

Cross-cutting issues and electoral choice. EU issue voting in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum

Abstract

As political competition is becoming increasingly multi-dimensional in Europe, voters often face the challenge of choosing which issues matter most to them. The European integration issue presents a particular difficulty for voters, since it is not closely aligned to the left-right dimension. We test the impact of the EU issue in the first parliamentary election following the UK's divisive Brexit referendum. We argue that while the EU issue was salient to voters, EU issue voting was inhibited by the indistinct and ambiguous positions adopted by the two major parties. To examine this, we combine an analysis of British Election Study data from the 2017 General Election with a conjoint experiment that allows us to present voters with a range of choices on both dimensions. Our findings show that the EU dimension has the potential to become a cross-cutting dimension that rivals the left-right dimension in British electoral politics, but this crucially depends on party competition.

Keywords: EU issue voting, elections, conjoint, Brexit, referendum.

Word count: 7413

1 Introduction

What happens to electoral behaviour when new political issues emerge that do not neatly align with the dominant dimension of party competition? In European party systems, we tend to conveniently locate parties along a single left-right dimension, stemming from the time of the French Revolution when members of the National Assembly were divided into supporters of the King sitting to the right and supporters of the Revolution sitting to the left. The left-right spectrum has since become an ideological “super issue” that contrasts the redistributive and interventionist role for the state on the left with the market-oriented approach of the right (Gabel and Huber, 2000; McDonald and Budge, 2005). This dimension also acts as a useful heuristic for voters, as they seek to vote for the party with the positions closest to their own preferences (Downs, 1957). However, many scholars today argue that the European political space is becoming multi-dimensional with a new orthogonal cultural divide that pits liberal cosmopolitans and cultural progressives against nationalists and cultural conservatives (De Vries and Marks, 2012).

In this paper, we examine the degree to which voting behaviour is affected by party competition on issues that are not clearly aligned with the left-right dimension. We explore the salient issue of European integration, since this is a quintessential example of an issue not readily subsumed by the left-right dimension of competition, yet increasingly salient to voters (Evans, 1999; Evans and Butt, 2007; De Vries and Van de Wardt, 2011; Van de Wardt, De Vries and Hobolt, 2014). It is a familiar argument in the literature that the question of European integration has long been a ‘sleeping giant’: an issue that has the potential to reshape patterns of electoral behaviour, but which only becomes electorally relevant when political entrepreneurs and political events increase the salience of the issue, despite mainstream party attempts to depoliticize it (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004; Tillman, 2004; De Vries, 2007; De Vries and Tillman, 2011). What happens when the giant is awoken from its slumber, due to salient events such as an EU referendum? Building on this literature, we argue that EU issue voting, i.e. the extent to which vote choices are based on voters’ EU preferences, is crucially conditioned by the choices offered by parties on both EU and left-right dimensions. The degree to which individual voters will base

their vote on EU preferences is shaped by the availability of congruent party choice on both dimensions.

We examine this proposition in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum on British membership of the European Union, which triggered a deep division in the British electorate (Hobolt, 2016; Evans and Menon, 2017). Given the divisive nature of the campaign, the close referendum result and the potentially far-reaching consequences of the decision for Britain to leave the EU (Brexit), it is not surprising that the issue of Britain's relationship to the EU became highly salient to voters. Yet, the main political parties, the governing Conservatives and opposition Labour Party, were internally divided on the issue and did not provide distinct and unambiguous positions in the parliamentary election that followed the referendum in 2017. This election thus provides us with an apposite case for examining the impact of a salient issue on voting behaviour, when party positions are both ambiguous and constrained. A key innovation of this paper is that it explicitly examines the effect of party supply on individual EU issue voting: firstly by analysing how the heterogeneity of issue voting is dependent on the congruence with parties on both left-right and EU dimensions in an observational study, and secondly by examining how EU-issue voting is affected by exogenously varying the party supply on both dimensions in an experimental setting. This enables us to examine both the extent of actual EU issue voting and the potential for the EU issue to reshape electoral behaviour as the party context changes.

Hence, we employ two empirical approaches to examine the impact of the EU issue on vote choices in the aftermath of the Brexit vote. First, we use survey data from the 2017 British Election Study (BES) to estimate a conditional logit model of how proximity to the political parties on the left-right dimension and the EU-dimension influenced vote choices. As expected, we find that the EU dimension has a significant effect, yet not as great as closeness to parties on the left-right dimension. However, it is unclear whether the weaker EU issue voting is due to lack of importance to voters or lack of distinct choices offered by parties. Therefore, our second analysis leverages a conjoint experiment to test the relative impact of the EU-dimension and the left-right dimension on vote choice when candidates are offering the full range of (randomised) options on both dimensions. The conjoint analysis reveals that the EU issue has the potential to

be as important, if not more important, as the left-right dimension in British electoral politics if the major political parties were to offer more distinct positions on both dimensions. This paper thus contributes to the understanding of how the impact of salient issues on vote choices is crucially moderated by the range of political choices offered by the parties.

