

The Valence Side of the EU: Advocating for National Interests in Europe

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Abstract

In the last decades, many challenger parties have tried to mobilize a conflict on European integration, increasing their entrepreneurial efforts on the EU issues. In fact, the permissive consensus on integration policies has progressively vanished, with citizens expressing polarized attitudes towards the EU. As a consequence, the issue competition on European integration has been mainly conceived as a positional struggle, where voter/party preferences are ordered along a Pro-/Anti-EU general dimension.

However, some parties may be prone to deploy a different strategy, mobilizing valence aspects related to the EU. These strategies revolve around party competence in advocating for national interests at the EU level, which has been considered as a generally desired goal of domestic electorates. Relying on their claimed superior competence to defend national interests within the EU, parties adopt a valence frame on the EU to avoid divisions within their electorates. However, it is still unclear how much and whether the voters have electorally responded to EU valence issues. This paper advances the following research questions:

Have EU valence issues affected electoral preferences?

Have EU valence issues outweighed the EU positional ones in explaining the voting preferences?

Which parties have been more likely to benefit from EU valence issues?

To answer these questions, we use an innovative dataset, the Issue Competition Comparative Project (2017-2018), including information on voters' attitudes on a number of issues. Most importantly, the dataset has tapped public opinion attitudes on both EU positional and valence issues in Italy and France. We employ regression analyses on a stacked data matrix, which allow us to test rival models and assess the impact of EU positional and valence issues on the propensity to vote. Finally, we evaluate which parties (mainstream vs challengers) have capitalized the most on EU valence issues.

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Introduction

The 2017 French presidential elections and 2018 Italian general elections occurred during a critical stage of the post-war European history. A set of different shocks, the Euro crisis, the refugee crisis and the Brexit referendum, acted as powerful catalysts of political change, transforming the European integration into a source of political contestation (Morlino and Raniolo 2017; Pirro et al. 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Börzel and Risse 2018; Taggart and Szcserbiak 2018; Otjes and Katsanidou 2017).

The Eurosceptic vote had a surge in the entire continent, with public attitudes towards the European integration explaining the growing preferences for challenger parties and the vote fleeing from the mainstream ones (Hobolt and De Vries 2016; Hobolt and Tilley 2016; Nielsen and Franklin 2017).

France and Italy made no exception. Since the outbreak of the Euro crisis (2008-2014), all the major governing parties, such as the Union for a Popular Movement/the Republicans (UMP/Rep.), Go Italy (FI), the French Socialist Party (PS) and the Italian Democratic Party (PD), have suffered from intense electoral costs, losing their governing positions. On the contrary, challenger parties, both the new and revitalized ones (for this distinction see: Morlino and Raniolo 2017), had electorally succeeded, leaving behind their political insulation and reshaping the ideological foundations of their respective party systems. By increasing their entrepreneurial efforts (De Vries and Hobolt 2012), they have provided the electorate with a new partisan supply, matching the growing Eurosceptic attitudes of voters (Hernandez and Kriesi 2016). This pattern has favoured the politicization of EU issues, awakening the *sleeping giant* of the European integration (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004).

As a consequence of this process, French and Italian electoral campaigns took place in a context of growing contentiousness of European integration, with Left-Right divide losing its capacity of structuring the party competition and the Pro-/Anti-EU positional conflict increasingly affecting domestic conflict (Raymond 2017; Schön-Quinlivan 2017; Giannetti, Pedrazzani and Pinto 2018). However, this scholarly debate has exclusively dealt with positional aspects related to European integration, while overlooking its potential valence framing. Indeed, growing Eurosceptic attitudes have certainly drew attention on the polarizing and divisive nature of EU integration and several scholars have widely acknowledged the relevance of EU issue voting. (De Sio, Franklin and Weber 2016; Hobolt and De Vries 2016). However, in an European institutional architecture that is still solidly anchored in the intergovernmentalist

mode of decision making, the defence of national interests in the EU has emerged as terrain for party competition, providing parties with the chance to frame the EU issues in a non-divisive outlook. In fact, the desirability of making one's country count more in Europe hardly constitutes a source of disagreement among voters. The current institutional setting of the EU has thus fostered the emergence of EU valence issues in the political debate, revolving around the safeguard of country-based preferences and the party competence in dealing with these.

On this backdrop, this work posits that EU valence politics might emerge as a concurrent explanation of voting behaviour, matching the explanatory power of the EU positional politics. By hypothesizing the impact of EU valence issues on electoral preferences, we also posit two different voting patterns associated with the different party types. On the one hand, we expect that mainstream parties should have exploited valence related aspects more than challenger parties. On the other hand, we hypothesise that challengers might have benefited more from EU positional issues. Our results confirm the relevance of EU valence issues in explaining voting behaviour and largely support our hypothesis according to which mainstream parties have been electorally rewarded on these valence issues more than challenger parties. On the contrary, our hypothesis is only partially confirmed when it comes to positional issues: whereas the general Pro-Anti EU dimension has benefited challengers more than mainstream parties, this appears to be not the case when positions on the Eurozone are considered.

This work is organized as follows: the first section discusses the theoretical background, outlining the three major hypotheses put forward in this study. The second section describes the data, the operationalization of variables, and the methodology. The third section presents the models and discusses the empirical results. The fourth section draws the concluding remarks.

