




# Euroscepticism and government accountability in the European Union

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## Abstract

The European Union has become a contested issue amongst voters in Europe. I analyze how the increasingly salient attitudes toward European integration have affected how voters hold their governments accountable for their policy decisions at the EU-level. I argue that attitudes toward the EU have become an important source of electoral accountability that complement attitudes on the left-right dimension, but they matter differently for pro- and anti-European voters. Whereas Eurosceptic voters are likely to use their attitudes toward the EU to hold their governments accountable, pro-European voters tend to rely on their specific attitudes toward particular policies to assess the responsiveness of their politicians. The paper presents the results of a conjoint experiment in a survey of 2,540 German citizens to analyze how pro- and anti-European voters' attitudes influence their assessment of typical signals of government responsiveness.

**Keywords** European Union · Electoral accountability · Responsiveness · Germany · Conjoint experiment · Immigration · Bailout

In the last decade, the European Union (EU) has experienced unprecedented economic and political turmoil. On the economic side, the Greek debt crisis of 2010 triggered a financial and political turmoil that brought the Euro zone to the verge of collapse. No sooner had the EU managed to stabilize its panicked markets than it confronted a security crisis when Russia annexed the Crimea in the spring of 2014. Doubts in EU's ability to provide for its own security intensified in 2015 when it failed to thwart two major terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels. The issue became even more complex and

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contentious when it merged with the problem of dealing with an unprecedented influx of asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa. The disunity the Union showed in its failure to fashion a collective response to this mass migration was starkly underlined in June 2016 when a popular referendum in the United Kingdom decided to withdraw the country from the EU, precipitating a still-unfolding period of uncertainty and economic instability for the region.

The cumulative effect of these shocks has been to sharpen the EU's legitimacy crisis and to contribute to a rising wave of populism. All across the EU, countries have witnessed a dramatic surge in support for populist candidates and parties with oftentimes explicit anti-EU mandates. This dramatic shift in domestic political support in EU member countries has not only called into doubt one of the most successful regional integration projects in the world, but also increased the pressures for mainstream parties to take into account Eurosceptic policy views when cooperating at the European level. European citizens have started to hold their governments accountable for their actions in the EU, and the sources of accountability have become increasingly complex. Whereas voters used to reward politicians for pursuing policies in line with their own specific attitudes toward these policies (oftentimes using the left-right dimension as a rough information short-cut), the rise of populism has increased the salience of a second dimension where voters hold politicians accountable for pursuing policies that are responsive to their own attitudes toward European integration. How have the increasingly salient attitudes toward the EU affected how voters choose whom to support at the ballot box? How do the two dimensions of voter attitudes interact with each other to explain electoral accountability in the EU? Have attitudes toward European integration become the dominant dimension for voters to hold their governments accountable for EU policies as the rise in Euroscepticism might suggest?

I compare these two sources of government accountability with a focus on how they affect voters' decisions to reward or punish their politicians' conduct in the European Union. I argue that public support for politicians is driven by the politicians' responsiveness to both attitude dimensions. However, the sources of electoral accountability are different for voters with pro-EU versus anti-EU attitudes. Because voter attitudes toward the EU have developed as a movement protesting European integration, Eurosceptic voters hold more consistent and salient attitudes on the relevant policies than pro-European voters. Consequently, electoral accountability on this dimension is mainly driven by Eurosceptic voters. For pro-European voters, the European integration dimension is much less salient. Their sentiments toward the EU are therefore much less likely to influence their opinions on specific policies that are relevant on this dimension. As long as the survival of the EU is not at stake, pro-Europeans' relatively permissive attitudes toward the EU are less likely to matter for their opinion formation on specific EU-level policies. Whereas they may have salient pro-European attitudes, their preferences toward particular EU-level policies are not necessarily consistent with their preferences toward the EU itself. Pro-European voters are therefore more likely to punish or reward governments with policy positions that are responsive to these specific attitudes toward EU policies rather than to their attitudes on the European integration dimension.

To compare the sources of electoral accountability, I conducted a conjoint experiment in a survey of 2,450 German adult citizens. I asked respondents to indicate the extent of their support for (a) the EU and (b) two specific European policies. Respondents then evaluated various politicians who differ on a set of policy choices that correspond to the

dimensions of theoretical interest as well as other characteristics of the politicians that may have an impact on their government approval (i.e., their political experience, party affiliation, and gender). By randomly assigning both the values that each feature takes and their order of presentation, the conjoint experiment allows me to compare the different types of electoral accountability analytically. Consistent with the theory, I find that both attitude dimensions matter, but they matter differently for Euro-sceptic voters than for pro-European voters. Voters do hold politicians accountable for taking positions that reflect voters' own attitudes toward the EU, but the effect is almost entirely driven by Euro-sceptic voters. Pro-European respondents do not reward politicians for pro-European positions on policies (or punish them for pursuing Euro-sceptic policies). This does not mean that they do not hold their governments accountable for responsive policy conduct. Pro-European voters rather tend to reward politicians when their conduct is responsive to voters' specific preferences toward those policies (and punish politicians when policies are not responsive to these preferences).

The findings shed new light on the sources of government accountability in Europe, with implications for politicians' conduct both at the national and the EU-level. My paper builds on previous work that demonstrates that voters use their attitudes toward the European project to hold their governments accountable for their actions at the EU-level.<sup>1</sup> My analysis corroborates these findings, but further analyzes how the two dimensions of electoral accountability work differently for pro- and anti-European voters. The experimental design allows me to address some of the challenges in the study of electoral accountability. Analyzing the sources of electoral accountability with observational data restricts vote choice to available party options. This in turn limits our ability to study how voter attitudes interact in forming attitudes toward politicians who take Euro-sceptic or pro-European positions on particular issues.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the strategic interaction between elites and voters – and the inherent incentives of elites to influence voter perceptions (Zaller 1992) – renders an observational study of the sources of electoral accountability challenging. Using an experimental approach, I find that pro-European voters are not likely to use their attitudes toward European integration to assess the responsiveness of their politicians even for highly politicized policy issues. This finding supports the argument that European integration is still less important to pro-European supporters of mainstream parties than left-right issues, making mainstream parties disproportionately more responsive to Euro-sceptic voters (Spoon and Williams 2017, 744), with potentially important implications for national parties and party systems (see also Konstantinidis et al. (2019) in this volume) and the future of European integration. Voters harmed by globalization and skeptical of international integration can be powerful domestic forces constraining national politicians' room to engage in international cooperation (see also (Bearce and Scott 2019) in this volume), especially given their disproportional impact in these debates. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that pro-European voters care about these issues, though