2 European integration: a cross-cutting issue

Schattschneider (1960) argued that politics is essentially about which political conflicts come to dominate the political agenda. Complex societies produce a multitude of diverse conflicts over public policy, “the game of politics depends on which of these conflicts gains the dominant position: The process in which one or several of these issue conflicts gain political dominance involves a mobilization of bias” (Schattschneider, 1960, 62). The left-right dimension has provided an organising principle for political competition in Europe for decades, with parties ordered according to their positions on the role of the state in the economy and the nature of its redistributive effort; a dimension once rooted in social divisions and the struggle between workers and the bourgeoisie (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948). While the underlying social cleavages of class and religion that gave rise the organisation of European party systems have undergone dramatic transformation, the left-right dimension has remained a powerful tool for aggregating interests and classifying parties (Van der Eijk et al., 1992). Yet, recent studies are pointing out that party competition is becoming more multidimensional in Europe and voters more volatile (Kriesi et al., 2008).

Many scholars have focused on structural changes in order to explain changes to the nature of party competition. They argue that increased political and economic integration in Europe accompanied with higher levels of migration created winners and losers has led to the development of a second ‘cultural’ dimension of party political conflict (Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008). Others have put emphasis on the strategic efforts of parties in mobilizing new issues. This is based on the assumption that parties are not simply vessels carrying societal divisions, but actively structure and determine the content of societal conflict (Schattschneider, 1960). As a result, the substantive

character of political competition will vary from election to election as new issues or positions are identified and mobilized by one party or another (Riker, 1982; Carmines and Stimson, 1989). Political parties politicize a new issue, or societal conflict, and attempt to encourage public attention over this controversy and win over voters (Evans and Butt, 2007; Hobolt and De Vries, 2015). As party positions are not simply a reflection of societal demands, there can often be a mismatch between the preferences of large electoral groups and the positions offered by parties (Van der Brug and Van Spanje, 2009; Lefkofridi, Wagner and Willmann, 2014).

The debate on European integration is a notable example of an issue that has become contested in the European political space. For decades the EU issue has had the potential to cross-cut the left-right dimension in European electoral politics. However, as Evans noted in the context of the 1997 UK general election: “at present this impact remains small. Yet it may become more important as integration proceeds and new and possibly more contentious questions than even monetary union arrive inescapably on the political agenda” (Evans, 1999, 220-221). The EU issue has remained a ‘sleeping giant’ in many European countries due to the lack of mobilization by the mainstream political parties (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004; Tillman, 2004; De Vries, 2007). Indeed, European mainstream parties sought to depoliticize the issue, while being broadly supportive of the European project (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002; De Vries and Edwards, 2009). In recent decades, however, the European integration issue has been employed successfully by challenger parties seeking to upset the pro-European consensus among mainstream parties and appeal voters (Van de Wardt, De Vries and Hobolt, 2014; Hobolt and De Vries, 2015). Studies have also shown that while such party mobilization has had an impact on voting behaviour on occasion, the effect of EU issue voting is still relatively weak in comparison with left-right orientations (Evans, 1998; Tillman, 2004; De Vries, 2007; Van der Brug, Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2007; De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Hobolt, Spoon and Tilley, 2009). For example, De Vries (2007) finds evidence of EU issue voting in countries with high levels of party conflict and issue salience over Europe, but not so in countries where the issue is less contested. Examining differences between East and West in 2004, De Vries and Tillman (2011) show that EU issue voting is more prominent in East-Central Europe compared

to more consolidated democracies in Western Europe. In the context of European parliament elections, studies have also shown that EU attitudes shape voters' choices as Eurosceptic voters are more likely to vote for Eurosceptic parties (Hobolt, Spoon and Tilley, 2009; Hobolt and Spoon, 2012).

Overall, the extant literature shows that the EU dimension has the potential to become more relevant to voters when the issue is salient and when Eurosceptic parties seek to mobilize voters. Yet, these studies are mainly based on observational data, which do not allow us to entirely disentangle the endogenous relationship between vote choice and issue position. Moreover, previous work does not consider cases where the EU issue becomes salient despite of, rather than because of, the efforts of the major political parties. What happens when an issue becomes salient even though the political parties are internally divided and struggle to provide clear and distinct positions? Can such an issue become consequential to electoral behaviour?

