Tracking a Sleeping Giant: Political Contestation of European Integration, 1945–2022

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Abstract

When did contesting European integration begin to pay off at the ballot box? Historians document that parties contested the European project from its founding, but whether this translated into electoral rewards remains untested across the full post-war period. I address this question through a Bayesian measurement model that estimates party EU contestation intensity by combining the temporal scope of manifesto data with the precision of expert surveys, then linking these estimates to electoral outcomes for 416 parties across 28 European countries from 1945 to 2022. The contestation estimates confirm that elite contestation accompanied European integration throughout its history. Yet the vote analysis reveals that electoral rewards for EU contestation emerged only in the post-Eurocrisis era; earlier treaty periods show no significant relationship between contestation and electoral performance. The supply side of EU contestation has always been present. Only recently has the European public responded at the ballot box.
keywords: European integration, Euroscepticism, party contestation, post-functionalism, Bayesian modeling

Introduction

The sleeping giant of the European public is wide awake, but was its slumber ever as deep as commonly assumed? This metaphor, central to post-functionalist scholarship on European integration, rests on the foundational narrative that mass public opinion remained dormant during a "permissive consensus" period, only awakening to exercise a "constraining dissensus" after Maastricht (Hooghe and Marks, 2009; De Vries, 2007; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). Historians often challenge the post-functionalist perspective by drawing on archival sources that document elite political contestation, newspaper coverage of integration debates, and singular contested events such as the EDC's defeat in 1954 (Ludlow, 2006; Patel, 2020; Kaiser, 2007). Yet this evidence cannot test the permissive consensus thesis, which concerns mass public responsiveness, not elite behavior. Without survey data, which begins only in the 1970s, it is impossible to determine whether media coverage reflected widespread public sentiment or whether voters rewarded or punished parties for their EU positions. The crucial empirical question that connects the historical and political sciences perspectives is whether elite contestation of European integration translated into public responses. Did voters respond to active contestation of European integration, or did they remain indifferent? Systematic empirical testing of this question has been constrained by data availability, with comprehensive cross-national survey evidence beginning only in the 1970s when Eurobarometer data collection commenced (Kriesi, 2016).

This study addresses this question by combining party contestation estimates with real electoral outcomes. I develop a Bayesian latent trait model, inspired by related approaches (Treier and Jackman, 2008; McGann, 2014; Caughey and Warshaw, 2015; Claassen, 2019), that estimates how intensely each party contested European integration by combining the temporal scope of manifesto data, which extends to 1945, with the precision of expert surveys where available. I then link these estimates to actual vote shares to test whether party contestation was electorally rewarded. This approach bypasses the requirement for individual-level survey data, enabling analysis of whether party contestation translated into electoral success across the entire post-war period. The scope of this analysis encompasses 416 parties across 28 European countries (EU member states and the United Kingdom) from 1945 to 2022.

Separate case studies suggest that elite contestation accompanied European integration from its founding. De Gaulle consistently framed integration as antithetical to French grandeur, culminating in the 1965 Empty Chair Crisis when France paralyzed EEC decision-making by refusing to attend Council meetings (Ludlow, 2006). The Dutch Boerenpartij mobilized smallholder farmers against EEC-driven agricultural consolidation (Bijsmans, 2020). The German Social Democratic Party initially opposed both the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community, arguing that worker protections would be better secured through national rather than supranational institutions (Shaev, 2012). Italian communists viewed the common market with suspicion (Garner, 1983; Benedetto, 2009), while Danish Eurosceptics shaped coalition dynamics for decades (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2016).

The party contestation estimates show that these historical episodes were not isolated cases. Parties across the political spectrum contested European integration throughout the post-war period. Yet a statistically significant positive electoral return emerges only in the Lisbon period; the Rome/EEC, Single European Act, and Maastricht periods show no statistically significant association between contestation and electoral performance.

This contrast gives empirical substance to the post-functionalist distinction between permissive consensus and constraining dissensus. The crucial change concerns the electoral relevance of European integration, rather than the existence of opposition to it (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). The sovereign debt and migration crises brought European authority into salient national disputes over economic adjustment, solidarity, and borders (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2018; Börzel and Risse, 2018). These developments provide a compelling explanation for the electoral pattern: heightened public attention to Europe made longstanding party contestation relevant to voters' immediate political concerns.

The sleeping giant's awakening thus concerns the public taking up an offer that parties had long made. The findings point to the activation of electoral demand, rather than the arrival of a previously absent supply. Parties had contested integration for decades. Only in the Lisbon period does that longstanding offer translate into a statistically significant positive electoral return.

The Political Contestation of European Integration

The dominant scholarly narrative describes European integration as a technocratic, elite-driven project that remained largely isolated from mass electoral politics until the 1980s, when public scrutiny began constraining further integration (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Building on Lindberg and Scheingold (1970)'s original concept of "permissive consensus," Hooghe and Marks (2009) influentially characterize this transformation as a shift to "constraining dissensus," marked by heightened party contestation and significant electoral consequences for parties' positions on European integration.

I define party contestation of the EU as the combination of oppositional EU positioning with issue salience. A party harboring Eurosceptic views that rarely discusses European issues is not actively contesting integration in the electoral arena. Similarly, a party that frequently engages with EU matters from a supportive perspective participates in European debates without contesting them. The electoral dynamics I examine emerge specifically from parties that combine oppositional positioning with sustained attention to European issues.

The scholarly understanding of political contestation has evolved through several distinct phases since the earliest examinations of European integration (Haas, 1958). The post-functionalist framework, which theorizes about mass public responsiveness to European integration, characterizes the transformation from "permissive consensus" to "constraining dissensus" as reflecting

fundamental changes in how citizens evaluate and engage with the integration project (Franklin et al., 1994, 1995; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Crucially, this framework connects public preferences with party strategies: the political consequences of opposition depend on its salience and mobilization in domestic competition.

According to this perspective, the early period of European integration was characterized by public acquiescence to expert decisions on matters like the common market and agricultural policy (Schmidt, 2020). This support was rooted in post-war optimism about cooperation in Europe, with democratic European identity strengthened by the contrast with Nazi Germany (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009). European integration also built on deeper foundations, with centuries of philosophical and political discourse shaping normative understandings of cooperation (van de Grift et al., 2018; Lipgens, 1982). Walter Lipgens' seminal work documents this intellectual tradition, showing that discussions about European unity predated modern institutions (Lipgens and Loth, 1985). European policymakers in the 1950s recognized that integration efforts needed public support, leading to early institutional discussions about fostering European identity (van de Grift et al., 2018).

The permissive consensus thesis, central to the post-functionalist framework, theorizes that mass publics were largely inattentive to European integration before the 1980s, enabling elites to pursue integration without electoral consequences. Evaluating this thesis requires systematic evidence on voter attitudes and behavior. Yet Eurobarometer surveys begin only in the 1970s.

For the founding period of European integration, no survey data exists to test whether voters responded to party positions on Europe.

Historians have challenged the permissive consensus narrative, but their evidence confronts a fundamental limitation (Kaiser and Varsori, 2010; Gilbert, 2008). Archival scholarship documents three types of contestation, none of which can establish voter responsiveness. First, historians have extensively documented elite political contestation through diplomatic archives, parliamentary records, and party political sources: the German SPD voted against ECSC ratification in 1952, with party chairman Kurt Schumacher condemning the Schuman Plan as "conservative, clerical, capitalist, and cartelist" (Edinger, 1965); the French National Assembly rejected the European Defence Community in 1954 (Fursdon, 1980); the Italian Communist Party consistently opposed integration until the 1970s (Pons, 2024); and British trade unions evolved from cautious openness to overt Euroscepticism (Fetzer, 2007). Second, press archives reveal that newspaper coverage of integration was often critical, with German newspapers showing the public was "undecided and even, at times, hostile" toward the Schuman Plan, and French press coverage of the EDC reflecting deep societal divisions rooted in anti-German sentiment and World War II memory (Aron and Lerner, 1956; Rioux, 1984). Third, singular contested events punctuated the integration process: the EDC's defeat in 1954, the 1959 "March on Bonn" by 60,000 German coal workers protesting ECSC policies, and accession referenda that produced significant opposition (Soutou, 1993; Rasmussen, 2005).