<sup>1</sup> For example, de Vries (2007); de Vries and Hobolt (2012); Tillman (2004); Schneider and Slantchev (8); Schneider (2019, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> This is problematic for analyzing the sources of electoral accountability for supporters of mainstream parties. If the integration dimension is not as salient to pro-European voters, as I argue here, then the correlation between the pro-European stances of mainstream parties and the pro-European attitudes of their voters may lead one to incorrectly assume that pro-European voters voted for these parties *because* they supported European integration even if that dimension may have been irrelevant.

in different ways. The increasing importance of issue-specific voting marks an important turn in the discussion about European integration, and signifies that not only the EU as a polity, but also European policies, have found their way into domestic political debates. Finally, most scholars have analyzed the two sources of electoral accountability in isolation even though both sources may be influential simultaneously for many policy issues. To my knowledge, this paper presents the first comparative analysis of both dimensions with new insights into how voters evaluate politicians. The findings thereby also support the argument in the introduction to this volume that populism can have profound effects on the debates about the content of EU policies themselves (Copolovitch and Pevehouse 2019).

## 1 Electoral accountability in Europe

Government accountability and the sanction of elections are essential elements of any democratic political system (Dahl 1973). In systems, where citizens hold their governments accountable via elections – that is, they vote to retain the incumbent only when the incumbent pursues policies that are in the voters’ best interest –, politicians are induced to choose policies that will be positively valued by citizens at the time of the next election (Manin et al. 1999, 40). Effective accountability implies that citizens know and care about the policy issues and that they are able to attribute responsibility for particular policy outcomes.

In the EU, this “chain of responsiveness” seemed to be broken (Powell 2004). For a long time, cooperation at the European level was not politicized in national political arenas, and voters neither knew nor cared much about what was going on in the EU decision-making process (Hobolt and Tilley 2014). The secrecy of negotiations made an attribution of responsibility all but impossible. Voters were uninterested and uninformed, and European integration seemed to proceed in the shadow of a “diffuse feeling of approval,” or a “permissive consensus” (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970; Reif and Schmitt 1980). Public opinion toward the EU is still characterized by a high degree of uncertainty, but it is undeniable that the “sleeping giant” is waking up (Van der Brug et al. 2007; Kriesi 2007). European countries have experienced an “increase in polarization of opinions, interests, or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU” (de Wilde 2011, 566 f.). The politicization of the EU began in the early 1990s, but further intensified with greater economic and political integration and during various crises, especially during the European debt crisis and after the British decision to leave the EU (Scharpf 2003; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Cramme and Hobolt 2015; de Vries 2018).

The consequences for domestic politics are readily predictable. Voters increasingly hold politicians accountable for their policy choices in the EU, especially when political entrepreneurs succeed in making the EU electorally salient (Hobolt et al. 2008; de Vries et al. 2011). In turn, politicians have started to signal that their conduct is responsive to the attitudes of their voters (Hobolt and Spoon 2012; Hagemann et al. 2016; Wrátil 2017; Schneider 2019, 2020). They take and commit to positions and try to achieve policy outcomes that are responsive to the attitudes of their national electorates. The position that parties take on European integration now influences their share of the vote in national elections (de Vries 2007, 2010). Parties that advance Eurosceptic positions

have managed to attract significant voter support (de Vries and Hobolt 2012). They have challenged the prevailing pro-European consensus of the mainstream parties and have contributed to the growth of internal divisions in centrist parties as well (Hutter et al. 2016). This has forced the ruling parties on the defensive, and today it is the parties in the governing coalitions that tend to be most active in debates on European integration during election campaigns (Dolezal and Hellström 2016).

Although there is convincing evidence *that* voters hold their politicians accountable for policies that are responsive to both their attitudes toward the EU and their attitudes toward particular policies, we know very little about *how* voter attitudes toward the EU and specific attitudes toward European policies matter for voters when they assess the responsiveness of their politicians. The “how” is important because the politicization of the EU has not only led to an intensified debate about EU-level policies in national arenas. It has increased the salience of the European integration dimension as a source of accountability and contributed to a two-dimensional contestation in the European Union (Hix and Lord 1997; Bakker et al. 2012). European voters could make decisions about whether any particular policy decisions are in their best interest based on both their attitudes toward policies on the left-right dimension as well as their attitudes toward European integration. It is not always clear which attitude dimension voters apply, especially for issues that cannot be clearly placed along either dimension. It is also not well understood whether the rise of the European integration dimension has affected voters in similar ways.

In order to develop an argument about the two dimensions of electoral accountability, it is helpful to discuss them with respect to the policies that are decided in the EU.<sup>3</sup> Voters usually hold specific attitudes toward policies that are decided at the EU-level. They prefer some policies over others, and would like the politician to represent their preferences in the EU. Accountability would imply that voters reward politicians who take positions on issues that reflect their own specific positions on those issues, and punish politicians who take positions that are not responsive to their specific preferences over these issues.<sup>4</sup> Oftentimes, but not always, voters’ specific attitudes can be placed along a left-right dimension, and the left-right placement of politicians serves as an information short-cut to voters. At least since the 1990s, voters also hold more salient preferences over whether they support any policies that lead to further European integration, or even about whether they believe that the EU itself is a desirable political system or should cease to exist. We can label individuals as either Euro-sceptic or pro-European based on their attitudes toward the EU. Accountability on this dimension would imply that voters rewarded politicians whose positions on policies that can be placed on the European integration dimension reflected their own positions on European integration.