The question of whether of the strength of "EU issue voting", i.e. the effect of EU preferences on vote choice, has remained of scholarly interest. Following Carmines and Stimson's theory of issue evolution, we expect that the electoral impact of a new issue is crucially dependent on elite polarization on the issue (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). According to this theory, an issue can alter the link between voters and parties and produce long-term changes in electoral politics (mass alignment) only if parties provide clear and distinct positions and voters are aware of (clarity), and respond emotionally to (affect), these differences in party positions on the new issue (Carmines and Stimson, 1989). In other words, in order for electoral politics to be shaped by a new issue, it is essential that parties provide clear and distinct positions AND that voters care about the issue. The aim of this paper is not to test the complete dynamic issue evolution model, but rather to focus on the issue voting aspect, namely the conditions under which preferences on a 'new' issue matter to voters. We propose the following hypotheses about EU issue voting:

H1: When the EU issue is salient domestically, closeness to a party on the EU issue shapes vote choices (EU issue voting), even when controlling for closeness on the left-right dimension.

H2a: EU issue voting is greater for voters who have congruent choices on both the EU and the left-right dimensions.

H2b: EU issue voting is more pronounced when the major parties offer a distinct range of positions on both the EU and left-right dimensions.

3 EU issue voting in the aftermath of Brexit

The context of the 2017 UK General Election provides a suitable case to test our expectations. The election came less than a year after the momentous referendum decision of British voters to exit the EU. Studies have shown that around three-quarters of British citizens identified as either Remainers or Leavers in the run-up to the 2017 election, and that these new identities cut across traditional party lines (Curtice, 2017; Hobolt, 2018). Survey data also shows that the EU was more salient to voters than it had been any time in the past (see Figure A.4 in the Appendix). But while the issue of EU membership was clearly very salient to voters in the aftermath of the very divisive and intense referendum debate, the major political parties did not present voters with a clearly distinct choice.

The two major parties –the Conservatives and Labour– were internally divided on the Brexit issue during the referendum campaign itself, but in the 2017 general election both parties promised to honour the referendum result,¹ but they focused little on the details of their plans for Brexit, in part due to their internal divisions over the UK’s future relationship with the EU. Prime Minister Theresa May had already given a major speech on Brexit that made it explicit that the government would negotiate to leave not only the EU itself, but also the Single Market and the Customs Union. The emphasis during the campaign was therefore on the need for a ‘strong and stable government to get the best Brexit deal’ (Conservative Party, 2017). The Labour Party was

¹For instance, MPs from both the Conservatives and Labour overwhelmingly backed Article 50 bill to trigger Britain’s exit from the EU. The Article 50 bill was passed by 498 votes to 114.

promising a ‘Jobs First Brexit’, which by some was seen as a softer approach to the negotiations, but the party made no commitment to staying in the Single Market or any promises of a second referendum.² The Conservative Party adopted a tougher stance on some Brexit-related issues, such as immigration, but its manifesto was ambiguous on many other issues, such as the type of “deep and special partnership” between the UK and the EU (Conservative Party, 2017). As a consequence, a large segment of the electorate had difficulties in understanding the parties’ stance on the issue. As shown by a YouGov poll in 2016, half of the population thought the Conservative Party was not clear about its Brexit policy. This ambiguity was also pronounced among Labour voters. About half of them mentioned their party was in favour of staying in the EU, with the rest thinking the party was split or favoured Brexit.³

This lack of clear and distinct party positions on the Brexit question poses the question of whether voters felt they had a congruent choice on the EU dimension, i.e. a party that represented their preferences. As explained in the theory section, our expectation is that for a dimension to be relevant voters need to face congruent choices in the same dimension. In order to descriptively visualize party-voter congruence in both the EU and the LR dimension, we looked at the measure of agreement suggested by Van Der Eijk (2001). This shows that congruence between parties and voters is lower on the EU dimension than on the LR dimension.⁴

Nonetheless, both the Conservatives and Labour increased their vote share in the 2017 election. While the Conservatives emerged as the largest party, they fell just short of an overall majority and the election thus led to a diminished Conservative minority government. The election signified the strengthening of two-party politics in the UK (Hobolt, 2018; Mellon et al., 2018). 82.4 per cent of voters voted for either a Conservative or a Labour candidate. Given the nature of the first-past-the-post electoral system in Britain, the battle for power is ultimately between the two major parties (even in cases where they join forces with a smaller coalition partner).

²Labour’s Manifesto was ambiguous on Single Market membership. The party promised to ‘scrap the Conservatives’ Brexit White Paper and replace it with fresh negotiating priorities that have a strong emphasis on retaining the benefits of the Single Market and the Customs Union, thus emphasising the ‘benefits’ of the Single Market, rather than ‘membership’ of the Single Market (Labour Party, 2017).

³The poll figures correspond to a campaign memo from the group Britain Stronger In Europe reported the Guardian (The Guardian, 30 May 2016).

⁴The specific values are included in the Appendix. If we use another measure of voters-elite congruence, namely the Mover’s Distance (Lupu, Selios and Warner, 2017), we obtain the same basic result.

