

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Under pressure? How regional dominant parties shift their EU positions when challenged by Euroskeptical parties

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ABSTRACT

With Euroskeptical parties being on the rise across European Union (EU) member states, dominant parties are pressured to reconsider their positions regarding a further European integration. Yet, dominant parties' positional reactions to Euroskeptical challenger parties are not limited to the national level but are also required at the regional level. Transferring insights regarding party competition at the national and European levels to the regional level in Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (2008–2017), we show that regional dominant parties shift towards more positive EU positions in response to electorally successful Euroskeptical challenger parties, particularly when these challenger parties emphasised EU issues to a larger extent. These findings have important implications for our understanding of party competition in European multi-level systems in the electoral arena, for the intricacies of regional party competition in Europe, and for dominant parties' strategies when faced with Euroskeptical challengers.

KEYWORDS

Euroskepticism; party competition; multi-level systems; dominant parties; challenger parties

Introduction

Dominant parties, that is, parties with government experience controlling 'the provision of policies' (De Vries and Hobolt 2020, 21), are increasingly challenged by Euroskeptical parties. The extent to which dominant parties should react to these challenger parties, i.e. parties that have never been in government (De Vries and Hobolt 2020), in national and European Parliament (EP) elections has sparked a lively debate in recent years (see, e.g. Adam et al. 2017; Filip 2021; Meijers 2017; Meijers and Williams 2020). One prominent suggestion in the literature is that Euroskepticism signals a lack of citizens' support for and content with European integration (de Wilde and Trenz 2012). Therefore, dominant parties should adjust their positions on and emphasis of European Union (EU) issues accordingly to prevent Euroskeptical challenger parties from becoming electorally stronger (Meijers 2017; Meijers and Williams 2020). This adjustment seems necessary because Euroskeptical challenger

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parties successfully act as ‘political entrepreneurs’ and drive ‘a wedge between coalitions of and within dominant parties’ regarding EU positions and issues with severe consequences for electoral outcomes, government formation, and government stability (De Vries and Hobolt 2020, 6).

Yet, one missing piece in this debate is the fact that dominant parties are not only challenged by Euroskeptic parties in national and EP elections (for an overview see Debus 2022) but also in regional elections, which is often the first political battleground where challenger parties are entering the political stage. Since regional authorities play an important role during the process of decision-making and implementation of the EU’s Cohesion Policy (Brunazzo 2016, 23–24), regional parties’ position-taking on and emphasis of EU issues matter for regional party competition in the EU’s multi-level system (see Gross 2022; Gross and Debus 2018; Massetti and Schakel 2016). Particularly *Euroskeptic* challenger parties are an electoral threat to dominant parties in regional elections. Even though the electorate typically considers these elections as less important than national elections (Cabeza 2018; Dandoy and Schakel 2013), one defining feature of Euroskeptic challenger parties is that their Euroskeptic stances are the essential core of their electoral campaigns. Since emphasising EU issues proved to be an electorally successful strategy in national and EP elections, they also use this strategy in regional elections (Cabeza 2018). Thereby, Euroskeptic challenger parties’ emphasis of their anti-EU positions is crucial, as it shows to dominant parties that Euroskeptic parties’ EU positions are precisely what brought them their electoral success.

On the national level, dominant parties become less supportive of European integration when Euroskeptic challengers are electorally successful and when Euroskeptic parties emphasised their position on European integration during the election campaign (Meijers 2017), even though this strategy is detrimental to dominant parties’ electoral success (Meijers and Williams 2020). However, we do not know if dominant parties *at the regional level* react to Euroskeptic challengers in the same way that dominant parties at the national level do. While the regional branches of party organisations that compete nationwide often position themselves similarly to their national party, they do not always hold the exact same positions (Müller 2013; Stecker 2015). Therefore, we cannot simply assume that the findings on dominant parties’ behaviour in the face of Euroskeptic challenger threats travel to the regional level. Focusing on regional elections in four (at that time) EU member states, this contribution is thus the first one tackling the question ‘*Do dominant parties shift their positions when challenged by Euroskeptic challenger parties at the regional level?*’

We propose several arguments regarding the reactions of dominant parties to electorally successful Euroskeptic challenger parties. We do so by using arguments from the spatial theory of party competition and issue competition theory that have been applied to national and European party competitions and transfer them to the regional level. Using a novel data set on parties’ positions on and emphasis of European integration issues in regional election manifestos in Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (UK), we show that – contrary to their national counterparts (see Filip 2021; Meijers 2017) – dominant parties at the regional level do not become more Euroskeptic but react to the rise of Euroskeptic challenger parties by adopting *more pro-European positions*, particularly when electorally successful Euroskeptic challenger parties emphasised EU issues to a greater extent.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of party competition in European multi-level systems in the electoral arena (Baumann, Ecker, and Gross 2020), for the intricacies of regional party competition in Europe (see, e.g. Detterbeck and Renzsch 2003; Meguid 2023; Pallarés and Keating 2003) and for dominant parties' strategies (see, e.g. De Vries and Hobolt 2020) when faced with Euroskeptical challengers (see, e.g. Filip 2021; Meijers 2017; Meijers and Williams 2020).

Why dominant parties should shift their positions when challenged by Euroskeptical parties

In order to develop our theoretical arguments, we follow De Vries and Hobolt's conceptualisation of 'dominant parties' in party systems as parties that are currently in government or that have been in government before in the respective country (De Vries and Hobolt 2020, 21). Consequently, challenger parties are parties that have never been in government before (21). The rise of newly founded and electorally successful parties in Western European democracies particularly since the 1980s has stimulated a large literature on the reactions of established, mainstream, or dominant parties, respectively.¹

Regarding the strategies of dominant parties in responding to the challenges by electorally successful new parties, the jury is still out on whether positional shifts towards the positions of challenger parties are electorally successful for dominant parties or not. One study, for example, has recently established a causal link between radical right parties' success and its effect on dominant parties' positions on immigration issues (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). On the other hand, experimental findings using counterfactual scenarios on potential electoral consequences show that dominant parties in Germany will not gain more votes when shifting towards more hard stances against immigration – the rather small electoral gains from attracting voters from the radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD) are overcompensated by the number of voters alienated from the dominant parties (Chou et al. 2021). Several other studies focus on green parties' impact on other parties' environmental stances, demonstrating that dominant parties shift their issue attention away from environmental issues (see, e.g. Abou-Chadi 2016; Meguid 2005).