Theory and Hypotheses

Spatial models of voting are based on a geometric representation of policy preferences, with parties/voters aligned along a given policy continuum (e.g., more vs less integration) and the proximity between parties and voters being responsible for the electoral choices of voters (Downs, 1957; Davis et al., 1970; Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Pardos-Prado, 2011). These approaches imply that issues should be framed prevalently as positional issues, with different policy objectives in opposition. This kind of issues has been widely acknowledged as key in explaining electoral choices of voters, and the pro-anti EU dimension is not an exception. In this perspective, several studies have demonstrated that the EU integration process has become a

contested issue and a source of political conflict in national arenas throughout Europe (Evans, 1998, 2002; Gabel, 2000; Tillman, 2004; De Vries, 2007, 2009). This process of increasing contentiousness of the EU integration in national contexts and its effect on voter choices is what we refer to when we talk about EU issue voting.

However, voting behaviour approaches have recurrently addressed the impact of non-positional issues on party choices. According to Stokes (1963), many issues cannot be framed in positional terms. Parties do not differentiate their positions on the so-called *valence issues*, those on which voters agree, unfitting the dimensional scheme. By challenging the Downsian positional model, Stokes developed a path-breaking theory of non-spatial competition, revolving around consensual issues, which represented shared goals for the overall electorate. Therefore, the valence-based politics do not depend on whether achieving one of two rival policy objectives, but on who is more competent in achieving a *shared* goal. When those issues are at stake, parties – rather than taking positions – rely on their credibility to achieve such shared goals (Stokes 1963), thus framing the voting choice in terms of *problem solving* rather than in terms of *conflict mobilization* (De Sio and Lachat 2019). An analogous conceptualization has been put forward by the *issue ownership* literature, where parties leverage their *ownership* of the issue, i.e. their long-standing superior reputation of competence in “handling” the issue, compared to their opponents (Petrocik 1996, 826; Van der Brug 2004; Van der Eijk and Franklin 2009). An attempt for generalization has been proposed within the *issue yield* framework (De Sio and Weber 2014), where the more general notion of party *credibility* in achieving a goal can be applied both to a single shared, *valence* goal or – separately – to each of the two rival goals that define a positional issue (D’Alimonte, De Sio and Franklin 2019).

However, regardless of the different conceptualizations and terminology, it is clear that such party reputations on issues and the associated goals constitute the strategic cornerstone of non-spatial competition, with parties conditioning the voting behaviour by strengthening their positive image or undermining their opponent reputation on valence issues (Bélanger 2003; Bélanger and Meguid 2008).

The scholarly literature has ascertained the non-spatial competition impact on voting choices and there is evidence showing that it often outweighs spatial-based explanations (Clarke *et al.* 2009; Sanders *et al.* 2011). More generally, several scholars have acknowledged the valence effect on issue competition in Western Europe, showing that: 1) parties try to emphasize those

issues on which they feel to hold a good reputation; 2) voters' preferences are conditioned by evaluations on party capacity in tackling consensual policy objectives (Hibbs 1977; Budge and Farlie 1983; Van der Brug 2004; Green-Pedersen 2007; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Bellucci 2012).

EU issues have always been conceived in positional terms, with parties/voters locating themselves along an ideological dimension, arraying from supranational integration (pro-EU) to national sovereignty (anti-EU) (Marks and Steenbergen 2004; Ray 2007). The scholarly debate has mainly revolved around the pro-/anti-EU impact on the existing space dimensionality of the political contestation, assessing its orthogonality vis-à-vis the Left-Right divide (Hix and Lord 1997, 2009; Hix 1999; Marks and Steenburgen 2004; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009; Bakker *et al.* 2012). These efforts have often challenged the Downsian one-dimensional representation of politics, dominated by a single left-right policy space on which parties and voters position themselves (Downs 1957).

However, although the European integration has been mainly framed as a positional issue, party leaders do not necessarily rally voters by leveraging a specific position along the pro-/anti-EU dimension. Parties may identify some EU-related valence aspects on which the entire population agree upon, framing these issues in a non-divisive outlook.

In the aftermath of the Maastricht Treaty³ approval (1992), public opinion shifted from a permissive consensus towards a constraining dissent (Hooghe and Marks 2009), injecting a positional impetus on these issues, with the European integration triggering a clear-cut division among the voters. However, this article hypothesises that the European integration has not been entirely synthesized by the Pro-/Anti-EU dimension in the Post-Maastricht era. Parties have escaped from the EU positional competition, leaning towards a consensual framing by emphasizing the matters of national interests bounded within European integration processes. Indeed, the Maastricht treaty had also strengthened the valence aspects linked to the European integration by formalizing the distinction between the supranational method and the intergovernmental one, with the latter rapidly taking the centre stage (Allerkamp 2009; Fabbri 2013; 2015). Intergovernmentalism has mainly revolved around the state-based interest formation, their intergovernmental bargaining in specific institutional channels (the

³ The Treaty on European Union (TEU), later labelled the Maastricht Treaty, was signed on 7 February 1992 by 12 countries.

Councils), which crystallized the inter-state agreements (Moravcsik 1995). This pattern was epitomized by the EU management of the Euro crisis, where the intergovernmental bodies channelled the hard bargaining among the different national interests, leading to the formation of a dominant coalition of creditor states under the aegis of the German government (Fabbrini 2013; Schimmelfenning 2015). Therefore, domestic preferences have shaped decision-making processes in the intergovernmental arenas, probably reinforcing – towards domestic audiences – a non-spatial understanding of the European integration. In brief, this work posits that the politics of intergovernmentalism may condition the EU issue framing, with parties resorting to the national interest principle to justify their choices or to refine their strategies both at the domestic and European level. The intergovernmental method provides political actors with incentives to adopt a consensual narrative, hinging upon the defence of the domestic interests and the party capacity in advocating for these at the EU level, rather than a positional one, based on the issue emphasis and ideological polarization along the Pro-/Anti-EU divide.