This may help explain why few voters switched to smaller parties with clearer and more unified Brexit positions, such as the pro-Remain Liberal Democrats and the pro-Brexit United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Mellon et al. (2018) have shown that party switching between the 2015 and 2017 elections was influenced by voters' position on the EU referendum and their opinions of the party leaders. Yet, this observational analysis does not compare the effect of closeness on EU dimension and the LR dimension on vote choice, leaving the question of which dimension was more salient to electoral choice unanswered. Our expectation is that when the major two parties adopt a similar (or ambiguous) position on the EU dimension, there is very little real choice available to voters focused on choosing the next government. In the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote, the available choices were particularly limited for pro-European Remainers, since neither of the two parties advocated a policy to seek to overturn the Brexit decision. Given these constraints, we expect that the EU-issue was less decisive for vote choices than preferences on the left-right dimension, on which the parties provided clearly distinct positions (H2a). Moreover, we expect EU issue voting to be especially restrained for Remainers given the lack of pro-Remain major parties (H2b).

We start by examining the effect of the EU and the left-right dimension on vote choice using survey data. We then complement this analysis with a conjoint design, which allows us to examine vote choices when voters are presented with candidates with a full range of left-right and EU positions.

4 Observational analysis

We first test the impact of European integration preferences on electoral behaviour using observational data. We employ the 12th Wave of the British Election Study Internet Panel (2017 pre-election study) (Fieldhouse et al., 2016).⁵ This was conducted between 5 May-7 June 2017 using a large representative sample of the UK population.⁶ As discussed above,

⁵Ideally, we would have used the 2017 post-election survey. However, the post-election wave did not include questions on people's perceived party position on the left-right and the EU dimension.

⁶Once we drop those that do not locate themselves on the LR scale or on the EU dimension, we are left with more than 32,000 observations.

the left-right dimension has traditionally structured political competition as well as electoral behaviour in the UK. Yet, the EU issue has increasingly preoccupied voters as well as political parties internally (Evans and Butt, 2007; Evans and Menon, 2017). Unsurprisingly, the Brexit referendum greatly enhanced the salience of the EU issue to voters.⁷ The question is what was the relative effect of closeness to parties on the left-right and EU issue on vote choices in the 2017 election?

To examine this question, our outcome variable is vote intention in the 8 June 2017 General Election: the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, or UKIP.⁸ Our main independent variables are respondents' self-reported position on the Left-Right (LR) scale (0 Left; 10 Right) and on the European integration dimension (0 "Unite fully with the European Union"; 10 "Protect our independence").⁹ Following the spatial theory of voting (Downs, 1957), we compute the relative weight assigned to issues using the distance between each voter's preferences on an issue and the perceived position of each party on the left-right and the EU dimension. In a conditional logit framework, the coefficient for the impact of distance can be interpreted as the salience (or weight) of a particular issue for voters' electoral decisions. We employ a conditional logit model (McFadden, 1974). More concretely, as we are interested in capturing potential heterogeneous effects—that is, in examining the effect each dimension has on vote choice for each of the parties, we extract as many alternative-specific coefficients as there are parties in the political system. This model allows us to test how the ideological closeness between voters and parties across several dimensions influences vote choice. In order to compare the effect across coefficients, we standardize the distances. The different models with party-varying issue salience coefficients also include controls for party identification, sex, gender, age, and education.

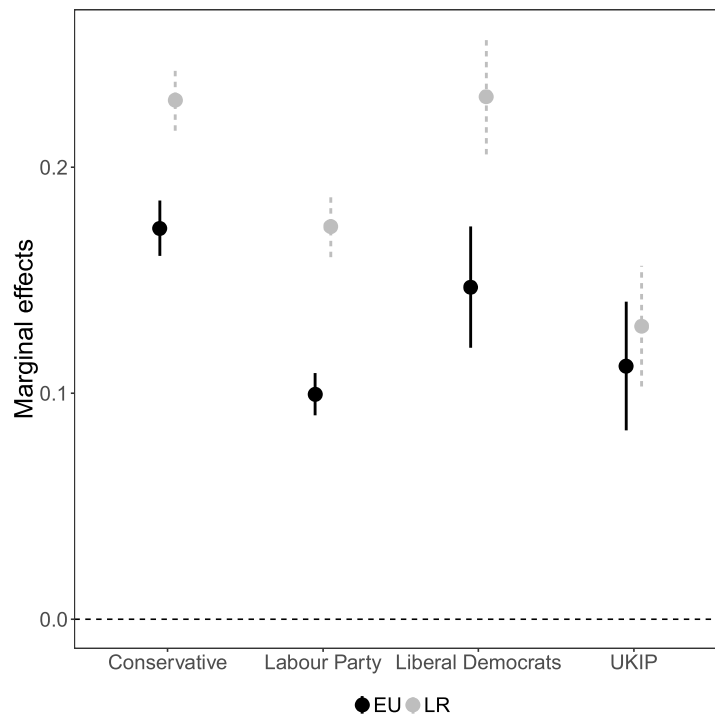
⁷See Figure A.4 in the Appendix. As reported by Ipsos-MORI, the EU was the second most important issue facing Britain nowadays right before the election (May-June 2017). 45% of respondents mentioned the EU, Europe or the Single Market as the most important issue, second only to the NHS (61%).

