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Partisan cueing and preferences for fiscal integration in the European Union

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ABSTRACT

Can political parties steer public preferences for highly contested issues? European integration has become increasingly politicised, forcing governments to heed constituents' preferences during international negotiations. Existing research suggests that parties can cue their voters, but it remains unclear whether public opinion responds to partisan cues on contentious, real-world European policies that directly affect national autonomy. To study the effects of in- and out-party cues on public preferences, we conducted a pre-registered information treatment experiment in five countries utilising real-world treatments that avoid deception while limiting the problem of pre-treatment. Applied to the case of joint European debt, we find that political parties can shape public opinion on fiscal integration, as both in- and out-party cues affect preferences. While this study focuses on EU politics, it has important implications for research on attitudes towards international cooperation more broadly.

KEYWORDS Partisan cueing; European Union; public opinion; political parties; information treatment experiment; fiscal integration

As the European Union (EU) has moved beyond regulatory integration and increasingly looks like a state, further European integration has become ever more politicised and controversial. While EU policymakers in the past were largely shielded from public opinion, Eurosceptic parties have mobilised opposition to European integration and, more broadly, international cooperation for political gain (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; De Vries *et al.* 2021). These challenger parties have capitalised on anti-globalization sentiments by politicising issues related to cross-border

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cooperation and interaction, such as regional integration, migration, or international trade.

This politicisation of European integration can have pervasive effects. Mainstream parties that support European integration have lost electoral ground to Eurosceptic parties (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Trubowitz and Burgoon 2022), and national governments face democratic constraints when negotiating at the European level (Beramendi and Stegmueller 2020; De Vries *et al.* 2021; Hooghe and Marks 2009). Governments pay close attention to their voters and are responsive to domestic public opinion (Hagemann *et al.* 2017; Hobolt and Wratil 2020; Schneider 2020). The systemic impact that Eurosceptic challengers can have on the international order manifested itself most prominently in the UK's withdrawal from the EU. From this perspective, it seems that governments and mainstream parties are at the behest of political entrepreneurs and a critical public when deciding about the future of Europe (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

At the same time, research has also shown that political parties can shape their voters' policy preferences (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Bullock 2011; Kam 2005). Party cues provide citizens with informational and directional shortcuts that facilitate citizens' decision-making and opinion formation (Druckman and Lupia 2016; Leeper and Slothuus 2014). Given the complexity of international affairs and its perceived distance from everyday life, elite communication can also affect citizens' approval of European integration and, more broadly, international cooperation (e.g. Dellmuth and Tallberg 2021; Dür and Schlipphak 2021; Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Steenbergen *et al.* 2007).

However, existing research has not addressed whether and how party cues affect citizens' support for contentious European integration steps in a comprehensive way. Previous research on party cueing in the EU context has mainly produced single-country studies with non-representative samples. In addition, these studies primarily focus on the effects of elite communication on more diffuse citizen attitudes towards European integration, such as regime legitimacy or polity support (Maier *et al.* 2012, 2017; Pannico 2017, Schneider 2020). Another recent study has demonstrated that the adoption of a policy by the European Council can drive popular support for that policy in Austria and Germany (Mikulaschek 2023). Yet, further European integration ultimately hinges on specific steps that are publicly contested, and it remains unclear to what extent political parties can lead public opinion on such contentious policies prior to adoption.

Moreover, while existing research on party cueing in the EU has significantly contributed to our knowledge about public opinion, several methodological challenges remain to be addressed. First, external validity

is low if entirely random treatment allocation leads individuals to receive unrealistic or deceptive cues that they are unlikely to receive in the real world (Gaines and Kuklinski 2011a; Leeper 2017). In reality, people may be more likely to be exposed to cues from some parties than others. Second, external validity also suffers when studies rely on simulated cues, rather than real-world party communication. The use of simulated elite communication has serious inferential limitations, as it is unclear whether the experimental stimulus has a bearing on real-world political communication (Barnfield 2023). Third, scholars have not been able to disentangle elite cueing effects on European integration from different types of elite sources. Yet, the extent to which the individuals feel sympathy or aversion to the source likely drives the direction of the cueing effect, as Aarøe (2012) shows in her study among Danish respondents. Finally, the use of single-country studies has limited the external validity of previous EU cueing studies. Precisely because future European integration steps can have differential effects across member states, it is essential to study elite cueing across different EU countries.

We address these challenges by using a pre-registered information treatment experiment to study the effect of partisan cues on preferences for fiscal integration in five EU countries: France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain.[1] Fiscal integration has been a highly controversial topic in Europe for years (Lehner and Wasserfallen 2019; Moland 2023; Walter *et al.* 2020). It affects both states' budgetary autonomy and the redistribution of wealth between states, thereby impinging on a cornerstone of national sovereignty (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018). However, despite the functional gains associated with fiscal integration (e.g. De Grauwe 2018), European citizens were reluctant to support extensive cross-border fiscal integration during the Eurozone crisis (Beramendi and Stegmueller 2020). We, therefore, examine the effect of party cueing on the question of joint European debt, or *Eurobonds*, in the context of the *NextGenerationEU* pandemic recovery fund.[2]

In our unique experimental design, we expose respondents to information on parties' actual position in a vote on Eurobonds in the European Parliament (EP). Using EP voting behaviour as elite cues allows us to expose respondents to real-life treatments and to run the same experiment across five EU member states that play a pivotal role in the debate over European fiscal integration. While real-world treatments are difficult to implement and hence rarely used, their usage has marked inferential benefits (Barnfield 2023). We do not randomise across different hypothetical interventions but rather randomise *exposure* to non-hypothetical interventions (see also Fernandez-Vazquez 2019). This significantly increases our experiment's validity vis-à-vis experiments with abstract or

artificial treatments. In addition, we examine cueing effects for respondents' 'in-party' (their preferred party) and 'out-party' (their least preferred party) (Bakker *et al.* 2020) to study both the role of positive and negative partisanship. Specifically, we estimate the effect of exposure to a party cue on a set of respondents compared to other respondents who could have received the same cue (based on their party preference) but did not. This counters external validity problems that are likely in fully random assignment (Gaines and Kuklinski 2011a; Leeper 2017).[3]

We find that partisan informational cues on specific integration steps have profound effects on preferences. Compared to respondents with similar in- and out-party preferences, respondents receiving in-party cues in favour of joint European debt are significantly more positive about joint debt, while people receiving in-party cues against joint debt are significantly more negative about it. Out-party cues in favour of joint debt moreover reduce support, but we do not find an effect of out-party cues against joint debt. Some country-level variation notwithstanding, these effects are relatively similar across national contexts and do not depend on ideological priors about the desirability of international cooperation. Overall, we thus find that party cueing can generate both support for and opposition to fiscal integration across political systems and the ideological spectrum.