The increasing salience of the European integration dimension has affected how voters hold their politicians accountable. I argue that even though both pro- and anti-European voters hold more salient preferences toward the EU in general, they are not equally likely

<sup>3</sup> Much of the discussion could also apply to electoral accountability in domestic politics. In this context, I am primarily interested in how voters hold their governments accountable when these cooperate at the EU-level.

<sup>4</sup> Voters also care about the responsiveness of the policy outcomes (Mayhew 1974). I focus on responsive policy positions to keep the theoretical discussion parsimonious. Below, I provide a more in-depth discussion of different concepts of responsiveness and responsibility in the context of European governance. I test those concepts in the empirical section and the online appendix, which is available on my webpage and the Review of International Organizations’ webpage.

to use these attitudes to hold their politicians accountable for their specific positions on EU policies. Attitudes toward the EU matter most for how Eurosceptic voters hold politicians accountable. The increasing salience of attitudes toward the EU mainly owes to the historical development of a protest movement that has been directed against globalization in general, and the European Union in particular. It is the economically disadvantaged – the losers of European integration and globalization – who started to doubt the European project and sparked the rise of European integration attitudes as a new important dimension of the national political space (Copsey 2015). These individuals did not benefit from the uneven distribution of the Single Market's benefits, they suffered particularly during the financial crisis, and they were most worried about the immigration of refugees and its implications for their own economic welfare. For this reason, supporters of Eurosceptic parties tend to be opposed to redistribution and immigration (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005; Toshkov and Kortenska 2015; de Vries 2018). The dissatisfaction with the performance of the European Union increased the importance of anti-EU attitudes for national vote choice in this group; a salience that is unmatched by voters who did not experience the same losses.

Eurosceptic voters also usually do not have many “real” choices when they want to support politicians with a more Eurosceptic agenda, especially if they do not have extreme positions on the left-right dimension. In Europe, voters (and opposition parties) tend to be more Eurosceptic than the political elites in government (Mattila and Raunio 2006; Hobolt et al. 2008). Since these mainstream parties all tend to adopt very similar positive positions on European integration (Hooghe et al. 2002), the salience of attitudes toward the EU should be even stronger for Eurosceptic voters.

Consequently, Eurosceptic voters should hold relatively salient and consistent attitudes toward policies that can be placed on a European integration dimension, and they should hold their politicians accountable for responsive conduct on this dimension. They should increase their support for politicians who support and pursue Eurosceptic policies in the European Union, and punish those politicians who support and pursue pro-European policies:

*Hypothesis 1 Eurosceptic voters' specific attitudes toward EU policies tend to be relatively consistent with their attitudes toward European integration. Consequently, Eurosceptic voters are likely to use their attitudes on the European integration dimension to hold politicians accountable for their conduct in the EU.*

Pro-European voters' specific attitudes toward EU policies tend to be much less consistent with respect to their attitudes on European integration. Since attitudes toward the European Union became a dimension of national contestation as a result of a protest movement that targeted globalization, economic redistribution, and immigration, it should not be very salient to voters who do not hold strong Eurosceptic views. Voters who self-identify as pro-European may in fact simply not perceive themselves as Eurosceptic without identifying this necessarily with particular policy views toward EU policies.

As long as the survival of the EU is not at stake, these attitudes should not play an important role for pro-European voters when deciding who to vote for. This argument is in line with the notion of the permissive consensus. Even

though they may believe the EU to be “a good thing,” historically European voters have held relatively diffuse, permissive feelings toward European integration, which implies that the EU as a polity should not drive their positions on particular policy issues. They may dislike immigration for a variety of reasons while at same time supporting continued membership of their country in the EU. On average, pro-European voters’ specific attitudes toward these policies diverge from their attitudes toward the EU and should be much more salient drivers of their vote choice. The extent of specific support for or opposition to specific European policies should lead voters to judge politicians upon whether their specific policy positions are in line with the voters’ own positions on these policies. In doing so, pro-European voters face greater vote choice: most mainstream parties in Europe consider themselves as EU-friendly, but offer a range of policy choices that could include more Euro-sceptic preferences on specific policy issues (without immediately calling into doubt the existence of the EU).<sup>5</sup>

In sum, while Euro-scepticism is driven by a protest to particular policies, and Euro-sceptics are likely to hold very consistent preferences on that dimension across relevant policies, pro-European sentiments toward these policies tend to be more variable. As a consequence, pro-European voters should be much less likely to use their attitudes toward European integration to hold politicians accountable for responsive policy positions in the EU. Rather than holding governments accountable for whether their policy choices are pro-or anti-European, they hold them accountable for pursuing policies that are responsive to their specific attitudes toward these policies (potentially represented on a left-right dimension).

*Hypothesis 2 Pro-European voters’ specific attitudes toward EU policies tend to be less consistent with their attitudes toward European integration. Consequently, pro-European voters are less likely use their attitudes on the European integration dimension to hold politicians accountable for their policy choices in the European Union, and more likely to use their specific preferences over individual policies to hold governments accountable.*

Before moving to the empirical test, it is important to note that the theoretical hypotheses are based on the assumption that voters care about the policy issues and that they have the ability to correctly attribute responsibility of policy positions and outcomes to politicians or political parties. In many cases, voters are uninterested or the attribution of responsibility is difficult. This lowers the ability of voters to hold their politicians accountable for their conduct in the EU. I abstracted away from these issues to focus on the mechanisms of how these attitudes affect accountability if accountability is feasible. Whereas changes in the information structure would affect the ability to hold governments accountable on either dimension, it would not change my hypotheses about the relative differences in electoral accountability across pro-and anti-European voters.

<sup>5</sup> The left-right continuum can serve as a convenient but imperfect information short-cut when voters who do not hold salient preferences on all issues or lack information. Many EU policies are difficult to place on a left-right dimension. Focusing on specific policies allows me to analyze the patterns of accountability more directly without having to assume that voters use particular short-cuts.