This archival evidence establishes that elites contested integration and that newspapers reported divisions, but it cannot answer the question the permissive consensus thesis poses. Without survey data, it is impossible to determine whether newspaper coverage reflected widespread public sentiment or merely elite opinion; whether voters actually rewarded or punished parties for their EU positions; or whether the dramatic moments of elite contestation translated into systematic electoral consequences. The historiography explicitly acknowledges this gap: scholarship on the founding period has been dominated by state-centered approaches focusing on elite actors, while grassroots sources that could document mass opinion, such as letters to newspapers, constituent correspondence to MPs, and civic organization records, remain largely unexploited (Kaiser and Varsori, 2010; Dickinson, 2015). The "permissive consensus" remains more a political science assumption than a historically verified phenomenon.

This study addresses the gap through a measurement approach that enables testing whether voters responded to party contestation across the full history of European integration.

Early empirical work revealed that attitudes toward integration reflected both economic calculations and broader political orientations (Inglehart, 1970; Gabel, 1998).

The economic dimensions of integration have consistently shaped public attitudes toward the European project. Utilitarian theories posit that support correlates with individual economic positions, with winners from market liberalization, specifically those with higher education and occupational skills,

showing greater support than those threatened by open borders (Gabel and Palmer, 1995; Anderson and Reichert, 1995; Tucker et al., 2002). At the national level, economic benefits from EU membership, whether through fiscal transfers or trade advantages, influence aggregate support levels (Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993; Carrubba, 1997). However, this utilitarian calculus is mediated by domestic contexts: in countries with extensive welfare states, left-wing citizens often oppose integration as a threat to social protection, while in countries with limited redistribution, they may support it as a path to greater social provision (Brinegar and Jolly, 2005; Burgoon, 2009).

Research demonstrates that party positions on European integration began serving as important cues for their supporters, as Ray (2003) demonstrates through analysis of how party stances shape voter attitudes toward integration. This cue-taking process operates through multiple channels: political parties provide the most direct signals (Steenbergen et al., 2007; Hobolt, 2007), but media framing also plays a crucial role (De Vreese, 2003; Azrout et al., 2012; Vliegenthart et al., 2009). Citizens increasingly rely on domestic benchmarks to evaluate EU performance, using national political and economic conditions as reference points (Anderson, 1998; de Vries, 2018; Rohrschneider, 2000). This benchmarking mechanism helps explain why support for integration varies with domestic government approval and economic performance (Rohrschneider and Loveless, 2010).

Several key dynamics characterize the politicization process in contemporary scholarship. EU issue voting, where attitudes toward European integration influence national vote choice, has been characterized as a significant

factor, though conditional on issue salience among voters and partisan conflict over Europe (De Vries, 2007; Tillman, 2004, 2012). Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) characterized European integration as a "sleeping giant" with the potential to disrupt party systems if politicized. They argued that voters hold meaningful EU preferences but cannot express them electorally when mainstream parties converge on European matters. The giant sleeps not because voters lack opinions, but because parties fail to offer differentiated choices. De Vries (2007) tested this proposition and found that EU issue voting occurs only when both partisan conflict and voter salience are high. Supply of party differentiation alone is insufficient; demand must also be activated through heightened issue salience. The historical presence of contesting parties shifts attention from the availability of opposition to the conditions under which voters respond to it. An electoral offer can persist without European issues becoming central to vote choice. The distinction is therefore between parties supplying contestation and voters treating that contestation as electorally relevant. Electoral research demonstrates that European issues increasingly matter in both European Parliament and national elections, particularly when challenger parties mobilize them (Hobolt et al., 2009; Clark and Rohrschneider, 2009; Evans, 1998).

Party competition patterns reveal distinctive strategies: mainstream opposition parties often avoided mobilizing EU sentiment due to their historical involvement in the integration process (De Vries, 2010), while parties on the political periphery frequently embraced EU issues as a means of differentiation (Sitter, 2001; Taggart, 1998). This strategic positioning reflects what De Vries

and Edwards (2009) identify as differential mobilization strategies, with left-wing Euroskeptic parties emphasizing economic grievances while right-wing parties focus on sovereignty and cultural threats. Mainstream parties increasingly face pressure from these challenger parties, leading to contagion effects in party positioning (Meijers, 2017; Van de Wardt et al., 2014). The success of issue entrepreneurship depends on political opportunity structures and the ability to link EU issues to existing concerns (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015; Green-Pedersen, 2012; Vries and Hobolt, 2020).

Scholarship on recent crises emphasizes their intensifying effect on these dynamics. The euro crisis led to increased politicization (Hutter and Kriesi, 2020), making European issues more visible in member states' politics (Kriesi, 2016; Statham and Trenz, 2015). These developments touched on core state powers, raising fundamental questions about statehood, national community, and democratic self-determination (Hutter and Kriesi, 2020). The crisis period saw changing dynamics of support, with economic considerations becoming more salient (Hobolt and Wratil, 2015; Kuhn and Stoeckel, 2014; Hobolt and Leblond, 2013). The distinction between core and periphery countries shaped responses to these developments: Bølstad (2015) demonstrates that public mood toward integration follows different trajectories in core versus peripheral states, with the periphery showing greater volatility, while debtor and creditor countries developed opposing views on solidarity and responsibility (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). In Southern European countries, EU politicization during this period was driven primarily by left-wing challengers, though for many Southern Europeans the EU has historically represented a "lifebuoy"

offering both economic resources and institutional reforms (Hutter and Kriesi, 2020; Vasilopoulou, 2018; Harteveld et al., 2013; van de Grift et al., 2018). Crises can bring European integration into domestic conflicts that voters experience as immediate political choices. These crises involved core state powers, bringing the exercise of European authority into salient disputes over fiscal obligations and border control (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2018). As Börzel and Risse (2018) argue, conflicts over crisis management also engage questions of solidarity and political community. As these questions become salient, longstanding party contestation can acquire greater relevance to electoral choice. Parties can therefore connect grievances over particular policies to broader contestation of European authority, giving longstanding opposition electoral relevance.

The contemporary landscape of European political contestation reflects complex interactions between public opinion, party strategy, and institutional dynamics. Euroscepticism, while a common feature across nearly all European party systems, manifests differently across contexts (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008; Kopecký and Mudde, 2002). In Western European affluent democracies, contestation often centers on cultural concerns and sovereignty, with right-wing populist parties framing European integration as threatening national identity, especially since the refugee crisis (Rohrschneider and Loveless, 2010; de Vries, 2018; Hutter and Kriesi, 2020). In Central and Eastern Europe, EU membership has been central to both legislative agendas and foreign policy aspirations of post-communist states, with citizens comparing EU benefits against memories of communist rule rather than against idealized national

sovereignty (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2008; Kopecký and Mudde, 2002; Batory, 2002; Rohrschneider and Loveless, 2010). When public opinion and party systems are polarized, issue contestation by far-right parties increases their electoral appeal (Down and Han, 2021). This phenomenon challenges earlier scholarly arguments that EU concerns had limited impact on national party systems (Mair, 2000; Sitter, 2001; Krouwel, 2004). The ideological positioning of parties toward the extremes of the left/right dimension consistently influences their positions on European integration, independent of electoral performance or government participation (Taggart, 1998; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2008). The multidimensional nature of EU attitudes, encompassing performance evaluations, identity concerns, and utilitarian calculations, creates complex patterns of support and opposition (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; De Vries and Steenbergen, 2013; Stöckel, 2013).

