

# The Europeanization of national elections. The role of country characteristics in shaping EU issue voting

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## ABSTRACT

Research has shown that voting in European elections is affected by domestic politics. However, in the last years, and particularly after the European debt crisis, also the EU has gained relevance and salience in national politics. In this paper we address the Europeanization of national elections and assess to what extent the characteristics of countries condition the intensity of EU issue voting. Using data from the European Election Studies and the Comparative Manifestos Project, our results demonstrate the importance of congruence between citizens' and parties' positions on the EU for the individual vote on the national level and show how this varies across countries. We provide evidence that EU issue voting is more intense in countries with more political influence in the EU as well as in countries that are net contributors to EU funds.

## 1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the European debt crisis, growing Euroscepticism among European public opinion has contributed to bring European issues to the fore. As a result of austerity measures taken at the supranational level, citizens have become more aware of how and what their governments negotiate in Brussels and how their domestic policies could be subordinated to European guidelines (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014). The electoral success of parties with a rhetoric of distrust toward the EU in national and regional elections suggests that European issues have an increased impact on the vote beyond the European Parliament elections and that, consequently, national elections are becoming more Europeanized (Hutter et al. 2016).

However, despite some research that analyzes the role of the EU as a "sleeping giant" with the potential to determine political behavior (De Vries 2007; Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004), research on how European issues differently affect voting choice in national arenas is scarce. One of the few examples is the study by Hooghe and Marks (2009) which pointed out that the European Union was moving from a permissive consensus to a constraining dissensus, thus politicizing European integration both in national elections and referenda. Other more recent contributions explore the added impact of the debt crisis on the politicization of European integration (Gross and Schäfer 2020; Hutter et al. 2016; Schäfer and Gross 2020), pointing to an increased relevance of EU

matters in the domestic electoral arena after the last recession (see, among others, De Vries and Hobolt 2016; Hobolt and Rodon 2020).

This paper goes beyond previous research and assesses whether parties' positions on the EU, as expressed in their manifestos, and their congruence with citizens' views on Europe determine voting in national elections. In particular, we study how this is conditioned by the extent to which EU politics is intertwined with national politics. This broad approach allows us to assess the Europeanization of national elections based on countries' characteristics.

While De Vries (2007) examined the varying impact of the salience of European issues in national elections by looking at perceived distances between the positions of individuals and parties, we here look at citizens' EU preferences and the actual EU preferences that parties declare in their manifestos. We aim to explore the extent to which citizens' voting decisions are conditional on parties' positions on EU integration. In addition, as parties are responsive to shifts in public opinion (Adams et al., 2004; Gross and Schäfer 2020; Williams and Spoon 2015), the growing influence of the EU among citizens' concerns has been reflected in making the EU more salient (Hutter et al. 2016). Even mainstream parties, which have traditionally been reluctant to make the EU prominent in their political program, have been pushed to respond to a new scenario, in which the EU is a relevant dimension of party competition (Hobolt and Rodon 2020). Our paper also allows us to assess in which countries congruence between individual preferences and parties'

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discourse with regard to the EU is more important in determining the vote in national elections.

We use an innovative approach that assesses the Europeanization of national elections in EU countries<sup>1</sup> and reflects the multilevel nature of EU citizens' voting decisions. In doing so, we combine individual data from the European Election Studies (EES) with information on parties' pro- or anti-EU positions in national elections from the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP). We also gathered contextual data from the countries included in our analysis. All this combined, we created a stacked data matrix that allows us to analyze how an individual's propensity to vote for a given party changes as a result of micro and macro factors relating to the EU.

Our results demonstrate, at the individual level, that a party's EU position matters in national elections and, at the macro level, that the impact of EU issue voting varies depending on the role of the country in the EU. In particular, we find that EU issue voting has a stronger impact in countries that are more influential in EU policymaking and in countries that are net contributors to the EU budget. Likewise, and contrary to our expectations, EU issue voting has not become more relevant in countries that had an EU economic intervention. With these findings, our research contributes to the literature on EU issue voting by illustrating the relevance of parties' EU positions as well as formulating country-level conditions that make national elections more Europeanized.

The paper proceeds as follows: we review the literature on EU issue voting and Europeanization of national elections in the next section. In section three we develop our argument and introduce our theoretical expectations. Section four presents the data and research design. After having presented and discussed the results of the analysis in section five, section six concludes and provides some paths for future research.

## 2. EU issue voting and the Europeanization of national politics

The study of the interrelation between European and national politics has traditionally focused on how domestic politics contaminates European elections. Since the seminal work by Reif and Schmitt (1980), much research has shown that European elections are second-order elections (Marsh 1988; Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Hobolt and Wittrock 2011; Schmitt and Teperoglu 2015; among many others) in which domestic considerations can have a large influence. European elections might be perceived as less consequential and therefore might allow for more sincere voting, as citizens can vote for their preferred party with lower costs if the party has no chance of holding office (Marsh 1988). Likewise, they facilitate the punishment of government parties (Reif and Schmitt 1980), protest voting (Oppenheim et al., 1996), voting for small parties (Hix and Marsh 2007), or strategic voting to balance the national election results (Carruba and Timpone 2005). Hence, the degree of influence of national politics on European election varies during the electoral cycle (Reif 1984).

While the importance of national issues on European elections has been analyzed extensively, research on the opposite direction of influence—the Europeanization of national politics—is less abundant. Yet, some authors have paid attention to how political parties develop more pro- or anti-European platforms in national elections (among others De Vries and Catherine, 2018; Ford et al., 2012; Markowski and Tucker, 2010). Traditionally, the opinion that prevailed is that the EU did not play a strong role in shaping national electoral competition. Some authors argued that this was part of the EU's success, as depoliticization could allow for a smoother functioning of its international organization (Zürn 2019), while others regarded this as one of the roots of the EU's democratic deficit (Hix 2008). According to this view, mainstream parties have until recently considered European integration an

unattractive issue to compete with in national elections, as it made them move away from the left–right dimension and jeopardized electoral rewards (Green-Pederson 2012). Hence, the Europeanization of national elections and the politicization of European integration has mostly been pushed by small extremist parties, which have “an interest in restructuring contestation to broaden their voter base, because their extreme position on the left–right dimension is likely to provide a low ceiling to their support base” (De Vries 2007: p.367).