Relying on the general and comprehensive framework of the issue yield theory (De Sio and Weber 2014), we are able to analyse both EU positional and valence issues, understanding both these kinds of issues in terms of goals on which political parties compete to be electorally rewarded. By campaigning on EU positional and valence issue goals, parties are committed to collect domestic support, seeking a mandate to act and possibly achieve these policy objective(s) in the inter-governmental arena. This approach allows us to compare EU positional and valence issues, because both are analysed in terms of issue goals on which political parties compete to obtain votes from national constituencies.

However, there is another perspective that makes our argument on the role of a EU valence frame particularly relevant. Traditionally, liberal intergovernmentalism has underlined the exclusive role of the economic groups in influencing the formation of national interests. Instead, other studies have identified the presence of a wider audience (national parliaments, electorates, etc.), which monitor government activities in the EU institutions (Wratil 2018; Rauh 2019). Governments aim at realizing a domestic responsiveness, sustaining the interests of their electorates in the Councils (Schneider 2018) and being electorally rewarded or punished by their constituents for their policy actions (Hagemann *et al.* 2019).

The formation of national interests during the elections is crucial in carrying out a representative function and in providing with a source of internal legitimacy for governments in their external action in the EU. Therefore, this valence side of the EU has important

implications at the democratic level, potentially matching responsibility towards the European institutions and the responsiveness towards the domestic electorates (Mair 2007). Nonetheless, this work analyses the impact of the EU valence frame in the electoral arena and its potential outcomes on the party strategic behaviour, without addressing the decision-making within the Councils. Furthermore, we are not able to unpack the nuanced policy or polity contents linked to the EU valence issues, but we scrutinise a general policy objective, revolving around the defence of the national interest. Delving into the electoral consequences of this EU frame may set up new avenues also for specialist in European integration theory, explaining the party/voter congruence within the intergovernmental channels.

All this given, this article does not hypothesize the demise of the Pro-/Anti-EU positional divide, but it argues that the EU valence politics might currently represent a concurrent predictor of voting behaviour. The core objective is to ascertain the multi-faceted nature of the EU issue voting, which may entail the co-existence of valence and positional issues. Consequently, the following hypothesis arises (H1): *EU valence issues (in terms of representation of domestic interests in EU decision-making) have affected electoral preferences, being a concurrent predictor of voting behaviour.*

Many works have analysed the party strategies associated with the pro-/anti-EU dimension, identifying the following patterns: On the one hand, party positional shifts have been residual tactical devices on this issue competition, with parties showing a prolonged and marked inflexibility along the pro-/anti-EU dimension (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Hooghe and Marks 2018). On the other hand, some overviews have argued that parties chiefly compete by adjusting issue saliency, with mainstream parties deflecting EU issues and challenger parties accentuating these issues within the political debate. Challengers, namely the radical right and radical left parties, have perceived some incentives in emphasizing EU issues, enjoying a major reputation on Eurosceptic stances and, thus, aiming at restructuring the issue dimensions to win more votes (Taggart 1998; Hooghe and Marks 2009; De Vries and Edwards 2009; De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hobolt and De Vries 2015). Mainstream parties, those belonging to entrenched European party families, have instead adopted a dismissal strategy, seeking to maintain the pre-existing configuration of conflicts for securing their electoral dominance (Statham and Trenz 2015; Kriesi 2016; Börzel and Risse 2018), with dynamics that can be also accounted for in terms of internal divisions vs. internal unanimity on the issue (De Sio, Franklin and Weber 2016).

The valence frame on the European integration requires some amendments to the existing system of strategic incentives associated with each party type. Indeed, Mainstream parties have been considered as quite static actors, simply adopting saliency dismissal strategies on EU issues, hiding their internal divisions. On the contrary, they may actively manipulate the ownership on valence aspects linked to the European integration, claiming their major competence in handling national interests. De Sio and Lachat (2019) have defined this strategic characterization as a *problem-solving approach*, with mainstream parties mainly priming their skills in managing shared policy objectives. Therefore, these parties have probably resorted to the national interest principle, asserting their major technical ability in advocating for the country preferences vis-à-vis the other member states.

By stressing their governmental status, mainstream parties characterize themselves as *problem-solving* actors, owning a consolidate background in dealing with the hard bargaining in the intergovernmental bodies. Therefore, the de-politicization does not constitute the only tactical device at the disposal of these parties, which may employ the defence of the national interest as a non-positional narrative. In Italy and France, the Euro crisis consequences have deteriorated public support for European integration (Goodliffe 2015; Morini 2017; Morini 2018), sparking off many strategic dilemmas for mainstream parties. Instead of choosing to deflect EU issues, these parties may have shifted towards a valence framing, associated with effective representation of national interests in EU decision making. This work suggests that these parties have predominantly adopted a non-divisive narrative on the EU issues, which has outperformed the spatial one in affecting their electoral preferences. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2a: Mainstream parties are more likely to (electorally) benefit from EU valence issues, as compared to challenger parties;