The post-functionalist expectation is therefore that the electoral relevance of contestation depends on the political context in which voters encounter it. Longstanding opposition can become electorally consequential when conflicts over European governance bring integration into the concerns shaping vote choice. This distinguishes the history of party contestation from the history of its electoral rewards. These diverse patterns of party contestation across member states underscore the importance of temporal context: understanding when electoral rewards for party contestation of the EU emerged requires analysis spanning the full history of European integration. Yet systematic longitudinal comparisons face challenges from varying data coverage and methodologies (Grande and Hutter, 2016; Hutter and Kriesi, 2020), with

existing data sources lacking the scope to cover the Union's complete history. I address these challenges through a Bayesian latent trait model that produces party contestation estimates combining the temporal scope of manifesto data with the precision of expert surveys. This measurement approach enables systematic analysis across the full history of European integration, examining how the relationship between party contestation and electoral outcomes has evolved across major phases.

A Bayesian Approach to the Study of Political Contestation

The theoretical perspectives reviewed above highlight diverse scholarly approaches to understanding European integration politics. Scholars have developed various terminologies, including politicization, issue voting, and Euroscepticism, each capturing specific aspects of how EU issues enter domestic political competition. While these conceptual frameworks provide valuable analytical distinctions, they share a common empirical foundation: the extent to which party positions on European integration translate into electoral consequences.

I measure political contestation through this fundamental democratic mechanism: does critical party contestation of European integration matter at the ballot box? When the combination of anti-EU positioning and issue salience systematically predicts electoral success, this reveals that European integration is contested by parties in electoral politics. The strength of this relationship

Project	Type	Coverage	Parties	Countries	Citation
Manifesto Project	Text	1945–2022	405	28	Lehmann et al. (2024)
PolDem	Text	1972–2017	98	12	Hutter and Kriesi (2019)
Ray Survey	Expert	1984–1996	120	14	Ray (1999); Ray and Narud (2000)
CHES	Expert	1999–2024	277	28	Jolly et al. (2022); Rovny et al. (2025)

Table 1: Overview of Data Sources

indicates the degree of party contestation, providing a direct measure grounded in democratic competition rather than relying on unavailable public opinion data. This approach cuts through diverse scholarly terminologies to focus on what ultimately matters in democracies: electoral outcomes.

Addressing this question across the full post-war period requires overcoming three empirical challenges: (1) temporal scope and data heterogeneity, (2) operationalizing critical party contestation from heterogeneous data sources, and (3) linking party contestation status to outcomes across time and space. The following subsections present each challenge alongside its modeling solution, demonstrating how a unified Bayesian framework enables systematic analysis from 1945 to 2022.

Data Sources

Extending the analysis to 1945 faces a fundamental data challenge: comprehensive cross-national evidence begins only in the 1970s with Eurobarometer surveys, leaving the crucial early integration period empirically inaccessible with conventional approaches. I address this by combining two types of data sources, each with distinct strengths and weaknesses (see Table 1).

Text data from the Manifesto Project offers comprehensive historical coverage back to 1945 but reflects parties' strategic decisions about emphasis and omission, exhibiting volatility as parties selectively highlight or downplay EU issues based on campaign context (Slapin and Proksch, 2008). The Political Debates on Europe (Poldem) project provides additional text data from media coverage of election campaigns. I incorporate five text-based items: three from the Manifesto Project (EU integration, internationalism, European partners) and two from Poldem (Europe, Euro).

Expert surveys provide more precise assessments of party positions through specialists' knowledge but become available only from the 1980s onward. The Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) covers 1999-2024, while the Ray Survey extends coverage back to 1984. Both surveys provide position ratings (how pro- or anti-EU a party is) and salience ratings (how important EU issues are to the party). I acknowledge that expert surveys may be influenced by personal biases or disagreement between experts (Ecker et al., 2022), while manifesto coding can suffer from subjective coding decisions (Mikhaylov et al., 2012).

For all data sources, I apply linear transformations to rescale the original metrics to a $[0, 1]$ scale while preserving ordinal relationships and relative distances between party positions. In some instances, this scaling procedure results in exact values of 0 or 1. Party-election observations scoring zero on any source are classified as non-contesters ($\theta = 0$) and excluded from the continuous likelihoods, while the latent scale for remaining observations is bounded away from exact 0 and 1 in estimation for numerical stability. Variable definitions and data sources are documented in Online Appendix A.21–A.22.

Defining EU Contestation

Party contestation of the EU captures the intensity with which parties actively contest European integration. This measure combines two inputs: positioning (how anti-EU a party is) and salience (how much attention the party devotes to EU issues). Neither alone constitutes party contestation. A party holding Eurosceptic views that rarely discusses European issues is not actively contesting integration; party contestation requires making opposition to the EU a visible part of electoral strategy. The party contestation score $\theta \in [0, 1]$ measures this intensity, where 0 indicates no party contestation and values approaching 1 indicate intense critical engagement with EU issues.

I operationalize party contestation through a configurational approach that requires both anti-EU positioning and issue salience. A pro-EU party receives a party contestation score of zero regardless of how frequently it discusses European issues, since supporting integration is not contesting it. Similarly, an anti-EU party that rarely emphasizes EU issues receives a low score because party contestation requires active engagement. This design distinguishes "quiet Eurosceptics" who hold critical views but do not campaign on EU issues from parties that make opposition to European integration a defining electoral strategy.

To illustrate this distinction, consider three parties from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey data. The Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) in 2014 exhibited a strongly anti-EU position (0.98 on a 0-1 scale where 1 indicates maximum Euroscepticism) combined with high EU salience (8.4 on a 0-10 scale), yielding a high party contestation score. In contrast, the German Social Democratic

Party (SPD) in 2019 showed a pro-EU position (0.08) with moderately high salience (6.9), yielding a party contestation score of zero because pro-EU positioning does not constitute party contestation. Most instructive is the case of the Belgian Vlaams Blok in 1999, which held an anti-EU position (0.80) but with low salience (1.9). Despite its Eurosceptic orientation, this party receives a low party contestation score because EU issues were not central to its electoral appeal. The configurational approach captures this "quiet Eurosceptic" as a weak contester, distinguishing it from parties that make EU opposition a defining campaign theme.

Calculating Contestation Scores

For expert survey data (CHES 1999-2024, Ray 1984-1996), I calculate party contestation scores that implement the configurational logic described above. Each expert survey observation provides both a position rating and a salience rating, which I combine into a single party contestation score:

$$\text{score} = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if position} \leq 0.5 \\ \text{position} \times \text{salience}^2 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

where position is rescaled to $[0, 1]$ with 1 indicating strongly anti-EU and salience is rescaled to $[0, 1]$ with 1 indicating highest salience. The quadratic penalty on salience reflects that party contestation requires substantial issue salience. A party with anti-EU position (0.8) but low salience (0.3) receives a score of $0.8 \times 0.09 = 0.072$, whereas the same position with high salience (0.9) yields $0.8 \times 0.81 = 0.648$. The threshold at position $= 0.5$ implements a con-

servative criterion: only parties on the Eurosceptic side of the scale contribute to party contestation.

For text data, I calculate party contestation scores from counts of positive and negative EU mentions:

$$\text{score} = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if negative} = 0 \\ \dfrac{\text{negative}}{\text{negative} + \text{positive}} \times \dfrac{\text{negative}}{\text{total}} & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

where negative is the count of critical EU mentions, positive is the count of supportive EU mentions, and total is the total sentence count. The first term captures position (the share of EU mentions that are critical), while the second term captures salience (the proportion of the document devoted to critical EU content). If no negative mentions appear, the score is zero, reflecting that absence of criticism provides no party contestation signal.