Our study has important implications for the study of European integration. The results suggest that if parties take clear positions and voters are informed about them, they have ample latitude to shape citizen preferences about far-reaching integration steps, even on highly contested European integration issues. This suggests that mainstream political parties may be less constrained by the mass politics of European integration than commonly assumed. Indeed, we find that party elites can steer support for Eurobonds, irrespective of individuals' degree of EU support. As such, parties might be able to use the politicisation of European politics to their advantage by shaping public opinion. When it comes to public support for EU integration, political parties, therefore, seem to reap what they sow; in particular, there appears to be untapped potential for pro-EU parties to shape voters' political views. This finding also helps us to understand how the EU was able to reach the remarkable and unprecedented decision to establish a pandemic recovery fund, including joint European debt, in July 2020 without major political backlash.

The mass politics of European integration

Whereas policymakers in the past often enjoyed tacit public support for European integration efforts, since the 2000s European integration has entered the domestic political arena and has become increasingly salient

and controversial (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Public opinion has, therefore, become a relevant force for national governments to reckon with when pushing for further European integration. Scholars argue that democratically elected governments are increasingly constrained by critical citizens and opposition parties (Beramendi and Stegmueller 2020; De Vries *et al.* 2021; Hooghe and Marks 2009). Public debate on international cooperation in settings like the EU has become more controversial and polarised (Hutter *et al.* 2016). As a result, governments are more responsive to public opinion in supra- and international negotiations (Hagemann *et al.* 2017; Schneider 2020), and substantial steps forward in integration have become contingent on public support.

One particularly contentious area of European integration is fiscal integration.[4] Fiscal integration implies some form of fiscal risk-sharing across borders and touches upon core state powers related to budgetary autonomy (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018). Nevertheless, fiscal integration is often considered a prerequisite for the survival and thriving of an international organisation like the EU (e.g. De Grauwe 2018; Mundell 1961). The Eurozone crisis, in particular, exposed significant deficiencies of a supranational monetary union without centralised fiscal policies. To alleviate the fragility of the Eurozone, economists have proposed that member states issue joint bonds (De Grauwe 2018, 240). Joint debt liability increases the creditworthiness of Europe's governments by shielding the common currency area from the destabilising influence of financial markets.

However, fiscal integration, and especially joint debt, is a highly controversial issue in the EU (Lehner and Wasserfallen 2019; Moland 2023). On the one hand, policymakers in Northern Europe have highlighted that joint debt may lead to 'moral hazard'. They fear that joint liability incentivizes imprudent debt issuance – to the detriment of 'responsible' member states. Common debt may also suffer from lower credit ratings compared to triple-A-rated northern member states (De Grauwe 2018, 240). Moreover, voters in Northern European countries expressed strong opposition to fiscal risk-sharing during the Eurozone crisis (Beramendi and Stegmueller 2020; Walter *et al.* 2020). They were sceptical about European bailouts (Bechtel *et al.* 2014, 2017) and vehemently opposed Eurobonds (Kanthak and Spies 2018; Nicoli 2019), as they feared significant financial transfers. The contentiousness of Eurobonds is exemplified by former German Chancellor Merkel's statement during the European sovereign debt crisis that there would be no Eurobonds 'as long as I live' (*Der Spiegel* 2012), a position that was strongly shaped by domestic politics and public opinion (Bernhard and Leblang 2016; Degner and Leuffen 2020; Howarth and Schild 2021; Schneider and Slantchev 2018).

Southern European member states, on the other hand, were reluctant to accept strict common budgetary and fiscal rules that Northern European governments demanded in exchange for limited fiscal support. EU bail-outs during the Eurozone crisis were conditional upon stringent austerity measures, which reduced support for fiscal integration in southern member states, such as Greece (Jurado *et al.* 2020). Experimental evidence from Italy shows that citizens would be reluctant to stay in the Eurozone if membership was conditional on further fiscal consolidation (Baccaro *et al.* 2021, 2023). This intense contestation over fiscal integration returned at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic when multiple governments called for introducing joint European debt to fight the pandemic.

Party cues and preferences for European integration

The politicisation of European politics has led domestic governments and mainstream parties to respond to (anti-European) public opinion (Hagemann *et al.* 2017; Schneider 2018, 2020) and anti-globalization challenger parties (Meijers 2017). Yet, citizens' preferences for European integration – also regarding fiscal integration – are not independent of political supply. Public opinion responds to elite communication, allowing political parties to actively shape citizens' political preference formation (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Kam 2005; Zaller 1992). Previous studies have shown that citizens adopt party cues as a heuristic to form accurate judgments or to bolster and rationalise political identities (Bullock 2011; Leeper and Slothuus 2014).

Given the complexity of European politics, elites are likely to have particularly strong leverage over citizens' preferences for European integration. Studies on elite persuasion in international politics have shown that while citizens' foreign policy preferences are not purely steered by political elites (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017), elite cues can play an essential role in shaping public opinion (Gabel and Scheve 2007; Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Steenbergen *et al.* 2007) – especially when elite messages are clear and unambiguous (Mutz 2021). Recent scholarship has shown that party cueing affects citizens' *diffuse* support for international cooperation and European integration. For instance, Dellmuth and Tallberg (2021) show that elite communication can affect the legitimacy perceptions of international organisations in Germany, the UK, and the US. With respect to European integration, studies have found that political elites can drive overall support for European cooperation (Gabel and Scheve 2007; Maier *et al.* 2012, 2017; Pannico 2020; Steenbergen *et al.* 2007).

