

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Time is on my side? The temporal proximity between elections and parties' salience strategies

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## Abstract

The emphasis national parties put on European Union (EU) issues in their manifestos varies to a great extent between countries. A systematic explanation of this variation is, however, still lacking. We address this gap by exploring the effect of the temporal proximity between national and European Parliament (EP) elections within the national electoral cycle on national parties' EU issue emphasis. Multilevel mixed-effects Tobit regressions on a sample of 956 manifestos, produced by 340 parties running for national elections in 27 EU member states between 1979 and 2019, indicate that temporal proximity displays a positive effect on national parties' EU issue salience: the closer in time EP elections are to national elections within the national electoral cycle, the more parties emphasize EU issues in their national election manifestos. This is particularly the case for non-Eurosceptic parties. These findings have important implications for our understanding of party competition in EU member states.

**Keywords:** manifestos; Euroscepticism; electoral cycle; issue emphasis; EU

## Introduction

European Union (EU) issues have gained increasing importance in election campaigns in European democracies in recent years (see Hutter and Grande, 2014; Hellström and Blomgren, 2016), although the issue of European integration is still 'moderately politicized at best' (Hoeglinger, 2016, p. 54) and the saliency of EU issues for parties in national election campaigns is low (Steenbergen and Scott, 2004; Pennings, 2006; Netjes and Binnema, 2007; Green-Pedersen, 2019). Moreover, 'parties put less emphasis on EU matters in national election manifestos than in Euromanifestos, whereas they take a rather similar position towards the EU in both electoral arenas' (Braun and Schmitt, 2020). The authors explain these findings by the different strategies pursued by parties in multilevel electoral systems because there are different issues at stake in elections for the European Parliament (EP) and the national parliament, that is, parties see EU matters as more important in EP than in national elections.

Yet it is unclear if this mechanism regarding the salience of EU issues in national and EP elections works uniformly for all party manifestos drafted for national and EP elections, regardless of their temporal proximity. We argue that this is not the case. Rather, the time span between national and EP elections within the national electoral cycle should matter for parties' emphasis of EU issues, that is, *the temporal proximity of national and EP elections works as both a direct and a conditioning factor on national parties' EU issue emphasis.*

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Although the extant literature includes variables capturing temporal aspects of party competition (e.g. previous party positions, issue emphasis, and positional shifts), these factors are all located at the same level of analysis, that is, variables at the national level are compared with other variables at the national level. Yet parties organized in multilevel systems will also react to external events, electoral results, and the electoral cycle at other levels of the political system (see e.g. Reif, 1984; Weber, 2007). Moreover, election manifestos are not written in isolation from each other but rather with an eye on content, positions, and issue emphasis of manifestos at other political levels, especially if elections are sufficiently close in time (Däubler, 2012; Braun and Schmitt, 2020).

We provide novel evidence on time-related aspects determining parties' EU issue emphasis strategies in their national election manifestos. We build on existing studies analysing the determinants of EU salience in party manifestos (Pennings, 2006; Netjes and Binnema, 2007; Braun and Schmitt, 2020), and we expand the geographical focus to Central and Eastern European (CEE) as well as Southern European EU member states. This matters because some authors argue that their results would not apply to parties in CEE countries due to the different patterns of EU-related party competition (Hoeglinger, 2016, p. 58). By relying on 956 observations (party manifestos per national election) from 340 parties running for national elections in 27 EU member states between 1979 and 2019, we explore the direct and conditioning effect of the temporal proximity of national and EP elections, within the national electoral cycle, on political parties' emphasis of EU issues in their national election manifestos.

The results show that time-related aspects matter for the explanation of parties' salience strategies in national election manifestos: the further away EP elections are from national elections starting the national electoral cycle, the less emphasis parties put on EU issues in their national election manifestos (a negative effect of around 34%). Furthermore, this cycle position of EP elections tends to condition EU issue emphasis strategies of Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties differently: the further away EP elections are from national elections within the national electoral cycle, the more Eurosceptic parties emphasize EU issues in their manifestos, compared to non-Eurosceptic parties (around 54% more), while temporal proximity diminishes these differences.

### National parties' election manifestos and the saliency of EU issues

Parties draft election manifestos for at least three reasons (see e.g. Däubler, 2012; Eder et al., 2017; Harmel, 2018; Harmel et al., 2018). Firstly, by summarizing their policy positions and making election promises on important issues, parties provide citizens with a document which might serve as a basis for their voting decisions. Secondly, election manifestos serve intra-party purposes by signalling parties' main campaign positions and issues not only to voters but also to party members and supporters. Thirdly, these documents are guidelines for parties' post-electoral bargaining on government formation and can be considered as 'authoritative' and 'representative statements for the whole party' (Klingemann et al., 2006, p. 164).<sup>1</sup>

Manifestos are widely used to analyse parties' policy positions, their emphasis of specific issues, and their responsiveness to voter preferences (for an overview see e.g. Adams, 2012; Budge, 2015; Fagerholm, 2016). The ways in which parties respond to voter demands have been investigated from two angles: position and salience. Parties try to adopt policy positions that are closely related to voter preferences (see e.g. Stimson et al., 1995; Ezrow et al., 2011). Additionally, parties emphasize policy issues in their manifestos that are salient for voters (see e.g. Spoon and Klüver, 2014; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016). In this contribution, we will focus on the second strategy – the varying degree of issue emphasis, that is *saliency*.