## 2 Research design: A conjoint experiment in Germany

I designed a fully randomized conjoint experiment to examine *how* voters assess different politicians based on typical signals of responsiveness in national and European politics. All respondents were instructed about the conjoint exercise and then exposed to comparisons between two politicians, each of whom varied along six dimensions. The survey was fielded in the fall of 2016; the sample includes 2,450 German adults who are eligible to vote in federal elections. Although *Respondi* uses various techniques to generate a sample that resembles the underlying population, online samples are never true probability samples. This particular sample skews toward younger and more educated male voters compared to the general voter population. I use entropy balancing to re-weigh the data from the survey so that it matches the demographic margins from the voter population (I weigh on age groups, gender, and level of education). The sample is well balanced geographically.<sup>6</sup>

The focus of my study is to gain an understanding of how voters use different attitude dimensions to hold their politicians accountable for EU policies, at least when they know and care about these policies. The experimental results will not help us understand the conditions under which they are likely to do so. I am interested in the internal validity for which the experimental design is appropriate. In addition, the survey experiment offers important complementary advantages to existing studies of government accountability. First, most scholars use quantitative analysis to test whether Eurosceptic voters are more likely to punish pro-European governments. They typically rely on data collected from party manifestos, which varies across national contexts. The survey experiment allows me to exogenously set the attitudes of the politicians, and present them to the respondents. This is particularly useful in this setting because previous work had to assume (given the data limitations) that politicians tend to take less Eurosceptic positions than their electorates. Second, I can control for other important aspects of vote choice, such as partisanship. This allows me to analyze the sources of electoral accountability holding potential confounding factors exogenously constant. Finally, whereas aggregated data makes it very difficult to compare the two different sources of accountability, the setup of the conjoint experiment allows me to distinguish more explicitly between them.

One potential disadvantage is that the nature of the experiment puts limitations on its external validity beyond the context of Germany. To the extent that the process that generates German voters' attitudes toward the policies differ from the process that generates individuals' attitudes toward these policies in other EU member states, it will not be possible to derive more general implications from the results. Whereas existing research on electoral accountability finds evidence for the two-dimensional space in all European countries, Otjes and Katsandidou (2016) find significant differences across the two dimensions for the poorer member states in Southern Europe. For example, economic issues are much more closely related to attitudes toward the EU in Greece than they are in the Northern European countries. Similarly, different institutional contexts across European countries could also influence the effects. A focus on

<sup>6</sup> Appendix A shows the demographic margins of the voter population, the raw online sample, and the weighted online sample. The imbalances are relatively minor, and the results are robust when unweighted data are used (see Appendix B).



Germany is still warranted because the policies discussed in this paper are mainly driven by intergovernmental negotiations with a powerful influence of states that carry the largest burden. Germany therefore has had important influence on policy formulation in these areas, and this influence merits a better understanding of potential domestic electoral causes for the policies that the government pursues.

The first step in the experiment was to elicit each respondent's ideal positions on two policies (i.e., their specific attitudes).

**Financial bailout for Greece** The survey coincided with public discussions of another European bailout for Greece. Since contributions to these rescue packages were pegged to the size of the economy, Germany expected to end up with the lion's share of payments. In consequence, the discussions rapidly politicized the issue among German taxpayers. To elicit voter preferences regarding another Greek bailout, the question was phrased as follows<sup>7</sup>:

We are now interested in your opinion about the debt crisis in Greece. Some believe that Greece should receive more financial aid from the European Union. Others believe that Greece should not receive more financial aid from the European Union. In general, how much do you support or oppose more financial aid for Greece?

**European migrant crisis** Starting in 2015, increasing numbers of people from South-west Asia and Africa arrived in the European Union. By the end of 2016, there were 2,582,780 first time asylum applications in the EU, which exceeded the total for the previous seven years combined. Of these, Germany had received nearly half (47%).<sup>8</sup> The German open door policy was made famous by Chancellor Angela Merkel who declared "Wir schaffen das" (We can do this), with the predictable effect of gravely intensifying the politicization of the issue. To elicit voter preferences regarding the migrant crisis, the question was phrased as follows:

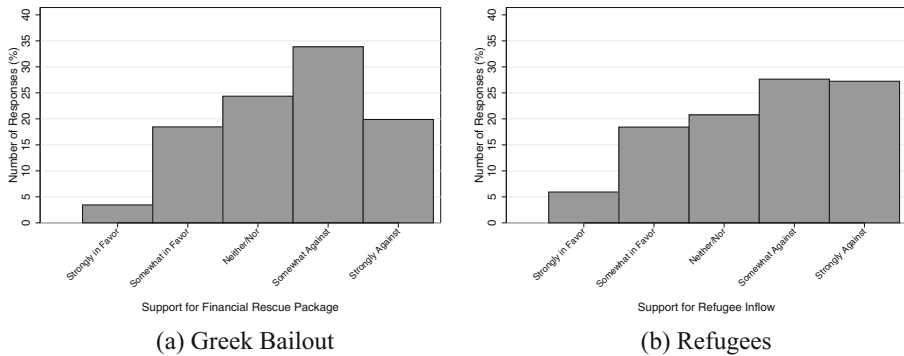
We are now interested in your opinion about the European refugee policies. Last year, more than one million people tried to enter the EU. Some believe that more immigrants should be accepted. Others believe that no more immigrants should be accepted. Are you for or against accepting more immigrants in the European Union?

For both questions, respondents could pick from the ordinal ranking "strongly in favor", "somewhat in favor", "neither in favor nor opposed", "somewhat opposed", and "strongly opposed".<sup>9</sup> Fig. 1 summarizes the respondents' attitudes toward (a)

<sup>7</sup> I follow Bechtel et al. (2014), Bechtel et al. (2017), and Stoeckel and Kuhn (2018) who asked similar questions to analyze the domestic sources of preferences over Eurozone bailouts.

<sup>8</sup> I use the terms "refugee", "immigrant", "migrant", and "asylum seeker" interchangeably in the text, but the survey exclusively used "immigrant" (*Einwanderer*) and "refugee" (*Flüchtling*) because these are the terms that the media tends to use and that are common in public debates. Technically, the terms refer to very different categories of people, and the concern tends to be about asylum seekers who enter the EU illegally.

<sup>9</sup> The ranking was reversed randomly.