I adopt a conservative approach to classification: a party-election observation is classified as a non-contester ($\theta = 0$) if any observed score across all data sources equals zero or if no data is available. This strict criterion ensures that parties are only classified as contesters when sources consistently indicate active party contestation of the EU. A party with high CHES party contestation but zero manifesto mentions, for instance, is treated conservatively because the conflicting signals suggest the party does not consistently emphasize EU issues across contexts.

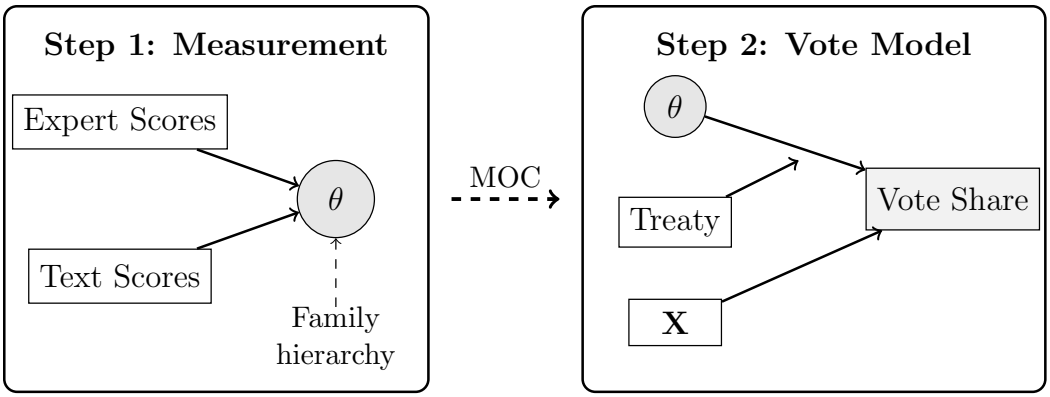


Figure 1: Two-Step Estimation Framework. Step 1 estimates party contestation intensity (θ) from expert and text data using a Bayesian measurement model. Step 2 employs the Method of Composition to estimate how the effect of party contestation on vote share varies across treaty periods.

Modeling Strategy

I address the empirical challenges through a two-step estimation framework that separates the measurement of party contestation intensity from the analysis of its electoral consequences (see Figure 1). This separation offers both substantive and statistical advantages: it enables precise uncertainty quantification at each stage while allowing flexible model specifications for the electoral analysis.

In the first step, I estimate a Bayesian measurement model that combines expert survey data and manifesto text to infer each party's party contestation intensity (θ) for each election. This latent trait captures the degree to which a party actively contests European integration, ranging from 0 (no party contestation) to values approaching 1 (intense critical engagement). The measurement model produces posterior distributions for each party-election ob-

servation, yielding both point estimates and uncertainty quantification that reflects the varying quality of available data.

In the second step, I employ the Method of Composition (MOC) to estimate how the electoral effect of party contestation varies across treaty periods while properly propagating measurement uncertainty. For each simulation, I draw party contestation values (θ) from their posterior distributions and estimate a vote model where treaty period moderates the relationship between party contestation and vote share, with a vector of control variables ($\mathbf{X}$) accounting for confounding factors. This interaction structure yields period-specific effect estimates (β_{treaty}). Combining results across simulations using Rubin's rules produces coefficient estimates and confidence intervals that account for both estimation uncertainty in the vote model and measurement uncertainty in the party contestation scores.

This two-step approach offers several advantages over a fully joint model. First, it enables different model specifications for the measurement and electoral components without requiring re-estimation of the entire system. Second, it produces interpretable posterior distributions for party contestation that can be examined independently of electoral outcomes. Third, the Method of Composition provides valid inference under measurement error while remaining computationally tractable. The approach draws on established methods for handling measurement uncertainty in two-stage estimation (Treier and Jackman, 2008) and builds on previous work utilizing Bayesian latent trait modeling to estimate political quantities from diverse data sources (McGann, 2014; Caughey and Warshaw, 2015; Claassen, 2019). I apply this approach

to party-level contestation, producing estimates that combine the temporal scope of manifesto data with the precision of expert surveys, enabling analysis across periods where expert data alone would be unavailable. Technical details of the measurement model, including likelihood specifications, prior distributions, and convergence diagnostics, are provided in Online Appendix A.1–A.6.

Measurement Model

The latent party contestation intensity θ follows a hierarchical structure with party family trajectories. On the logit scale, I model:

$$\text{logit}(\mu_i) = \alpha_{f(i)} + \beta_{f(i)} \times t + \epsilon_{p(i)},$$

where $\alpha_{f(i)}$ captures the baseline party contestation level for party family f, $\beta_{f(i)}$ captures family-specific temporal trends, and $\epsilon_{p(i)}$ captures individual party deviations from their family trajectory. This structure reflects that party families exhibit systematic patterns in party contestation of the EU (radical right parties contest more than Christian democrats) while allowing individual parties to deviate based on strategic choices or national contexts. The family-level parameters receive hierarchical priors that share information across families while permitting heterogeneity, and the party deviation terms are shrunk toward zero, preventing overfitting to noise in parties with limited data.

For expert observations, I employ a Beta likelihood with high precision. Expert surveys such as CHES and Ray are validated census-style instruments with low measurement error, which I reflect through a precision prior of $\phi \sim \text{Gamma}(20, 0.1)$, yielding a mean precision of 200. This high precision indicates that expert scores provide nearly deterministic information about underlying party contestation intensity.

For text observations, I employ a Gamma likelihood with sample-size weighting. Larger documents receive greater weight in estimation, reflecting their more reliable signal. Unlike the high-precision expert data, text scores exhibit substantial variability reflecting both genuine party differences and measurement noise from manifesto coding.

To identify the scale of θ, I anchor one well-measured observation. I select a party-year with consistently high party contestation scores across multiple expert surveys and fix its θ value at the observed score. This anchor provides a reference point that breaks the multiplicative confounding between the latent scale and the measurement parameters, analogous to fixing a factor loading in item response theory models.

Vote-Weighted Contestation

To characterize the supply side of party contestation of the EU at the country level, I compute vote-weighted party contestation scores. For each country-year, this measure weights each party's contestation intensity by its electoral importance:

$$\text{Contestation}_{c,t} = \frac{\sum_{p \in c,t} v_p \times \theta_p}{\sum_{p \in c,t} v_p},$$

where v_p is party p's vote share and θ_p is its party contestation intensity. This aggregation reflects that large parties' party contestation drives competitive dynamics more than small parties. A country where a 30% vote share party intensely contests the EU exhibits fundamentally different electoral dynamics than one where only minor parties do so.

I compute this measure using the full posterior distribution of θ, yielding country-year estimates with appropriate uncertainty quantification. For each posterior draw, I calculate the vote-weighted average, producing a distribution of country-year party contestation levels. The resulting series reveals how the supply of party contestation of the EU in each country's party system evolved from 1945 to 2022, providing the descriptive foundation for understanding when and where parties offered voters choices on European integration.

Electoral Effects Model

Having measured party contestation intensity with full posterior uncertainty, I turn to the central question: does party contestation of the EU affect electoral outcomes, and how has this effect changed over time? While observational data cannot definitively establish causation, the design of the vote model addresses key confounds through several features.

To properly propagate measurement uncertainty from the first stage to electoral inferences, I employ the Method of Composition (MOC). The procedure draws party contestation values $\theta^{(m)}$ from their posterior distributions for each party-election, estimates the vote model with these drawn values, and stores the resulting coefficient estimates. This process repeats for M simulations,

and the final estimates combine results using Rubin's rules, which properly account for both within-simulation sampling variance and between-simulation variation due to measurement uncertainty in θ. This approach ensures that confidence intervals reflect the full uncertainty about party contestation intensity rather than treating point estimates as known quantities. To account for the nested structure of the data, I compute two-way clustered standard errors at the party and country levels, addressing both serial correlation within parties over time and cross-sectional correlation among parties within the same country.