One core assumption of salience theory is that parties strategically choose to manipulate the saliency of issues (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Klingemann et al., 1994; Budge et al., 2001). Parties can 'own' issues (Petrocik, 1996) – due to their prior performance and history (Seeberg, 2017) – or

<sup>1</sup>Däubler (2012) summarizes the scarce literature on how parties prepare manifestos.

they might promote issues that have been previously ignored (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). We follow this line of research and argue that the emphasis put on EU issues in national parties' election manifestos will co-vary with several contextual and political variables.

EU issues have undoubtedly gained importance in national election campaigns in recent decades, even though the *extent* to which these issues are politicized is still contested (see De Vries, 2007; Kriesi, 2007; Green-Pedersen, 2012, 2019; Hutter and Grande, 2014; Hoeglenger, 2016; Gross and Schäfer, 2020). On the one hand, this comes as no surprise since national elections are still mainly about domestic issues. On the other hand, this raises the question of why we would even expect parties to address EU issues in their national election manifestos in the first place. National politics in European countries is more and more intertwined with EU issues. EU directives, EU national and regional transfer of money as well as EU crises have an impact on domestic politics and citizens' everyday lives. Consequently, we would argue that national parties cannot ignore the European political sphere and must address EU issues in their manifestos.

Previous research shows that parties do emphasize EU issues to a much lesser extent than other issues in their national election manifestos. This is particularly the case for large, mainstream parties (Green-Pedersen, 2012, 2019) or dominant parties (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). The main explanatory factor for why parties put *more* emphasis on EU issues in their national election manifestos is the salience of EU issues at the party system level (see e.g. Steenbergen and Scott, 2004; Netjes and Binnema, 2007). Yet these findings based on manifesto data only explain differences in national parties' EU issue emphasis *between countries*, not *within* a country. We therefore add an additional argument that sheds light on the differences in national parties' EU issue emphasis both between countries and within a country: the temporal proximity of national parliamentary elections and EP elections within the national electoral cycle.

### Temporal proximity of national and EP elections and parties' EU issue emphasis in national election manifestos

The rationale for our temporal proximity argument has two aspects. First, even though manifestos tend to get longer over time (see e.g. Dolezal et al., 2012), there is a limit to how many finely detailed policy issues parties can emphasize. Parties must decide which issues they want to highlight, and which pledges they want to include (also with regard to post-electoral bargaining on government formation). Second, drafting manifestos can be time-consuming for the party organization, especially in parties that have a long process from drafting the first version of the manifesto, to consulting party activists and party factions, to adopting the final manifesto in a congress (see Däubler, 2012; Braun et al., 2019).

Since manifestos are to a large extent not re-used from one election to the other but heavily updated, parties must allocate resources for drafting manifestos for each and every new election, be it at the European, national, or sub-national level (see Dolezal et al., 2012). We argue that if two elections at different layers of a multilevel political system are close in time, then parties need to decide which issues they will focus on in their respective manifestos because the process of manifesto preparation is not happening simultaneously (Däubler, 2012, pp. 55–56). Regarding national parties' considerations when drafting EP election manifestos, they 'are expected to respond to the problem agenda in their immediate national environment, not least because it is on the national level that they are rewarded or punished for their campaign communication' (Braun et al., 2019, p. 802). Hence, national parties emphasize many national issues in their EP election manifestos. However, we argue that this argument could also be flipped around: if EP and national elections happen close to each other, national parties must also consider European issues in their national election manifestos.

Nevertheless, parties still focus much more on national than on European issues in both their national and EP election manifestos (see e.g. Braun and Schmitt, 2020) because they mainly

mobilize their voters in first-order election campaigns (Weber, 2007) and, therefore, also focus more on first-order than on second-order election issues to maximize their electoral support. Yet, although EP elections are still considered 'second-order' elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Corbett, 2014; Däubler et al., 2022) – and voters continue to use them as an opportunity to punish domestic governments, engage in protest voting, vote sincerely for small parties, or experiment with new ones (Reif, 1984; Weber, 2007) – the European content of these elections has increased in recent decades compared to the 1980s and 1990s (Steenbergen and Scott, 2004; Senninger and Wagner, 2015). With regard to national parties' position-taking on and emphasis of EU issues, parties actually try to 'demobilize' voters in domestic election campaigns (Weber, 2007, p. 523 emphasis in original). Due to their internal conflicts about European integration issues (see e.g. Hix and Lord, 1997; Lynch and Whitaker, 2013), or because they benefit from not politicizing EU integration, parties intentionally apply a strategy of de-emphasizing such issues in domestic election campaigns when national and EP elections are close in time (Weber, 2007, pp. 523–524). Weber's findings on voters' perceptual agreement regarding parties' positions on EU integration (party-level aggregates of individual-level survey data) seem indeed to indicate that the 'logic of demobilization [on the EU integration dimension] is most effective in the run-up to a first-order election' (Weber, 2007, p. 524).