**Fig. 1** Attitudes toward a Greek Bailout and More Immigration in Germany, 2016. Histograms of responses in the online survey about respondents' attitudes toward (a) providing more financial aid to Greece, and (b) accepting more immigrants in the EU

providing another financial aid package to Greece, and (b) accepting more refugees in the European Union.

Both policies were highly politicized in Germany at the time. Voters cared about the issues and German politicians expected to be held accountable for their conduct during the EU-level negotiations.<sup>10</sup> Both policies were also debated with strong reference to the value of European integration, which should make it more likely to detect the accountability mechanism through European integration attitudes (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005; Toshkov and Kortenska 2015). If I find that pro-European voters do not use their pro-European attitudes to hold their politicians accountable on those issues, I would be more confident that they do not use these attitudes to hold their politicians accountable on other policies that are less salient on this dimension. This would more firmly establish the differences across voters with pro- and anti-European sentiments. At the same time, scholarly work has shown that Europeans care about these issues and do have attitudes on them. Moreover, the attitudes toward these policies could also vary on a left-right dimension. Consider the immigration policies: whereas anti-EU parties tend to reject immigration because of the cultural invasion of foreign customs and traditions, and because they pose a threat to national security and welfare (Mudde 1999), traditional right-wing parties have also been more likely to appear tougher on immigration than left-wing parties (Ivarsflaten 2005; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Even though it might be interesting to see whether voters respond differently to policy issues that are not politicized, I chose not to analyze this particular question for three reasons. First, it would be very difficult to model a non-politicized issue experimentally because by merely including such a policy area the experimenter would draw the respondent's attention to the issue in a way that would not happen in reality for non-politicized issues. This could elicit a response in the experiment even though there would have been no effect outside it. Second, the theoretical mechanism requires voter awareness of the issue, and the point of the experiment is to demonstrate that in this case voters make the hypothesized inferences and choices. For this, highly politicized issues are appropriate because they guarantee such awareness. If we were to discover no connection between signals of responsiveness and voter choices here, then we would have fairly strong evidence that the mechanism has made implausible assumptions. Third, many still believe that voters do not care about signals of responsiveness at the EU level even when the issues are politicized. Instead, voters are supposed to rely largely on the government's ideological stances to inform their electoral choices. The relevant setup here is to include ideological affinity as a control and see whether signals of responsiveness have a discernible effect anyway. As we shall see, this is exactly what the experiment does.

The second step in the experiment was to assess the respondents' attitudes toward the EU itself. The survey asked respondents whether they believe that Germany's membership in the EU is a good thing, a bad thing, or neither a good nor a bad thing. The results indicate that 54.4% of respondents indicated that membership is a good thing, while only 16.2% believed that it is a bad thing. Almost 26% of respondents did not have a strong opinion on EU membership either way.<sup>11</sup>

The third step in the experiment was to present respondents with the scenario for one of the policy areas. When participants were done answering questions for the first area, the survey returned to this step for the other area. The order of the policy areas was random. The scenario informed respondents that further positive action on the relevant policy would require more negotiations among EU members, and that German politicians would be involved.

The bailout scenario was framed as follows (the refugee one was analogous):

Further financial aid for Greece would require negotiations between EU members. These negotiations also involve German politicians. These politicians can represent different opinions and have more or less influence on the outcomes of the negotiations. We will now show you some examples of such a negotiation behavior. We will show you among other things:

the position which the politician represented at the start of negotiations, the position for which the politician voted at the end of the negotiations, and the final policy outcome

We will always show you two possible scenarios to compare. For each comparison, we would like to know which of the two politicians you would prefer if there was an election next Sunday. Even if you like or dislike both politicians, please let us know which one you would prefer to the other. In addition, we will ask you how likely you would vote for each politician if there was an election next Sunday. There are neither correct nor incorrect responses for this question. *Please read the scenarios carefully before you make a decision.*

Respondents could not proceed to the next page without spending at least ten seconds on these instructions.

The fourth step in the experiment was to ask respondents to evaluate two sets of two hypothetical politicians who used different strategies to signal responsiveness in a policy area, choose which one they supported, and indicate how likely they would be to vote for each if elections were held next Sunday. Politicians were defined by three personal attributes (party affiliation, gender, and political experience), the initial position they took on the issue, their final vote, and the negotiation outcome. Table 1 lists all possible values of the variables for each of the policy areas.

Each respondent was presented with a pair of hypothetical politicians (Politician A and Politician B) within a fully randomized choice-based conjoint

<sup>11</sup> I compare the responses in my survey to the results of the Eurobarometer survey in Appendix C.

**Table 1** Politician attributes and signals of responsiveness

	Bailout	Refugees
Personal Attributes		
Party Affiliation	CDU/CSU	CDU/CSU
	SPD	SPD
	FDP	FDP
	The Greens	The Greens
Gender	male	male
	female	female
Political Experience (years)	0	0
	2	2
	4	4
	6	6
	8	8
	10	10
Signals of Responsiveness		
Position Taken	favors more aid	favors more refugees
	opposes more aid	opposes more refugees
Final Vote	favors more aid	favors more refugees
	opposes more aid	opposes more refugees
Negotiation Outcome	more aid	more refugees
	no more aid	no more refugees

framework, wherein each politician varied along the six dimensions of each variant.<sup>12</sup> This design permits the identification of causal effects non-parametrically and does not require one to make assumptions about the function that maps signals of responsiveness to levels of support.

Respondents were then asked to choose between the two politicians. They had to select one, and only one, of the two. The forced-choice design allows me to analyze the correspondence between the signals of responsiveness and what a voter might actually do at the ballot box. For a somewhat more fine-grained analysis, I also included a continuous measure of the intensity of voter preferences for both politicians. The respondents were asked,

If there was an election next Sunday how likely is it that you would vote for each of the politicians? Please give your answer on the following scale from highly unlikely (1) to highly likely (10).

<sup>12</sup> See Hainmueller et al. (2014) for this method. This design builds on previous experiments about political repositioning and voter behavior in American politics (Butler and Powell 2014; Van Houweling and Tomz 2016a,b; Abrajano et al. 2017). I adapted it for the European context, and added the responsiveness dimensions.