The vote model estimates:

$$\text{vote}_{p,t} = \alpha_p + \lambda_e + \rho \times \text{vote}_{p,t-1} + \beta_{\text{treaty}} \times \theta_{p,t} + \gamma_{f(p)} \times t + \mathbf{b}^\top \mathbf{X}_{p,t} + \epsilon_{p,t},$$

where α_p are party fixed effects, λ_e are election fixed effects, ρ captures vote share persistence through the lagged dependent variable, β_{treaty} captures the effect of party contestation in each treaty period (Pre-Rome, Rome/EEC, SEA, Maastricht, Lisbon), $\gamma_{f(p)} \times t$ captures family-specific time trends, and $\mathbf{X}_{p,t}$ includes control variables. The $\theta \times$ treaty interaction allows the electoral effect of party contestation to vary across major phases of European integration.

The combination of party and election fixed effects provides a powerful identification strategy. Party fixed effects absorb all time-invariant party characteristics, enabling comparison of within-party changes in party contestation to within-party changes in vote share. Election fixed effects are the key identification lever: by comparing parties competing in the same election, I hold

constant all election-specific factors including economic conditions, political climate, media environment, and campaign dynamics. This means the analysis asks: within a given election, did parties with higher party contestation of the EU perform better or worse than their competitors? This within-election comparison controls for confounders that affect all parties equally in a given electoral context. Family-specific time trends account for secular changes in party family vote shares, particularly the documented decline of mainstream parties beginning in the 1970s. The lagged dependent variable captures vote share persistence and momentum effects.

Control variables isolate the specific effect of party contestation of the EU from other determinants of vote share. The Manifesto Project's RILE scale (Budge, 2013) captures general left-right positioning, ensuring that estimated party contestation effects are not confounded with ideological placement. A democracy score constructed from manifesto data captures parties' general support for democratic governance. Government participation is measured through both current cabinet membership and an indicator for whether the party has ever held government office, accounting for incumbency advantages and the electoral costs that governing parties often face.

I report Average Marginal Effects (AME) representing the vote share change associated with moving from non-contester ($\theta = 0$) to high contester ($\theta = 0.434$, a fixed high-contester reference value). This provides substantively meaningful estimates: how many percentage points does intense party contestation of the EU translate to at the ballot box? The AME calculation

accounts for the nonlinear relationship between the linear predictor and vote shares, evaluating marginal effects at observed covariate values.

The combination of party fixed effects (comparing within-party changes), election fixed effects (comparing parties within the same electoral context), and extensive controls strengthens causal interpretation. The key identifying assumption is that changes in party contestation intensity are not driven by anticipated vote share changes conditional on these controls. While this assumption cannot be definitively tested, the design addresses the most obvious confounds: parties that expect electoral decline might increase party contestation as a mobilization strategy, but the party fixed effects control for baseline party characteristics, and the family-specific time trends absorb systematic patterns of party family decline that might otherwise confound the estimates.

Contesting Europe over Eight Decades

Before examining the electoral consequences of party contestation of the EU, I present descriptive evidence on how political parties have contested European integration from the supply side. This analysis draws on two complementary perspectives: aggregate party contestation at the country level, measured as vote-weighted averages across all parties in each election (Figure 2), and individual party trajectories for selected cases that illuminate key patterns (Figure 3). Together, these perspectives demonstrate that active contestation of European integration has characterized party competition since the founding of

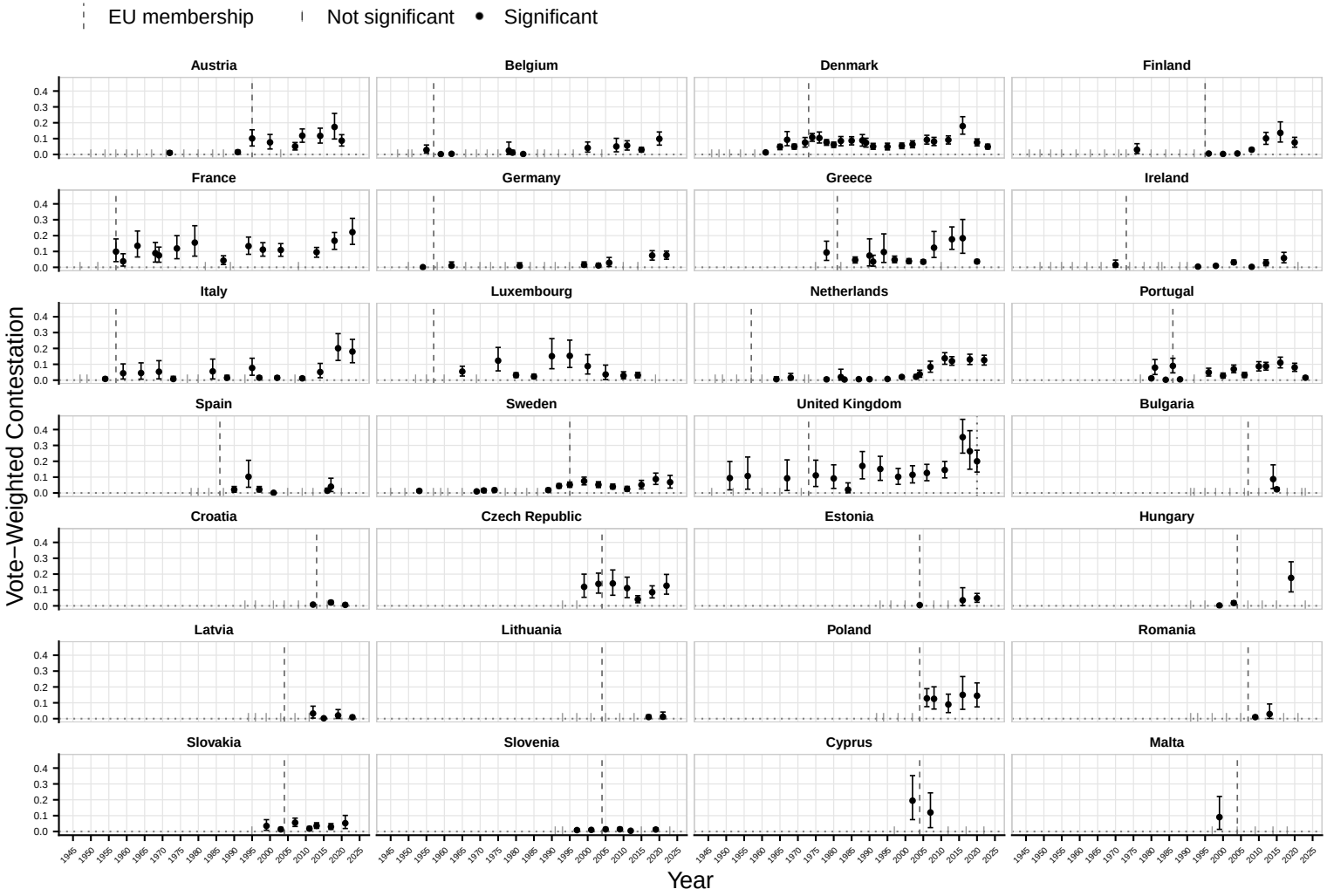


Figure 2: Vote-Weighted Party Contestation of European Integration by Country, 1945–2022. Each point represents the vote-weighted average party contestation intensity (θ) across all parties competing in a given election, with error bars showing 95% credible intervals. Higher values indicate greater aggregate party contestation of European integration in the party system.[1]

the European project, documenting the supply of contestation that forms the basis for examining whether such contestation produced electoral rewards.