⁸We exclude the Greens and the Nationalist parties and Northern Irish parties due to the low number of observations.

⁹The correlation between both dimensions is 0.5 ($p < 0.05$). As we show in the Appendix, voters occupy most of the quadrants, providing us with sufficient variation in each of them. One of the limitations of using the LR dimension is that this might be influenced by non-economic issues. Yet, when we correlate it with other issues (environment, values, etc), the correlation is always above 0.5 and significant.

Are there systematic differences in the impact of the LR and the EU dimension on party choice across parties? Given the salience of the EU issue to voters, we expect it to shape vote choices, even controlling for left-right congruence (H1). Yet, considering the lack of distinctive Brexit positions of the two major parties, our baseline expectation is that the EU issue was less decisive for vote choices than preferences on the left-right dimension (H2b), and particularly so for Remain voters (H2a). Figure 1 displays and compares the marginal effects of distance to a party in the LR and the EU scale. The graph shows that the effect of closeness on the left-right dimension is, for all parties, significantly larger than that of the EU closeness. For example, when the LR closeness to the Conservative party goes up one standard deviation, the probability of voting for the party increases by 23%. In contrast, the same increase in closeness the EU dimension increases the likelihood of voting the Conservatives by 17%. The relative effect of closeness on the LR dimension vis-a-vis the EU dimensions is larger for the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, and lower for the Conservatives and UKIP. However, the results also show that the effect of the EU dimension is not negligible, in line with H1.

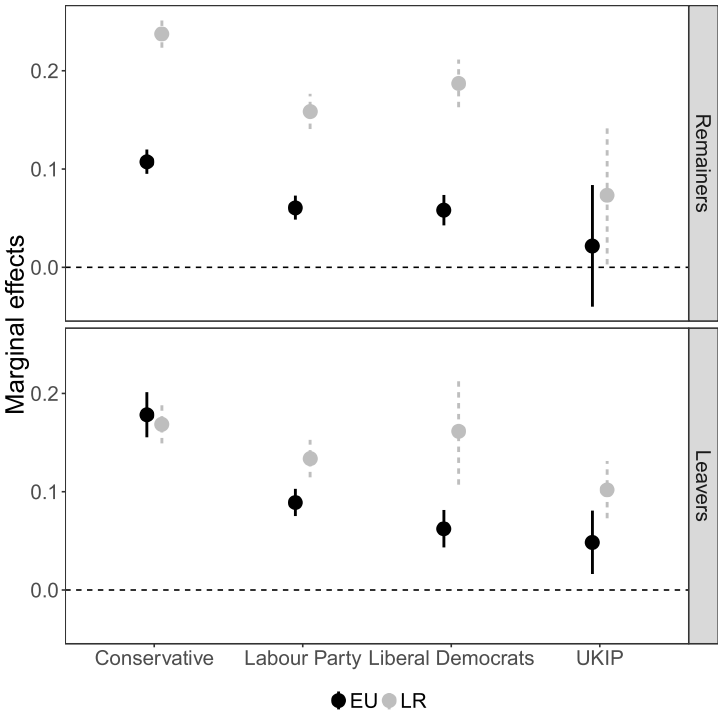
Figure 1: The effect of closeness on the left-right and EU dimensions on vote intention



This plot shows the marginal effects of the LR and the EU dimension extracted from a conditional logit with party-varying coefficients. All distances have been standardized. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Models include controls for party identification, sex, gender, age, and education. Source: BES pre-election survey 2017.

Moreover, we expect that EU issue voting varies across Leavers and Remainers. This is what Figure 4 shows. It plots the marginal effect of closeness on both dimensions for Leavers and Remainers. As expected, the LR dimension has a larger effect on vote choice than the EU dimension across all parties for Remain voters. This is likely due to the fact that Remain voters were offered little choice on the EU issue. In contrast, the magnitude of EU issue voting and LR voting is similar among Leavers, who had the choice between a left-wing pro-Brexit party (Labour) and a right-wing pro-Brexit party (Conservatives). This is in line with our expectation that choice on both dimensions matter to the strength of EU issue voting (H2a).

Figure 2: The effect of closeness on the left-right and EU dimensions on vote intention across respondents' Brexit vote



This plot shows the marginal effect of the LR and the EU dimension extracted from a conditional logit with party-varying coefficients. It distinguishes between those who voted Remain and Leave. All distances have been standardized. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Models include controls for party identification, sex, gender, age, and education. Source: BES pre-election survey 2017.