The varying impact of the temporal proximity of first-order (national) and second-order (EP) elections is a recurrent topic in the literature on voter behaviour and electoral cycles in multilevel systems, because EP elections 'take place at different moments of their respective national (first-order) electoral cycles' (Reif, 1984, p. 248; see also Weber and Franklin, 2018, p. 833). This literature and its empirical insights, however, primarily deals with national parties' strategies during election campaigns, whereas our argument is based on national parties' strategies for writing manifestos. We acknowledge that national parties may have incentives to decrease their EU issue emphasis in their national election campaigns because voters mainly care about domestic issues in these first-order elections; however, due to the increase in the intertwining of politics at the national and supranational level, and because national government parties will be represented in the various EU institutions, we argue that national parties must address EU issues in their national election manifestos more than they do during their campaigns. The German parties' election campaigns for the federal elections in 2021 provide an example of this divergence in manifesto issue emphasis and campaign strategy. Even though, on average, parties' manifestos contained around three percent of content referring positively to European topics – and this value is even higher when factoring in the Alternative for Germany's additional six percent of manifesto content that refers to European topics negatively (see Burst et al., 2021, pp. 5–6) – European issues did not play a role during the electoral campaigns (see Faas and Klingelhöfer, 2022).

The closer national elections are to EP elections, the more parties are inclined to concentrate more on European issues in their national election manifestos. When an EP election is on the horizon, the media will increase its coverage of parties' positioning on and emphasis of EU issues in their national election manifestos, and parties do want to shape the public agenda with their electoral programme (on this manifesto-media link see Merz, 2017a,b).<sup>2</sup>

The close succession of national and EP elections can make EU issues more salient to voters because of priming by media, opinion leaders, or political elites (Rauh, 2015; Schulte-Cloos, 2018). This priming often takes the form of emphasizing the national executive's EU-related responsibilities and powers. Since member state governments decide on EU constitutive issues, both the media and more informed voters could reasonably expect to learn of parties' plans for the overall pace of integration, enlargement, and other EU polity-related issues from national election manifestos. This increased saliency of the EU for voters, facilitated by increased media coverage of EU

<sup>2</sup>We do not claim that media will shift its entire attention to EU issues when an EP election is on the horizon. Rather, we argue that the media coverage of EU issues will increase in comparison to situations when national and EP elections are taking place far away from each other.

issues (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019), could also alter parties' calculations of the costs of ignoring EU issues in national contests that happen close to EP elections. The plausibility of such adaptation is strengthened by the finding that temporal proximity of national and European elections leads to an increase in parties' responsiveness to citizens' issue priorities as indicated by parties' issue emphasis in manifestos (Spoon and Klüver, 2014).

Temporal proximity could also affect EU saliency through a different mechanism. Unlike other issues, such as health care or the environment, the party ownership of EU-related issues is contested in several member states (Guinaudeau and Persico, 2013). When an EP election takes place in close succession to the national election, all parties with a stake in EU issue ownership would anticipate a higher level of EU attention from competitors and would be incentivized to reassert their ownership claims via increased EU salience in their manifestos. This could spill over even for parties which do not compete over EU issue ownership. As Seeberg (2022, p. 291) has shown: 'high and consistent attention from all rival parties and proximity to an election' makes parties engage with their rivals' agendas. While his findings are restricted to one type of party communication (press releases) the same logic should apply to manifestos.

Therefore, we expect parties to increase the space assigned to EU issues in national election manifestos *when an EP election is imminent*. The latter point is crucial for our argument. We expect parties to draft their manifestos mostly in a present- and future-oriented manner, meaning that they will include *the time span to the next EP election* in their considerations, but not previously held EP elections. The general idea that manifestos are forward looking has recently been corroborated empirically by an analysis of the temporal focus of national parties' election manifestos in various countries, showing that, on average, less than ten percent of a manifesto focuses on the past (see Müller, 2022). Thus, our first hypothesis reads as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** *The closer a national election is to the next EP election within the national electoral cycle, the more will parties emphasize European issues in their national election manifestos.*

### Euroscepticism and the temporal proximity of national and EP elections

We also argue that the temporal proximity of European and national elections contributes to the reduction of differences between Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties' EU issue emphasis. Eurosceptic parties should emphasize EU issues more than non-Eurosceptic parties at all types of elections because they want to signal that they provide a political alternative for voters unsatisfied with the consensus of mainstream parties in favour of further European integration (Hoeglinger, 2016). It is in their direct interest to 'keep the [EU integration] issue alive and on the political agenda' (Steenbergen and Scott, 2004, p. 189). Since most Eurosceptic parties are not 'traditionally successful parties', they also 'benefit from emphasizing their relatively distinctive, and potentially, extreme issue positions' (Basu, 2020, p. 456) on the EU. This strategic choice also allows them to blur their positions on other policy dimensions, on which their stances might be less popular, or on which they might be perceived as less competent than other parties. Even though second-order elections, such as sub-national or supranational elections, are a good opportunity for Eurosceptic parties to attract voters (Gross and Jankowski, 2020; Schulte-Cloos, 2018), the mere fact of 'being Eurosceptic' is a brand claim for such parties which they should play out at all political levels on which they compete. Therefore, at the national level as well, Eurosceptic parties should emphasize EU issues in their manifestos more than other parties (see also Senninger and Wagner, 2015).<sup>3</sup> This assumption is complemented by the notion that non-Eurosceptic, mainstream parties do not want to put EU issues on the political agenda