However, the deepening of the EU depends on *specific* integration steps that directly affect national autonomy (cf. Easton 1975). Rather than

studying how parties shape citizens' views on the EU in general, it is important to study partisan cueing for specific, contentious real-world integration proposals (see also Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Mikulaschek 2023; Stoeckel and Kuhn 2018). European integration in so-called 'core state powers' is particularly controversial because such policy areas are closely linked with collective identity (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018). Since the future of the EU increasingly depends on public support, it is pertinent to understand how political parties can shape public preferences about such contentious integration steps.

Moreover, previous research on party cueing on EU integration emphasises that the public is open to cues from knowledgeable elites they trust. However, elite persuasion by an opposing political party can provide citizens with meaningful information that could inform their political preferences (Aarøe 2012; Kam 2005; Somer-Topcu and Tavits 2023). Rathje *et al.* (2021), for instance, find that out-group aversion drives individuals' engagement. Aarøe (2012) notes that *out-party* cues can lead to *contrast effects*, i.e. lowering support for the elite's position among Danish respondents.

We investigate whether in- and out-party cues affect support for the introduction of joint European debt, a specific integration step that is highly contested. Existing research shows that preferences for fiscal integration are not exclusively shaped by more general attitudes towards European integration (Kleider and Stoeckel 2019). This should give parties ample space to shape preferences. We thus expect that in-party cues from parties that support Eurobonds have a positive effect on respondents' Eurobonds support vis-à-vis the control group, which does not receive a party cue. In contrast, in-party cues from parties that oppose Eurobonds should have a negative effect on respondents' support compared to the control group. Specifically, for in-party cues, we formulate the following hypotheses:

> Hypothesis 1a: Respondents receiving an in-party cue in favour of common European debt support Eurobonds more than respondents in the control group.

> Hypothesis 1b: Respondents receiving an in-party cue in opposition to common European debt support Eurobonds less than respondents in the control group.

We expect out-parties cues to have the opposite effect, as they also provide respondents with information about the policy at stake. If respondents are informed that a party they strongly dislike supports or opposes a given policy, it can influence their view of the policy. We, therefore, posit the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Respondents receiving an out-party cue in favour of common European debt support Eurobonds less than respondents in the control group.

Hypothesis 2b: Respondents receiving an out-party cue in opposition to common European debt support Eurobonds more than respondents in the control group.

Table 1 shows an overview of our pre-registered expectations.[5]

Table 1. Expected effects of party cues on support for Eurobonds relative to the control group.

	Party position on European debt	
Treatment group	Support	Opposition
In-party	+	−
Out-party	−	+

Data and methods

Extant studies on party leverage on support for international cooperation have relied on indirect observational evidence (Gabel and Scheve 2007; Steenbergen *et al.* 2007), or on experimental evidence of diffuse regime support, covering a limited number of countries and parties (Dellmuth 2016; Maier *et al.* 2012, 2017; Pannico 2017, 2020; Stoeckel and Kuhn 2018). In contrast, we conduct a survey experiment to examine the persuasion effect of in- and out-party cues on a real-world, controversial integration issue in multiple countries, while limiting problems related to pre-treatment.

Given the differentiated nature of politicisation as well as the between-country polarisation on the issue of fiscal integration across the EU, we test our expectations in five member states. Specifically, we conducted the survey experiment in July 2020 (10 July–28 July) in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain. This selection ensures variation on important country-level variables such as the likely net recipient/contributor position from the recovery fund and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the five countries, Italy and Spain are net beneficiaries of the recovery fund of which the joint European debt was part of, while France, Germany, and the Netherlands are net contributors (Giovannini *et al.* 2020).

Our country selection also covers the most relevant member states involved in debates about debt mutualisation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Italy and the Netherlands represent the two opposing poles in the European discussion, where Italy represents the 'Southern bloc' that demanded pan-European solidarity, while the Netherlands represents the

'Northern bloc' (or more specifically, the so-called 'Frugal Four') that was reluctant to support cross-border transfers (De la Porte and Jensen 2021). Germany and Spain belong to the Northern and Southern camps, respectively, but took more moderate negotiation positions during the COVID-19 crisis, showing a willingness to compromise. Finally, although France had a clear negotiation position during the Eurozone crisis (Degner and Leuffen 2019; Lehner and Wasserfallen 2019), it is often a mediator between the Northern and Southern blocs.

We recruited 1,500 respondents per country, which gives us a sample of 7,500 respondents in total. The survey was conducted in the countries' main languages and the samples in each country were drawn from a large online panel provided by the survey company IPSOS.[6] Sampling quotas ensure that the sample in each country is nationally representative for the following categories: age, gender, education level, and region of residence (NUTS1-level). Moreover, we used a soft quota for household income.[7]

Fieldwork was conducted in the period when European governments agreed on the creation of the *NextGenerationEU* pandemic recovery fund, including jointly issued debt, at the July 2020 European Council summit. In the period preceding our fieldwork, joint debt was again a highly contested issue in Europe after nine heads of state had demanded that the EU should issue 'Corononbonds' in response to the pandemic in March 2020. This started a heated, political discussion within the EU that lasted for several months, and evidence from Google Trends shows that this discussion also reached the general public: Compared to previous years, the term 'Eurobonds' grabbed people's attention again in almost all countries under consideration, as the search volume on Google was only somewhat lower than during the height of the Eurozone crisis (see Figure A.1).[8]

Experimental treatment

In the information treatment experiment, we expose all respondents to a vignette that informs them about a real European Parliament (EP) vote on an amendment to a motion for resolution on the European pandemic recovery fund. The amendment was proposed on 16 April 2020, by Philippe Lamberts of the Belgian party *Ecolo* and the European party group Greens/European Free Alliance. It advocated for the issuance of joint European debt in the recovery fund.[9]

Despite the contentious nature of the issue of Eurobonds among member states during our fieldwork, we expect *exposure-based pre-treatment* in our study to be unlikely. We purposively derive our elite cues from a parliamentary vote that was not widely known to the general public. Specifically, we refer to an amendment vote on a symbolic motion of

Table 2. Vignettes for control and treatment groups.