Empirical studies focusing on parties' position-taking on the European integration dimension at the *national* and *European* levels have also shown that parties adjust their policy preferences based on their competitors' preferences and electoral support (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Braun, Adrian Popa, and Schmitt 2019; Meijers 2017). Particularly the study by Meijers (2017) demonstrates that an increasing electoral support for Euroskeptical challenger parties which put great emphasis on EU issues forces dominant parties to adopt more Euroskeptical positions (see also Filip 2021). However, the scholarly discussion about challenger parties' success in forcing dominant parties to adopt more negative positions towards European integration is still going on and empirical evidence is rather mixed (see, e.g. Filip 2021; Green-Pedersen 2012; Meijers 2017; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2016; Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014; Turnbull-Dugarte 2021; Williams and Spoon 2015). Recently, Meijers and Williams (2020) have shown that for centre-right parties, shifting towards more Euroskeptical positions can even be electorally detrimental when faced with electorally strong Euroskeptical challenger parties.

In addition to actively taking positions, parties can also compete by emphasising certain issues over others (Budge and Farlie 1983; Meyer and Wagner 2016; Petrocic

1996). In the context of EU issues, especially dominant parties are more likely to be internally divided and hence tend to de-emphasise this issue area in their communications (Adam et al. 2017; van de Wardt 2014). Challenger parties, in contrast, might reap electoral benefits from putting EU issues on the political agenda (Meijers 2017), even though the party-system agenda is mainly set by large, dominating parties (Green-Pedersen 2019). All in all, recent research suggests that party-based Euroskepticism has moved ‘from the margins to the mainstream’ (Brack and Startin 2015, 242) and has also been adopted by dominant parties at the national level (Braun, Adrian Popa, and Schmitt 2021).

Yet, we still do not know very much about if and to what extent these empirical results for national parties’ policy shifts and emphasis of European integration issues travel to the *regional level*. We use arguments established for the analysis of party competition in the electoral arena at the national and European levels and transfer them to the regional level.

When analysing parties and their behaviour at the regional level, party scholars primarily deal with regional party organisations’ leeway in deviating from national party organisations’ policy stances (Müller 2013; Stecker 2015) and the impact of socio-economic and institutional factors on parties’ left-right position-taking (Cabeza, Gómez, and Alonso 2017; Müller 2009). Only a few studies exclusively focus on the position-taking and saliency strategies of regionalist parties and of national parties’ regional branches towards European integration (Elias 2008; Gross 2022; Gross and Debus 2018; Jolly 2007; Massetti 2009; Massetti and Schakel 2016). This is surprising because even though regional elections are widely seen as ‘second-order elections’ (Cabeza 2018; Müller 2018; Schakel and Jeffery 2013), party competition at the regional level is increasingly contested in the last years (Amat, Jurado, and León 2020; Cabeza, Gómez, and Alonso 2017; Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Schakel 2013).

Due to the EU having decentralised more authority to governments in European regions and increased possibilities for participation by regional parliaments (Abels and Eppler 2015; Schakel and Jeffery 2013), parties competing in European regions have incentives for having strong preferences about EU integration and addressing EU issues in regional politics (Graziano 2010). For example, since EU Cohesion policy funding is ‘the most substantive and tangible manifestation of the EU policy for the regions’ (Massetti and Schakel 2016, 217), and since voters are increasingly aware of the regional benefits of Cohesion Policy (Hlatky 2021; Schraff 2019), regional political actors should have an interest in formulating clear stances towards the EU. This holds especially true for those parties that are competing in regional units that are particularly dependent on EU funding and that receive more financial support from EU Cohesion funds (Gross 2022; Gross and Debus 2018; Massetti and Schakel 2016).

Many spending policies outlined in the various Cohesion Policy programmes are of a redistributive nature, which should not only increase citizens’ awareness of these policies (Dellmuth and Chalmers 2018), but which also have been shown to drive partisan politics at the regional level (see, e.g. Schraff 2019). Additionally, these policies are also covered by regional media (Mendez et al. 2020) and thus should not only contribute to the politicisation of EU issues at the national level (see, e.g. Hutter, Grande, and Kriesi 2016) but also at the regional level, especially since regional authorities participate in the formulation and implementation of these programs.

Applying our knowledge of political parties' strategies at the national and European levels regarding the position-taking and issue emphasis of their competitors to the regional level, the remainder of this section will develop our hypotheses on the driving factors of regional dominant parties' position-taking on EU issues when challenged by electorally successful Euroskeptical parties.

Dominant parties' reactions to the electoral success and saliency strategies of Euroskeptical challenger parties

To maximise their vote share, political parties adjust their policy positions towards what they perceive to be voters' preferences (Downs 1957). However, a party's policy shift not only depends on voters' ideal points but also on a party's competitors' positions (Meijers 2017). Given a challenger party that is electorally successful, dominant parties have incentives to respond to the competitor's success in an attempt to attract some of its voters (see also Filip 2021). If the dominant party and its competitor are ideologically distant from one another, the dominant party might take the competitor's success as a clue that voters agree with the challenger's policy position (Meijers 2017). This leaves the dominant party in a situation where it must choose between sticking to its position to not alienate its existing voters and closing the gap with the challenger to be more attractive for the competitor's voter base. The more successful the challenger party is in mobilising on an issue that the dominant party has previously not (or only insufficiently) focused on, the more likely it is that the dominant party takes the risk of disconnecting from its own voter base to prevent the competitor from becoming even more successful in future elections (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; Meguid 2005; Meijers and Williams 2020).

The kind of behaviour that dominant parties show when facing a credible threat from a challenger party can be applied to their EU attitudes: if a challenger party is electorally successful in mobilising especially on the EU integration dimension, dominant parties are more likely to adjust their EU position towards the preference that the challenger party has voiced. Challenger parties that focus their efforts on EU issues are typically Euroskeptical parties (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002), which either want to abolish the EU altogether or keep it but with very drastic changes. Furthermore, promoting Euroskeptical positions is a beneficial electoral strategy for both radical left-wing parties (Wagner 2022) and radical right-wing parties (Carrieri and Vittori 2021). Therefore, dominant parties should become more Euroskeptical as well when facing electorally successful Euroskeptical challenger parties.² In particular, the study by Meijers (2017) demonstrates that an increasing electoral support for Euroskeptical challenger parties which put great emphasis on EU issues forces dominant parties to adopt more Euroskeptical positions (see also Filip 2021).

Consequently, our first hypothesis on the effect of Euroskeptical challenger parties' electoral success on dominant parties' shifts regarding their European integration positions reads as follows:

H1: The more votes Euroskeptical challenger parties won in the previous election, the more dominant parties will shift towards anti-European integration positions in the current election.