<sup>3</sup>We do not anticipate the reinforcing effect of temporal proximity to vary depending on the ideological roots of EU contestation: the strategy should benefit equally hard and soft Eurosceptics (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008) and left and right variants (Braun et al., 2019).

and de-emphasize these issues as much as they can (see e.g. De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Green-Pedersen, 2012, 2019).

Yet when national elections take place right before EP elections, we would expect these differences between Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties to be diminished. Eurosceptic parties know that their electoral gains in national elections are larger, the closer in time national elections occur to EP elections (Schulte-Cloos, 2018; also see Somer-Topcu and Zar, 2014). This is explained by scholars with reference to the increased saliency of EU issues and the large visibility enjoyed by such challengers in the context of the proximity of elections. However, we argue that Eurosceptic parties will always be 'Eurosceptic' in their manifesto content, just as green parties will always be 'green', because it is their essential feature which distinguishes them from their competitors (cf. De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Green-Pedersen, 2019). Therefore, the temporal proximity of national and EP elections should not matter for Eurosceptic parties' manifestos drafting strategies as much as it does for non-Eurosceptic parties.

Consequently, we argue that the temporal proximity of national and EP elections matters more for non-Eurosceptic than for Eurosceptic parties' issue emphasis strategies. Non-Eurosceptic parties will put more emphasis on EU issues if national elections are close in time to the next EP elections, but they will display lower levels of EU issue emphasis if the next EP elections are still far away. We expect the differences between Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties regarding their varying degrees of EU issue emphasis in national election manifestos to be more pronounced the further away national elections are from the next EP elections. Thus, our second hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 2:** *Eurosceptic parties will emphasize EU issues in their national election manifestos more than non-Eurosceptic parties, the further away a national election is from the next EP election within the national electoral cycle.*

## Research design and data

To evaluate the hypothesized effects of the temporal proximity of national and EP elections on parties' emphasis of EU issues in national election manifestos, we rely on the Manifesto Project Database (version 2019b) (Volkens et al., 2019). In a first step, we restricted this dataset to only include manifestos from countries that were EU member states at the time of the national elections. In a second step, we deleted all national manifestos that are coded with missing values in the EU-related categories *per108* and *per110*. In a third step, we excluded all party lists running for national elections which comprised more than one party, that is, alliances and coalitions. In a fourth step, we excluded parties which did not gain parliamentary representation in the national elections. The Manifesto Project comprises many parties that did not gain parliamentary representation following national elections and we concentrate on relevant parties that had a realistic chance of crossing the threshold of parliamentary representation.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, we dropped all observations when no EP election took place between two national elections (see Table S1 in the supplemental material). Overall, our dataset comprises 956 observations from 340 parties running for national elections in 27 countries between 1979 and 2019.

## Operationalization of the dependent, independent, and control variables

The dependent variable is the salience of EU issues (*EU issue emphasis*) in party manifestos drafted for national elections. Using the aforementioned data set from the Manifesto Project (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006), which developed a classification scheme with 56 categories via

<sup>4</sup>Absent comparable polling data for all parties, elections, and countries under study, we use the outcome of the national election as a proxy for assessing a party's probability of entering parliament.



**Figure 1.** Illustrative example for calculating the independent variable *Cycle position*.

Notes: The figure displays the calculation of the independent variable *Cycle position*. *Cycle position* is calculated as the number of days between a national election in  $t$  (NPE $_t$ ) and the next EP election (EPE) ( $x$ ), divided by the total number of days between the national elections in  $t$  (NPE $_t$ ) and  $t+1$  (NPE $_{t+1}$ ) ( $y$ ), thus ranging from 0 to 1.

human coding of national election manifestos, we compute a party's emphasis of EU issues as the percentage of quasi-sentences in the manifestos by summing the two shares of 'European Community/Union: Positive' (*per108*) and 'European Community/Union: Negative' (*per110*).

To test the effect of the temporal proximity of national and the next EP elections on national parties' EU issue emphasis, we calculate the time span between national elections and the next EP elections, relative to the length of the country-specific legislative period at the national level (cf. Reif, 1984; Weber, 2007). The *Cycle position* is calculated as the number of days between a national election in  $t$  and the next EP election ( $x$ ), divided by the total number of days between the national elections in  $t$  and  $t+1$  ( $y$ ), thus ranging from 0 to 1 (see Figure 1). Low values indicate that a national election starting the legislative period in a country is close in time to the next EP election. Following the electoral cycle literature, this operationalization has three advantages: (1) using the national electoral *Cycle position* takes the varying lengths of legislative periods in the countries under study into account; (2) when drafting their national election manifestos parties already know when the next EP elections will happen, and they cannot manipulate the election date because this is decided at the supranational level; (3) whereas 'national elections occur on different cycles', EP elections are held every five years and 'fall at different points in these cycles' and this allows us to analyse variations both between and within countries (Weber and Franklin, 2018, p. 838).