**Table 2** Choice-based conjoint (English)

	Politician A	Politician B
Negotiation Position in the EU	<i>opposes more aid</i>	<i>supports more aid</i>
Voting Behavior in the EU	<i>opposes more aid</i>	<i>opposes more aid</i>
Negotiation Outcome in the EU	<i>more aid</i>	<i>no more aid</i>
Party Affiliation	<i>FDP</i>	<i>CDU/CSU</i>
Gender	<i>male</i>	<i>female</i>
Political Experience (in years)	6	4
Your Choice	O	O

The row ordering of the variables and their values (in italic) are merely examples. In the experiment both the order of the variables and their values were randomized

Half of the respondents were randomly chosen to receive the scale in this order, and the other half received it in reverse order, from highly likely (1) to highly unlikely (10).

When respondents were finished with their selections, they were presented with a second set of a different hypothetical pair, and asked to choose between them and to indicate the probability of voting for each (i.e., the step was repeated with two other randomly-assigned politicians).

Table 2 shows the basic layout of the forced choice-based conjoint in English.<sup>13</sup> Values for each dimension in each politician's profile were randomly assigned, and the ordering of the dimensions was also randomized. Each respondent was given two sets of these hypothetical politician pairs for each policy area, so they had to make a total of four forced choices. The analysis is based on the forced choices because these are what matters during elections. Estimations using the continuous measure of support intensity can be found in Appendix E.<sup>14</sup>

Governments can signal that they are responsive to their citizens' interests by taking positions that are responsive to the citizens' positions at the initial stages of the negotiations and by casting a final vote that is responsive to the citizens' positions (Wrátil 2017; Schneider 2019)<sup>15</sup>:

*Position Similarity:* An indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the politician's initial policy position in favor or against the policy is the same as the voter's preferred position, and 0 otherwise.

*Vote Affinity:* An indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the politician's final vote in favor or against the policy is the same as the voter's preferred position, and 0 otherwise.

<sup>13</sup> Appendix D shows a screenshot of the instructions that individuals received during the survey.

<sup>14</sup> Although the uncertainty around the estimates varies somewhat (in both directions), the results are remarkably robust to the results using the forced choice question.

<sup>15</sup> In addition, governments can signal responsiveness by defending responsive positions, and by achieving more responsive policy outcomes. Appendices F and G present results analyzing how these signals matters; they are consistent with the results on politicians' position-taking strategies.

To test the empirical implications of my theoretical argument on the different underlying dimensions of electoral accountability – voters’ specific attitudes toward particular policies and their attitudes toward the EU in general – the variables *Position Affinity* and *Vote Affinity* are measured differently with reference to the respondent’s position. To analyze the impact of specific attitudes, both variables are measured with reference to the voter’s specific position on each of the policies as discussed above (i.e., in favor or against the policy). To analyze the impact of voters’ attitudes on the European integration dimension, both variables are measured with reference to the voter’s attitudes on European integration, as discussed above (i.e., EU membership is a good thing or a bad thing). I assume that positions in favor of the policy (providing a bailout, accepting more immigration) indicate pro-European positions and positions that oppose the policy (no bailout, rejecting more immigration) indicate anti-EU positions. This assumption is fully consistent with the literature (see above), which has discussed issues of immigration and financial redistribution as ‘new issues’ where political conflict amongst political parties tends to be aligned on the European integration dimension.<sup>16</sup>

I expect that attitudes toward European integration matter more for respondents’ vote choice only if they are Eurosceptic. Specific attitudes, on the other hand, should drive vote choice for both pro-EU and anti-EU respondents.

All estimations share four controls:

*Outcome Similarity*: An indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the outcome (in favor or against the policy) is the same as the voter’s preferred policy, and 0 otherwise.<sup>17</sup>

*Partisan Similarity*: An indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent and the politician affiliate with the same party, and 0 otherwise.

*Gender*: An indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent is female, and 0 otherwise.

*Experience*: A variable that measures the years of experience the politician has. It takes values from the set specified in Table 1.

<sup>16</sup> Another potential design would have provided direct information on the politician’s attitudes toward the EU. While appropriate, this design would have the shortcoming that it does not allow me to formally compare the two dimensions of electoral accountability. In addition, the design that I implemented better reflects actual strategies of politicians in mainstream parties in Germany who oftentimes take positions that would be considered Eurosceptic, but shy away from explicitly characterizing themselves as Eurosceptic. Party identity is only an (imperfect) short-cut for the positions that politicians take on different issues, and the focus on politicians’ positions on specific policies is therefore more appropriate. That is, I am most interested in whether voters’ attitudes on these two dimensions affects how they hold politicians accountable for the positions they take on issues decided at the European level.

<sup>17</sup> *Outcome Similarity* allows me to control for the possibility that voters care little about input responsiveness but simply about the responsiveness of the outcome of the negotiations (output responsiveness). The variable does not take into account the influence the politician had on the outcome (his or her responsibility). In Appendix G, I demonstrate that achieving responsible outcomes successfully is another way for politicians to signal responsiveness effectively (the accountability mechanisms are very similar in this case). But even though bargaining success is significantly correlated with vote choice, it does not affect the relationship between responsive positions of politicians and vote choice as I demonstrate in Appendix K, where I estimate my main models but add the politician’s bargaining success as a control variable.