This relationship should be even stronger when Euroskeptical challengers put more emphasis on EU issues than their competitors, thereby mobilising voters on this specific issue area rather than on another one. Additionally, such an ‘issue entrepreneurial strategy’ (De Vries and Hobolt 2012) by Euroskeptical challenger parties gains more attraction both in the media and in the public, thus potentially forcing dominant parties to engage with EU issues more than before. Therefore, our next two hypotheses read as follows:

H2: The more emphasis Euroskeptical challenger parties have put on EU issues in the previous election, the more dominant parties will shift towards anti-European integration positions in the current election.

H3: The effect of Euroskeptical challenger parties’ electoral support in the previous election on dominant parties’ support for EU integration in the current election is stronger when Euroskeptical parties have put greater emphasis on EU issues in the previous election.

Three additional moderating effects: dominant parties’ government-opposition status, dominant parties’ left-right positions, and the timing of elections

While we expect that all dominant parties will at least seriously consider a positional reaction to electorally successful Euroskeptical challengers, we do not expect *all* dominant parties to react in the exact same way. In addition to the moderating effect of the interaction between Euroskeptical challenger parties’ electoral success and their EU issue emphasis in previous elections (H3), we expect three more factors to have a moderating effect on dominant parties’ positional reactions to electorally successful Euroskeptical challenger parties: their government-opposition status, their left–right positions, and the timing of regional *vis-à-vis* EP elections.

First, we argue that dominant parties that are currently in government are likely to react very differently than dominant parties that are currently in opposition. Several studies have shown that dominant parties in opposition are more likely to adjust their ideological positions on some issues and try new strategies to be electorally more successful, thus responding more to fringe party pressures than dominant parties in government (see, e.g. Meijers 2017; van Spanje 2010). Government parties do not have the same incentives when it comes to changing strategies, since their policy positions are what helped them getting into government in the first place (van Spanje 2010). Furthermore, government parties are ‘risk-averse’ and rather follow the reactions of dominant opposition parties, whereas dominant opposition parties are ‘risk-acceptant’ and rather follow the agenda of challenger parties (see van de Wardt 2015). Thus, we expect that dominant parties currently in opposition should be more likely to adjust their positions when faced with Euroskeptical challenger parties than dominant parties that are currently in government:

H4: The effect of Euroskeptical challenger parties’ electoral support in the previous election on dominant parties’ support for EU integration in the current election is stronger for dominant parties in opposition than for dominant parties in government.

Secondly, we argue that Euroskeptical challenger parties' positions on the general left-right dimension should also make a difference in how they affect dominant parties' EU attitudes. Parties from both the far left and the far right are a lot more Euroskeptical than other parties (Gross and Debus 2018; Jolly 2007; Marks, Wilson, and Ray 2002). The electoral support for far-left and far-right Euroskeptical parties stems from different motivations, however (Beaudonnet and Gomez 2017; van Elsas, Hakhverdian, and van der Brug 2016). Far-right Euroskeptical parties argue on very different aspects of EU integration and address ideological grounds that differ from those of the far-left (Braun, Adrian Popa, and Schmitt 2019; Hooghe and Marks 2009). Whilst the far-right discusses European integration with a focus on the cultural dimension and on the preservation of the nation state (therefore also adopting anti-immigration positions), the far-left rather focuses on aspects of wealth and redistribution by criticising the EU for its perceived neoliberal economic policies (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Meijers 2017). Issues that are traditionally tapped into by far-right parties, such as immigration (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020), have the potential to affect dominant parties of both the centre-right and centre-left (Bale et al. 2010; van Spanje 2010), which indicates that far-right parties' Euroskeptical arguments seem to be more powerful in convincing dominant parties than those of the far-left (Meijers 2017; Meijers and Williams 2020). Therefore, particularly right-wing dominant parties should be more prone to Euroskeptical contagion from electorally successful Euroskeptical challenger parties than left-wing dominant parties, as right-wing Euroskeptical arguments are closer to the positions that right-wing dominant parties already occupy. Even though the empirical evidence does not lend support for the electoral success of such an accommodative strategy by right-wing dominant parties, it is still a widespread belief among these parties that such a strategy would work (see Abou-Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner 2022; Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023). Complementing this, recent findings demonstrate that it is not electorally beneficial for left-wing dominant parties to change their EU positions towards a more negative stance when faced with increasing radical right, anti-EU support (Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020). Transferring these findings and lines of reasoning to the regional level, our fifth hypothesis reads as follows:

H5: The effect of Euroskeptical challenger parties' electoral support in the previous election on dominant parties' support for EU integration in the current election is stronger for right-wing than left-wing dominant parties.

Third, we argue that the timing of regular elections in multi-level political systems impacts parties' strategies (Gross, Krauss, and Praprotnik 2023). We hypothesise that regional elections taking place close to EP elections should have an impact on parties' emphasis of European issues in regional elections: the closer an EP election is to regional elections, the more regional parties should emphasise EU issues in their election manifestos. Studies dealing with the temporal proximity between national and EP elections show that Euroskeptical parties' electoral gains in national elections are larger, the closer in time national elections occur to EP elections (Schulte-Cloos 2018; Somer-Topcu and Zar 2014). This can be explained by the increased saliency of EU issues and the large visibility enjoyed by such challenger parties in the context of the proximity of elections (Gross and Chiru 2022). European issues are debated in the media and perceived by voters in the

run-up to EP elections (Maier et al. 2019) which might in part overshadow parties' electoral campaigns (Rauh 2015; Schulte-Cloos 2018). This, in turn, should create an incentive for dominant parties at the regional level to adopt more anti-European positions to counter the electorally successful Euroskeptical challenger parties' campaign strategy. Therefore, our sixth hypothesis reads as follows:

H6: The effect of Euroskeptical challenger parties' electoral support in the previous election on dominant parties' support for EU integration in the current election is stronger the closer a regional election is to an EP election.

Data and measurement

Our theoretical expectations are not restricted to specific geographical areas within the EU multi-level system. Therefore, ideally, we would use positional and issue emphasis data for parties competing in regional elections in all EU member states. Yet, although cross-country data on dominant and challenger parties' positions on EU integration and their emphasis of EU issues is available at the *national* level (e.g. as part of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey data set or the Manifesto Project data set; see Bakker et al. 2015; Lehmann et al. 2022), we lack such comprehensive and comparative data at the *regional* level.