Basic vignette (shown to everyone)		
The European Parliament recently voted on the question of whether the countries in the European Union (EU) should commit to so-called common European debt. In this case, EU countries would borrow money together on the financial markets as a group in order to help those EU countries who are experiencing economic problems because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For a substantial share of this new common debt, the EU countries would then be responsible together for paying it back.		
Control group ($n = 1/3$)	Treatment 1 & 2 ($n = 1/3$)	Treatment 3 & 4 ($n = 1/3$)
No further information	In this vote, **[in-party]** voted in **favour**. In this vote, **[in-party]** voted **against**.	In this vote, **[out-party]** voted in **favour**. In this vote, **[out-party]** voted **against**.

resolution in the EP in our experiment. The EP generally does not receive a lot of attention from national media outlets (Gattermann and Vasilopoulou 2015). This is especially true for motions for resolution, as these pertain to position-taking and do not constitute legislation acts. Amendments to such motions receive even less attention, and the EP considers a multiplicity of motions and amendments to those motions in a given week. The amendment vote that we focus on also received very little media attention.[10] It is thus unlikely that respondents had been exposed to information about their in- or out-party voting behaviour on this amendment before taking our survey. In other words, while the *issue* of Eurobonds was highly contested again in the months before our fieldwork, the vote on which our treatment is based occurred in a *venue*, the EP, that can be considered to have minimal visibility. Nevertheless, if respondents had been pre-treated by information about their in- or out-party's position on joint debt or the recovery fund more generally, our results can be regarded as a conservative estimate, as the experiment would identify the *additional* treatment effect of the experiment, alongside the real-world treatment (Gaines and Kuklinski 2011b, 450).

Our experimental design combines a randomised component with a mechanism where respondents are allocated to treatment based on their political preferences. Concretely, we randomly assigned respondents to one of three treatment groups, shown in Table 2.[11] One-third of respondents were assigned to the control condition and received the vignette informing them about the EP vote without a party cue. The second third of respondents were allocated to the condition in which the vignette was accompanied by a statement on how their in-party voted on the amendment. The final third of respondents were allocated to a condition in which the vignette was accompanied by a cue on how their out-party voted on the amendment. Within each treatment group, respondents received information about the actual position that their chosen in- or out-party, respectively, took in the EP vote. In other words, a

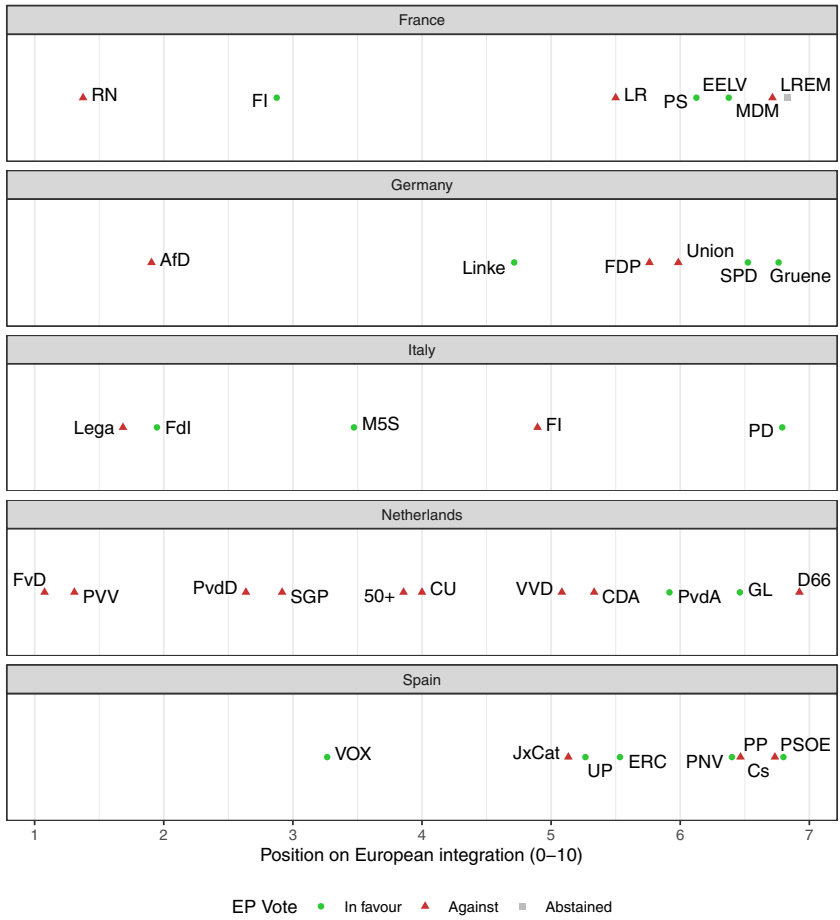


Figure 1. Voting behaviour of parties on the amendment by EU position.
Note: The figure shows the voting behaviour of all parties represented in the EP in each country by their general position on European integration. The parties' positions are based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Jolly *et al.* 2022). For a list of all party abbreviations, see Online Appendix A.3.

respondent's in- or out-party choice determined the specific information that they received in the experiment.

We determined the parties' positions based on their real voting behaviour on the amendment. All parties voted in a unitary fashion. In total, 40 political parties were included in the experiment.[12] A total of 16 parties voted in favour of the amendment, 20 parties voted against the amendment, two abstained from voting, and two were not represented in the European Parliament.[13]

Importantly, there is no straightforward relationship between parties' voting behaviour and their positional reputations on European integration (Figure 1) or left-right position (see Online Appendix A.5). Figure 1

shows that Eurosceptic parties like Unbowed France (*La France Insoumise*), Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*), and Vox (Spain) voted in favour of the amendment, whereas pro-EU parties like D66 (The Netherlands) and the People's Party (*Partido Popular*, Spain) voted against joint borrowing. This discrepancy between parties' general positions and their voting decisions renders *reputation-based pre-treatment* unlikely (Druckman and Leeper 2012; Slothuus 2016).

Before the experimental manipulation, we measured respondents' in-party (i.e. the party one supports) and out-party (i.e. the party one opposes). While in- and out-party measurement in two-party systems is straightforward, this is not the case in our five multi-party democracies. Some studies have circumvented this problem by reducing the number of parties that respondents could choose from, selecting only 'major parties' (e.g. Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018). Not all countries in our sample have two major parties, however. To measure a respondent's in-party, we, therefore, asked which party they would *most* likely vote for if national elections were held; a respondent's out-party is measured by asking them which party they would *least* likely vote for if elections were held (Bakker *et al.* 2020). Online Appendix A.6 shows the distribution of respondents' in- and out-party in each country.