Correspondingly, at the individual level, the most common view is that the EU has played only a minor role in determining voting behavior and choice in national elections. This, however, does not mean that citizens' EU positions are not potentially relevant. Gabel (2000) and Tillman (2004) showed that voting choice and EU attitudes were correlated in some European countries, and Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) noted that the general pattern in Europe was that EU attitudes varied more among voters than among parties—which held more similar and favorable EU views—, implying that the EU was a “sleeping giant” that could be woken up if parties decided to politicize the issue.

Only in countries like the United Kingdom, in which European integration has traditionally been more politicized, relevant effects on voting choice in national elections of voters' perceptions of parties' positions on European integration could be found (Evans 1998, 2002). The seminal work by De Vries (2007) also showed that the congruence between citizens' attitudes toward the EU and parties' positions on the EU could affect national elections if parties made the differences between them sufficiently salient. According to De Vries (2007), the distance between the EU positions of parties and those of individuals matters more in countries in which the conflict over the EU is stronger. In her analysis she finds that the Europeanization of national elections (or EU issue voting) is significant in countries such as the United Kingdom or Denmark, where parties differ even more in their EU positions than on the traditional left–right ideological dimension, while this is absent in countries such as Germany or the Netherlands, where parties differed little in their EU positions at the time of her analysis. De Vries also argues that this elite divergence is driven by small and extremist parties that use EU salience to differentiate themselves from the big parties. In this regard, De Vries (2010) provides evidence that EU issue voting is more intense when parties have issue ownership over the EU debate or when radical parties use the EU to challenge and compete against mainstream parties in their ideological space.

All in all, the discussed works support the statement that EU issues can indeed be relevant in national elections. This paper contributes to this body of research by overcoming some limitations of previous analyses. First, research tends to measure EU issue voting as the distance between citizens' positions on the EU and the perceived positions of parties. However, the perceived positions of parties are endogenous to party choice. In this paper we use measures based on the actual positions of parties according to their manifestos. This allows us to directly capture the congruence between citizens' views and those declared by the parties competing in national elections.

Previous research mostly finds that EU issue voting is anti-EU voting, being unclear about the extent to which mainstream parties can also gain electoral rewards from increasing (or reducing) EU saliency in their manifestos. However, Hooghe and Marks (2009) already warned about the latent trends of EU politicization that were making EU issues increasingly relevant in national elections for all—including mainstream—parties. The global financial crisis might have reinforced this, as some of the European party systems have become more Eurosceptic (Gross and Schäfer 2020) and even pro-EU citizens have started to pay attention to parties' discourse about the EU (Hutter et al. 2016). Even when the impact of the crisis has been asymmetric, for many citizens it has uncovered the role of supranational institutions in limiting national responses to the economic crisis (Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso 2017). As a consequence, many authors have highlighted that the relevance of European integration for political parties has increased, and therefore the Europeanization of national elections has intensified (Leupold 2016;

<sup>1</sup> Our sample covers all EU countries except Malta, for which no data is available for the corresponding years in the Comparative Manifestos Project.

Hutter and Kriesi 2019). In this paper we intend to delve into these questions by analyzing EU issue voting of both pro-European and anti-European voters as well as assessing whether a greater politicization of EU issues can affect the electoral prospects of political platforms in national elections after the financial crisis.

Finally, although EU issue voting is well documented, variations between countries have been less studied. Exceptions such as De Vries et al., 2011a,b provide evidence that EU issue voting is more pronounced in contexts in which political information on European matters is more accessible and where the domestic institutional environment provides clear lines of responsibility. Likewise, De Vries and Tillman (2011) have shown that EU issue voting is more intense in Eastern European countries, and Gross and Schäfer (2020) have shown that economic crises can also make EU salience more relevant in national arenas. Our paper aims to expand on this by looking into the country-level conditions that make EU issue voting more or less prominent. We argue that this is contingent upon the interconnection between the EU and the national arenas. When both levels are more entangled, EU issue voting should become more relevant in national elections.

### 3. Argument and hypotheses

Our argument is that the crisis has uncovered the importance of European-level policy and that EU issue voting is more intense in countries in which the EU and national policymaking are more intertwined. In this regard, voters' attitudes, whether in favor of or against European integration, should be a relevant explanatory factor of voting preferences in the wake of the crisis. However, EU issue voting will not be similar across countries and the Europeanization of national elections will be stronger in some contexts. Our argument, in a nutshell, is that this will depend on each country's relation to Europe and the extent to which both arenas—the national and the European one—overlap. When European issues have more saliency and relevance and European (national) politics have a larger incidence on national (European) policies, voters will pay more attention to the position of national political parties on the EU and EU issue voting will increase. Specifically, we argue that this depends on three dimensions: the country's capacity to shape European policies, the extent to which European decisions limit the country's policymaking, and the extent to which the country contributes to financing European policies.

With regard to the Europeanization of national elections based on the importance of the national debate on EU politics in shaping European policy, we argue that the EU will be more prominent in the national area of countries that are more able to provide input into European-level decisions. Here we borrow Torcal and Rodon's (2015) concept of pivotal countries. The authors argue that some countries, labelled as pivotal, have more impact on European policymaking than others. As Torcal and Rodon (2015, p:3) suggest, "in states that play a pivotal role in the European institutions, such as Germany, citizens perceive (at least marginally) that their vote could have some impact on European policies (...). In these contexts, citizens have internalized the influence of their government in European affairs and consequently citizens display 'positional issues' on the European issues, generating a 'nationalization of EU politics'". In other words, in countries that are more influential in shaping European Union policy, the discussion of EU issues at the national level is more meaningful, because it has the capacity to guide European policy outputs. In these contexts, national elections are relevant in that they create a mandate on what positions the national government will defend in the European institutions. In contrast, in countries in which the government and their European representatives have a more limited influence on European policymaking, mostly due to the size of the country, national elections are considered less consequential in European terms and citizens will have more incentives to pay attention to other issues. We formulate our first hypothesis as follows:

**H1.** EU issue voting is higher in countries that have more input into

European policymaking.