In the following, we will use manifesto data instead of expert judgements because this guarantees that we are exclusively dealing with a party's offer to the voters at election day and not with its actual behaviour as government or opposition party. Even if the approach we are using for estimating parties' policy positions on EU integration is applicable for all EU member states, the limitations regarding the comprehensiveness of the countries covered in this study are caused by the limited data availability on parties' regional election manifestos – and therefore their positioning on and emphasis of EU issues at the regional level.

We need data on both parties' positional EU integration shifts and information on their emphasis of EU-related issues. Regarding parties' policy positions, we use parties' manifestos drafted for regional elections from the Political Documents Archive (Benoit, Bräuninger, and Debus 2009; Gross and Debus 2018) to study how the electoral success of Euroskeptical challenger parties affects regional dominant parties' EU position-taking. We combine this data with information on parties' emphasis of EU-related issues. To the best of our knowledge, there only exist two data sets providing data on parties' emphasis of EU issues at the regional level: one is the Regional Manifestos Project (Alonso, Gómez, and Cabeza 2013), comprising manifesto-related data on parties in Italy, Spain, and the UK; the other one is the data set by Gross (2022), where regional election manifestos have been coded regarding their emphasis of EU issues in Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and the UK. We opt for the latter data set because it comprises more countries and regions.

Therefore, we focus on regional dominant parties' positional reactions to Euroskeptical challenger parties in four West European democracies: Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and the UK (that is, Scotland and Wales).³ Even though we only focus on these four countries, the countries and their regions display a wide range of variation of potentially relevant characteristics without compromising the overall comparability of regional

dominant parties' positional reactions to Euroskeptical challenger parties. First, in all four countries Euroskeptical parties have been on the rise in the last years and have politicised EU-related issues in domestic politics at all layers of the respective multi-level political system (Braun, Adrian Popa, and Schmitt 2019). Yet, this electoral rise of Euroskeptical parties varies between the four countries and is also mirrored in the differences with regard to citizens' support of EU integration in Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and the UK (Aiello, Maurice Reverberi, and Brasili 2019; Dąbrowski, Stead, and Mashhoodi 2019).

Secondly, all four countries have regions and regional governments, and both dominant and challenger parties compete in a '*coherent territorial entity situated between the local and national levels with a capacity for authoritative decision making*' (Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010, 4; emphasis in original). There is considerable variation in the legislative powers of the respective regional parliaments, and therefore the involvement of regional political actors 'in EU economic, employment and budgetary policies' (Stahl and Kuby 2015, 152), as well as their involvement in administering and implementing EU-related policies (Bursens and Högenauer 2017; Schakel 2020). Regions vary not only regarding the amount and purpose of EU regional policy money allocated to them but also with regard to the economic effects associated with this transferred money (Crescenzi, Fratesi, and Monastiriotis 2020; Gross and Debus 2018; Medeiros 2017). This gives regional political actors an incentive to position themselves on and emphasise EU issues in their regional election manifestos. For example, even though regional elections can be considered as 'second-order elections', regional parties emphasise EU issues in their regional election manifestos to a larger extent than national parties in their national election manifestos (see Braun and Schmitt 2020; Gross 2022).⁴ Additionally, the degree of regional autonomy varies between the regions the parties are competing in, ranging from a combined shared- and self-rule score of 21 (all regions in Germany) to 11.5 (Wales) (see Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010). Moreover, the countries also differ at the national level by comprising three countries that are (or were, in the case of the UK) net contributor to the EU's budget (Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK) and one net beneficiary country (Spain).

Overall, the data set comprises 222 regional election manifestos by 27 different regional dominant parties in 36 regions which campaigned in regional elections in Germany (2009–2017), Spain (2008–2015), the Netherlands (2011–2015), and the UK (2011–2016).⁵ Note that we only include cases where dominant parties in a region are challenged by Euroskeptical parties. Therefore, we skip all regional elections and parties' election manifestos where Euroskeptical challenger parties did not run in the previous election. We control for the total amount of EU regional transfer money a region in the four countries receives and the extent to which this affects the relationship between the electoral success of regional Euroskeptical challenger parties and dominant parties' positional shifts on EU integration. Therefore, we only consider regional elections that were held in 2007 or later, which is in line with the EU Cohesion Policy funding periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020). Furthermore, the time frame for our study is in a sense restricted regarding the different countries by the information provided by other studies on parties' EU issue salience as well as by limited data availability on parties' election manifestos when competing at the regional level. For example, it is important to note that our data does not include the more successful Euroskeptical challenger parties AfD in German regions and VOX and Podemos in Spanish regions, as they rose to electoral

success after the timeframe that we study in this paper. These parties are prominent examples of Euroskeptic challenger parties and would thus be very interesting cases for studying how their behaviour affects dominant parties. Yet, the Political Documents Archive has not been updated with regard to the most recent regional elections in the countries under study. Therefore, we cannot estimate the EU integration policy positions of parties competing at the regional level. Furthermore, we also cannot assess the salience these parties attach to EU issues in their regional election manifestos. Yet, the fact that we lack data on the potential impact of the AfD, Podemos, or VOX on regional dominant parties' strategies means that we are rather underestimating than overestimating any effect that Euroskeptic challenger success might have on dominant parties' behaviour.

Table A1 in the online appendix gives an overview of the elections that are included and displays how successful Euroskeptic challenger parties were in the previous election. We can see that Euroskeptic challenger success varies considerably between regions and over time. There are some elections where previous Euroskeptic challenger support was in the low single digits (such as the German region of Baden-Wuerttemberg in 2016 or the Spanish region of Castile and León in 2011 and 2015). However, one must bear in mind that the (likely) entry of Euroskeptic challenger parties in regional parliaments considerably complicates dominant parties' government formation opportunities because these challenger parties are usually not considered as potential coalition partners (at least at their first appearance). Moreover, there are also regional elections with significant pressure from Euroskeptic challenger parties, such as the German region of Saxony in two consecutive elections (2009 and 2014), or the Dutch region of Flevoland in 2015. This variance in Euroskeptic challenger parties' electoral success enables us to study the behaviour of dominant parties and how it differs conditional on how strong Euroskeptic challenger parties are in each region.

Dependent variable

Our dependent variable measures the change in regional dominant parties' positions on further EU integration (Δ *EU Position*). Transferring the definition of De Vries and Hobolt (2020, 21) of 'dominant' parties to the regional level, we define regional dominant parties as parties with government experience in the respective region. At least in the regions they are competing in, these parties had office experience and the possibility to implement their policies. Table A2 in the online appendix shows which parties are considered as dominant parties and which parties are Euroskeptic challengers. Note that in most cases, a party's status as being dominant or a challenger is consistent across regions, but there are some parties in Germany and the Netherlands where their status differs between regions.