As already mentioned, challenger parties have been regarded by scholars as more dynamic issue entrepreneurs on EU issues. Both left and right challengers have gradually identified the electoral potential associated with this conflict mobilization. Indeed, these parties have been mainly located at the extreme poles of the left-right ideological divide, marginalised from governmental offices by mainstream *cartel parties* (Katz and Mair 1995). One of the core characteristics of this cartel has been a long-lasting *pro-European* consensus, with traditional party families substantially colluding on EU issues. According to Hooghe and Marks (2009),

challengers have sensed a political opportunity to reverse their losing positions in party systems by mobilizing the European integration issue. Manipulating issue dimensionality often represents a major tactical device for parties to reshape their electoral fortunes, especially when parties are lagging behind on dominant sources of conflict (Riker 1986; De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Rovny 2013; De Sio and Weber 2014). Therefore, *conflict mobilization* strategies have been associated with challenger party status (De Sio and Lachat 2019), with these parties having a major incentives to politicize EU issues compared to mainstream actors (Taggart 1998; De Vries and Edwards 2009; De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hobolt and De Vries 2015; Van Elsas, Hakhverdian and Van der Brug 2016). Challenger parties have employed a divisive frame to characterize themselves, strategically exploiting their ideological Euroscepticism to break the cartel of governing parties. Consequently, this work argues that positional, divisive strategies are of paramount importance for these parties, aiming at mobilising the Pro-/Anti-EU division as a terrain of ideological contestation. This contends the major electoral profitability of the EU spatial frame for challengers, outlining:

H2b: Challenger parties are more likely to (electorally) benefit from EU positional issues as compared to mainstream parties;

Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we rely on survey data collected by the ICCP (Issue Competition Comparative Project),⁴ a project on party competition developed in the context of issue yield theory (De Sio and Weber 2014). CAWI surveys were carried out in 6 West European countries (namely, Austria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK) in the period preceding the last general elections. The dataset contains rich information about individual issue attitudes towards a large number (approx. 30 issues in each country) of selected positional and valence issues. In each country a set of relevant issues have been selected by country experts, on the basis of their relevance throughout the campaign. In ICCP surveys, issue attitudes are captured by referring to issue *goals*, which provide more general and abstract building blocks that can be employed to homogeneously conceptualize both positional and valence issues. While valence issues are represented by a single shared goal (e.g. “protect <country> from terrorism”) where party credibility is then explicitly asked, positional goals first require the respondent to select one of two rival goals, and party credibility is then asked on the selected goal. As a result,

⁴ <http://cise.luiss.it/iccp/> .

homogeneous measurement is achieved for capturing party credibility on any issue goal (either related to positional and valence issues), thus also allowing homogeneous data analysis (D'Alimonte, De Sio and Franklin 2019).

In France and Italy, country experts selected the following set of policy goals associated with European integration: on the one hand, a pair of rival goals capturing positional divisions among voters, namely "*Stay in the EU*" vs. "*Leave the EU*"; and "*Stay in the Euro*" vs. "*Leave the Euro*". On the other hand, a single shared goal taps into the dimension of effective representation of national interests in EU decision making, which captures our idea of a valence framing of EU politics: "*Make <country> count more in the European Union*". Being assumed to enjoy full public support (actually the case in both countries, according to country experts), the latter issue may be qualified as a shared policy goal, which does not trigger a political division along the pro-/anti-EU scale. Therefore, this set of issue goals allow us testing the different impact of the EU valence and positional politics on voting behaviour in Italy and France.

Although a pre-designed, expert-driven selection of issues allows to capture the domestic electoral contexts in detail, this procedure results in certain degree of heterogeneity across countries, with some issues emerging as crucial only in certain contexts; however, attitudes on a large number of issues have been measured in all countries. This is especially true for Italy and France, which share both valence and positional framings concerning the EU, cornerstones for the arguments developed in this study. Also, as seen above, the dataset contains information about party credibility (captured through multiple choice items, thus containing endogeneity) for achieving each of the issue goals included in the analysis.

Our dependent variable is propensity to vote (PTV), operationalized as an eleven-point scale variable to capture voter preferences towards each party competing at the elections. For each party, respondents were asked to report their propensity to vote that party. The variable ranges from 0 (the probability for the respondent to vote the party is not-existent at all) to 10 (highest probability to vote for that party).

We preferred PTV to vote choice for several reasons. Voting choice, operationalized as a dichotomous variable (Lewis-Beck 1990), has shown many weaknesses, being not able to synthesize voters' relationship with those parties they are not voting for nor to control for the variety of the incentives related to electoral rules operating at the national level (Van der Brug, Van der Eijk and Franklin 2007a). PTVs, instead, allow carry out analyses within individuals,

thus accounting for variations of preferences for any given party within each respondent. Therefore, it is possible to establish not only who preferred party A over party B, but also *how much* an individual preferred party A over party B. Furthermore, it allows maximizing information about preferences for smaller parties, which are more difficult to detect relying on a variable recording simple party preference. In fact, PTVs control for party size, multiplying the number of cases associated with each party (Van der Brug, Van der Eijk and Franklin 2007a, Van der Brug, Van der Eijk and Franklin 2007b). Finally, PTVs allow carrying out analyses at a more abstract level, favoring the implementation of a generic model of voting (van der Eijk, De Sio, and Vezzoni 2019).

A generic model does not focus on the identification of specific political parties chosen by individuals and it does not address the identification of those variables that explain support for a given party. It is instead directed to the analysis of “the process that leads these choices” (van der Eijk, De Sio, and Vezzoni 2019). We do not ask which are the factors leading an individual to vote for a specific party, but rather what are the processes that produce the vote calculus of individuals. Focusing on European issues as key elements of the vote calculus, we do not want to establish whether positive or negative attitudes towards further integration affected the decision of voters to vote for a specific party. What we ask is how much EU positional and valence issues influenced the process at the base of this choice, that is the relative weight of European issues in establishing how individuals decided to vote.