Figure 2 reveals that contestation of European integration at the party system level has existed since the Treaty of Rome era among the founding members. France shows significant contestation as early as 1957, the very year the Treaty was signed, with elevated levels continuing through the 1960s and 1970s, a period marked by social upheaval and challenges to the established order (Janda, 1969; Goguel, 1968). Italy similarly displays contestation from the mid-1950s onward, growing through the following decades. Belgium exhibits early contestation in the mid-1950s, while Denmark shows consistently elevated levels from 1961 onwards, maintaining this pattern across six decades as Eurosceptic parties repeatedly shaped coalition dynamics (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2016). These patterns document that supply-side contestation accompanied European integration from the outset.

The United Kingdom represents the extreme case of party contestation, displaying the highest levels among all countries examined, particularly around the Brexit period. The peak during the implementation of Brexit aligns with Boris Johnson's successful "Get Brexit Done" campaign, demonstrating how party contestation can intensify dramatically when European issues become central to electoral competition. Even before the referendum, however, British party contestation remained notably elevated compared to continental members.

Germany presents a striking contrast as the founding member with the lowest party contestation levels. The data shows numerous election periods

without any measurable party contestation at all, a pattern that persisted until the emergence of the Alternative for Germany (AfD). This exceptionally low baseline reflects Germany's unique historical relationship with European integration, where support for the project became embedded in post-war national identity across the major parties.

While party contestation has generally increased since the Eurocrisis across many countries, most dramatically in Greece where mainstream parties collapsed and new actors like SYRIZA emerged (Dinas and Rori, 2013; Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, 2013), this pattern is not universal. Luxembourg, which displayed substantial party contestation in the 1990s, saw these levels decline to negligible amounts by the late 2010s. Poland has maintained remarkably stable party contestation levels since joining the EU, neither increasing nor decreasing substantially despite the broader European trend. Most Central and Eastern European newer members display generally low levels of party contestation, consistent with scholarship emphasizing how EU membership served as a "return to Europe" for these countries and anchored their democratic transitions (Maravall, 1979; Pérez, 2014; Racz, 1991; Crampton, 1997; Kostadinova, 2013).

Turning to party-level patterns in Figure 3, I observe clear differentiation across political families. Mainstream conservative parties and social democrats largely do not actively contest European integration. Social democratic parties such as the SPD, PSOE, PS, and PD show no significant party contestation throughout the observation period. These parties evolved from fragmented national actors to coordinated supporters of integration through mechanisms

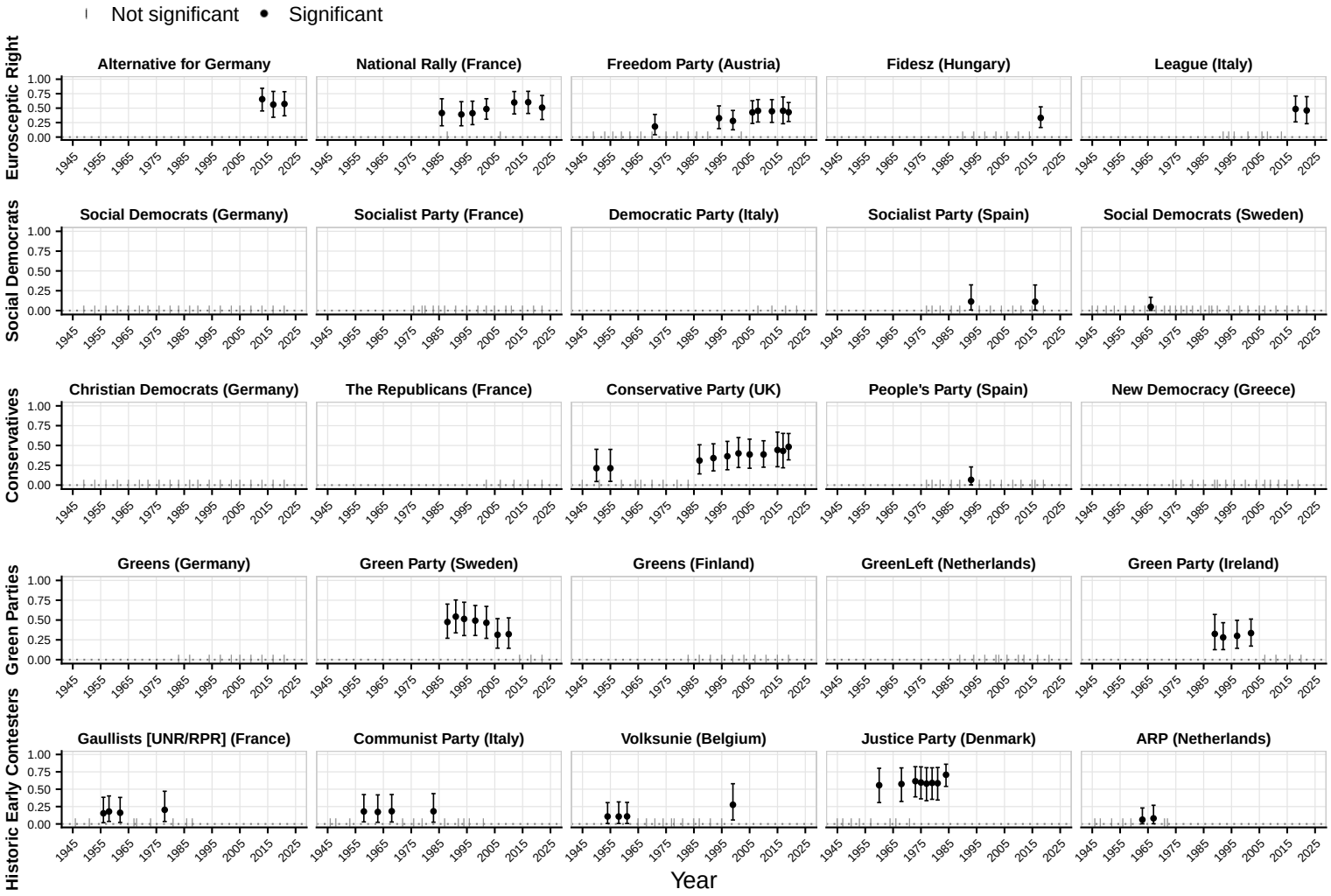


Figure 3: Party Contestation Intensity (θ) for Selected Parties, 1945–2022. Points show posterior means with 95% credible intervals. Higher values indicate stronger party contestation of European integration. Parties are grouped by political family to illustrate variation in party contestation patterns across the political spectrum.

such as the Party of European Socialists, which served as a networking platform to develop common positions (Ladrech, 2003). The Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) similarly display no party contestation, reflecting how support for European integration became foundational to post-war Christian democratic identity. The British Conservatives represent a notable exception among mainstream conservative parties, displaying substantial and increasing party contestation over time.

Contemporary Euroscepticism is dominated by parties of the radical right. The AfD maintains consistently high party contestation from its founding, while the French National Rally (formerly Front National) shows elevated party contestation throughout its existence. The Austrian FPÖ presents a particularly dramatic case of transformation: historically a supporter of European integration reflecting economic liberalism and desired ties to Germany, the party reversed course during the period leading up to Austria's EU accession, ultimately becoming a persistent opponent, a transformation consolidated by the party's breakthrough in 1999 when Eurosceptic campaigns helped it capture over a quarter of the vote (Müller, 2000; Weisskircher, 2025). Lega similarly shifted from regional interests to placing hostility toward EU policies at the heart of its rhetoric under Matteo Salvini's leadership (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017).