To sum up, the observational analysis shows two significant patterns: First, it reveals that the electorate in the UK cared about both the EU and the LR dimension in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum in line with H1. Yet, the substantive effect of the EU issue on vote choices is smaller than that of the LR dimension. Second, the effect of the LR and the EU dimension varies across people's vote choice in the Brexit referendum. Specifically, we find significant heterogeneity in voter responses, which essentially means that the effect of the EU issue among Leavers is greater than for Remainers. These findings suggest that the impact of the EU issue on electoral behaviour depends on the match or mismatch between voter preferences and the political supply, as outlined in Hypothesis 2a and 2b.

5 Experimental analysis

In this section we present the results from a conjoint design, an experimental strategy commonly employed in marketing research and recently been applied to political science (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2013; Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley, 2019). Our conjoint experiment allows us to examine how the party supply influences EU issue voting, by exogenously varying the candidates' position on the LR and the EU dimension. This essentially means that our design (randomly) builds different configurations of party supply on the LR and the EU dimension. By randomly assigning congruent/non-congruent candidates, we are able to better capture the effect of both the LR and the EU dimension on vote choice. Additionally, the conjoint design limits the phenomena of projection and contrast effects, two common problems in observational research: previous works have shown that individuals tend to reduce the perceived ideological distance between themselves and parties they favour (projection effect) (Merrill, Grofman and Adams, 2001). In addition, they tend to exaggerate the distance to parties for which they do not intend to vote (contrast effect). The use of a randomized design helps us in such enterprise. All in all, our conjoint design seeks to assess how voters weigh the LR and the EU dimension in a controlled setting when facing candidates with a range of ideological positions on these two dimensions.

The conjoint experiment was embedded in an online survey that was conducted in May 2017 in the UK by YouGov. The survey consists of a representative sample of 1,936 respondents above the age of 18. It was fielded during the campaign of the UK General Election of 2017, which made the scenario provided in the survey more realistic to respondents and thus enhances the external validity of our findings. Respondents were presented with pairs of generically labelled candidates (e.g. candidate A-B, C-D, etc). This is important for several reasons: First, we did not cue respondents with party information as this might have triggered a partisan bias. In other words, including party labels would have contaminated the (randomized) parties' policy position on both dimensions by pre-treatment perceptions of parties. Second, without party labels respondents could focus instead on the candidates' attributes and policy positions. Finally, without party labels attached, respondents were less likely to directly compare the characteristics

of the actual candidates at their constituency.

For each candidate, respondents were presented with eight attributes. For the purpose of our analysis, the two most important attributes were the candidate's ideological position (Extreme Left, Left, Centre, Right, Extreme Right) and the candidate's position on the EU referendum (for Leaving the European Union or for Remaining in the European Union). To present respondents with a more realistic choice, we also included five additional attributes. These dimensions were the candidate's immigration position (a highly salient issue to voters), the candidate's chances of being elected to Parliament, the candidate's chances of entering the government and the candidate's gender and ethnicity.¹⁰ Unlike most experiments, which vary one or two dimensions, a conjoint design allows us to offer a set of (bundled) policy positions and a more realistic scenario to respondents. In other words, instead of priming survey respondents to think about the candidate's position on the EU dimension, we make them think about a set of characteristics, in which the EU dimension is one of them. Compared to previous research, this is relevant as it enables us to test the effect of the party supply and, in particular, the significance of the EU dimension once the other candidate characteristics are controlled for.

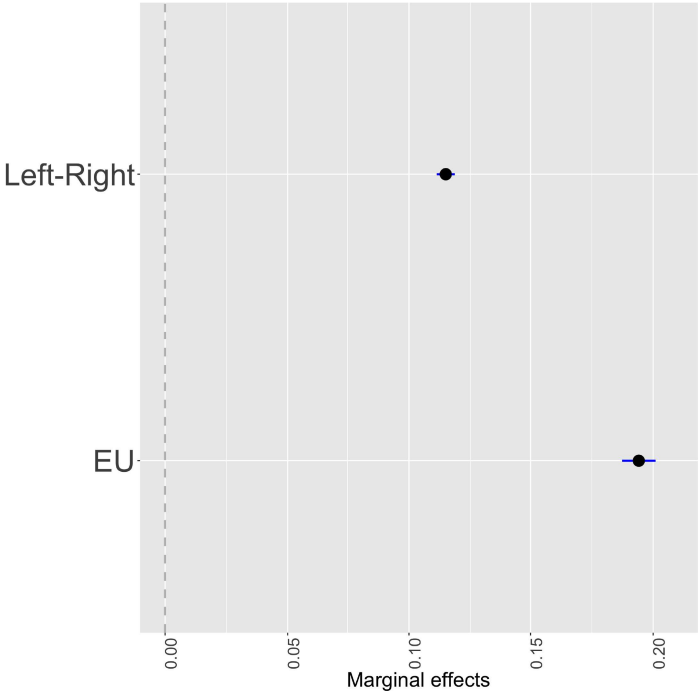
The profiles were presented side-by-side, with each pair of profiles on a separate screen. To ease the cognitive burden for respondents while also minimizing primacy and recency effects, the attributes were presented in a randomized order that was fixed across the five pairings for each respondent. After seeing the candidates, we asked respondents to choose between the two candidates. Each respondent repeated this task five times. We re-stack the data matrix so that each candidate k of task j presented to respondent i is a different row. The survey included 1,936 respondents, hence generating a total of 11,616 observations.