We estimate each party's EU position using the semi-supervised Wordscores technique for extracting these policy positions from parties' regional election manifestos (Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; Lowe 2008).⁶ We use expert ratings of national parties' EU integration support as 'reference scores' from the 1999–2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) trend file (Bakker et al. 2015; Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2020; Polk et al. 2017) to cover the same time period that our regional data encompass. We match these reference scores with national election manifestos for the closest general election in the respective country (see Table A3 in the online appendix). We then use these positions of national parties to

estimate parties' positions towards further EU integration at the regional level. Lastly, we calculate each party's change in EU integration support between two regional elections, that is, between t and $t - 1$. Parties' EU integration positions are estimated on a scale from 0 to 7. Consequently parties' EU position changes can theoretically range between -7 and $+7$, where negative values stand for a shift towards more Euroskeptical positions. Figure A1 in the online appendix displays the large variance in positional shifts in regional dominant parties' EU integration support across countries that needs to be explained in the empirical analysis.

Independent and control variables

Our main independent variable contains the vote share that Euroskeptical challenger parties gained in the previous regional election (*Euroskeptical Challenger Success*). We use the information provided by Gross (2022) to define which parties can be considered as Euroskeptical parties. A party's challenger status is coded based on the distinction by De Vries and Hobolt (2012, 2020). Challenger parties are those parties that have not previously held political office in the region they are competing in. *Euroskeptical Challenger Success* then is calculated as the total amount of vote shares of all Euroskeptical challenger parties in a respective region.

Euroskeptical Challenger EU Salience is measured as the emphasis Euroskeptical challenger parties put on EU issues in their previous election manifestos by using the share of words that is devoted to EU-related issues of any kind. Again, we retrieve this data from Gross (2022).

We define a regional government party (*Government Party (Regional)*) as a party that drafted its regional election manifestos whilst being in government (value '1'). Parties not being in regional government at the time of writing the election manifestos are assigned the value '0'. Information on parties' government status is retrieved from Gross (2022).

A dominant party's *Left-Right Position* is determined using the Wordscores estimations of regional parties' election manifestos regarding the general left-right dimension. As reference scores, we again use national parties' left-right positions provided by CHES, covering the same time span that was also considered for parties' EU integration positions.

To measure a regional elections' *Distance to EP Election*, we manually collected election dates for all regional elections in our data. Additionally, we also collected EP election dates to gather the time span between the two elections. The time between a regional election and an EP election is measured in months.

We control for three variables that have been found influential in the literature on parties' positional shifts at various layers of European multi-level systems. First, and in accordance with Meijers (2017), we control for the electoral size of a dominant party by considering a dominant party's vote share in the previous election (*Dominant Party Vote Share*). Secondly, we control for the overall sum of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) money allocated to regions per capita in the Cohesion Policy programming periods 2007–13 and 2014–20 (*Regional ESIF Money p.c.*) by using the data provided by Gross and Debus (2018). Some regions will benefit more from ESIF transfer money than other regions. Recent research demonstrates that parties at the regional level, in particular parties in government, increase their EU issue emphasis and adopt more pro-European

positions the more ESIF transfer money is allocated to the region they are competing in (Gross 2022; Gross and Debus 2018; Massetti and Schakel 2016). We take the natural logarithm of *Regional ESIF Money p.c.* to get a more normalised distributed variable. Finally, we include regional dummy variables to account for regional – and, implicitly, country – differences not captured by other independent variables.

Empirical analysis

To estimate how Euroskeptical challenger support affects dominant parties' EU stances, we run multi-level mixed effects regression analyses. By including parties nested in regional elections on the lower level we account for the clustered structure of the data. For each hypothesis, we estimate a multilevel model containing the dependent variable and key independent variables, as well as control variables. Table 1 displays the results for Models 1–3, whereas the results of Models 4–6 are presented in Table 2.

Model 1 tests our first hypothesis that dominant parties shift towards more anti-EU integration positions, the stronger Euroskeptical challenger parties in their region have been in the previous election. We find a direct effect of Euroskeptical challenger parties' success on dominant parties' EU-related positional shifts (see Model 1 in Table 1). The larger the electoral success of Euroskeptical challenger parties has been in the previous election, the more dominant parties change their EU positions towards being *more pro-European*. This contradicts the theoretical reasoning for H1. Our findings rather indicate that dominant parties at the regional level are not susceptible to Euroskeptical contagion, but instead provide a position that *objects* to Euroskeptical challenger parties' positions.

Table 1. Determinants of change in sub-national dominant parties' EU position – hypotheses 1–3.

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Hypothesis 1:</i>			
Euroskeptical Challenger Success	3.215*** (1.239)		1.371 (1.441)
<i>Hypothesis 2:</i>			
Euroskeptical Challenger EU Salience		–2.755* (1.637)	–9.941*** (4.249)
<i>Hypothesis 3:</i>			
Euroskeptical Challenger Success			52.216* (28.007)
X Euroskeptical Challenger EU Salience			
<i>Controls:</i>			
Dominant Party Vote Share	–0.300 (0.238)	–0.342 (0.246)	–0.307 (0.246)
Regional ESIF Money p.c.	0.0002 (0.001)	0.0002 (0.001)	0.0003 (0.001)
Region dummies included?	✓	✓	✓
Constant	–0.220 (0.925)	0.141 (0.981)	–0.020 (0.863)
Observations	210	206	206
Log Likelihood	–107.496	–108.270	–98.341
Akaike Inf. Crit.	296.992	296.540	280.682
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	434.223	429.655	420.453

Dependent variable: Change in a dominant party's EU position between election $t-1$ to election t (Δ EU Position). Multi-level mixed effects regression models. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Determinants of change in sub-national dominant parties' EU position – hypotheses 4–6.