Therefore, our unit of analysis is not the individual voter, but the voter-party dyad. For each respondent we do have as many dyads as the number of parties available in the party system. To carry out this analysis, we reshaped our data matrix into a stacked data matrix. This procedure results in a multiplication of observations, with each observation corresponding to the relation between the respondents and each party available in the party system (respondent x number of parties) (Van der Brug, Van der Eijk and Franklin 2007b).

In Italy the procedure has been implemented considering the major parties which ran the campaign before the 2018 general elections (i.e. Go Italy, the Democratic Party, the League, Free and Equals, Brothers of Italy, Five Star Movement and More Europe). In France, the same procedure has been adopted for the candidates to the first round of the 2017 presidential elections (i.e. Workers’ Struggle, the France Unbowed, New Anticapitalist Party, the Socialist Party, the Republic on the Move, the Republicans, France Arise, the Popular Republican Union and the National Front).

As for the independent variables, we adopted a differentiated strategy to model them. For those variables which are connected to specific parties (e.g., the credibility of the party in achieving a certain goal), these variables have been stacked by party. Thus, each row of the data matrix reports a respondent-party dyad containing information not only for what concerns the propensity to vote for party A, but also how party A is assessed by R on different items recording perceived characteristics of the party. For those variables which do not vary within the individual (e.g., social class, gender, education), we use synthetic variables measuring the affinity between respondents holding certain characteristics and each political party. These affinity measures (i.e. \hat{y}) are derived from the predicted values of multiple party-specific bivariate OLS regression models of PTVs based on the respondent characteristic at hand (REF).

To measure the impact of EU positional issues on PTVs, we use an item assessing the desirability of leaving or remaining in the EU. The respondents had to select a specific goal (e.g., either leaving or remaining in the EU) and, for each selected goal, they were asked to indicate whether each of the party available in the party system was deemed credible in achieving the goal.

Thus, initially, each voter-party dyad sees a value of 1 if the party was deemed to be credible in achieving the goal selected by the respondent; whereas a value of 0 was assigned otherwise. It is worth to note that – for any positional issue – the same variable contains credibility information on either of the two rival goals, depending on which one was selected by the respondent. As a result, a generic “party credibility on R’s preferred goal” is recorded, allowing – later – to gauge the generic effect of such party issue credibility on PTV – regardless of the side taken by the respondent.

Secondly, in order to get a more fine-grained measure of respondent-reported party goal credibility, we make this measure *relative* to the goal credibility of all other parties. This is because deeming a party credible is different when all other parties are deemed not credible, or instead when all other parties are also deemed credible. To capture these differences, we calculated – on any given goal – the difference between the credibility assigned to a party and the average credibility assigned to all other parties. This yields a measure ranging from +1 (party credible, all others not credible) to -1 (party not credible, all other parties credible).

A practical example helps illustrating this procedure. Respondent A has selected -as her preferred goal- to leave the EU. Then, she is asked to express the credibility of each party to achieve this goal. For each party, credibility is either 0 (= the party is not credible) or 1(= the

party is credible). In case the respondent assessed all the parties as credible on this goal, then each party dyad will have a value of 1: thus the relative credibility of each party will be equal to 0 (i.e. Credibility of party [=1] – Average Credibility of all other parties [=1]). If the respondent selected only one party as credible on the goal, then we will have a value of 1 only for that party. Therefore, the relative credibility of the party will be equal to 1 (the selected party is the only one to result to be credible on that specific issue).

As for EU valence voting, our key variable measures the perceived credibility of each party to achieve the goal of representing and advocating for national interests in Europe. The strategy we adopt to assess the impact of EU valence voting is the same as above, with one qualification. Differently from positional issues, valence issues are consensual, meaning that there is only one shared goal. Thus, and in line with previous studies on valence voting (Pardos-Prado, 2012), we operationalize EU valence voting by means of party credibility, this time captured on the same goal for all respondents. However, the result is a variable that is fully homogeneous with the previous one calculated for a positional issue, thus whose effects can be directly compared (D'Alimonte, De Sio and Franklin 2019). Furthermore, and coherently with what we have done for positional issues, we convert this variable into a *relative* measure of party credibility, as derived from the difference between each party credibility and the average credibility of all the other parties available in the party system on that issue.

The same procedure has been adopted for a set of other positional issues, which have been included in our analyses to control for the relation between EU positional issues and the propensity to vote a certain party. These variables include an economic and a cultural dimension which have been deemed to be highly salient during the electoral campaign and that are intended to tap the two relevant dimensions structuring political conflict (Kriesi *et al.* 2006; Kriesi *et al.* 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2009; 2018). On the one hand, we included a variable measuring party credibility in increasing versus reducing income differences to measure an economic dimension that is generally subsumed under the traditional economic left-right ideological cleavage. On the other hand, we plugged in our models an issue that more generally fall into a cultural/identitarian cleavage and which relates to immigration (party credibility in limiting/ accepting refugees).

We finally include a set of standard sociodemographics, usually associated with electoral behaviour. As these variables do not vary within individuals, to assess their effects we calculated measures of affinity (\hat{y}) as described above. The variables included as controls

are gender, education, age, church attendance, and self-assessed social class.

Results

To test our hypotheses, we present a series of OLS models with country fixed effects (Table 1). In doing so, we are able to capture variations across countries and estimate the effects of position and valence issues on the propensity to vote for a party, net of contextual factors. In Model 1, we include socio-demographic variables only, excluding EU issues and all the other issues we use as control variables. This model will be our benchmark to assess the other models presented in this study. Although all the socio-demographic variables seem to have had an effect on electoral choices of voters, overall the model has a poor fit, with just 4% of variance explained.