As a first step, we follow the same logic as in the previous observational section and examine the effect of congruence on the LR and the EU dimension on vote choice. In order to do it, we transformed the respondent's position on the LR scale into five categories (from extreme

¹⁰To make the interpretation easier (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley, 2019), we decided not to apply constraints in the randomization of the attributes. As a result, some combinations of candidate characteristics that may appear unusual were possible. However, our results do not change if we exclude combinations that might be considered unrealistic. In the end, we decided not to exclude any combination, as we could be introducing a selection on the dependent variable problem and, most importantly, we do not know the combinations voters deem as unrealistic.

left to extreme right). In a second step, we used this new categorical variable to calculate the congruence with the candidate’s policy position.¹¹ Similarly, we created a dummy indicator to capture whether the respondent’s position on the EU question is congruent with that of the candidate. Then, we ran a conditional logit with both the LR distance and the EU congruence dummies. Results are displayed in Figure 3. As it can be seen, this simple model shows that congruence with a party on the EU issue shapes vote choice, even when controlling for congruence on the LR dimension (H1). It also shows that, in line with our H2a, the effect of the EU dimension is slightly greater than congruence on the left-right dimension when respondents are given a range of choices on both dimensions, unconstrained by party labels.

Figure 3: Effects of congruence on the left-right and EU dimensions on vote choice



This plot shows the marginal effects of the congruence on the LR and EU position between the respondent and the party. Estimates are based on the regression estimators with clustered standard errors; bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Next, we further explore the interaction between a respondent’s position on both the LR and the

¹¹If we apply different criteria when transforming left-right position from a scale to categorical variable the results are virtually the same (see online appendix). The figure displayed in the manuscript uses the following categories: 0-1 Extreme left; 2-3 Left; 4-6 Centre; 7-8 Right; 9-10 Extreme Right.

EU dimensions and candidate's policy position on the same dimension. In order to do it, we use a linear regression model to estimate two causal quantities of interest: the average marginal component effect (AMCE) and the Marginal Means (MM). The AMCE provides the expected change in the outcome of interest when a given attribute is compared to the baseline and relative to the other attributes included in the model. A conjoint analysis also allows us to explore heterogeneous effects, modelled as an interaction between the moderating variable and the attribute of interest. To do so, and as suggested by Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley (2019), we employ marginal means, which can be interpreted as the probability of choosing a particular candidate given a set of characteristics, and this allows us to compare the importance of characteristics across sub-groups.

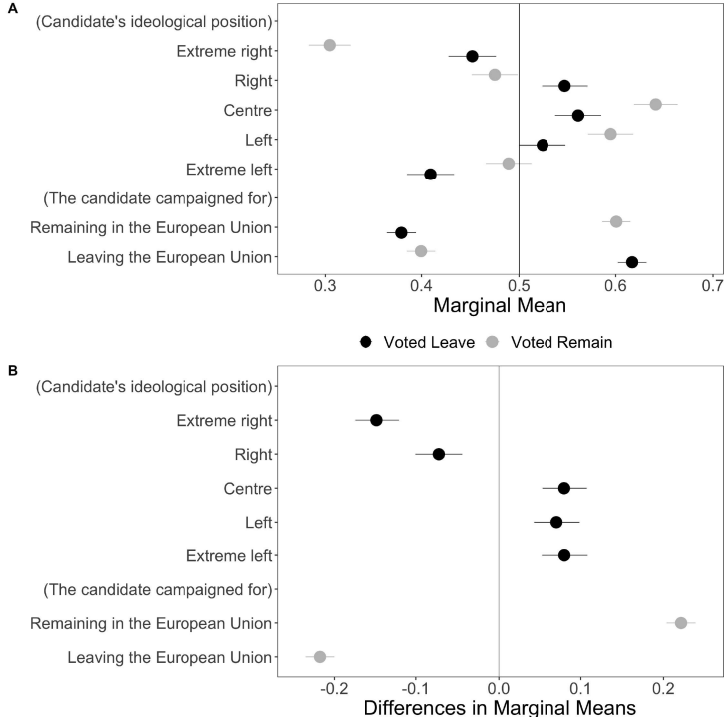
Figure 4 shows the effect of the candidate's left-right and EU positions on vote choice across people's Brexit vote.¹² Panel A shows the marginal mean by Leavers and Remainers, while panel B shows the estimated differences in marginal means. Starting with panel A, we see the clear differences between Leavers and Remainers. As the last four coefficients show, their voting logic is almost asymmetrical, with a few exceptions, such as when they face an extreme right-wing candidate. Results show that Leavers are about 60% less likely to vote for a candidate who wants to remain in the EU, which is a similar probability than when Remainers see a candidate that want to leave the EU. In addition, we also observe differences across candidates' left-right positions. For instance, centrist candidates are more likely to be favoured by Remainers than by Leavers.