Variables	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Euroskeptical Challenger Success	3.598*** (1.394)	0.315 (2.107)	3.872* (2.049)
<i>Hypothesis 4:</i>			
Government Party (Regional)	0.063 (0.064)		
Euroskeptical Challenger Success X Government Party (Regional)	−0.483 (0.720)		
<i>Hypothesis 5:</i>			
Left-Right Position		−0.139** (0.057)	
Euroskeptical Challenger Success X Left-Right Position		0.521 (0.326)	
<i>Hypothesis 6:</i>			
Distance to EP Election			0.005 (0.017)
Euroskeptical Challenger Success X Distance to EP Election			0.035 (0.126)
<i>Controls:</i>			
Dominant Party Vote Share	−0.468* (0.273)	−0.265 (0.235)	−0.321 (0.239)
Regional ESIF Money p.c.	0.0002 (0.001)	0.0002 (0.001)	−0.0001 (0.001)
Region dummies included?	✓	✓	✓
Constant	0.002 (1.006)	0.477 (0.960)	20130.023 (0.974)
Observations	201	210	210
Log Likelihood	−108.117	−106.727	−111.874
Akaike Inf. Crit.	302.235	299.454	309.749
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	446.160	443.380	453.674

Notes: Dependent variable: Change in a dominant party's EU position between election $t-1$ to election t (Δ EU Position). Multi-level mixed effects regression models. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

While contradicting our first hypothesis, this finding is in line with a recent finding by Turnbull-Dugarte (2021) who demonstrates that German parties at the federal level adopted more pro-European positions in their election manifestos for the federal elections in 2017 when faced with the electoral success of the AfD. Dominant parties thus might want to stick to their position, re-enforcing their ideological standpoint (Bale et al. 2010) instead of moving towards more anti-EU integration positions. For example, both Green-Pedersen (2012) and Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug (2014) find no or only limited support for the assumption that mainstream parties react programmatically to the electoral success of challenger parties in terms of changing their policy positions on EU integration issues or by becoming more populist.

In H2, we expect that the level of EU issue emphasis by Euroskeptical challenger parties in the previous election affects dominant parties' policy shifts regarding EU integration positions in a negative way. Model 2 in Table 1 shows that a higher level of Euroskeptical challenger parties' EU salience in the previous election is indeed related to more Euroskeptical positions voiced by dominant parties in the current election, thus lending support to our second hypothesis. This is in contrast to the finding that a previous electoral success of Euroskeptical challenger parties leads dominant parties to adopt more pro-European positions and, therefore, underlines the importance of considering spatial and issue party competition simultaneously (see, e.g. Abou-Chadi 2016).

In our third hypothesis, we hypothesized that the effect of Euroskeptical challenger parties' success on dominant parties' EU positions should be stronger when Euroskeptical challenger parties put greater emphasis on EU issues. The interaction term displayed in Model 3 in Table 1 is positive and statistically significant. To graphically display the effect of the moderator variable (*Euroskeptical Challenger EU Salience*) on the expected association between *Euroskeptical Challenger Success* and Δ EU Position, we use a Johnson-Neyman-Plot. Johnson-Neyman-Plots allow for an assessment of 'how the main effect varies across the full range of values of a moderator' (Lin 2020, 494).⁷ Figure 1 illustrates that at higher levels of Euroskeptical challenger parties' EU salience in the previous election, the effect of Euroskeptical challenger success on dominant parties' EU positions is indeed stronger (mean value of *Euroskeptical Challenger EU Salience* = 0.043). Regional dominant parties take the previous electoral success of Euroskeptical challenger parties and their issue emphasis strategies seriously and try to counter their competitors' appeal in this specific issue area by adopting more pro-European positions, from the point on when Euroskeptical challengers devote at least 2% of their manifesto content to EU-related issues.

In our fourth hypothesis, we expect that dominant parties campaigning as government parties should be less affected by the previous electoral success of Euroskeptical challenger parties than opposition parties. Yet, we do not find a statistically significant difference between dominant parties' positional shifts, whether they campaigned as government or opposition parties (see Model 4 in Table 2). Most strikingly, even when faced with Euroskeptical challenger parties that only have been moderately successful in the previous elections (up to 8% vote share), dominant parties in opposition position themselves as more pro-European than in the previous election. This contradicts the expectation that

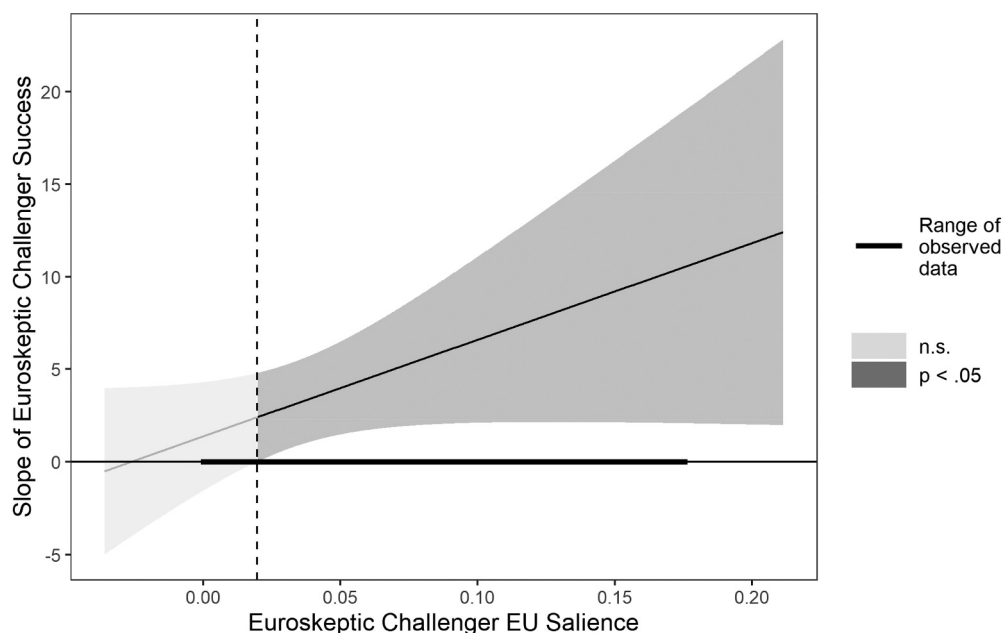


Figure 1. How Euroskeptical challenger parties' EU salience moderates the estimated effect of euroskeptical challenger parties' success on dominant parties' EU position. Notes: Johnson-Neyman-Plot, based on Model 3 presented in Table 1.

opposition parties in general will adjust their ideological positions more to be electorally more successful (Meijers 2017; van Spanje 2010) but corroborates the inconclusive findings by Filip (2021), (119–120) regarding the relationship between dominant parties' government status and their positional reactions towards electorally successful Euroskeptical challenger parties. Therefore, we reject H4.⁸

Regarding our fifth hypothesis, we expect the effect of Euroskeptical challenger parties' success on dominant parties' EU positions to be stronger for right-wing dominant parties than for left-wing dominant parties. Model 5 in Table 2 shows that the more right-wing a dominant party is, the more it changes its EU position to more negative stances, which is indicated by the negative and statistically significant effect of *Left-Right Position* on Δ EU Position. Yet, the interaction effect does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, which does not lend unequivocal support for H5. Note, however, that for some range of the observed data we do see a statistically significant association, indicating that regional dominant parties from the centre-right react more strongly to Euroskeptical challenger parties' electoral success than centre-left parties (see Figure 2).