Based on the combinations of the vignettes (in- vs. out-party) and the voting behaviour of the different parties (in favour vs. against), our design results in four different treatment groups: in-party in favour, in-party against, out-party in favour, and out-party against. Hence, while the overall treatment assignment is randomised, individuals receive treatments that are both realistic and meaningful for them. This is important because respondents are more likely to pay attention to informational cues from their in-party, but research also shows that out-group animosity drives engagement with the out-group's messages (e.g. Rathje *et al.* 2021). Online Appendix A.7 shows that we have a fairly balanced distribution of respondents across our experimental groups, although some differences exist due to the distribution of party positions and respondents' preferences.[14] Covariate analyses show that there are no major differences in socioeconomic characteristics between the treatment groups (Tables A.4 and A.5).

Analytical strategy

After the experimental manipulation, we measured two distinct dependent variables. First, we included two different measures of support for Eurobonds: We asked respondents to indicate their preference for joint European debt on a 7-point scale, and we asked them how they would have voted on the amendment ('in favour', 'against', or 'would not vote').

To aid the interpretation of results, we recode the variable's scale so that it ranges from 0 (complete opposition) to 1 (complete support). Given that we are interested in *support* for integration, we also recode respondents' vote choice: The variable takes a value of 1 if respondents would have voted in favour of the amendment and a value of 0 if they would have voted against it or abstained from the vote.[15]

Following the pre-analysis plan, we employ ordinary least squares (OLS) and linear probability regression (LPM) models to estimate the average treatment effects (ATEs). Given that our experimental design combines a randomised component with a component where respondents' preferences determine the specific treatment, we propose a new modelling strategy. To ascertain that our results are not affected by self-selection, we split up the control groups into four separate groups based on respondents' reported in- and out-party preferences. We then match respondents who received a party cue with respondents from the control group who did not receive a party cue but could have, in theory, received the same cue. Hence, we compare each treatment group with a control group constituted of respondents with a similar in- or out-party preference, respectively. For example, respondents who received the in-party cue in favour of Eurobonds are only compared to respondents in the control group whose in-party also voted in favour of Eurobonds. To this end, we estimate separate regression models to estimate the treatment effects of our different cues. This allows us to isolate the causal effect of the party cues that respondents actually received, avoiding the possibility that self-selection drives differences between the treatment and control groups.[16] To test the stability of treatment effects across countries and individuals, we compute heterogeneous treatment effects (HTEs) by country and respondents' priors on the EU in exploratory analyses.

Results

Before we examine the average treatment effects of party cues on support for joint debt, we explore the levels of baseline support for joint European debt in July 2020 in the control group. We see that support for joint debt was generally high, certainly higher than much of the existing literature would suggest. The left panel of Figure 2 shows that support for Eurobonds is left-skewed, with average support being 4.18 on a 1–7 scale. The right panel shows that 52.4% of respondents would have voted in favour of the amendment in the EP, whereas only 24.9% would have voted against it (with 22.7% abstaining). The high overall support for joint debt, however, masks variation across countries (see Figure A.8 in the Online Appendix). There was a clear majority in favour of common European debt in Italy

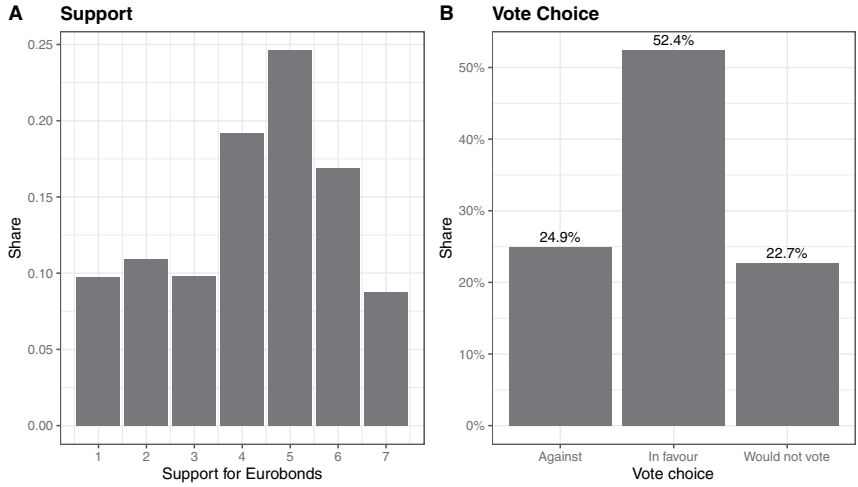


Figure 2. Support for Eurobonds in five european countries, pooled.
Note: (a) The left panel of the figure shows the distribution of respondents for a continuous measure of support for joint debt. (b) The right panel of the figure shows the distribution of responses to a hypothetical vote question. The full question wording is shown in Table A.4. Missing observations are excluded. Only data from the control group is shown.

and Spain, where 63.9 and 72.2% were in favour, respectively. In France and Germany, a relative majority was in favour, as 47.6 and 44.5% supported the proposal, respectively. Dutch citizens were much more sceptical: Almost 47% of respondents would have rejected the proposal; only 32.7% would have voted in favour.

Average treatment effects of partisan cueing

How do in- and out-party cues affect support for joint debt? Our results suggest that, despite the relatively high average support for Eurobonds, party cues have a substantial and statistically significant influence on support for Eurobonds. Figure 3 shows the ATEs of the four different cues on individuals' support for Eurobonds and their hypothetical vote choice. The effects are robust to controlling for country-fixed effects and individual-level covariates.[17]

We find that in-party cues have a large effect in both directions on support for Eurobonds, as shown in the left panel of Figure 3. Informing people that their in-party voted against joint European debt reduces support by 5.5 percentage points in the full model, compared to respondents whose in-party also opposed joint European debt, but who did not receive an in-party cue. Informing respondents that their in-party voted in favour of common European debt increases support by 3.6 percentage points, again compared to respondents whose in-party voted in favour of