**Table 3** Position-taking, attitudes toward the EU, and accountability

(Pro-EU)		(Anti-EU)
Politician's signals (Baseline: Dissimilar)		
Initial position	0.010 (0.007)	0.021* (0.012)
Final vote	0.003 (0.008)	0.047** (0.013)
Negotiation outcome (Baseline: Dissimilar)		
Outcome	-0.002 (0.07)	0.038** (0.012)
Partisan similarity (Baseline: No)		
Party similarity	0.052** (0.012)	0.091* (0.056)
Gender (Baseline: Male)		
Gender	-0.011* (0.006)	0.004 (0.014)
Political experience (Baseline: None)		
2 Years	0.005 (0.011)	-0.020 (0.023)
4 Years	-0.002 (0.013)	-0.039* (0.023)
6 Years	0.010 (0.011)	-0.029 (0.020)
8 Years	-0.004 (0.012)	-0.031 (0.021)
10 Years	0.003 (0.010)	0.009 (0.025)
N	5520	
F-test	2.76**	

Reported coefficients represent marginal effects. Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$

### 3 Empirical results

For the analysis, I estimate average marginal component-specific effects. I regress the dependent variable, a binary measure of whether the respondent voted for a particular politician or not, on the set of indicator variables that I discussed above. For each dimension, I omit one of the attribute values and use it as the baseline category. To formally explore the interaction effects between voter attitudes toward the EU and politicians' responsiveness signals, I regress the dependent variable on the indicator variables and a full set of interactions between voters' attitudes on the EU (good thing vs. bad thing) along with the constitutive terms.

The regression coefficient for each dummy variable indicates the average marginal component specific effect of that value of the dimension relative to the omitted value of that dimension for each voter group. I report standard errors for these estimates clustered by respondent to account for within respondent correlations in responses.

**Table 4** Public Support for EU membership and EU policies

	Attitudes toward EU		
	Bad thing	Good thing	Neither/Nor
<b>Attitudes toward immigration</b>			
Strongly in favor	0.3%	10.6%	2.5%
Somewhat in favor	5.1%	29.8%	10.4%
Neither/Nor	9.6%	19.9%	25.9%
Somewhat against	28.2%	26.2%	28.9%
Strongly against	56.9%	13.5%	32.5%
<b>Attitudes toward bailout</b>			
Strongly in favor	0.6%	5.8%	1.8%
Somewhat in favor	6.8%	29.3%	10.0%
Neither/Nor	12.1%	21.9%	30.8%
Somewhat against	36.1%	33.1%	35.3%
Strongly against	44.5%	9.9%	22.1%

To keep the discussion parsimonious, the main estimations are pooled across the two policies.<sup>18</sup> I also estimated regressions that take into account the respondents' political knowledge and the respondents' attention during the survey without changing the main results (see Appendices I and J).

I start out by analyzing the effects of voters' attitudes toward the EU on how they hold politicians accountable. Table 3 presents the marginal effects of the interaction between the set of explanatory variables and the respondent's attitudes toward the European Union. In these regressions, *Position Similarity* and *Vote Similarity* refer to the similarity of the respondent's attitudes toward EU membership with the politician's own position (measured as similar if their position is against bailouts or immigration). For better visualization, the first column (Pro-EU) reports the marginal effects of all variables for respondents who believe that EU membership is a good thing; the second column (Anti-EU) reports the marginal effects of all variables for respondents who believe that EU membership is a bad thing.

The findings are consistent with the theoretical expectations. Eurosceptic respondents are more likely to reward politicians who take Eurosceptic positions or cast votes that are considered Eurosceptic. Politicians who are responsive to Eurosceptic voters experience a significant 2.1% (for responsive initial positions) and a 4.7% (for responsive vote choices) increase in public support. The effects for pro-European voters are largely positive, but insignificant across both signals. These findings indicate that the effects of attitudes on the European integration dimension on government support in the two policy areas are predominantly driven by Eurosceptic voters. The effects hold even though I control for whether the politician and the respondent share the same partisan ideology, a factor that exerts a significant positive influence on vote choice. Politicians

<sup>18</sup> Appendix H provides results by policy. The effects are consistent but expectedly stronger for the more politicized immigration policies.



who share the voter's ideology increase their support by 5.2% amongst pro-European voters and 9.1% amongst Eurosceptic voters.<sup>19</sup>

Why do pro-European respondents fail to reward politicians for their pro-European policies? I argued that Eurosceptic voters are likely to have more consistent (and consistently salient) preferences on policies that are connected to European integration, whereas pro-European voters may interpret support for the EU in much less salient and more general terms. Even though pro-European voters may care about immigration and bailout policies, they likely have preferences that are not consistent with their attitudes toward the EU. It is possible to use the data to analyze my argument in greater depths. Taking first a descriptive approach, Table 4 presents information on the overlap between attitudes on the European integration dimension and specific attitudes (column percentages). Eurosceptic respondents overwhelmingly tend to oppose both a Greek bailout (80.6%) and further immigration of refugees into the EU (85.1%). Pro-European respondents, on the other hand, do not depict very consistent attitudes: 35.1% of pro-European respondents support a Greek bailout, but 43% oppose it. Similarly, 40.5% of pro-European respondents support further immigration of refugees, but 39.7% oppose it. The European integration dimension appears more prevalent among the Eurosceptic voters who protest existing policies in the European Union. Pro-European voters, on the other hand, vary much more strongly in their disposition toward European policies; they do not indiscriminately support pro-EU policies.

This may then explain why pro-European respondents seem to rely primarily on party identification to make their vote choices. As argued above, if pro-European voters are less likely to use attitudes on the European integration dimension to hold their politicians accountable, their choices will be mainly influenced by their attitudes toward specific policies, which may not correlate with their attitudes on the European integration dimension (they do for Eurosceptics). Ideology offers a short-cut for voters to assess congruence on specific attitudes, and the positive and significant effect indicates that pro-European voters are more likely to use specific attitudes to hold governments accountable. The experimental setting allows me to test this directly. To analyze whether pro-European voters base their vote choice on specific attitudes toward policies rather than on attitudes on the European integration dimension, I refined the main variables on responsiveness signals. The re-defined variables take into account how similar the politician's initial position and final vote is to the voter's preference on the issue, and how closely the outcome corresponds to the voter's ideal point, without reference to the respondent's attitudes on the European integration dimension a measure that reflects general notions of congruence in the politics literature. The voter's preference is measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly in favor) to 5 (strongly opposed), so I coded voters with values 1 through 3 as being in favor of the policy (more aid to Greece and more refugees to EU, respectively), and those with values from 4 through 5 as being opposed to it. The three measures of affinity are as follows:

<sup>19</sup> One potential concern is that approximately 17% of respondents self-identified with the Eurosceptic AfD, but the experimental setting did not allow politicians to be from that party. Since AfD voters would not identify with any politician on partisan ideology, they may be more likely to focus on signals of responsiveness, thereby biasing the effects upward. To analyze whether the findings on responsiveness signals are driven by AfD voters, I analyzed the main results without AfD supporters in Appendix L. The findings are remarkably robust.

