in Greece. For Portugal and Spain, these findings support the assumption that high salience of European issues plays mostly into the hands of Eurocritical parties (Rohrschneider & Whitefield 2016), and that public Euroscepticism often lies dormant but can become activated when parties decide to mobilise on EU-related issues (De Vries 2018). However, the political will among citizens in Greece to stay within the EU becomes even more apparent when the elites polarise and the idea of a ‘Grexit’ becomes a possibility. At the same time, it might also be the case that parties are responsive to citizens’ moods and, when public opinion is less enthusiastic about the EU, parties in Portugal and Spain are more willing to address the EU issue in their manifestos, whereas in Greece case they downplay EU salience.

Regarding hypothesis H2, according to which the effects of party-system EU polarisation are moderated by the prominence parties give to the EU in their

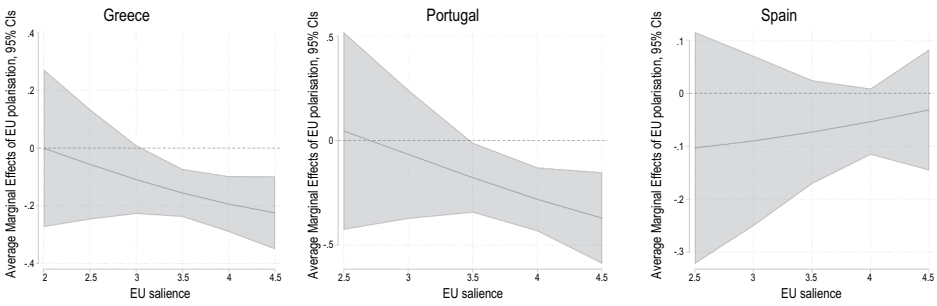


Figure 7. Interaction effects of salience and polarisation on EU support in Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Marginal effects from country-wise hierarchical logistic regression, with 95 per cent CIs. Full results are in Tables A3a–A3c in the Appendix (Model 2).

manifestos. [Figure 7](#) plots the interaction effect between EU salience and polarisation, based on our second model. We observe that in Spain, the negative effect of EU polarisation is not dependent on levels of EU salience. In Greece and Portugal, however, party-system EU polarisation only displays a negative association with EU support when EU salience is also high, supporting hypothesis H2. These findings speak to the classic politicisation theory (Hutter & Grande 2014) which assumes that the relevance of EU issues in the political arena is stronger when they are both salient and polarised. They also lend support to the argument that mainstream parties strategically depoliticise European integration domestically by reducing salience before national elections (Rauh & De Wilde 2018; Schimmelfennig 2020). Our findings indicate that this strategy has the potential to be successful, as party-system polarisation is less strongly related to public opinion when parties keep EU issue salience low.

To better understand how the effect of EU party-system polarisation changes over time and varies according to the political context of each election, [Figure 8](#) plots the interaction effect of EU polarisation and election year based on our third model. Here, we can see that while party-system polarisation on the EU has

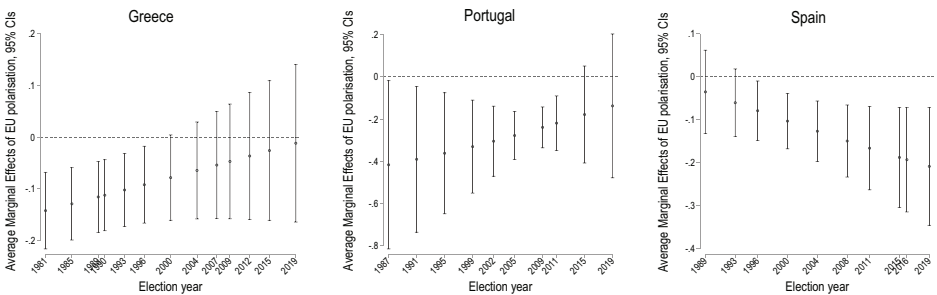


Figure 8. Interaction effects of election year and polarisation on EU support in Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Marginal effects from country-wise logistic regression, with 95 per cent CIs. Standard errors are clustered by election year. Full results are in Tables A3a–A3c in the Appendix (Model 3).

an overall negative relationship with EU support in all three countries, the effects indeed differ throughout the time period. In Greece, EU polarisation had a significant negative effect in the early years of democracy and EU (EEC) membership (1981–1996). From the 2000s onwards, EU polarisation is not significant. In Portugal, we observe a broadly similar pattern: a clear negative effect of polarisation starting in the 1980s, which remains significant for longer than in Greece (throughout the Eurozone crisis), only losing significance after 2015. Spain shows a reversed pattern with EU polarisation having a negative effect in the 1990s and becoming stronger throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Overall, these findings are in line with hypothesis H3: the negative effect of party-system EU polarisation is not just dependent on salience but also varies over time.

These results require further elaboration. Even in countries with similar developmental trajectories, such as the countries studied here, the relationship between polarisation and EU attitudes can diverge, with Greece, Portugal, and Spain each showing specific patterns that change over time. For Greece, we can confirm that as soon as the Eurozone crisis hit, party-system polarisation on the EU no longer correlated with citizens' support for the EU, and EU attitudes turned dramatically more negative. For Portugal, we can confirm Lisi's (2019, 2020) conclusion that while the crisis has strengthened the existing polarisation of the party system on EU issues, with negative consequences for EU support, the subsequent effort by left-wing parties to depoliticise and desalience their differences on European integration was fruitful and has reduced the negative impact of polarisation post-2015. For Spain, the crisis confirmed a trend that started after Maastricht: when parties show more disagreement on the EU issue in their campaign, citizens are less positive in their evaluation of EU membership. Again, we are not testing for causal effects, so this correlation could indicate that politicisation of the EU is the result of either top-down or bottom-up activation.