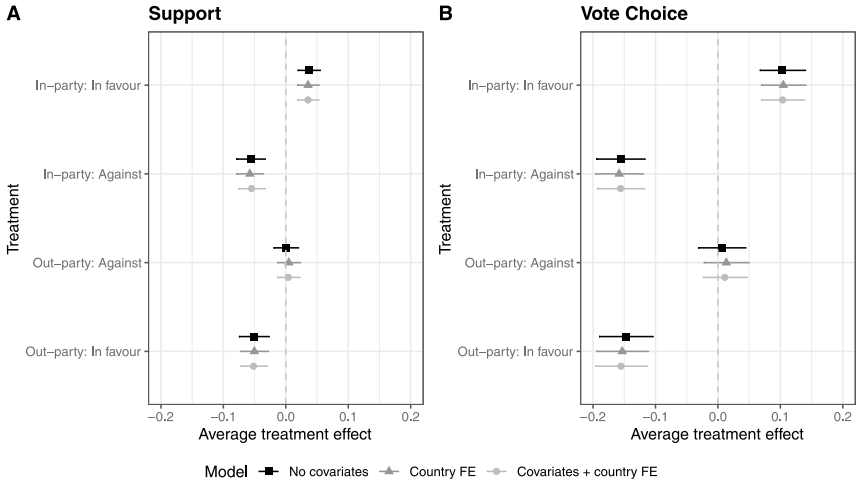


Figure 3. Average treatment effects of informing respondents about the positions of different types of parties on Eurobonds.
Note: The figure shows the average treatment effect of different party cues on support for Eurobonds. The treatment effects are estimated based on separate OLS regressions for each treatment, comparing respondents in the treatment group to respondents with similar in-/out-party preferences from the control group. For each treatment, Model 1 includes no covariates, Model 2 includes only country-fixed effects, while Model 3 includes country-fixed effects and several individual-level covariates (age, age squared, gender, education, income). The regression tables are shown in Online Appendix B.2.

Eurobonds, but who did not receive an in-party cue. This is clear evidence in support of Hypothesis 1a and 1b that respondents follow partisan cues and align their positions on European debt with their in-party.

The treatment effects are even larger for respondents' hypothetical vote choice in the EP vote. For example, informing respondents that their in-party voted against the proposal reduces their likelihood of voting in favour of it by 15.6 percentage points. This is the largest treatment effect that we observe. Informing respondents that their in-party voted in favour still increases the likelihood that respondents support the amendment by 10.4 percentage points.

With respect to out-party cues, we see that out-party cues in favour of joint debt have the expected effects, in support of Hypothesis 2a. Informing respondents that their out-party voted in favour of the amendment decreases support for Eurobonds by 5.2 percentage points vis-à-vis respondents whose out-party voted in favour of Eurobonds, but who did not receive an out-party cue. With respect to respondents' hypothetical vote choice, we see that out-party cues in favour of Eurobonds have a substantial effect (15.5 percentage points).[18] Yet, if respondents are informed that their out-party voted against the introduction of Eurobonds, this neither affects their support, on average, nor their vote choice in the hypothetical vote. We thus reject Hypothesis 2b.

We can speculate that the null-finding for out-party cues against Eurobonds is due to its informational content being the lowest of all four cues. One's out-party likely opposes many positions that one agrees with, hence the new information provided by the treatments is smaller. This is especially true in our case since most cues in this group referred to the voting behaviour of populist radical right parties, except in Spain. People who strongly dislike these parties are a heterogeneous group, but for most of them, it is no news that they oppose European debt mutualisation. For parties of the populist radical right who voted in favour of debt mutualisation (e.g. VOX in Spain), the informational content of our cues is higher, which helps to explain the asymmetric effect of out-party cues.

A number of robustness tests confirm the reliability of our study's findings (see Online Appendix C for a full discussion of the robustness tests.). First, treatment effects are driven by respondents who passed an attention check. We find even stronger effects than reported above when excluding respondents who failed the attention check (Figure A.11). Second, alternative models designed to isolate the causal effects of our treatments, including party-clustered standard errors and separate in- and out-party analyses with party-fixed effects, do not alter the results (Figure A.12).[19] The inclusion of respondents who received cues indicating their in- or out-party did not cast a vote in the EP amendment vote does not affect the findings, either (Figure A.14). Finally, multi-level regression models (Tables A.11 and A.12) as well as alternative operationalizations of the vote variable, using binary and multinomial logistic regressions (Tables A.13–A.15), also produce consistent results.

Overall, the results in Figure 3 show sizeable cueing effects for in-party cues (in both directions) and for out-party cues in favour of joint debt. The effects are substantially large. This suggests that information about parties' voting behaviour in supranational political arenas can, indeed, influence people's preferences.

Heterogeneous treatment effects of partisan cueing

The average results shown in Figure 3 may hide important variation in the treatment effect since preferences for Eurobonds vary by country and correlate with ideological priors on European integration. Country contexts and motivated reasoning may thus undermine the treatment effects in some instances. We test whether this is the case below by including interaction effects in our analyses and computing HETs.

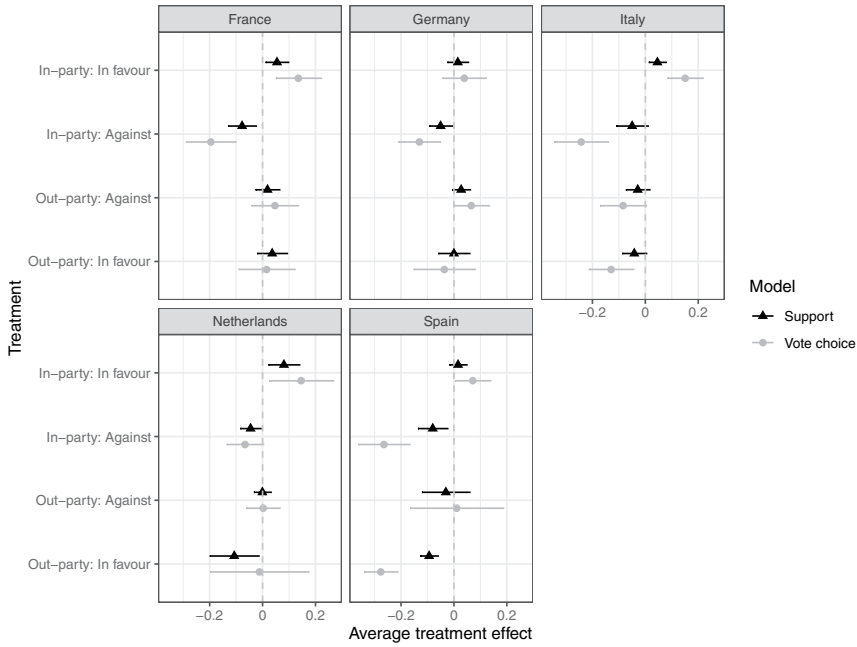


Figure 4. Party cueing effects on support for Eurobonds by country.
Note: The figure shows the heterogeneous treatment effects on Eurobonds support and vote choice by country. Effects are estimated based on OLS and LPM regressions using country-fixed effects.