In Model 2, we include the EU positional issue, tapping the general feelings towards the EU membership. The R^2 substantially increases as compared to Model 1, moving from 0.04 to 0.197. The EU positional variable included displays a high level of statistical significance and is a relevant predictor of voters' party preferences. This is not surprising: the EU membership of these two countries has been widely politicized issue in national electoral arenas, with challenger parties holding, at best, critical positions towards the EU.

In Model 3, in addition to the socio-demographic variables, we include our measure for the EU valence dimension only. The variable is statistically significant and, most relevantly, it boosts the explanatory power of our benchmark model (Model 1): the R^2 of the model is equal to 0.203, with 20 percentage points of variance explained -one percentage point more as compared to Model 2, the one including EU positional issues only. The result holds true also in Model 4, where EU positional and valence issues are plugged in together. The results of our analysis broadly confirm the significant impact of both EU positional and valence issues on the vote calculus of voters. Most importantly, comparing the effects of the EU valence issue with the coefficients of the EU positional issue, party credibility in advocating for national interests in Europe slightly outweighs party credibility on the pro-anti EU dimension included in our models. Indeed, the coefficient of the EU valence issue is equal to 2.7, whereas the coefficients for the EU positions equals 2.4. Finally, the predictive power of the model further increases as compared to previous models, with the R^2 moving to 0.255, with 6 and 5 percentage points of additional variance explained as compared respectively to Model 3 and 2.

This pattern is confirmed also in Model 5 and in Model 6. In Model 5 we include as a control variable party identification. Not surprisingly, identification with a party exerts a strong impact on voting preferences, further increasing the explanatory power of the model ($R^2=0.322$). However, the effect of party identification does not wipe out the effects of both positional and valence issues, with the latter still outweighing the explanatory power of the EU positional issue. The same holds true in Model 6, where in addition to party identification we include two controls for economic and cultural issues, which by now are recognized as powerful sources of party competition ("*increase vs reduce economic inequalities*" and "*keep accepting refugees at the actual level vs limit the number of refugees*"). Even in this case, the significance of the EU valence issue is largely confirmed and, once again, the effect of the valence is shown to be stronger as compared to the one found for positional issues.

This means that a EU valence frame has been *more* important as compared to a positional frame in driving voting preferences in France and Italy. Therefore, we corroborate *H1*, with *EU valence issues affecting electoral preferences and being a significant concurrent predictor of voting behaviour*.

Which parties are more likely to benefit from a EU position and/or valence frame? Are there any differential strategic incentives for different parties? According to our hypotheses, mainstream parties should be likely to benefit more from a valence frame as compared to challenger parties. Quite the contrary, challenger parties have been hypothesised to be more likely to be electorally rewarded when competing on positional issues. To test these hypotheses, we included in our models three interaction terms (Model 7), aiming at exploring which parties might have the strongest incentive to compete on either positional or a valence issue (see Figures 1).

We do not find any significant effect for the interaction between the pro-anti EU dimension and party type. Looking at the coefficient for the interaction term between mainstream-challenger parties and the credibility of parties on the more general pro-anti EU dimension, there is no significant difference as for which type of party is more likely to capitalize on this issue. This raises an intriguing question about the reasons lying behind this pattern. To a certain extent, this result might suggest that, contrary to our expectations, challenger parties (the ones which are generally identified as conflict mobilizer actors) might have pushed mainstream parties to compete on the pro-anti EU dimension, progressively losing their electoral advantages on this conflict. In other words, as long as mainstream parties have downplayed EU positional issues,

the pro-anti EU dimension has been a source of political conflict on which challenger parties have been rewarded. To the extent mainstream parties have been dragged to collide on this issue, the competitive advantage of challenger parties on this issue might have been neutralized by a Pro-European coalition of parties/voters.

However, looking at the interaction term between mainstream-challenger parties and the EU valence issue, we do find a statistically significant negative coefficient (Figure 1). The result broadly confirms our hypotheses as for the strategic incentives deriving from a valence frame of the EU. Indeed, mainstream parties are accounted as more credible to advocate for national interest in Europe and are more likely to be rewarded on this dimension by the electorate when compared with challenger parties. This might be good news for the EU. If challenger parties, which are usually characterized by a Eurosceptic profile, have lost their competitive advantage on the divisive nature of the EU, mainstream (generally Europhile) parties can still mobilize voters on their credibility to advocate and defend national interests in the European intergovernmental arena.

To synthesise our findings, we find that the EU positional frame is not the only one able to affect voting preferences. Although the EU has been generally seen as a positional source of conflict, with parties and voters aligning along a pro-anti EU dimension, we find that the EU valence frame is at least as much relevant as the positional one. Both in France and Italy, the credibility of political parties in representing national interests at the EU level has had a clear and strong effect on voting preferences, thus revealing the political weight of the valence side of Europe.

The distinction between a valence and positional frame when it comes to the EU allow us to delve into the different strategic incentives associated with different part types. On the one hand, we confirmed our hypothesis according to which mainstream parties do hold a significant competitive advantage on a valence dimension of the EU, stressing their *problem-solving capacity*. On the other, we have shown that on a general pro-anti EU dimension, challenger parties do not have a clear incentive to mobilize this conflict, as there is not any difference between challenger and mainstream parties in being rewarded on this issue.

Therefore, our two hypotheses, H2a and H2b, results to be partially confirmed:

On the one hand, Mainstream parties (electorally) benefit from the EU valence issues.

On the other hand, Challenger parties, contrarily to our expectations, do not display any significant electoral advantage from the general EU positional issue as compared to mainstream parties.