**Table 5** Position-taking, specific attitudes, and accountability

	(Pro-EU)	(Anti-EU)
Politician's signals (Baseline: Dissimilar)		
Initial position	0.026** (0.007)	0.025** (0.012)
Final vote	0.036** (0.008)	0.040** (0.013)
Negotiation outcome (Baseline: Dissimilar)		
Outcome	0.024** (0.007)	0.038** (0.012)
Partisan similarity (Baseline: No)		
Party similarity	0.051** (0.012)	0.099* (0.055)
Gender (Baseline: Male)		
Gender	-0.009 (0.006)	-0.004 (0.014)
Political experience (Baseline: None)		
2 Years	0.007 (0.012)	-0.023 (0.020)
4 Years	-0.001 (0.013)	-0.042* (0.023)
6 Years	0.006 (0.011)	-0.031 (0.020)
8 Years	-0.003 (0.012)	-0.039 (0.021)
10 Years	0.005 (0.011)	0.004 (0.025)
N	5520	
F-test	4.93**	

Reported coefficients represent marginal effects. Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$

*Position Similarity*: An indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the politician's initial position in favor or against the policy is the same as the voter's preferred position, and 0 otherwise.

*Vote Similarity*: An indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the politician's final vote in favor or against the policy is the same as the voter's preferred position, and 0 otherwise.

*Outcome Similarity*: An indicator variable that takes the value of 1 if the policy is set to the position preferred by the voter, and 0 otherwise.

Table 5 presents the results. The results demonstrate the centrality of specific attitudes for both pro-European and Eurosceptic respondents to hold their governments accountable for responsive behavior in the EU. Eurosceptic voters are significantly more likely to reward politicians whose position or vote is

close to their own ideal positions than politicians with dissimilar positions (by 2.5% and 4.0%). These results are not surprising given the high consistency of preferences amongst Euro-sceptics toward the two policies.

The main difference in the results is for pro-European respondents. Respondents who self-identified as pro-European are significantly more likely to reward politicians who take responsive positions than politicians who take non-responsive positions. Politicians who take responsive positions significantly increase their support by 2.6%, those that vote responsively significantly increase their support by 3.6%.

Having the same party affiliation as the politician remains the strongest predictor of vote choice, just like the many studies of voting patterns in Europe would lead one to expect. However, it is worth emphasizing that the variables that account for responsive position-taking have statistically discernible effects even when partisanship affinity is taken into account.

In sum, the findings imply that pro-European respondents are likely to assess government's responsiveness based on their attitudes toward individual policies (or using the left-right dimension as a short-cut). Their attitudes on the European integration dimension, however, do not play a role in holding governments accountable for their behavior in European negotiations. That the two policies under observation have been identified as salient on the European integration dimension lends further importance to these findings. The European integration dimension, at least in Germany, matters primarily for Euro-sceptic voters.

## 4 Discussion

The paper provides a comparative analysis of the sources of government accountability in the EU. I argue that attitudes toward the European Union and specific attitudes toward individual policies serve as important drivers of electoral accountability, albeit they matter differently for pro- and anti-European voters. Given the absence of Euro-sceptic parties in most European governments, variations in attitudes toward the EU should become particularly important for Euro-sceptic voters as a way to sanction governments for pro-European policies (or to reward them for Euro-sceptic policies). Pro-European voters, on the other hand, are more likely to take specific policy positions of politicians into account when deciding whom to vote for.

I presented the results of an experiment to assess comparatively how German respondents' attitudes influence their assessment of typical signals of government responsiveness. I find that the two attitude dimensions matter differently for pro-EU and anti-EU voters. The effects of attitudes toward the EU on electoral accountability are predominantly driven by Euro-sceptic respondents who blame and reward politicians for their actions at the EU-level depending on whether those actions are in line with a Euro-sceptic or a pro-European view. The effects are particularly strong for policies on refugees, which are highly salient to Euro-sceptic voters. Pro-European respondents, on the other hand, do not seem to hold their governments accountable on the basis of their attitudes toward the EU, but rather on the basis of their specific attitudes.

These findings provide first evidence that specific attitudes – the source of electoral accountability that is usually applied as a benchmark in democratic countries – matter for voters when they hold their governments accountable for their actions at the EU-level. They also show how voters activate different attitudes under different circumstances. These findings are particularly important to guide research and policy on government responsiveness in the European Union. The EU has faced a rise in populism and Euroscepticism, which has brought the question of the democratic deficit to the forefront of debates on how to address these challenges. My findings provide insights into how voters use these attitudes to assess government performance with important implications for government behavior in the European Union.

The paper complements existing observational research that has focused on analyzing voter attitudes in isolation and sheds more light on electoral accountability in the EU. The nature of the experiment offered crucial advantages for the purpose of the analysis, but it also has shortcomings with respect to the external validity of the results. The survey was conducted in Germany, and future research needs to ascertain that the findings hold for other EU member states as well. The relatively homogenous distribution of preferences on these issues across Europe that I documented above are somewhat reassuring in this respect, but the existing differences could point to interesting variations of electoral accountability across countries, especially in the European South. In addition, my analysis focused on two highly politicized issues. This choice was made intentionally to analyze how different sources of electoral accountability matter (rather than whether they matter to begin with). As I discussed previously, I do not expect that voters always hold their governments accountable for their actions at the EU level. I would expect that electoral accountability mechanisms are much more likely to hold for policies that are politicized. Finally, my paper has focused on electoral accountability through the intergovernmental channel. Whereas the experimental set-up has not made this explicit, it would be important to analyze whether the patterns are similar for the European Parliament as well, especially since the attribution of responsibility is much more difficult in the European Parliament.

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