Figure 1 demonstrates why we exclude observations where no EP election took place within a national electoral cycle: otherwise, we would end up with values greater than '1' if we took the national elections in  $t+2$  instead of the national elections in  $t+1$ . For example, we include the Danish parliamentary elections in 1984 and 1990 in the analysis but exclude the elections in 1987 because there were no EP elections within the national electoral cycle between 1984 and 1987. Furthermore, the Belgian example highlights why *Cycle position* can take on the values '0' and '1'. We deliberately set the value to '0' when there are concurrent national and EP elections *at the beginning* of a national electoral cycle because we assume that concurrent elections force parties to emphasize EU issues in their national election manifestos, and also because the media will increase its coverage of parties' emphasis of EU issues leading parties to try to shape the public agenda with their electoral programme (see Merz, 2017a, b). Therefore, *Cycle position* takes on the value '0' for the observations of the Belgian parliamentary elections in 1999, which were held concurrently with EP elections on 13 June 1999. If, however, an EP election is held concurrently *at the end* of a national electoral cycle, such as has been the case for the Belgian electoral cycle starting with the parliamentary elections in 1995, *Cycle position* takes on the value '1' because the national electoral cycle is exactly as long as the time span between the Belgian parliamentary elections on 21 May 1995 and both the parliamentary and the EP elections on 13 June 1999.

To test the conditional effect of *Cycle position* on the varying strategies of Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties, we use a dummy variable: being a *Eurosceptic party* is measured as a binary variable (value 1) if a party covered in the Manifesto Project Database is considered as Eurosceptic

by *The PopuList* (Rooduijn et al., 2019) and by De Vries (2018) and Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008).

We control for several factors that are regularly considered to influence parties' issue emphasis strategies when drafting their manifestos: first, we control for a party's status of being in government or in opposition when drafting a national election manifesto (*Government party*). One might expect a positive effect of *Government party* on *EU issue emphasis* because (a) government parties are directly involved in EU politics via the various EU institutions (Gross, 2021), and (b) government parties tend to write longer manifestos and include more issues than opposition parties, not least because '[g]overnment parties simply have more resources available' (Dolezal et al., 2012, p. 872). The data on a party's status of being in government or in opposition are obtained from the *ParlGov* database (Döring and Manow, 2020).

Second, we control for whether the manifesto was issued by a party campaigning in Central and Eastern Europe (*CEE party*) or in Southern Europe (*South European party*). We expect CEE parties to emphasize EU issues in their national election manifestos less than parties from other European regions (see Whitefield and Rohrschneider, 2009; Haughton, 2014). Election campaigns and manifestos in CEE are usually dominated by bread-and-butter issues and anti-corruption appeals, while EU themes remain marginal. Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia are coded as CEE countries.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the literature suggests different patterns and levels of EU politicization in Southern Europe compared to Northern Europe and CEE (Kriesi, 2016; Otjes and Katsanidou, 2017; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain are coded as Southern European countries.

Third, we control for concurrent parliamentary and EP elections (*Concurrent elections*), which is a hard test for our data because such elections impact the calculation of both the lower and upper limit of the independent variable *Cycle position*. Fourth, we control for two 'critical junctures' with regard to party competition over European integration: the Maastricht treaty, marking the largest authority transfer to the supranational level, and the 'Euro crisis' from 2010 on, which further intensified party competition over European integration and EU matters (see Schäfer et al., 2021). *Pre-Maastricht* receives the value '1' for national elections before 1994 (we expect a negative effect on *EU issue emphasis*), whereas *Euro crisis* displays the value '1' for all national elections from 2010 on (we expect a positive effect on *EU issue emphasis*).

Sixth, we include a party's general left-right position (MARPOR's *Rile*) to control for the empirical finding that it is mainly parties from the far-left and the far-right that are opposed to further European integration (see e.g. Hooghe et al., 2002), which might also be reflected in greater EU issue emphasis. Lastly, we use a variable to account for a party's EU issue emphasis in its previous manifesto (*EU issue emphasis<sub>t-1</sub>*). Some parties may have a stronger tendency to emphasize EU issues in their manifestos, which may not be captured by other variables in our models (e.g. preferences by party activists or political elites, see Spoon 2012).

## Results

We first present descriptive information on national parties' EU issue emphasis in their manifestos (for descriptive statistics of dependent, independent, and control variables see Table S2 in the supplementary material). On average, national parties dedicate only 2.81% of their entire national manifestos to EU issues. This is slightly lower than the 3.2% reported in Braun and Schmitt (2020, p. 644) and is due to the fact that they focus only on 15 Western EU member states, whereas we also include all Central and Eastern EU member states. While we find no difference in the average

<sup>5</sup>This operationalization also captures the fact that CEE parties ran in a smaller number of EP elections than many parties in 'older' EU member states. There is a negative correlation between the number of times a party ran for EP elections and being a CEE party (Pearson's  $r = -0.39$ ).