The intertwining between European issues and national issues does not only depend on how strongly the country can interfere in European-level discussions. We also expect that EU matters will be more relevant in explaining citizens' voting preferences in countries that are more affected by the European Union. In particular, voters in countries that received bailouts from the European Union should be more aware of the consequences of policy decisions taken at EU level. Ruiz-Rufino and Alonso (2017) showed that EU bailouts had a strong impact on satisfaction with democracy in countries that have been subject to some level of international intervention. Their argument is that voters updated their knowledge about democratic institutions and learned through the intervention in their countries that national governments have less room to maneuver and that policy is largely determined exogenously to national institutions. This is why these authors observe that the decrease in satisfaction with democracy in countries with intervened economies (Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Cyprus, and Spain) happened at the moment of intervention and not at the outbreak of the financial crisis. Very similar results have recently been provided by Schimmelfennig and Schraff (2020), who also show that bailouts have a negative impact on satisfaction with democracy in the Eurozone. Following this reasoning, we argue that citizens in countries with intervened economies should pay more attention to European politics and to what national parties say about Europe when deciding their vote in national elections, because they have learned that their national governments have limited political room to maneuver. In other words, European issues partially replace national issues in determining voters' preferences. This can be seen as a logical consequence of economic voting. Costa-Lobo and Lewis-Beck (2012) put forward that one consequence of the crisis in Southern Europe is that economic voting has decreased as a result of the increased perception that the European Union limits national responsibility over economic outcomes. We therefore expect that this is replaced by a more European-driven vote. In this regard, Giuliani and Massari (2019) confirmed that, in countries severely hit by the economic crisis, parties with more defined positions on the European dimension (mostly anti-EU parties) were able to capitalize on their positions electorally. Their success was directly proportional to the severity of the recession. On the other hand, mainstream parties were similarly punished for bad economic performance, regardless of their left-right positions or whether they were in government or in the opposition. This suggests that national elections become more Europeanized in countries with intervened economies.

**H2.** EU issue voting will be higher in countries that have had intervened economies.

Finally, national-level and EU-level politics are more intertwined when European policies impose more costs on the national taxpayer. The contribution to the European budget varies immensely across countries, and support for European integration is severely affected by the utilitarian evaluation of the benefits and costs of being an EU member (Gabel 2009). In particular, the literature so far has shown that fiscal transfers and EU redistribution matter for public opinion. Countries that receive more money from the European Union tend to have a more pro-European attitude and a public opinion that is more favorable to European integration, while those that are net contributors tend to have a more negative public opinion on the EU (see, for instance, Eichenberg and Dalton 1993; Karp et al., 2003; Hooghe and Marks 2004, 2005).<sup>2</sup> We argue that this also has consequences on voting, in particular following the Great Recession, after which the perceived costs of membership have increased. From an economic voting perspective, we expect that the discussion about the EU should be more relevant in the national elections of countries where being a member of the EU is economically

<sup>2</sup> Hobolt (2012), however, does not find any significant effect of EU transfers on satisfaction with democracy.

costlier—i.e., their contribution to the EU budget is higher than what they receive from it. The second-order nature of EU issues will decrease as there are more economic costs at stake with European integration. This brings us to our last hypothesis:

**H3.** EU issue voting is higher in countries that have a larger net contribution to the European budget.

#### 4. Data and methods

We aim to analyze whether EU issue voting is more intense in countries in which the national arena is more intertwined with the EU arena. We do this by looking into how congruence between individual assessments of the EU and parties' discourse affects citizens' voting in national elections and how this is conditional on country characteristics. To this end, we pooled data from different sources and created a "stacked" dataset in which the unit of analysis is a dyad of respondent and party (Van der Eijk et al., 2006). Each dyad (our unit of observation) contains information on variables related to a voter, a political party, and their country. Hence, this strategy considers different variables at different levels, allowing us to assess how party–voter relationships and cross-level interactions affect electoral behavior. The number of observations adds up to 152,399 respondent–party dyads.

We use data from the last two waves of the European Election Studies—2014 and 2019—, conducted after the Great Recession (Schmitt et al., 2015; Schmitt et al. 2020), to obtain information about citizens' political preferences and evaluations of the European Union. Our dependent variable is the propensity to vote for a party (PTV) in national elections, measured from 0 (not at all probable) to 10 (very probable).<sup>3</sup>

Our aim is to account for how citizens' vote is affected by parties' objective positions on the EU. Thus, we measure EU issue voting with a variable that captures whether a respondent's position on European unification is congruent with that of a given party. Because we focus on parties' objective positions, we gathered information concerning parties' discourse from the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) (Volkens et al., 2019).<sup>4</sup> As we hypothesized that EU issues matter in national elections, we are interested in assessing parties' mentions of the EU in their manifestos and whether they are linked to voters' preferences. Research has shown that parties devote a higher percentage of quasi-sentences in their electoral texts to issues that are more relevant to them and also to those that respond to their voters' demands (Klüver and Spoon 2016). Similarly, in their electoral manifestos parties address their thematic priorities but also political issues and citizens' concerns that are more present in the public debate and in the media (Spoon and Klüver 2014; Wagner and Meyer 2014). Therefore, we consider that the percentage that is devoted to a certain topic in a manifesto responds to a strategic decision that signals a party's thematic focus and links to their voters' priorities.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, we measure each party's sentiment toward the EU by taking the share of positive mentions of the EU in the manifesto and subtracting the percentage of negative mentions.<sup>6</sup> When

the sentiment of a party toward the EU takes positive values, it means that the party is mostly positive toward EU integration. Negative scores indicate that the party's mentions of the EU are more negative and, consequently, stances are against EU unification. Finally, when a given party does not mention the EU in its manifesto or when the share of positive and negative mentions of the EU is the same, the party scores 0 in its attitude toward the EU. Building upon each party's position on the EU as expressed in their manifestos, we calculate our main independent variable, which is the congruence between the individual and the party with regard to their position on EU integration. Hence, we computed a dummy variable (*EU congruence*) that takes the value 1 when the positions on the EU—either positive, negative or indifferent—of the respondent and the party are congruent and 0 otherwise. Respondents' positions on European unification are taken from the European Election Studies and are considered positive when ranging between 6 and 10 on a scale from 0 ('it has already gone too far') to 10 ('it should be pushed further'). Individuals who are located in the middle of the scale—i.e., in position 5—are considered indifferent, while those who are positioned below 5 are identified as respondents with a negative view of EU integration.