The divide created by the Brexit vote is illustrated in Panel B, which further explores preference heterogeneity by showing the differences between conditional marginal means. The figure conveys the same substantive conclusions than before, showing that all differences are statistically significant. Yet, it allows us to illustrate that the largest estimated difference in marginal means corresponds to the candidate's position on the EU referendum. This result supports H2b, as it

¹²In order to analyse the effect of both the LR and the EU dimensions, it is important to consider respondents' positions on both issues. Thus, all graphs in this section correspond to sub-group analyses. Readers can find the full-sample analyses in the appendix. In addition, for the sake of simplicity, we excluded all the other candidate characteristics. We only show the coefficients across the two dimensions of interest—the LR and the EU dimension. Following Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley (2019), we have run an ANOVA test and confirmed all interaction coefficients reported in the paper are distinguishable from zero.

shows that when a respondent was confronted with a candidate with a different position on the EU dimension than her own, she systematically voted for the other candidate, even if the other candidate did not align with her on the LR dimension. Overall, this indicates that the EU dimension trumped the effect of the LR dimension in guiding people’s vote choice, when the party supply was unconstrained on both dimensions.

Figure 4: Effect of candidate’s left-right and EU positions on vote choice across people’s Brexit vote (marginal means and differences in marginal means)



These plots show estimates of the effects of the randomly assigned candidates’ left-right and EU positions on vote choice (for the sake of simplicity, the rest of the attributes are not displayed) by people’s vote in the Brexit referendum. Estimates are based on the regression estimators with clustered standard errors; bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Baseline denotes the attribute value that is the reference category for each attribute. Top plot shows marginal means and bottom plot shows the differences in marginal means.

All in all, the conjoint analysis reveals that the EU dimension matters as much to voters, or even more, than the left-right dimension, when voters are presented with a party supply that is unconstrained on both the left-right and EU dimensions and without the filter of specific party labels.

6 Conclusion

Over the past few decades, the issue of European integration has become one of the clearest examples of politicization of an issue that is not firmly aligned with the left-right dimension within European party systems (Kriesi et al., 2006; Hobolt and De Vries, 2015). In most European countries, mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties have remained firmly pro-European, while parties on the fringes have mobilized the issue with more Eurosceptic positions (De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002). As a consequence, the EU issue has been described as a ‘sleeping giant’ (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004); a political issue has remained dormant in elections due to the consensus among mainstream parties, but which has the potential to be awakened (De Vries, 2007). In the UK, both major parties in Britain remained internally divided on the issue and their positions were thus more ambiguous to voters. The Brexit referendum made the issue more salient than ever. In this paper, we have examined how electoral behaviour has been influenced by the rising salience of this cross-cutting issue in a context in which parties offered ambiguous positions and indistinct positions.

Given the heightened salience of the EU issue in the British public debate, we expect the issue to have an impact on electoral behaviour, even when controlling for left-right ideology. Yet, issue-voting is also shaped by the choices available to voters. In the British context, we argue that the fact that the two major governing alternatives—the Conservatives and Labour—adopted similar positions in the wake of the Brexit referendum, both arguing in favour of a relatively hard Brexit, constrains the degree to which voters—especially Remain voters—could express their EU attitudes in the ballot box. We extend the literature on EU issue voting by explicitly testing how EU issue voting is conditioned by party supply, examining both how it depends on congruence with parties on one or both dimensions and on the choice set available to voters.

Our empirical analysis confirms this expectation. In our observational analysis of vote intentions in the run-up to the 2017 General Election, the conditional logit results show that EU attitudes did have a significant effect on the electoral appeal of the four largest parties, even controlling for left-right ideological distance (H1). However, this was considerably more muted for Remainers

who may have felt that the major parties offered limited choice on the issue (H2a). To address the question of the potential for the EU-dimension to shape electoral behaviour in a scenario where parties offer the full range of ideological positions on both the left-right and the EU dimensions, we conducted a conjoint experiment during the same period leading up to the general election. The results demonstrate that the Brexit position of candidates is as important to voters as candidates' left-right positions, when voters are given the choice between a candidates with a range of positions and attributes (H2b).

These findings demonstrate the EU issue has a powerful potential to shape voters' electoral behaviour, at least in the current post-Brexit referendum political climate. It is too early to tell whether the major parties will respond to the heightened salience of the issue and adjust their positions more clearly along pro-Brexit/pro-Remain lines in the long run. If they do, the Brexit referendum may have been the trigger of a gradual realignment of British politics. More broadly, the results in this paper contribute to the literature on issue-voting by highlighting the importance of the range of party political choice in moderating the electoral impact of attitudes on cross-cutting issues.

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