However, the historical record reveals that party contestation of European integration is not exclusively a phenomenon of the contemporary right. The "Historic Early Contesters" group in Figure 3 illustrates how different political actors contested integration in earlier decades, often from different ide-

ological foundations. The Danish Justice Party (Retsforbundet), a libertarian Georgist movement, displayed the highest party contestation levels of any party in the dataset during the 1960s through 1980s, grounded in principled opposition to centralized authority. The French Gaullists showed significant party contestation during the 1950s through 1970s, reflecting sovereignty concerns that culminated in the Empty Chair Crisis, when de Gaulle's boycott of EEC institutions revealed fundamental conflicts over supranational authority (Ludlow, 2006). The Belgian Volksunie contested integration from regionalist concerns about Flemish autonomy. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) was initially hostile to the European project based on concerns about losing control over redistributive policy, though this party contestation declined gradually as the party developed more moderate positions through the "Eurocommunism" transformation (Garner, 1983; Benedetto, 2009).

Green parties represent another historical source of party contestation based on policy concerns rather than nationalist opposition. The Swedish Greens (Miljöpartiet) grounded their Euroscepticism in the core principle of decentralization, arguing that decisions should be made at the "lowest possible level" rather than transferred to supranational institutions (Burchell, 1996). Green parties more broadly advocated for decisions "matched with local requirements" to "oppose and reverse present trends towards homogeneity, over-centralisation, the abuse of power" (Bomberg, 1998). The Irish Greens similarly displayed party contestation during the 1990s, reflecting environmental policy concerns.

These patterns suggest an important evolution in the nature of party contestation of the EU. Early party contestation was predominantly policy-based: communists worried about losing control over redistributive policies, greens concerned about environmental competences being transferred upward, and regionalists anxious about centralization threatening local autonomy. Contemporary Euroscepticism, by contrast, appears more strongly rooted in normative opposition to the cosmopolitan values the Union represents. The trajectory of the PCI illustrates this shift: high party contestation in the 1950s through 1970s gave way to acceptance as the party transformed ideologically. The case of Fidesz shows a different pattern, where Kopecký and Mudde (2002) classified the party as "Euroenthusiasts" in the early 2000s before its subsequent transformation into a prominent Eurosceptic force, increasingly combining anti-immigration rhetoric with hostility toward EU institutions (Krekó and Enyedi, 2018; Scheppele, 2022; Várnagy, 2023).

In sum, the descriptive evidence demonstrates that party contestation of the EU has been a persistent feature of party competition since European integration began. What has changed is not whether the EU is contested but rather which actors contest it and on what grounds. The contemporary dominance of radical right parties in Eurosceptic politics represents a shift from earlier patterns where left-wing parties, greens, and regionalists voiced opposition based on specific policy concerns. This evolution from policy-based to more normatively-grounded party contestation has important implications for understanding the electoral dynamics examined in the following sections.

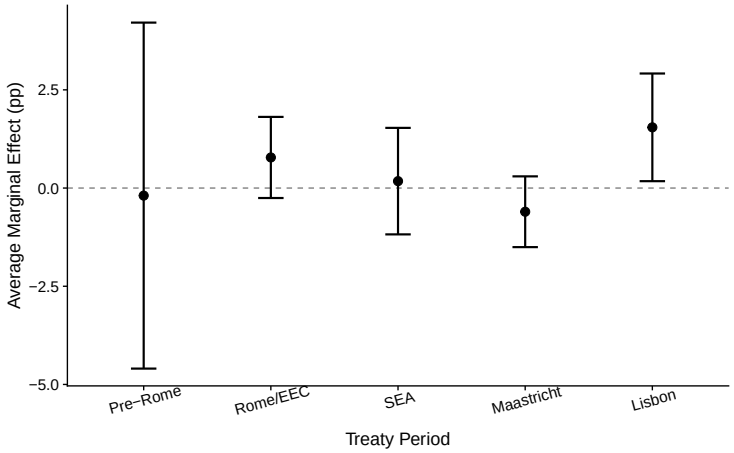


Figure 4: Average Marginal Effect of Party Contestation of the EU on Vote Share by Treaty Period. Points show the estimated vote share difference (in percentage points) between a high contester (reference value $\theta = 0.434$) and a non-contester ($\theta = 0$). Error bars indicate 95% credible intervals. Positive values indicate electoral rewards for party contestation; negative values indicate electoral penalties.

The Electoral Impact of EU Contestation

The descriptive analysis above documents that party contestation of European integration has been a persistent feature of party competition since the Treaty of Rome. Parties from across the political spectrum, including communists, Gaullists, greens, and regionalists, have voiced opposition to integration throughout the EU's history. But did this contestation translate into electoral success? To answer this question, I employ a two-step estimation approach that examines the entire history of European integration from 1945 to 2022.

First, the Bayesian measurement model estimates each party's contestation intensity (θ) by combining expert survey data and text-based measures. Second, I use Method of Composition (MOC) to propagate uncertainty from the measurement model into a vote share regression. The vote model includes party and election fixed effects with two-way clustering (by party and country), alongside standard controls for ideological positioning and government participation. This specification allows me to examine whether the electoral returns to party contestation of the EU have changed across major treaty periods while properly accounting for measurement uncertainty and the nested structure of the data.

Figure 4 presents the average marginal effects of party contestation of the EU on vote share by treaty period. Each point represents the estimated vote share difference (in percentage points) between a high contester ($\theta = 0.434$) and a non-contester ($\theta = 0$). Positive values indicate that party contestation

was electorally rewarded during that period; negative values indicate that party contestation carried electoral penalties.

The central finding is striking: electoral success based on contesting European integration is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Despite eight decades of party competition over integration, the Lisbon period (2010 onward) shows the only statistically significant electoral effect. High contesters gained an estimated 1.55 percentage points relative to non-contesters (95% CI: 0.18 to 2.92). This finding aligns with the electoral implications of "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Risse, 2011; Tosun et al., 2015; Ferrara and Kriesi, 2022). Read through postfunctionalism, this finding suggests that the sovereign debt and migration crises helped activate the electoral relevance of longstanding party contestation. The estimate summarizes the association across the Lisbon period, 2010–2022, with treaty periods providing the historical framework for the comparison. Full regression coefficients are reported in Online Appendix A.7.

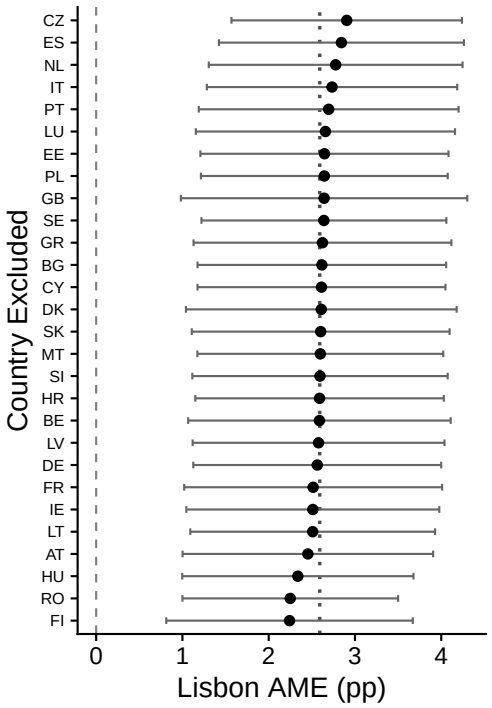
The earlier treaty periods (Rome/EEC, SEA, Maastricht) show no statistically significant effects, with confidence intervals spanning zero. This contrast in the period-specific evidence is substantively important: while the supply of party contestation of the EU has existed since integration began, a statistically significant positive electoral return is evident only in the Lisbon period. The earlier period estimates provide no clear evidence of an average electoral advantage for contestation. The contemporary dominance of Eurosceptic radical right parties thus reflects not merely a shift in which actors contest integration, but a fundamental transformation in how voters respond to such contestation.

These findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution regarding causal claims. While the model includes extensive controls and party fixed effects account for time-invariant party characteristics, the possibility remains that unobserved factors jointly influence both party contestation levels and electoral outcomes. The estimated effects capture the evolving electoral relevance of party contestation of the EU within the larger context of party system change, rather than necessarily representing direct causal impacts isolated from structural processes. The following robustness section demonstrates that the Lisbon effect withstands extensive sensitivity testing.

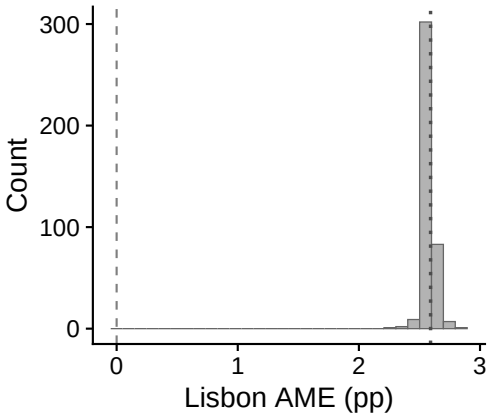
Robustness Checks

The two-step estimation approach requires careful attention to uncertainty propagation. Following Tai et al. (2024), I use the Method of Composition (MOC) with Rubin's rules to account for measurement uncertainty in the latent party contestation measure. Figure 5d compares the point estimate approach, which treats θ as known, with the MOC approach. The point estimate yields 1.55pp [0.39, 2.70], while the MOC estimate is 1.55pp [0.18, 2.92]. The MOC confidence interval is wider because it properly accounts for measurement uncertainty in θ: when θ is estimated with uncertainty (coefficient of variation $\approx 50\%$ for contesters), the MOC procedure correctly reflects this additional uncertainty. Both estimates remain statistically significant, confirming the robustness of the Lisbon effect.

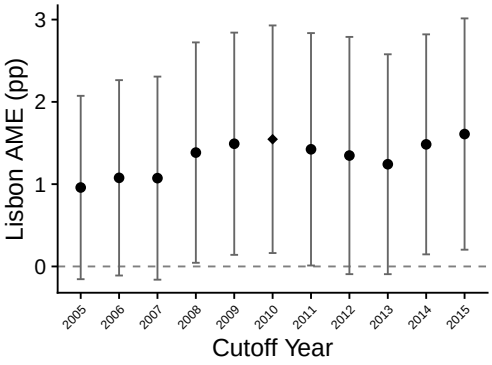
To assess whether results are driven by specific countries or parties, I conduct leave-one-out analyses (Figure 5). The Lisbon effect demonstrates ex-



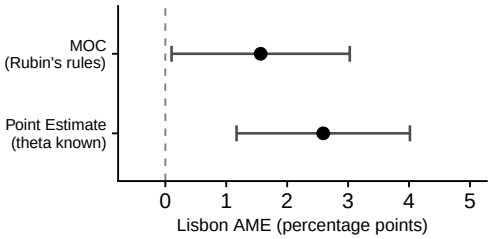
(a) Leave-one-out by country



(b) Leave-one-out by party



(c) Placebo treaty cutoffs



(d) Uncertainty propagation (MOC)

Figure 5: Robustness tests for the Lisbon treaty effect. Panel (a) shows the Lisbon AME when each country is excluded; the dotted line indicates the baseline estimate. Panel (b) shows the distribution of Lisbon AME estimates across 405 leave-one-out party samples. Panel (c) tests alternative Lisbon cutoff years from 2005 to 2015; the diamond marks the true 2010 cutoff. Panel (d) compares the point estimate CI (treating θ as known) with the MOC CI (incorporating measurement uncertainty via Rubin's rules); the MOC CI is appropriately wider.

ceptional robustness: all 28 country-excluded estimates remain positive and statistically significant, ranging from 0.068 (excluding Finland) to 0.082 (excluding Sweden). Similarly, across 405 party-excluded samples, all estimates remain positive with a tight distribution centered near the baseline. Beyond robustness, Online Appendix A.20 estimates the Lisbon-period effect separately by country: 23 countries admit estimation and 5 show significant effects, with the largest point estimates in Hungary and Romania and no uniform crisis map: Greece and Italy show small positive but insignificant estimates and Spain a small insignificant negative estimate. This uneven pattern is consistent with the importance of national political contexts in translating crisis pressures into contestation (Ferrara and Kriesi, 2022). It directs attention to political mobilization alongside direct exposure to crisis.

As a specification check for the 2010 Lisbon cutoff, I test alternative breakpoints from 2005 to 2015. The estimated association is statistically significant for every cutoff examined. Each specification changes the start of the period over which the association is estimated. The exercise therefore assesses sensitivity to the placement of the period boundary, with the positive association robust to these alternative boundaries. Online Appendix A.9–A.20 reports additional robustness tests including heterogeneity by party family, alternative specifications, and measurement validity checks.

Conclusion

The tension between historical and post-functionalist accounts of European integration has persisted in part because neither side possessed the data to resolve it. Historians documented elite contestation from integration's founding, but could not establish whether voters responded. Post-functionalists theorized about mass public responsiveness, but survey data begins only in the 1970s, leaving the founding period inaccessible. By combining manifesto data (extending to 1945) with expert surveys and electoral outcomes, this study overcomes the data limitation. The findings reveal that both phenomena coexisted: party contestation of European integration was a persistent feature of party competition throughout the post-war period, yet voters did not systematically reward such contestation until the Eurocrisis. The Lisbon period (2010 onward) is the only treaty era showing statistically significant electoral effects. The historical presence of party contestation and the emergence of a statistically significant positive electoral return only in the Lisbon period are thus distinct features of the findings.

This finding gives electoral substance to the post-functionalist distinction between the presence of opposition and its consequences in mass politics (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). The supply of party contestation was already present; the sovereign debt and migration crises offered opportunities to mobilize public concerns around European integration. Conflicts over economic adjustment, solidarity, and borders made questions of European authority tangible in domestic politics (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2018; Börzel and Risse,

2018). Contestation of crisis policies can, in this interpretation, be a route through which contestation of integration acquires electoral relevance. The statistically significant positive association found only in the Lisbon period is consistent with this account of public activation, in which electoral rewards depend on the political context connecting party contestation to voters' concerns.

The methodology developed here, combining Bayesian party estimates with electoral data, allows the study of electoral behavior in time periods previously inaccessible to behavioral research. Two directions for future research emerge from this approach. First, the methodology is potentially applicable to any policy domain where party positions can be estimated from text and expert sources; future work could apply this framework to study electoral responsiveness to party positions on immigration, welfare, or other contested issues across extended time periods. Second, the present analysis relies on national elections alone; future work could incorporate regional elections to expand statistical power and enable investigation of subnational heterogeneity in how voters respond to EU contestation.

The sleeping giant metaphor captures this connection between supply and demand (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004; De Vries, 2007). Parties offered opposition to European integration throughout the post-war period, while a statistically significant positive electoral return appears only in the Lisbon period. The post-functionalist interpretation places the awakening in the activation of public concerns: crises give parties opportunities to connect longstanding contestation to questions that matter at the ballot box. The significance of the

finding lies in the electoral relevance of that contestation, rather than simply in its historical presence.

Artificial Intelligence

The author used Claude Opus 4 (Anthropic, publicly available at claude.ai) intermittently throughout the research and writing process (September 2025 to September 2026) to assist with coding and language editing. All code was reviewed, tested, and edited by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

Data Availability Statement

Seimel, Armin. 2026. Replication Data for: Tracking a Sleeping Giant: Political Contestation of European Integration, 1945-2022 (EJPR-2026-0151). Harvard Dataverse (EJPR Dataverse). `https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NH2LU1`.

Supplementary Materials

Additional tables, figures, and robustness tests are provided in the online appendix, available as supplementary material.

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