This variable allows us to capture whether positive or negative individual-level attitudes toward Europe correlate with the positions of parties expressed in their manifestos. When this variable has a stronger and more significant impact on the vote, it means that EU issue voting is stronger. When congruence regarding EU positions does not affect the probability to vote for a party in national elections, EU issue voting is absent.

Our analysis focuses on how the impact of congruence varies according to country-level characteristics. We have argued that certain country characteristics interact with the congruence between the individual and the party with regard to their positions on the EU in determining voting preferences and explaining cross-country variation in the Europeanization of national elections. Specifically, to measure countries' input on European policymaking, we took the number of MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) elected by each country in 2014 and 2019. Our indicator is a continuous variable with values ranging from 6 to 99. We believe that the number of MEPs is a proxy of the influence of each country in EU policymaking. Even if MEPs eventually vote in the European Parliament according to party lines, voters will be aware that the party they vote for at the national level will be more relevant in defining the position of the corresponding European parliamentary party when their country elects more MEPs. Likewise, the MEPs of that country will be more relevant in defining the parliamentary party's position in important matters, such as the approval of the Commission. The size of a country will also be more relevant in defining the EU's position in other instances. Therefore, the overall size of a country's MEP delegation serves as proxy of a country's influence in EU policymaking. As a robustness check, in the Appendix we use an index on voting power in the EU developed by Bilbao et al. (2002), who employ Banzhaf indices to compute the decisiveness of each country to effect a swing and produce an absolute majority in the Council of Ministers of the European Union.

With regards to our second hypothesis, we distinguish economies that were intervened by the EU by creating a dummy variable, *intervention*, which takes the value 1 when the EU has intervened in the country's economy (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Cyprus and Spain) and 0 otherwise.

Finally, data on the *net contribution* of the countries were obtained from the reports of expenditure and revenue published by the European Commission. We took the information about the operating budgetary balance of each country with the EU in millions of euros for the years

<sup>3</sup> As party systems differ in the number of competing parties, the number of utilities for each respondent may vary. See Table A.1 in the Appendix for details on the number of party stacks for each country and election.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the previous literature on EU issue voting does not consider parties' positions on EU integration but rather the perceived distance on this dimension between respondents and parties, which is mostly endogenous to voting choice—as citizens' perceived distances on EU integration might be biased—and does not allow for assessing whether it could be electorally beneficial for parties to present a pro- or anti-EU discourse in national elections. By using the CMP measures and relating them to individuals' EU positions, we overcome these limitations.

<sup>5</sup> For each party's manifesto, we take the values in the CMP dataset that corresponds to the closest national election prior to the survey dates.

<sup>6</sup> The variable sentiment results from *per108-per110*.



**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics.

	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Propensity to vote for a party	152,399	3.552	3.255	0	0	6	10
Congruence	152,399	0.374	0.484	0	0	1	1
Saliency of EU issues in manifesto	152,399	2.793	3.240	0.000	0.881	3.107	19.849
Number of MEPs	152,399	31.127	27.140	6	13	33	99
Countries with intervened economies	152,399	0.212	0.409	0	0	0	1
Standardized balance with EU	152,399	-0.078	1.007	-2.736	-0.348	0.491	2.627
Left-right distance with party	152,399	0.334	0.242	0.000	0.100	0.500	1.000
Yhat - age	152,399	-0.0004	0.388	-2.807	-0.170	0.161	3.060
Yhat - sex	152,399	-0.00001	0.175	-0.767	-0.094	0.096	1.005
Yhat - education	152,399	0.002	0.271	-1.217	-0.145	0.146	0.910
Yhat - interest in politics	152,399	0.012	0.292	-0.998	-0.191	0.199	0.884
Yhat - occupational status	152,399	0.001	0.235	-1.370	-0.119	0.123	0.867
Difference EU GDP	152,399	0.560	1.742	-6.496	-0.426	1.409	6.023
Party member of the EPP	152,399	0.215	0.411	0	0	0	1
Country percentage EU identity	152,399	0.689	0.103	0.449	0.631	0.753	0.885
Election 2019	152,399	1.333	0.471	1	1	2	2

**Table 2**  
Basic models.

	Model 1	Model 2
Congruence on EU integration	0.43*** (0.02)	0.31*** (0.02)
Saliency of EU in manifesto		-0.05*** (0.00)
Congruence*saliency		0.05*** (0.01)
Left-right distance	-0.15*** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.03)
Yhat - age	0.95*** (0.02)	0.95*** (0.02)
Yhat - sex	1.01*** (0.05)	1.01*** (0.05)
Yhat - education	0.80*** (0.03)	0.80*** (0.03)
Yhat - interest in politics	0.82*** (0.03)	0.83*** (0.03)
Yhat - occupational status	0.43*** (0.04)	0.43*** (0.04)
Election 2019	1.02*** (0.02)	1.01*** (0.02)
(Intercept)	2.07*** (0.09)	2.20*** (0.09)
AIC	787223.49	787048.79
BIC	787332.76	787177.93
Log Likelihood	-393600.74	-393511.39
Num. obs.	152399	152399
Num. groups: country	27	27
Var: country (intercept)	0.21	0.21
Var: residual	1.64	1.63