Conclusions

Although much ink has been spilled on the role of the EU as a positional issue in affecting voting behaviour at the national level, less is known about the effects of EU valence issues on the electoral fortunes of different political parties. In filling this void, this paper has tested a model of EU valence voting, advancing different kind of hypotheses as for the role of both EU positional and valence issues in party performances. Empirical evidence provides us with new cues on the structure of strategic incentives associated with this party type.

Our models demonstrate the significant effects of the EU valence issues on the voting behaviour, representing an additional explanation in affecting the electoral preferences. Our analysis shows that defence of the national interest outperforms the general EU positional issue. Therefore, parties compete not only on a dimensional space, framing the EU in terms of pro/anti stances, but also by profiling themselves as the more competent candidates to handle the defence of national interest in Europe.

However, parties are not borne all equals and they capitalize on different kind of issues. Mainstream parties have benefitted from the EU valence issues as compared to their Challenger counterparts. By placing these policies at the centre stage, these actors may develop a supplemental strategic device, framing the European integration in valence terms. In fact, their credibility on this subset of EU issues has clearly outweighed that of Challengers in predicting their vote. Challengers have been weaker in capitalizing on the EU valence issue, strategically lagging behind in advocating for the domestic interest.

Meantime, Challengers have not established an electoral primacy on the EU positional as compared to the Mainstream parties, with no significant variations occurring between the two party types. Therefore, valence issues are not the entire story behind Mainstream parties' electoral preferences, with these parties being likely to benefit from the EU positional issues as much as their counterparts. The multiple set of crises has probably reinforced the politicization of a general pro-/anti-EU positional divide, which is not anymore "*limited*", "*intermittent*" or "*punctuated*" (Kriesi 2016; Grande and Kriesi 2016; Hoeglinger 2016). A fully-fledged political conflict may have spurred a strategic response of Mainstream parties, which have mobilized a coalition of pro-European voters. Thus, these parties might act as genuine Europhile political entrepreneurs, increasing their saliency on the EU related issues and consolidating a systemic politicization. On the contrary, by leading towards a more contested and polarized pro-/anti-EU positional divide, Challengers have probably undermined some of their competitive advantages, being victim of their own entrepreneurial success.

There is growing evidence of Mainstream positional shifts on the EU issues, with these parties may employ a Euro-Reformist approach (Vittori and Tarditi 2019) or slightly colluding on Eurosceptic stances (Meijers 2017; Braun, Schmitt and Popa 2019). Though the literature has considered this tactic as residual (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Hooghe and Marks 2018), these positional shifts may bring some electoral payoffs for Mainstream parties, perhaps propelling divisions among the Challengers. Indeed, Challengers have suffered from internal struggles and positional ambiguities on the some EU policy, such as the single currency, which have somehow divided these parties (Evans and Ivaldi 2018). This result suggests that unpacking this general dimension emerges as an unescapable empirical step for future research, as it will allow us to identify the difference nuances underlying the EU positional issue voting.

It is worth to note that Mainstream parties have at their disposal a set of tactical repertoire both on the valence and on positional issues. On the one hand, there are not constrained to downplay the EU positional issues, relying on a solid constituency of voters. On the other hand, they can benefit from a greater credibility on the EU valence issues, characterizing themselves as problem solving actors on this shared policy objective. Conversely, Challengers have been weaker in developing this kind of reputation, reaping less electoral benefits as compared as their counterparts on the EU valence issues. Moreover, their conflict mobilization strategy may have backfired over time, with Europhile voters/parties responding on the pro-/-anti-EU positional divide.

In brief, the awakening of the sleeping giant fully involves the valence side of the European integration, revolving around the defence of the national interest in the intergovernmental arena. This pattern of voting may reinforce a dynamic of responsiveness at the domestic level, with the governing parties receiving a mandate for acting within the EU level. By collecting the voter preferences on the national interests, parties may successfully connect their national constituency within the intergovernmental bodies. In doing so, the party may carry out a deep-seated representative function, being under the public scrutiny for their action in the EU level. We are not investigating the efficacy of national parties/governments as stakeholders vis-à-vis other national actors in the Councils. Nonetheless, by shedding light on the weight of the valence side of Europe, we posit that a different form of party-voter congruency occurs within the EU, hinging upon the defence of national interest. Our findings not only suggests the importance of a EU-related policy objectives, outweighing the divisive ones, but it also may

reflect the impact of the politics of intergovernmentalism in shaping the electoral competition at the domestic level, magnifying the valence side of the EU.

Table 1: Linear regression with random intercept for countries (standard errors in parentheses). * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