Finally, in our sixth hypothesis, we expect the effect of Euroskeptical challenger parties' electoral success on dominant parties' EU positions to be stronger when the regional election takes place close to an EP election. The Johnson-Neyman-Plot in Figure 3 does not lend support for our hypothesis and the respective coefficient of the interaction effect in Model 6 in Table 2 does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. We see, however, that an increasing time distance between regional and EP elections up until approximately 22 months amplifies the effect of Euroskeptical challenger success in the

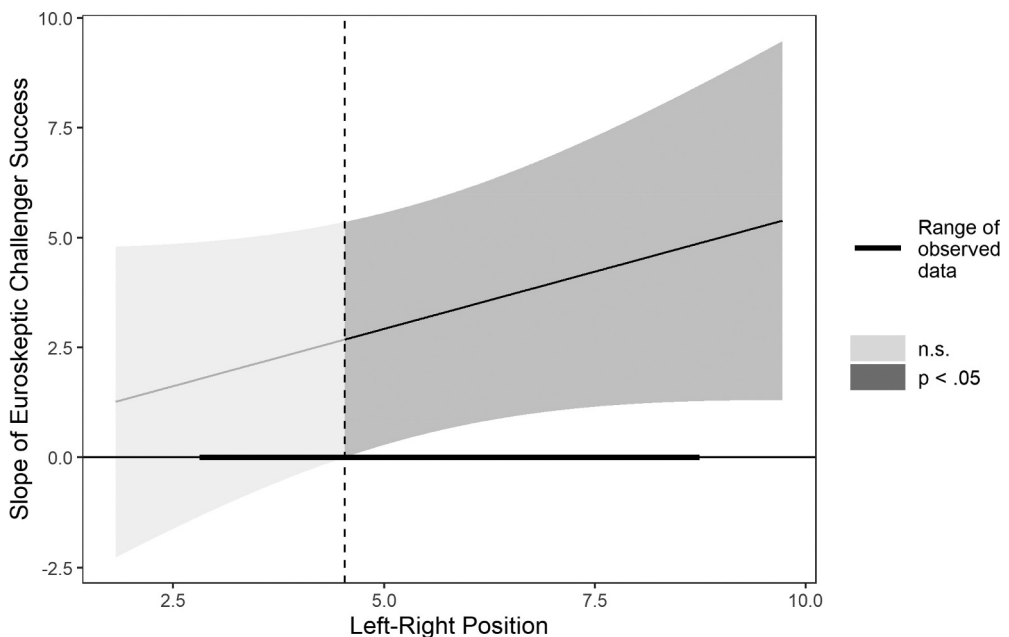


Figure 2. How dominant parties' left-right positions moderate the estimated effect of euroskeptical challenger parties' success on dominant parties' EU position. Notes: Johnson-Neyman-Plot, based on Model 5 presented in Table 2.

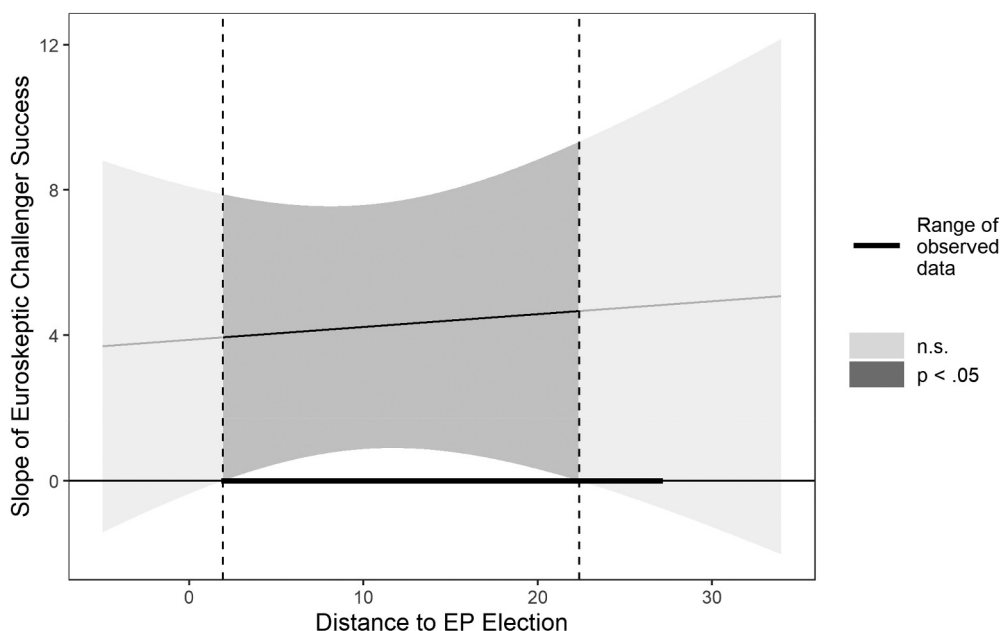


Figure 3. How election timing (in months) moderates the estimated effect of euroskeptic challenger parties' success on dominant parties' EU position. Notes: Johnson-Neyman-Plot, based on Model 6 presented in Table 2.

previous election on dominant parties' EU positions in the current election. This is contrary to our hypothesis, and we therefore reject H6.

Since the EU's regional money per capita is allocated towards the regions within the countries under study here (and not as a lump sum to member states), we controlled for the specific regions in all empirical models. Yet, one could argue that there are still differences between the four countries, which is why we ran robustness checks by excluding one country at a time. The results remain substantially the same (see Tables A4-A7 in the online appendix).

Conclusion

We analysed how dominant parties at the regional level in Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and the UK react to previous electoral successes of Euroskeptic challenger parties. We transferred theoretical and empirical insights from dominant parties' reactions to Euroskeptic contagion from the national and European levels to the regional level and we used new data on parties' positions on and emphasis of EU-related issues in regional elections.

Our results demonstrate that dominant parties shift toward more pro-European integration positions when faced with Euroskeptic challenger parties that have been electorally successful in the previous election. This echoes recent findings in the literature that dominant parties try to counter Euroskeptic positions by challenger parties by adopting more pro-European positions (see Turnbull-Dugarte 2021). Furthermore, this effect persists once Euroskeptic challenger parties' saliency strategies are considered: regional

dominant parties turn towards more positive EU positions the more Euroskeptical challenger parties emphasised EU-related issues in the previous election. This is especially the case when these Euroskeptical challenger parties have been electorally successful in the previous regional election.