EU emphasis of government and opposition parties, Eurosceptic and Western European parties devote more space in their manifestos to EU issues than non-Eurosceptic and CEE parties (3.13 vs. 2.72 and 2.96 vs. 1.99 percent, respectively). Even though the Manifesto Project coding procedure tends to underestimate ‘the salience of EU-related issues’ (Guinaudeau and Persico, 2013, p. 151), this descriptive information already indicates that the manifesto salience of EU issues for national parties still is rather low. Nevertheless, the negative bivariate association between the mean of national parties’ EU issue emphasis at a national election and the cycle position (see Figure S1 in the supplementary material) lends support to our theoretical expectation about the effect of temporal proximity of national and the next EP election and parties’ EU saliency strategies. Moving from the lowest (mean *EU issue emphasis* = 3.69) to the highest (mean *EU issue emphasis* = 1.48) value of *Cycle position*, parties’ EU issue emphasis decreases by a factor of 2.5.

In the next step, we evaluate our theoretical expectations based on a multivariate regression analysis. The data is hierarchically structured, as party manifestos are written at a specific point within the national electoral cycle and are nested within countries. Given that these countries vary extensively in terms of the structure of party competition at the national level, we apply a multi-level mixed-effects Tobit regression with random intercepts at the country level to allow for varying mean emphasis of EU issue-levels across spaces (see Netjes and Binnema, 2007; Steenbergen and Scott, 2004; Hoeglenger, 2016). Using a Tobit regression is appropriate because the observations in the data can only take on positive values or zero for the dependent variable *EU issue emphasis*. The right-skewed distribution of *EU issue emphasis* (see Figure S2 in the supplementary material) requires a log-transformation of the dependent variable to meet the assumption of homoscedastic residuals underlying Tobit models.

The estimated results are presented in Table 1. The first model tests the direct effect of the temporal proximity of a national election and the next EP election on parties’ EU issue emphasis in their national election manifestos within the national electoral cycle (Hypothesis 1). The second model investigates the interaction effect between a party’s status of being a Eurosceptic party and the temporal proximity of national and EP elections within the national electoral cycle (Hypothesis 2). Model 3 re-examines the first two models by including several control variables.<sup>6</sup>

In line with Hypothesis 1, the regression analysis shows that *Cycle position* has a statistically significant negative effect on parties’ emphasis of EU issues in their national manifestos. Parties put less emphasis on EU issues in their manifestos, the further away the next EP elections are within the national electoral cycle. In other words, parties increase the space assigned to EU issues in their national election manifestos when an EP election is imminent. Because *EU issue emphasis* is log transformed, the fixed-effect coefficients of *Cycle position* displayed in Table 1 can be interpreted in terms of percentage change. On average, parties devote 34% more of their national election manifestos to EU issues when a national election and the next EP election happen at the beginning of the national electoral cycle, compared to situations where parties know when writing their national election manifestos that the next EP election will happen at the end of the national electoral cycle. An illustrative within-country example in this regard is the case of the Social Democratic Labour Party in Sweden, which has been in government when drafting national election manifestos in all but one of the elections under study here. As shown in Table S3 in the supplemental material, the Swedish Social Democrats varied their EU issue emphasis according to our theoretical expectations by putting more emphasis on EU issues when national and EP elections were close in time within the national electoral cycle, while displaying less emphasis when national and EP elections were far apart from each other within the national electoral cycle.

Regarding the conditioning effect of the temporal proximity of national elections and the next EP elections on the differences between Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties’ EU issue emphasis, we find support for our second hypothesis: the further away a national election is from

<sup>6</sup>The sample size decreases considerably once a party’s previous EU issue emphasis is included because the first appearance of a party in a national election is dropped, and there are parties covered only once in the data.

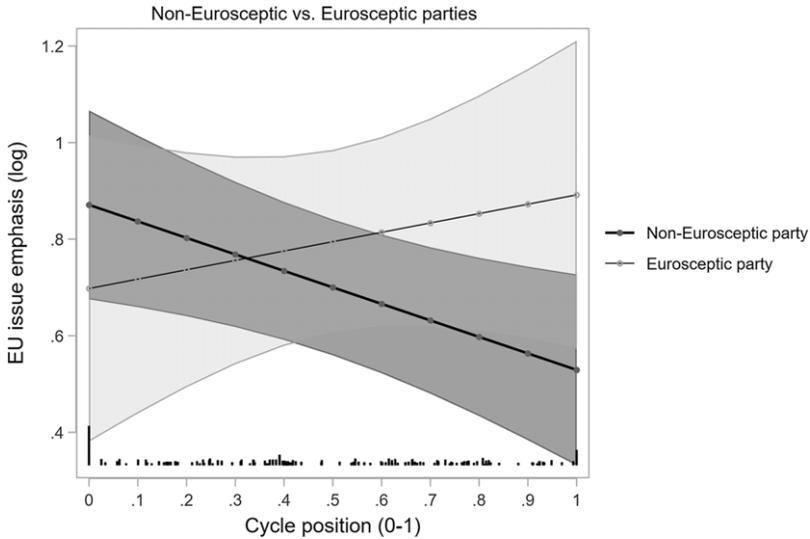
**Table 1.** Explaining EU issue emphasis in national manifestos