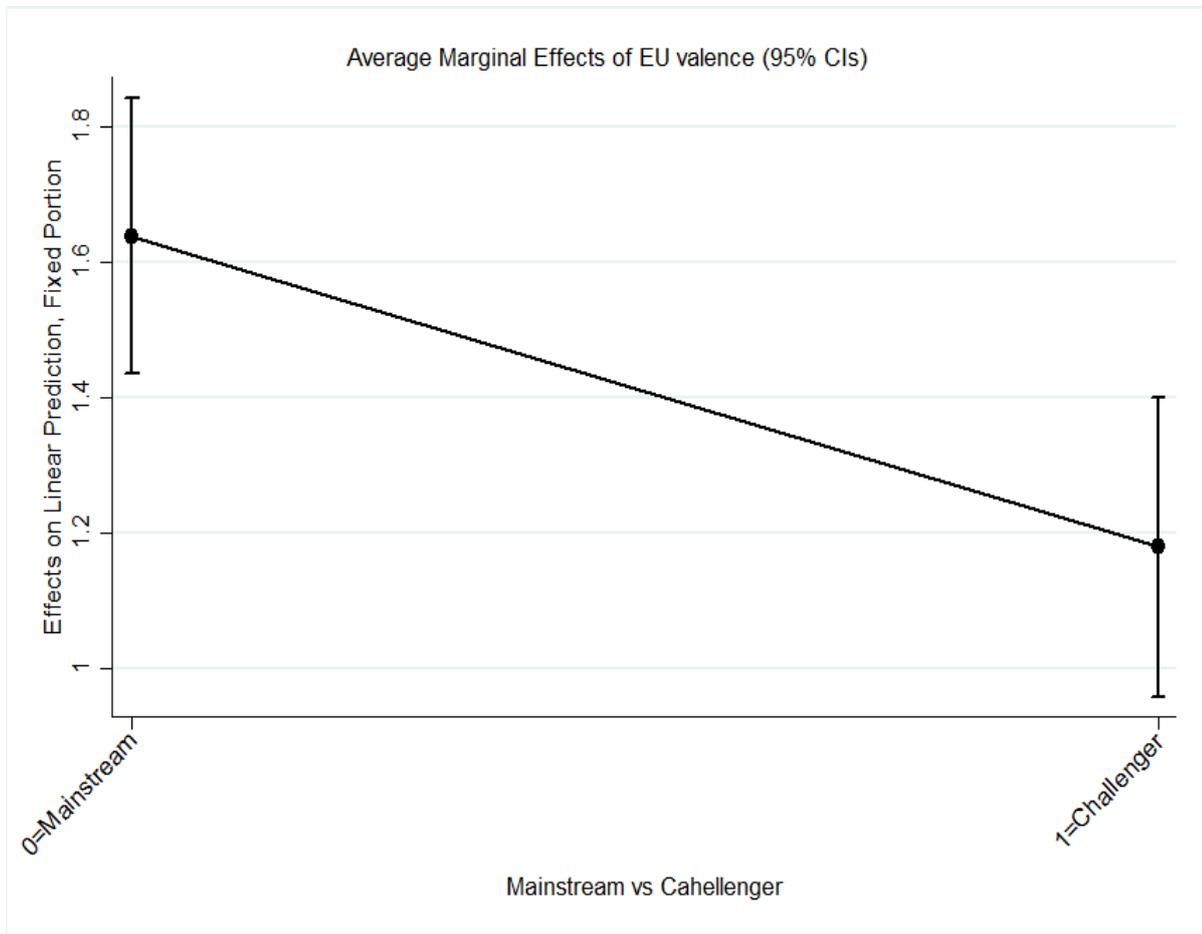
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Woman (y-hat)	1.011*** (0.190)	0.860*** (0.174)	0.766*** (0.173)	0.742*** (0.167)	0.646*** (0.160)	0.586*** (0.157)	0.599*** (0.157)
Church attendance (y-hat)	0.977*** (0.0619)	0.924*** (0.0568)	0.914*** (0.0566)	0.899*** (0.0547)	0.856*** (0.0522)	0.852*** (0.0512)	0.848*** (0.0512)
Education (y-hat)	0.799*** (0.0892)	0.474*** (0.0820)	0.587*** (0.0815)	0.437*** (0.0789)	0.448*** (0.0753)	0.421*** (0.0740)	0.423*** (0.0739)
Age cohort (y-hat)	1.026*** (0.0861)	0.800*** (0.0791)	0.800*** (0.0788)	0.720*** (0.0762)	0.711*** (0.0727)	0.704*** (0.0714)	0.710*** (0.0714)
Self-assessed class (y-hat)	0.761*** (0.0815)	0.459*** (0.0750)	0.573*** (0.0745)	0.431*** (0.0722)	0.374*** (0.0689)	0.395*** (0.0676)	0.388*** (0.0677)
EU Positional		3.592*** (0.0677)		2.387*** (0.0742)	1.788*** (0.0725)	1.321*** (0.0739)	1.331*** (0.100)
EU Valence			3.867*** (0.0712)	2.666*** (0.0783)	1.972*** (0.0769)	1.430*** (0.0789)	1.639*** (0.104)
Party Id					4.234*** (0.111)	3.631*** (0.112)	3.639*** (0.112)
Position inequalities						1.152*** (0.0762)	1.150*** (0.0763)
Position immigration						1.110*** (0.0686)	1.105*** (0.0703)

Mainstream vs Challenger (1=Challenger)							0.0759 (0.147)
Challenger x EU Positional							0.00357 (0.140)
Challenger x EU Valence							-0.460** (0.147)
Intercept	2.785*** (0.0950)	-0.829*** (0.141)	2.761*** (0.123)	0.367* (0.153)	0.714*** (0.0888)	-1.052*** (0.126)	-1.097*** (0.150)
lns1_1_1 _cons	-2.052*** (0.547)	-1.766*** (0.522)	-1.768*** (0.522)	-1.684** (0.518)	-2.714*** (0.628)	-2.327*** (0.557)	-2.239*** (0.549)
lnsig_e _cons	1.208*** (0.00581)	1.121*** (0.00581)	1.117*** (0.00581)	1.083*** (0.00581)	1.036*** (0.00581)	1.018*** (0.00581)	1.017*** (0.00581)
<i>N</i>	14810	14810	14810	14810	14810	14810	14810
<i>R</i> ²	0.044	0.197	0.203	0.255	0.322	0.346	0.347

Standard errors in parentheses

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

Figure 1: Average marginal effects Challenger x EU Valence (95% CIs)



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