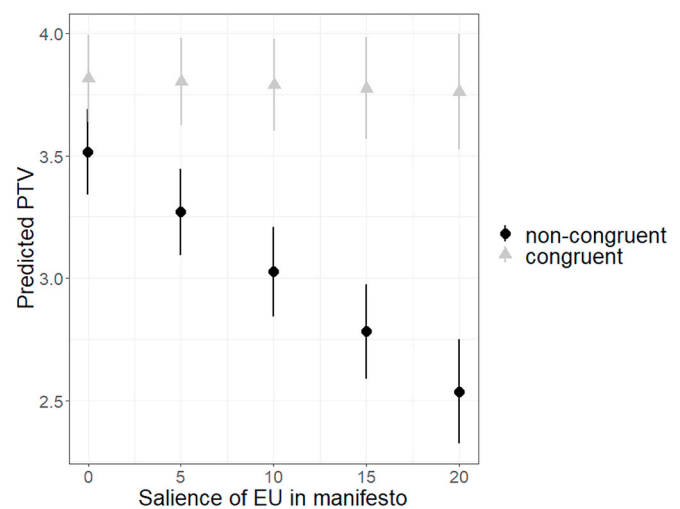
**Note:** Linear mixed-effects regression models with random intercepts at the country level. The dependent variable runs from 0 to 10.  
\*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05.

2013 and 2018. This last variable was standardized<sup>7</sup> for our analyses, so negative values would fall below the mean and positive values would indicate a net balance above the mean.

Our analysis also includes a set of relevant covariates. A crucial covariate is the perceived *ideological distance* between a respondent and a particular party.<sup>8</sup> This variable captures how ideologically close each voter feels to each party. This allows us to control for any other factor

<sup>7</sup> Values of countries' budgetary balance were standardized following this formula:  $Z = \frac{x - \bar{x}}{S}$ , where  $x$  is the original value;  $\bar{x}$  is the sample mean, and  $S$  is the standard deviation of the sample.

<sup>8</sup> While the respondent's ideology and the perceived ideology of the party were originally measured on a 0–10 scale, we transformed them to a scale from 0 to 1.



**Fig. 1.** Predicted propensity to vote for a party by saliency of the EU in the party's manifesto and congruence with position on EU integration. **Note:** Estimates are based on the linear mixed-effects regression models presented in Table 2 (Model 2). Adjusted predicted values with 95% confidence intervals.

beyond the EU that makes voters feel close to parties and that can correlate with EU views. This is a very demanding control because citizens will tend to identify as ideologically close those parties they like and that hold similar views on the EU (Aspinwall 2002; Hooghe et al. 2002). By introducing this control, we are able to purge the EU issue voting coefficient and mitigate the omitted variable bias that explains vote choice, isolating the impact of congruence on EU views and EU issue voting.

A set of variables captures the impact of individual characteristics on the probability to vote for a party. Age, sex, education, occupational status, and interest in politics are relevant individual-level variables that affect vote choice. Given that we work here with stacked data, our units of observation are dyads of respondent and party, and these individual-level variables cannot be included in their original form, because they do not vary for each party alternative. Thus, we created yhat affinities centered around the party mean within each country and election (Navarrete 2020). These yhats are measures of the sociodemographic characteristics and political interest that are different for every respondent-party dyad (De Sio and Franklin 2012; Navarrete 2020; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996).

Our analyses contain a further covariate at the party level. We calculate the saliency of the EU in an electoral manifesto by adding together the percentage of positive and negative quasi-sentences

**Table 3**  
Models with cross-level interactions.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Congruence on EU integration	0.24*** (0.03)	0.35*** (0.02)	0.31*** (0.02)	0.10 (0.13)	0.32** (0.12)	0.27* (0.12)
Saliency of EU in manifesto	-0.05*** (0.00)	-0.05*** (0.00)	-0.05*** (0.00)	-0.05*** (0.00)	-0.05*** (0.00)	-0.05*** (0.00)
Congruence*saliency	0.04*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)
MEPs	-0.01 (0.00)			-0.00 (0.00)		
Congruence*MEPs	0.00*** (0.00)			0.00*** (0.00)		
Intervened economies		0.07 (0.23)			0.22 (0.22)	
Congruence*intervened economies		-0.24*** (0.04)			-0.25*** (0.04)	
Balance with the EU			-0.58*** (0.07)			-0.32*** (0.07)
Congruence*balance with the EU			-0.06** (0.02)			-0.07*** (0.02)
Difference with the EU mean GDP				0.02 (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Party member of the EPP				0.15*** (0.03)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.15*** (0.03)
Country percentage EU identity				1.99*** (0.37)	2.13*** (0.37)	1.75*** (0.37)
Congruence*difference EU GDP				0.03* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)
Congruence*EPP				0.14*** (0.04)	0.15*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.04)
Congruence*EU identity				0.07 (0.18)	-0.03 (0.18)	-0.04 (0.18)
Left-right distance	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.02)	-0.13*** (0.02)	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.03)
Yhat - age	0.95*** (0.02)	0.95*** (0.02)	0.95*** (0.02)	0.94*** (0.02)	0.94*** (0.02)	0.94*** (0.02)
Yhat - sex	1.01*** (0.05)	1.01*** (0.05)	1.01*** (0.05)	1.01*** (0.05)	1.01*** (0.05)	1.01*** (0.05)
Yhat - education	0.80*** (0.03)	0.80*** (0.03)	0.80*** (0.03)	0.80*** (0.03)	0.80*** (0.03)	0.80*** (0.03)
Yhat - interest in politics	0.81*** (0.03)	0.82*** (0.03)	0.82*** (0.03)	0.81*** (0.03)	0.81*** (0.03)	0.81*** (0.03)
Yhat - occupational status	0.43*** (0.04)	0.43*** (0.04)	0.43*** (0.04)	0.43*** (0.04)	0.43*** (0.04)	0.43*** (0.04)
Election 2019	1.00*** (0.02)	1.01*** (0.02)	1.00*** (0.02)	0.85*** (0.03)	0.85*** (0.03)	0.88*** (0.03)
(Intercept)	2.42*** (0.15)	2.19*** (0.10)	2.28*** (0.13)	1.07*** (0.28)	0.86*** (0.25)	1.18*** (0.24)
AIC	787058.40	787024.22	786988.53	786903.64	786872.63	786872.74
BIC	787207.42	787173.24	787137.55	787112.26	787081.25	787081.36
Log Likelihood	-393514.20	-393497.11	-393479.27	-393430.82	-393415.32	-393415.37
Num. obs.	152399	152399	152399	152399	152399	152399
Num. groups: country	27	27	27	27	27	27
Var: country (intercept)	0.27	0.22	0.42	0.21	0.20	0.19
Var: residual	1.63	1.63	1.63	1.63	1.63	1.63

**Note:** Linear mixed-effects regression models with random intercepts at the country level. The dependent variable runs from 0 to 10.