Effects by country

Figure 4 shows the average treatment effect of party cues on support and vote choice by country. It is important to note that we lack statistical power to conclusively analyse country differences, especially for cues that are rare in individual countries (see Figure A.7 in the Online Appendix). Still, the effects of in-party cues on support for joint debt have the expected direction in most countries. While the effect of the 'in-party in favour' cue is statistically significant in France, Italy, and the Netherlands for both the continuous support variable and the vote choice variable, we do not detect such effects in Germany. In Spain, only the effect on vote choice is significant. In contrast, the 'in-party against' cues are statistically significant in all five countries. This is tentative evidence that parties have leverage over their supporters' preferences across different contexts.

As in the pooled sample, the effect of out-party cues against joint debt is not significant in any of the five countries for either dependent variable. The effects of 'out-party in favour' cues on support for joint European debt are subject to more country-level heterogeneity. While we see the expected negative and statistically significant effects in Italy and Spain for both the support and the vote variable, the negative effect in the Netherlands is only significant for the support measure. In France and

Germany, 'out-party in favour' cues do not have significant effects. Such differences between countries could stem from different levels of baseline support for joint debt in these countries (see Figure A.8 in the Online Appendix). As noted above, results could also be affected by the varying distribution of cues due to unequal positioning in the EP vote.

Overall, we find that the effects of in-party cues are mostly consistent across countries, despite insignificant effects in Germany for 'in-party in favour' cues. Out-party cues against joint debt are not significant in any of the five countries, while out-party cues in favour have the expected negative effect in three out of five countries. These findings suggest that although cueing effects in real-world scenarios can be subject to contextual variation, party cues can affect preferences in different countries in a similar way.

Effects by priors on European integration

As motivated reasoning is pervasive, people often ignore cues that go against their prior attitudes and beliefs (cf. Zaller 1992). Thus, it is important to make sure that our results also hold for people who are not ideologically predisposed to the cue. To this end, we examine the HTEs by respondents' priors on European integration.

We leverage a question, asked before exposure to treatment, on EU competencies for social and economic policy. In particular, we use the following question as a proxy for respondents' integration preferences: 'Regarding economic and social policies, should decisions be made mainly by the [COUNTRY] government, mainly by the European Union, or jointly?'. We distinguish between individuals who believe that decisions should mainly be made by the national governments ('nationalists') and all others ('supranationalists'). Figure 5 shows the treatment effects of party cues by responses to this question.

People who generally support supranational decision-making on socio-economic policy are also supportive of Eurobonds, as shown in multivariate regression analyses (Tables A.8–A.9). Nevertheless, we find that the party cues have very similar effects for nationalists and supranationalists alike, as the effects for both groups follow the same pattern found in Figure 3 based on the full sample. There seems to be no ceiling effect for respondents with 'supranationalist' priors. Respondents with 'nationalist' priors are, moreover, equally likely to follow in- and out-party cues in both directions ('in favour' and 'against' Eurobonds).

In sum, the results show that the treatment effects exist even among people who have different priors about European integration. Compared to other topics, priors may matter less in our case because some parties adopted surprising positions on Eurobonds compared to their usual

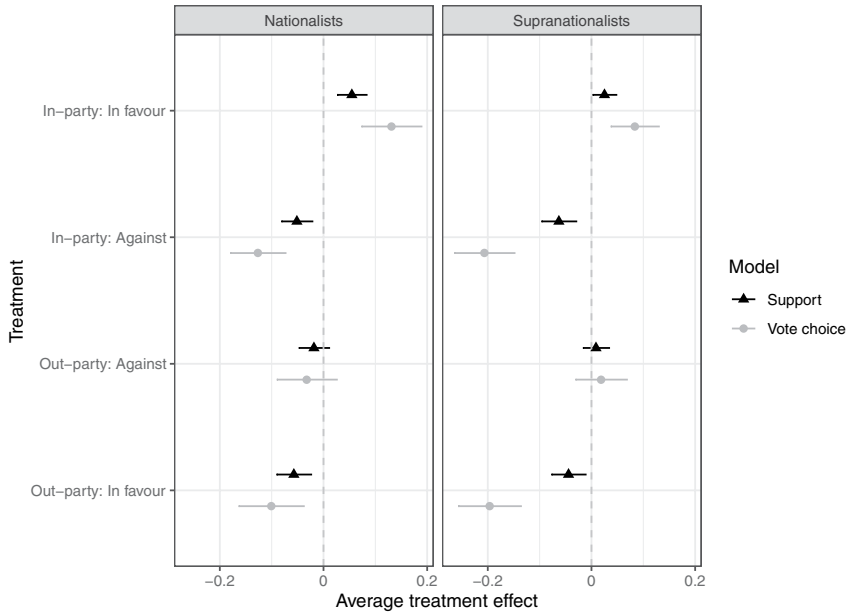


Figure 5. Party cueing Effects on support for Eurobonds by EU integration priors.
Note: The figure shows the heterogeneous treatment effect on support for common European debt by treatment group and EU integration priors. Effects are estimated based on OLS and LPM regressions using country-fixed effects.

position on European integration (as discussed above). Given such surprising positions, party cues provide new information, influencing peoples' views on EU fiscal integration, irrespective of their priors.

To further test the robustness of our findings, we also test whether the effects hold consistently across other ideological priors, party types, and key demographic characteristics of our respondents, such as education and concerns about COVID-19's economic impact. Overall, we find that party cues can shape preferences on EU fiscal integration across diverse contexts and subgroups. A complete discussion of these additional HTE analyses can be found in Online Appendix C.7.

Conclusion

European policymakers increasingly have to reckon with domestic political dynamics (Beramendi and Stegmueller 2020; De Vries *et al.* 2021; Hooghe and Marks 2009). Due to improved channels of democratic representation and politicisation by Eurosceptic challengers, European integration is no longer insulated from mass politics. This has led scholars to conclude that political parties, particularly mainstream or governing parties, are constrained by the public when negotiating further international integration.