Our findings have important implications for the study of party competition in European multi-level political systems. The different reactions of dominant parties towards Euroskeptical challenger parties, depending on their previous electoral success and their level of EU issue emphasis, speak to the ongoing debate on which strategies dominant parties are applying (see, e.g. Green-Pedersen 2012; Meijers 2017; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2016; Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014; Williams and Spoon 2015) and if, for example, an ‘accommodative strategy’ (Meguid 2005) would be electorally successful (see, e.g. Chou et al. 2021; Meijers and Williams 2020). At least for a time (2008–2017) when EU member states were confronted with severe economic and societal challenges (that is, the global and financial crisis, the Euro crisis, or the so-called ‘migration crisis’), dominant parties at the regional level still tried to counter challenger parties’ Euroskeptical positions by adopting more pro-European positions.

Nevertheless, further studies are needed to get a more in-depth understanding of party competition and electoral responsiveness at the regional level within EU member states. When studying Euroskepticism across Europe, it is important to consider that not all EU member states are alike. Politicisation of European integration varies across countries (De Wilde et al., 2016) and Euroskepticism in Southern Europe was fundamentally different from Euroskepticism in North-Western Europe – at least in the time period under study here (2008–2017): whilst in southern countries it has been Euroskeptical parties from the far left that were electorally more successful, in northern countries people rather voted for Euroskeptical parties from the far right (Hobolt, 2015; Kriesi, 2016).

Yet, the political landscape in Europe changed considerably in the past years. EU member states faced additional challenges (e.g. dealing with the consequences of Brexit and the first election of Donald J. Trump as US president; the ongoing heated discussions on migration; or the COVID-19 pandemic) and new Euroskeptical parties were established in the countries we study: further research is needed on a data set that also includes several very recently electorally successful Euroskeptical challenger parties in regional elections in Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands – AfD, BBB (Farmer-Citizen Movement), BSW (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht), VOX, and Podemos. Expanding the data set to these parties as well as to other countries (especially in Central and Eastern Europe where public support for Euroskeptical parties has been higher in the last years, as compared to Western Europe) would not only increase the number of radical right and radical left Euroskeptical parties but also the number of regional, non-state wide parties that are increasingly important for the formation of governments at the regional level (Schakel and Massetti 2018).

Associated with this, the extension of the time frame studied would also be helpful in analysing time-varying trends that we could not cover in our analysis. For example, the 2019 EP elections saw a consolidation of Euroskeptical parties’ vote shares across Europe (Treib 2021) and this might also lead to the possibility at the regional level that a former Euroskeptical challenger party gets into a regional government, thus becoming an Euroskeptical dominant party (which has not been the focus of our analysis here, but

is worthwhile to study in the future). However, we do not know if this electoral challenge for parties is also establishing itself at the regional level, which is characterised by an increasing electoral volatility and new challenges for territorial politics in recent years (see, e.g. Vampa 2024). Unfortunately, since the Political Documents Archive has not been updated so far to cover the most recent regional elections in our countries under study, we lack data on parties' positioning on and emphasis of EU issues in their regional election manifestos. But even if the regional election manifestos would be available, we still would face the challenge to manually code the level of EU issue emphasis parties at the regional level display in their regional election manifestos. The manual coding of additional regional party manifestos is an extremely laborious and expensive task, which we must leave to future, large-scale research projects to investigate if regional dominant parties reacted to electorally successful Euroskeptical challenger parties in recent years in the same way as they did between 2008 and 2017.

Furthermore, given the data at hand, this contribution treated European integration as a single political issue (see e.g. Spoon, 2012; Steenbergen and Scott, 2004). Other research, however, argues that European integration should be treated as a multidimensional phenomenon by distinguishing between polity and policy issues and by focusing on economic and political EU integration, respectively (Braun et al., 2016, 2019). Future research should investigate further to what extent parties at the regional level might have different political stances regarding these different components of European integration. Additionally, the concept of EU integration can be interpreted differently by different parties in different countries (Huijsmans and Krouwel 2021). The extent to which this varying interpretation of EU integration might also play a role in regional party competition still needs to be analysed. The data at hand, however, does not allow for such a fine-grained analysis.

Finally, even though dominant parties do not seem to be prone to Euroskeptical contagion programmatically in their election manifestos (see, e.g. Green-Pedersen 2012), dominant parties adopt more Euroskeptical behaviour in parliament when faced with Euroskeptical challenger parties' oppositional behaviour (see Persson, Karlsson, and Mårtensson 2023 for the case of Sweden). The extent to which these results could also travel to political actors' behaviour in parliaments at the regional level is an intriguing question to be answered in future research.

Notes

1. As noted by De Vries and Hobolt (2020, 21, fn. 21), this conceptualisation of 'dominant parties' 'bears resemblance to the thresholds of "relevance" of parties found in the important writings of Giovanni Sartori and Mogens N. Pedersen'. For an excellent overview of other, but related definitions of dominant parties in party systems see Bogaards (1994). For a completely different conceptualisation of dominant parties in party systems, based also on the ideological appeal of a party and the perceptions by voters, see Dunleavy (2010).
2. For a discussion if such a strategy of dominant parties could be electorally successful see Chou et al. (2021) and van Spanje and De Graaf (2018).
3. Northern Ireland and England are not covered in the data set by Gross (2022), leaving us with Scotland and Wales as the two only UK regions we can focus on.

4. We cannot assess the effect of public opinion shifts on dominant and Euroskeptical challenger parties' policy shifts and changes in issue emphasis due to the lack of public opinion data regarding citizens' views on European integration issues that is representative at the sub-national level in the countries under study. Recent research suggests, however, that particularly far-right parties are responsive to citizens' shifts towards more anti-EU integration positions (Braun, Adrian Popa, and Schmitt 2019).
5. Note that the number of observations differs in the estimated models due to a lack of data for some smaller parties in some independent and control variables.
6. For a more detailed explanation of our application of Wordscores, see the online appendix.
7. We use the *Johnson-Neyman()* function in the *interaction* package, version 1.1.4 (Long 2022), for R version 4.2.1.
8. One could argue, however, that dominant parties in opposition might not change their positions on EU integration but rather their *emphasis* of EU issues due to the pressure by electorally successful Euroskeptical challenger parties (see van de Wardt 2015). This seems worthwhile to be studied in more detail in the future.

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