\*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05.

assigned to the EU. Hence, the variable measuring *EU saliency* in a specific manifesto can take a value between 0 (not a single quasi-sentence is devoted to EU-related issues) and 1 (all quasi-sentences are assigned to EU-related issues).

Finally, we also include as covariates whether the party is a member of the largest group in the European Parliament (i.e., the European People's Party), the country's percentage of people identifying as European according to the data from the Eurobarometer, and the difference between the country's GDP and the EU average GDP. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of all these variables.

As our dependent variable measures the propensity to vote for a party on a scale from 0 to 10, we test our hypotheses by running several linear mixed-effect regression models with random slopes at country level.<sup>9</sup> Given the structure of our stacked dataset in which there are as many observations per respondent as propensities to vote for different parties, we have to consider the number of respondent and party combinations in order to avoid bias. As individuals vary in the number of parties they evaluate, this variation is controlled by weighting the observations for each respondent. Hence we weight our analyses by the inverse of the number of available combinations of party and respondent

<sup>9</sup> By election level we mean whether the individual data correspond to the EES 2014 or EES 2019.

for each individual, a procedure that has been followed by other researchers working with stacked data (Lachat 2015, 649). Finally, and because we want to avoid the problems associated with having too few clusters at the upper level in mixed-effect models (Elff et al., 2020), we include a dummy variable for the European election that captures possible unobservable factors regarding the years 2014 and 2019, when the data was collected.

## 5. Results

While our focus is on the effects of contextual factors on EU issue voting in national elections, we start with a test of EU issue voting by looking into the impact of our EU congruence variable on the vote. The results shown in Table 2 support the initial expectations. There is a significant and positive impact of *EU congruence* on the probability to vote for a party (Model 1 in Table 2). In other words, parties with more pro-EU attitudes are more likely to be voted by citizens with more positive attitudes toward the EU, while parties with more negative statements against the EU in their manifestos tend to attract voters with similarly negative views. We therefore find evidence that citizens are coherent with regard to their preferences toward the European Union when voting in national elections. Even when we control for the perceived ideological distance to parties, there is a higher probability that citizens vote for parties that hold similar views on European integration. This is relevant because the left–right ideology can be seen as a super-issue (Inglehart 1984) or as “an aggregator of policy positions” (Navarrete 2020: 3), and our results indicate that there is still an independent effect of EU issues on the vote. Even more, the effect of EU congruence with regard to the EU on the probability to vote for a party is higher than that of left–right distance.

Together with the validation of our initial expectation, Model 2 in Table 2 interacts EU congruence with EU salience. Fig. 1 (simulating Model 2 in Table 2) shows that, when a party and a voter have a similar position on the EU, no matter how salient it is in the manifesto, the effect on the propensity to vote for the party remains almost constant. In contrast, when an individual and a party disagree about the EU, the more the party emphasizes the EU in its manifesto the less likely the voter is to vote for that party. Consequently, the more evident the differences in positions between the voter and a given party are, the lower is the voter’s propensity to vote for that party.

We now move on to our main interest—the contextual variation in EU issue voting—for which we hypothesized that the relationship between the propensity to vote for a party and EU congruence will be stronger in countries that have more input into European policymaking (Hypothesis 1), whose economy has been subject to an intervention by the EU (Hypothesis 2), and that contribute more to the EU budget (Hypothesis 3). The main take-home message from the results shown in Table 3 is that congruence between parties’ EU positions as stated in their manifestos and voters’ EU positions does indeed make parties more (or less) attractive to voters depending on the contextual conditions. In other words, under certain circumstances, it pays off for parties to make the EU salient in post-crisis elections, as voters pay more attention to European issues. In Models 1 to 3 in Table 3, we include the same controls we used for the baseline models: the subjective ideological distance between the individual and the party, the yhat affinities, and the dummy variable for the European election.

As a robustness check, in Models 4 to 6 in Table 3 we include whether the party is member of the European People’s Party, the percentage of citizens in the country who identify themselves as European citizens, and the country’s difference in GDP with the average EU GDP. A party’s membership of the European People’s Party indicates that the party is more influential in EU policymaking, given that this is the biggest party

in the European Parliament (and the one that has been chairing the Commission). This variable allows us to test the robustness of our results with regards to the conditional impact of the number of MEPs, as it captures another dimension by which voters might perceive that their vote is more influential at the EU level. By including the percentage of citizens that feel European, we can control for the identity dimension while testing our hypotheses. The growth differential with respect to the EU captures De Vries’ (2018) argument that citizens whose country has higher rates of growth than the EU will be more likely to think that their country can do well outside the EU. We also expect that these voters pay more attention to EU matters. Including this control allows us to isolate the effect of country balance from other considerations that have to do with living in a country that is doing better than the average EU country. We interact these three variables with congruence to see whether our results hold.

Hypothesis 1 is tested in Models 1 and 4 of Table 3. The hypothesis stated that EU congruence is more relevant in explaining the vote in countries that are more influential in shaping EU policy. The interaction between the number of MEPs and congruence is significant. This means that in countries with high political influence on the EU, citizens are more likely to vote for parties that are congruent with their position on EU unification.