In this study, we have argued that political parties can cue citizens on controversial and highly salient European integration steps. Applied to the case of European fiscal integration, we have leveraged a unique experimental setup that combines real-world party messages with experimentally randomised exposure. This has allowed us to examine how in- and out-party cues affect support for jointly issued European debt in five EU countries.

Our results show that information about parties' voting behaviour in the EP can influence people's preferences on European fiscal integration. Exposing respondents to information about their preferred party's voting behaviour has, on average, a marked effect on public opinion: Cues in support of joint debt drive support, while cues against joint debt depress support. With respect to the effects of 'out-parties', we find that cues in favour of joint debt negatively affect support. Despite some country variation, these results are relatively similar across countries. Moreover, they do not depend on people's prior positions on the EU, which suggests that motivated reasoning is largely absent, as people are open to changing their position in response to elite communication. Overall, our findings imply that cues from political parties can induce both support for or opposition to contentious European policies among citizens.

Our experiment using real-world information as treatments and accounting for people's priors while limiting pre-treatment has important inferential advantages in terms of external validity. The results suggest that *when* citizens are exposed to information about a vote in a second-order parliament like the EP this can influence public opinion. Ultimately, however, the generalisability of this finding depends on the extent to which citizens are *actually* informed about such voting behaviour in the real world. Furthermore, while our study presented respondents with cues from their in- and out-party, in reality, citizens are presented with multiple conflicting cues. Future research should examine how competing elite messaging on European integration can affect public support. Finally, it is also possible that the 'second-order' nature of the EP could have affected some respondents' tendency to follow cues. Yet, if anything, the use of an EP vote as stimulus material makes our finding of elite persuasion on European integration a conservative estimate. Moreover, since the elite communication in our treatment is the voting behaviour of national political parties (and not individual MEPs), we believe that our findings have a bearing on elite communication on EU integration beyond the arena of the EP. All in all, our findings suggest that both proponents and opponents of Eurobonds – be they political parties, EU institutions, media outlets, or civil society organisations – can manufacture support or opposition for European integration by publicising parties' voting behaviour in the EP.

Since fiscal integration in the EU is a particularly far-reaching and contentious instance of international cooperation, our results have implications for other forms of international cooperation beyond the EU, such as international trade, migration, or climate change negotiations. More directly, however, our findings shed light on why European member states were able to agree on the *NextGenerationEU* pandemic recovery fund in July 2020, which included joint European debt for the first time in the history of the EU. While previous studies found fiscal integration, and Eurobonds in particular, to be highly contentious (e.g. Beramendi and Stegmueller 2020; Moland 2023), our results show relatively high baseline levels of support for Eurobonds – even in the absence of elite cueing. This could suggest that EU governments' repeated emphasis on European solidarity during this crisis, documented by Ferrera *et al.* (2021), played a role in garnering public support for cross-country fiscal solidarity during the pandemic. While some have hailed the EU's decision to engage in some form of debt mutualisation as a 'Hamiltonian moment' (see Georgiou 2022), ultimately, time will tell if the *NextGenerationEU* pandemic recovery fund, indeed, paved the way for more durable fiscal integration.

Notes

1. This study was pre-registered online: https://osf.io/h5xvu. It received IRB approval from the Ethical Advisory Board of the Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research.
2. We use the terms 'joint (European) debt', 'common (European) debt', and 'Eurobonds' interchangeably throughout this article.
3. At the same time, our experimental design also mitigates the risk of endogeneity that inflicts studies using observational data to study public opinion.
4. We define 'fiscal integration' as the pooling of budgetary decisions under common institutions shared by participating governments.
5. In the pre-analysis plan, we had also pre-registered hypotheses on the effect of cue reception on attitude certainty. Due to space constraints, we do not present those results in this article.
6. In Catalonia, respondents could choose between taking the survey in Spanish or Catalan.
7. Online Appendix A provides further information on our survey.
8. This was especially the case in the northern European countries, Germany and the Netherlands, where the term 'Eurobonds' was as often searched on Google as the term 'SARS.Cov.2' in the first few months of the pandemic (see Figure A.2 in the Online Appendix). In other countries, the term was clearly much less searched on Google than the official name of the virus.
9. Online Appendix A.2 shows the amendment text.
10. The amendment was one out of 80 amendments to that specific motion for resolution (B9-0143/2020).
11. We kept the vignettes as simple as possible, without omitting any necessary detail.

12. Table A.3 in the Online Appendix gives an overview of all these parties, how they voted, and how the cue was coded.
13. Four parties in our sample were accompanied by the 'cue' that the party did not vote on the issue. *Le République en Marche* and *Italia Viva* abstained in the EP vote and *Debout la France* and the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) did not have a seat in the EP. In our main analyses, we drop respondents who received the cue that their in- or out-party did not participate in the vote, as this cue is not of substantive interest but was only included to reflect the real-life situation and to include all parties. Very few respondents selected the four relevant parties as their in- or out-party, except in France, given that *La République en Marche* abstained from the vote.
14. In particular, we have somewhat fewer respondents in the 'in-party: against' and 'out-party: in favour' groups.
15. Online Appendix A.2 provides more information on all key variables, including their operationalization and summary statistics.
16. By splitting the control group into four groups, we deviate from the pre-analysis plan, which stipulated the use of a single control group. Yet, we deem this new operationalization superior, as it allows us to avoid the risk that the findings are driven by self-selection. Results from analyses following the pre-analysis plan are shown in Table A.10. Moreover, we also conduct further robustness tests (see below).
17. Further regression analyses show that the results are similar if additional control variables are included in the models (see Tables A.8 and A.9).
18. All effect sizes discussed in the text refer to models that include covariates and country-fixed effects.
19. This is also supported by the descriptive differences in support for Eurobonds by treatment group shown in Figure A.13.

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Data availability statement

The data is publicly available on Harvard Dataverse at: Meijers, Maurits; Bremer, Björn; Kuhn, Theresa; Nicoli, Francesco, 2025, 'Replication Data for: Partisan Cueing and Preferences for Fiscal Integration in the European Union', https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/RNSKQV, Harvard Dataverse.

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