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<b>Hypothesis 1:</b>			
Cycle position	-0.2597* (0.1141)	-0.4219*** (0.1251)	-0.3418* (0.1404)
<b>Hypothesis 2:</b>			
Eurosceptic party		-0.3108* (0.1384)	-0.1732 (0.1649)
Cycle position X Eurosceptic party		0.7657** (0.2493)	0.5358+ (0.2814)
<i>Control variables:</i>			
Government party			0.0664 (0.0782)
CEE party			-0.3402+ (0.1821)
Southern European party			-0.0914 (0.1644)
Concurrent elections			-0.2738* (0.1336)
Pre-Maastricht			-0.0178 (0.0943)
Euro crisis			0.0001 (0.0865)
Left-right position			0.0017 (0.0019)
EU issue emphasis <sub>t-1</sub>			0.0678*** (0.0112)
Constant	0.7166*** (0.0850)	0.7864*** (0.0882)	0.7486*** (0.1301)
<i>Random effects:</i>			
Party manifesto level	0.7975 (0.0458)	0.7883 (0.0453)	0.6529 (0.0453)
Country level	0.0749 (0.0331)	0.0688 (0.0311)	0.0637 (0.0327)
Observations	956	956	621
Log Likelihood	-1174.5447	-1169.6223	-722.4362
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2357.0893	2351.2445	1472.8723
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	2376.5403	2380.4211	1534.9110

Notes: Dependent variable: EU issue emphasis (log). Multilevel mixed-effects Tobit regression. Standard errors are given in parentheses. Significance levels: +*P* < 0.10; \**P* < 0.05; \*\**P* < 0.01; \*\*\**P* < 0.001.

the next EP election within the national electoral cycle, the more Eurosceptic parties emphasize EU issues, whereas non-Eurosceptic parties tend to de-emphasize such issues (see Figure 2). On average, and compared to non-Eurosceptic parties, Eurosceptic parties devote 54% more of their national election manifestos to EU issues when a national election and the next EP election happen at the end of the national electoral cycle, compared to situations where parties know when writing their national election manifestos that the next EP elections will take place at the beginning of the national electoral cycle. The results displayed in Figure 2 and Model 3 in Table 1 lend additional support to the descriptive information that Eurosceptic parties put more emphasis on EU issues in their national election manifestos than non-Eurosceptic parties and corroborate previous findings for both national election manifestos (Green-Pedersen, 2012, 2019) and Euromanifestos (Braun et al., 2016).

As expected, a party's emphasis of EU issues in the previous election is positively associated with its current EU issue emphasis. Furthermore, the regression analysis shows that parties in CEE countries emphasize EU issues less than parties in other countries (see e.g. Pennings, 2006), whereas we find no difference between Southern and Northern European parties. In line with previous findings in the literature, we do not find a statistically significant difference between government and opposition parties' EU issue emphasis in their national election manifestos



**Figure 2.** Interaction plot.  
 Note: The figure is based on Model 3 in Table 1. The lines on the x-axis show the distribution of cycle positions in the sample.

(see also Netjes and Binnema, 2007; Spoon, 2012; Braun et al., 2016; Hoeglinger, 2016; Green-Pedersen, 2019, p. 20). Neither the Maastricht treaty and Euro crisis dummies, nor a party’s left-right position make a difference for national parties’ EU issue emphasis. Yet, we find a statistically significant and negative effect of concurrent elections, indicating that parties put less emphasis on EU issues when national and EP elections take place on the same day. This is in line with second-order election theory because both the media environment and voters’ interests are focused on the first-order national elections.

Since the operationalization of the independent variable *Cycle position* includes concurrent elections both at the very beginning and at the very end of the national electoral cycle, we re-run the models, this time accounting for a possible non-linear effect by including the squared term of this variable (see Weber, 2007). The results remain substantially the same. If national elections are close in time to the next EP elections within the national electoral cycle (but not on the same day), then parties put more emphasis on EU issues, compared to situations when national and EP elections are taking place far away from each other. Our results remain robust to additional tests, such as the exclusion of three outliers in our data set in terms of their high degree of EU issue emphasis in national election manifestos<sup>7</sup>, or the exclusion of parties that do not emphasize EU issues at all in their election manifestos (even though this is a deliberate choice by these parties). Moreover, and counter to our theoretical argument, we test if there is an alternative temporal explanation for national parties’ EU issue emphasis, namely the time span between a national election and the closest EP election, meaning that we now change the operationalization of the main independent variable and use a variable capturing the absolute difference in days between a national and an EP election (*|Days between elections|*) instead of *Cycle position*. We do not find any statistically significant effect of this variable and are therefore confident to conclude that it is *not* just the temporal proximity of national and EP elections but rather the temporal proximity of national and *the next* EP elections, accounting for the national electoral cycle. All results of the robustness tests are included in Tables S4–S7 in the supplementary material.