To account for the significance of the results across different levels of political relevance in the EU variable, Fig. 2 plots the marginal effect of parties’ EU congruence as the number of MEPs increases. It can be seen that parties in countries with a large number of MEPs have more incentives to talk about European issues, because these are more relevant to voters and drive the propensity to vote for them upwards. The effect is modest, but non-negligible.<sup>10</sup>

According to our second hypothesis, citizens in countries subject to an intervention by the EU pay more attention to European issues also in

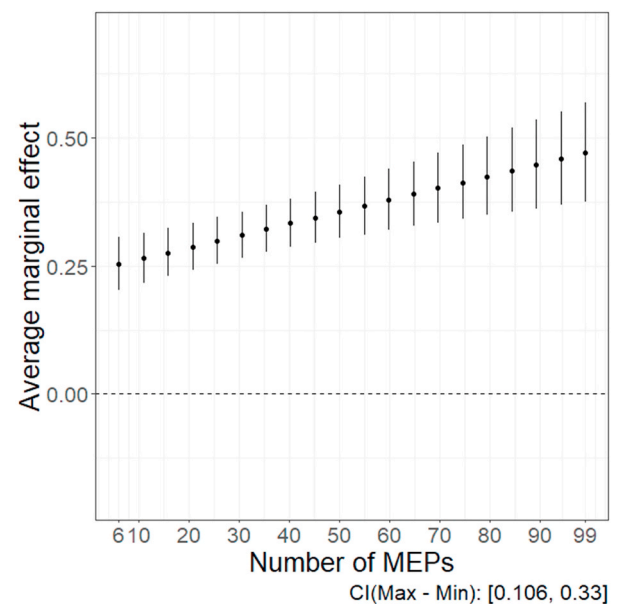
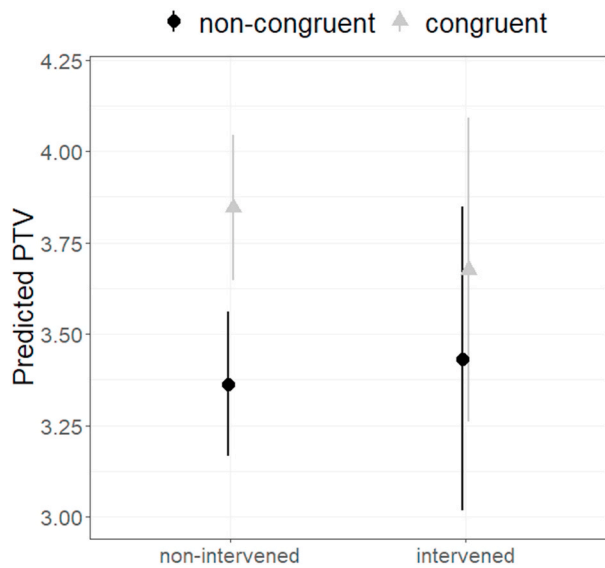


Fig. 2. Average marginal effect on propensity to vote of the congruence of positions on the EU by number of MEPs. Note: Estimates are based on the first linear mixed-effects regression model presented in Table 3. Average marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals.

<sup>10</sup> Figure A.1 in Appendix 2 replicates the analysis using Bilbao et al.’s (2002) measure of voting power in the EU. Results are virtually the same.



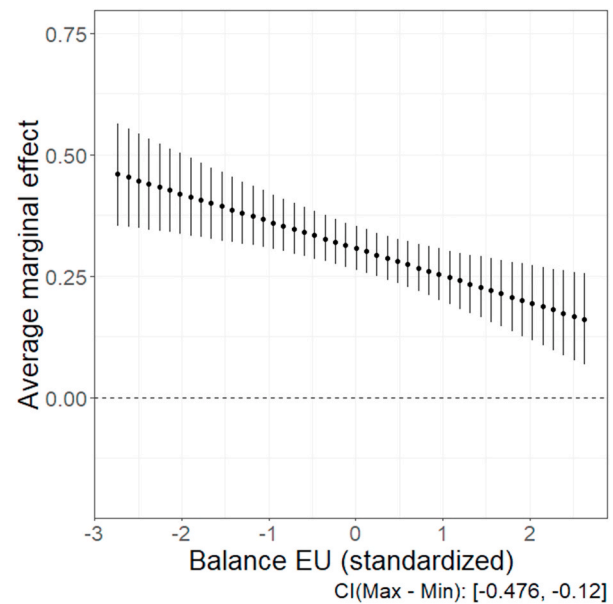
**Fig. 3. Predicted propensity to vote for a given party by intervened economy and congruence of positions on the EU.** Note: Estimates are based on the second linear mixed-effects regression model presented in Table 3. Adjusted predictions with 95% confidence intervals.

national elections; hence we expect them to prefer parties that are congruent with regard to their position on the EU as expressed in their manifestos. Our results do not support the hypothesis. Models 2 and 5 in Table 3 show the opposite result. The interaction between congruence and the dummy variable of intervened countries is negative and significant. The average marginal effects of the interaction between EU congruence and the variable identifying Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Cyprus, and Spain is plotted in Fig. 3. Against our expectation, it clearly indicates that there is no EU issue voting in national elections in countries in which the EU is particularly consequential for the economy, while EU issue voting exists in the rest of the sample.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in our third hypothesis we hypothesized that the larger a country's net contribution to the EU the more important the congruence between individuals' and parties' positions on the EU for voting decisions. The rationale is that countries that contribute more to the European budget are expected to have a larger and more intense debate about how European funds are expended. This hypothesis is validated by our results as shown in Models 3 and 6 in Table 3. We find that EU congruence becomes more relevant for vote choice when countries become net contributors of EU funds. In those countries parties will have more incentives to talk about the EU and to position themselves close to the general public opinion toward the EU.

To better understand these results, in Fig. 4 we plot the average marginal effects of the standardized net balance with the EU and the congruence between individuals' and parties' positions on European issues. The values on the x-axis provide information on the standardized balance with the EU, meaning that those with negative scores would be countries that contribute to the European budget above the mean. As can be seen, congruence with regard to the EU has a positive impact on individuals' propensity to vote for a party in countries that contribute more to the EU budget. As predicted by the interaction coefficient, lower net contributions decrease the relevance of EU issue voting in national elections.