Finally, we conducted extensive robustness tests. Figure A4 in the Appendix shows the interaction effects of polarisation and crisis intensity on EU support, confirming the previously described patterns across countries. Tables A4a – A4c replicate all models using 'benefit from membership' as the dependent variable (depicted in Figure A5), supporting our previous results, including the negative effect of EU polarisation, despite some missing data. Using a limited range of elections with CHES data to measure polarisation and salience, we replicate models 1 and 3, confirming that the direct effect of EU polarisation is negative in all three countries (although statistically significant only in Greece), while salience shows a negative effect in all three countries. Polarisation also shows a clear pattern of increasingly negative effects in crisis- and post-crisis years in Portugal and Spain (see Figures A6 and A7, as well as Table A5).

Discussion

After five decades, the Greek, Portuguese, and Spanish democracies have successfully consolidated their political regimes. The EEC and, subsequently, the EU contributed to this not only by promoting democratic values but also by fostering the modernisation of these Southern European economies. This has shaped public perception of the 'European myth' (Cavallaro 2019), which inspired Europeanism for many years. In this study, we have analysed EU support in Greece, Portugal, and Spain across 37 national elections since these countries joined the EU in the 1980s, mirroring each country's democratic development. We tested the extent to which citizens' attitudes towards the EU in these countries correlate with party-system EU polarisation and how this effect can be moderated by the salience of EU issues or contextual factors, such as the 2010 sovereign debt crisis, during which EU matters become more prominent in citizens' lives. In doing so, we also provided an overview of party positions and party-system conflict regarding the EU issue, thereby contributing to our understanding of why EU support has proven to be more resilient in Portugal and Spain compared to Greece.

This article introduces a novel approach for measuring the polarisation of party systems regarding the EU and illustrates the relevance of this approach in understanding individual attitudes towards the EU. We find evidence that both individual-level and election-level factors are associated with citizens' attitudes towards the EU, and we observe many similarities – but also some crucial differences – between the three countries' trajectories. First, we find that a highly polarised party system on the EU issue has a consistently negative effect on EU support in all three countries, which confirms hypothesis H1. This lends support to the 'polarisation as conflict' approach that is widespread in the literature on ideological polarisation (Van Elsas & Fiselier 2024). We can add a fundamental new piece of evidence to this literature by proving that, as with left – right polarisation, higher levels of disagreement over EU issues between parties lead citizens to perceive more conflict and, consequently, grow dissatisfied with the European project. Our conclusions on the negative effects of polarisation for EU support align with findings by Heyne, Lobo and Pannico (2023), who show that EU politicisation in parliamentary debates is associated with an increase in EU issue voting, especially for those parties more critical of the EU. We also highlight the wider implications of parties actively politicising the EU issue: polarisation at the elite level has lasting effects at the individual level because citizens express more political discontent when exposed to a polarised party system. In this regard, polarisation over EU issues in the three Southern European countries is similar to broader patterns of ideological polarisation in these countries⁸: as Bosco and Verney (2020) note, even if fertile ground already existed within the national societies, the main entrepreneurs of polarisation in

⁸See South European Society and Politics, Volume 25, Issue 3–4 (2020) on 'The Politics of Polarisation in Southern Europe'.

Southern Europe are political parties, and elite polarisation contributed to the (re) politicisation of new and old lines of division amongst the electorate.

We can also confirm that not just party-system polarisation, but also the salience that parties assign to EU issues matters. EU salience has a negative effect on EU support in Spain and Portugal. That is, parties giving more prominence to the EU in their manifestos is associated with citizens being less supportive of the EU. Interestingly, the effect of EU polarisation is unrelated to EU salience in Spain, while in Greece and Portugal party-system EU polarisation only shows a negative effect on EU support when EU salience is also high. We thus have partial confirmation of hypothesis H2; in two of the three countries, the association between EU support and party-system polarisation on the EU is moderated by the prominence parties give to the EU. In other words, parties in Portugal and Greece have significant control of the politicisation of European questions, and their choices matter: elite and party conflict over the EU has a negative effect on EU support and has reduced the initial 'Euphoria' of the third-wave democracies. On the other hand, parties in Spain might be reacting to traditionally more Europhile public opinion. These findings confirm that, in many ways, as Lisi (2020) has pointed out, Europe is still an 'elite game' that can be downplayed or emphasised according to a specific context, and wherein political parties are key players for linking public opinion to European issues.

Moreover, our results indicate that the relationship between EU polarisation and support varies not only between countries but also over time, reflecting both the historical and the contextual specificities of Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Despite similarities in their paths to democratisation and EU membership, each country exhibits unique patterns of political debate around EU issues, particularly in response to economic and political crises and shifting political dynamics. Both the patterns and the attitudinal consequences of party-system polarisation on EU issues are a part of the specific democratisation history of each country, and of larger political cleavages. The Great Recession served as a breaking point that set Greece apart from both Portugal and Spain, where party systems were better able to control and absorb the salience and polarisation around EU issues, and economic recovery helped bring back a degree of 'Euphoria'. Our research underscores the importance of understanding the interplay between party strategies, polarisation, and public opinion in shaping attitudes towards the EU in Southern Europe.

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Data availability statement

All original data is publicly available.

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