<sup>7</sup>Liberal Reformation Party in Belgium 1999: 27.8% EU issue emphasis; Liberal Party in Denmark 1990: 25.7%; Portuguese Social Democratic Centre Party 1987: 24.2%.

## Discussion and conclusion

What explains parties' varying emphasis of EU issues in their national election manifestos? Using information on 956 election manifestos drafted by 340 parties for national elections in 27 EU member states between 1979 and 2019, we demonstrate that a previously ignored factor, the *temporal proximity of national and the next EP elections*, influences the salience of EU issues in national party manifestos. Parties devote more attention to EU issues in their national election manifestos the sooner the next EP election is going to happen. Yet, by dedicating only 2.81% of manifesto content to EU issues, national parties still only focus to a small extent on EU-related topics. This complements previous findings on parties' rather low EU issue salience during the last months of their national election campaigns (Senninger and Wagner, 2015; Hoeglinger, 2016).

By highlighting the importance of considering the temporal proximity of national and EP elections for the explanation of national parties' EU issue emphasis, our study adds a supply side-perspective (see also Brunsbach et al., 2012; Braun and Schmitt, 2020) to the literature on the connection between first- and second-order elections. That literature showed that populist radical right parties or opposition parties benefit electorally when national and European elections are close in time (see e.g. Somer-Topcu and Zar, 2014; Schulte-Cloos, 2018) and that voters tend to vote sincerely in EP elections held closer to national elections, whereas they engage more often in protest voting when the European elections take place at considerable temporal distance from national ones (van der Eijk et al., 1996; Gabel, 2000). Our results indicate that Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties take this kind of voting behaviour into account by varying their EU issue emphasis in national election manifestos: the further away EP elections are from national elections within the national electoral cycle, the more Eurosceptic parties emphasize EU issues, whereas non-Eurosceptic parties decrease their EU issue emphasis.

Furthermore, we add new empirical evidence on the importance of considering time-related aspects in politics (see e.g. Goetz, 2014). Previous research has shown that the legislative electoral cycle, in particular, influences the behaviour of political actors regarding coalition parties' issue attention (Sagarzazu and Klüver, 2017), incumbents' responsiveness to public opinion (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2019), or government and opposition parties' short- and long-term issue emphasis strategies (Schröder and Stecker, 2018; Seeberg, 2022), and this behaviour can also be traced in political actors' parliamentary speeches (Schwalbach, 2022). Our theoretical arguments and empirical results speak to this literature by highlighting the fact that political actors seem to take the national electoral cycle and the next EP elections into account when deciding on their issue emphasis strategies in their national election manifestos.

Nevertheless, at least three caveats of this study need acknowledging. First, our analysis specifically dealt with how temporal proximity to European elections influences the *salience* of EU issues for parties in their national election manifestos. It has not been the purpose of this contribution to investigate whether this temporal proximity also influences *how* parties talk about EU issues in their manifestos. This might be a fruitful route for future research. A natural expectation would be to observe a higher level of consistency in positions for elections taking place in close succession. Nevertheless, parties might still strategically adapt their positions following debates in the election campaign and updated information about the (un)popularity of certain EU-related stances. Irrespective of this, the fact that we observe diminishing differences in EU issue salience between Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties when the two sets of elections are close in time, contributes to a recent body of work identifying the growing strategic efforts of Europhile parties in priming EU issues in electoral debates (Braun and Grande, 2021; Jurado and Navarrete, 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2021).<sup>8</sup>

Second, since we rely on manifesto data, we do not fully capture how parties at the national level strategically alter their emphasis of EU issues *throughout* the national electoral cycle.

<sup>8</sup>We thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

Government parties might highlight EU issues more during the ‘democratic life cycle’ of governments (Strøm *et al.*, 2010) when they have to undertake actions, whereas they have to focus on a broader set of issues in their manifestos to address as many voters as possible before an election. This could explain why we do not find significant differences between government and opposition parties’ EU issue emphasis in their manifestos.

Lastly, our argument about temporal proximity influencing parties’ salience strategies in their election manifestos is neither restricted to the comparison of national and EP elections nor to EU issues. Parties may also face certain constraints in allocating resources for the preparation of manifestos when national and sub-national elections happen close to each other. This has already been shown for Sinn Féin in the Irish national elections and the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in 2007 (see Däubler, 2012, pp. 55–56). Furthermore, if two elections at different layers of a multi-level political system are taking place close in time to each other, parties may also face the dilemma of answering the following question: ‘Which issues do we emphasize in which manifesto?’ Do parties stick to the issues where they legally can regulate or change the policy output? Or do parties also highlight issues that they are legally not responsible for but which they know their voters and party supporters would probably care about? Based on our theoretical considerations and empirical findings, we would expect that particularly the answer to the latter question is influenced by time-related aspects.

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773922000376>.

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