<sup>11</sup> In the Appendix, however, we explore whether there are differences between pro-EU and anti-EU citizens. Interestingly, we find that, in intervened economies, the likelihood of voting for a given party increases when both the party and the individual have a positive view of EU unification (see Figure A.2. in the Appendix).



**Fig. 4. Average marginal effect on propensity to vote of congruence of positions on the EU by a country's net balance with the EU.** Note: Estimates are based on the third linear mixed-effects regression model presented in Table 3. Average marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals.

Finally, it is worth mentioning some of the results related to our covariates. We have found (Models 4 to 6 in Table 3) that EU congruence matters particularly for parties that are member of the European People's Party. As that party is part of the EU-level majority, citizens will be more likely to vote for it when they perceive that it has similar views on the EU. This reinforces the idea that voters are able to pay attention to the positions of parties on the EU and weigh how relevant their position is going to be in the whole EU-level policymaking. We do not find, however, significant differences in the intensity of EU issue voting in countries in which more people identify with the EU, and only moderate and not always significant effects of the growth differential with regard to the EU on the intensity of EU issue voting.

Altogether, our analyses show that citizens are coherent in their voting preferences in national elections with regards to EU integration. Citizens are able to categorize parties so that their attitudes toward the EU are reflected in a higher probability to vote for parties with similar attitudes toward the EU. In addition, the main finding of this paper is that the degree of Europeanization of national politics varies across countries. When we consider the congruence between citizens' positions on EU integration and parties' sentiment toward the EU as expressed in their manifestos, we observe that congruence between positions on the EU is more relevant in explaining national-level voting behavior in countries that play a more relevant role in the EU, politically and economically. While the magnitude of the effects might seem modest, it has to be noted, first, that the effect is independent from other covariates that are relevant in the calculus of voting, such as socio-demographic characteristics and ideological distance. Second, these effects are robust as they hold even after including other country factors, such as globalization or being a post-communist country (see Table A2 in the Appendix). Third, they point toward a trend that might consolidate in the future, as increased EU issue voting will make parties more likely to make the EU more salient in their manifestos.

## 6. Discussion

This paper analyzed EU issue voting and its varying magnitude across countries. Using a stacked dataset that combines individual-level data, data from the Comparative Manifestos Project, and country-level



data, we have shown that parties' EU positions matter for voters in national elections, both for pro-EU and for anti-EU voting. Voters are more likely to vote in national elections for parties that align with their EU views, even when controlling for ideological distance. Our paper expands on extant research by showing that EU issue voting is more intense depending on the country-level context. European issues play a stronger role in determining citizens' probability to vote for a given party in countries that are more pivotal in shaping EU decisions as well as in countries that contribute more to EU funds. We have not found evidence that EU issue voting is higher in countries in which the EU has intervened in the economies.

Altogether, the paper contributes to the literature studying how European issues affect national elections. For a long time, this has been considered a minor issue in national electoral behavior, mostly with regards to Eurosceptic parties. As Hooghe and Marks (2009) argued, the transition of European integration from a permissive consensus to a constraining dissensus—intensified with the EU debt crisis—has changed this. The ongoing polarization around European integration and the electoral growth of anti-EU parties has made the issue more contentious. As we have shown, both citizens with positive and negative views on the EU prefer to vote for a party that is congruent with their positions, particularly when parties make the EU salient in their manifestos.

The study also sheds light on the contextual conditions that make European issues more relevant in national elections. We have shown that EU issue voting is more intense in bigger European countries. This result implies that the leading role of these countries is reinforced by national-level voting behavior. Bigger countries tend to be more influential at the EU level not just because they have more capacity to shape positions, but also because their electorates pay more attention to the EU positions of parties. In the long term, this may create more unequal electoral arenas. In the non-influential countries, EU issues will remain of second order, whereas in big countries the politicization of European integration will become more decisive in national elections.

We have also shown that EU issue voting is more intense in countries that are net contributors to EU funds. This result highlights the importance of the economic dimension when assessing the politicization of the European Union. Hooghe and Marks (2009) argued that the politicization of European issues increases the conflict structure and that this will be reflected following an identitarian or distributional logic. Research has paid more attention to the identitarian side of the conflict, but our paper shows that EU issue voting is also influenced by the within-EU distributional conflict.

We did not find evidence, however, that bailouts and interventions have intensified. Contrary to our expectations, these results confirm other studies, such as Turnbull-Dugarte (2020). He shows that the impact of the crisis on the saliency of the EU in national elections is asymmetric: in states in which there has been some level of intervention by the EU and the Troika, the saliency of the EU has decreased, while it has increased in countries in which there has been no intervention. As economic interventions have curtailed sovereignty and forced mainstream parties to take unpopular decisions, parties have incentives to downgrade the relevance of European issues in national elections. This shows that EU issue voting can also be endogenous to parties' strategies and contexts in which parties have more incentives to make EU issues visible to the voters.

This paper opens up some possible paths for future research. First, we have studied the effect of country-level conditions—being a pivotal country, having an intervened economy, or being a net contributor to or beneficiary of EU funds—in moderating or amplifying the impact of EU issues on citizens' voting in national elections. Further research establishing other conditions under which EU issue voting is more or less intense will contribute to a better understanding of Europeanization. Second, the paper has focused on post-crisis elections. New analyses comparing pre-crisis and post-crisis elections would allow us to estimate more precisely how much change there has been in the level of

Europeanization of national elections. Third, and contrary to our expectations, our results also indicate that the congruence between an individual's preferences toward the EU unification and the position of a party on this issue as expressed in its manifesto does not have any impact on the vote in countries with intervened economies. However, further research should continue exploring this finding by analyzing parties' press releases and speeches concerning the EU or by using expert surveys in order to assess whether the use of other sources could lead to different conclusions about parties' EU positions. Finally, the Covid-19 crisis has again highlighted the relevance of the European level in addressing global crises. We have argued that the Great Recession and subsequent debt crisis has made EU issue voting more prominent. It would be interesting to track the evolution of EU issue voting and assess whether a new crisis of a different nature will further intensify Europeanization in some countries.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102286>.

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