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Abstract

EU studies extend into political science, political theory, public and foreign policy analysis, and international relations. The field's diversity speaks to different ontological, epistemological and methodological traditions and research practices. How the EU is conceived as a political reality and entity (ontology) tends to shape how researchers substantiate knowledge production about EU affairs (epistemology) and the way they uncover this knowledge (methodology), alongside choosing research methods and data. We argue that a 'directional dependency' exists between research ontology, epistemology, methodology and design. Using a meta-analysis, we review EU politics research, mapping out directional dependencies in research design; how the paths operate; and deviations from those paths. We explore damaging effects of the research design process, evaluating how much this trap informs research in principle or in practice. We find that while in-principle directional traps exist, research can be trapped to in-practice dependencies, limiting the scope of innovation in the field.

Keywords: directional dependency; EU studies; European Union; methodology; research design

Introduction

The field of European Union (EU) studies extends into many disciplines including, but not limited to, classic political science, political theory, public and foreign policy analysis, and international relations. As such, the production of knowledge around the EU and its wider politics is driven by the research traditions embedded in these disciplines. The ways in which we study EU politics have direct effects not only on the quality of our research and the conclusions drawn on the back of our analyses but also on the way we understand the EU as a political entity and reality. The purpose of this article is not to assess the quality of the ever-growing field of EU-related political research, however defined. Rather the article investigates the research design practices of EU political research and explores the consequences these practices have on how we view and understand the actuality of the EU. What do we see when we look at EU politics through our preferred research designs? And arguably even more important, what type of research questions and dimensions of EU politics are underexposed and even silenced in the process?

Thankfully, examples of how research shapes both societal and political understandings of the EU are plentiful. Some of the most well-known ones include the ability of the EU to exercise 'normative power' (Adler-Nissen and Kropp 2015; Manners 2015) through its position in global politics; and the ability of EU politics to unfold on interconnected levels of governance at the domestic and subnational arenas (multilevel governance, cf. Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006; Bache et al. 2016; Gänzle et al. 2021). We may – or may not – consider such notions as accurate reflections of the political reality

of the EU or view them as useful or even innocent analytical categories. However, the significance of how we approach the study of EU politics is illustrated in the way EU studies are criticised as

(a) lacking firmer methodological and research design grounding compared with mainstream political science (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2012),
(b) suffering from 'methodological nationalism', that is, overexposure of the role of the nation state in EU politics (Rosamond 2008) and,
(c) displaying features of a 'mono-disciplinary' culture that limits its ability to handle complex phenomena in EU politics (Lynggaard et al. 2015; Manners et al. 2015; Rosamond 2015; Jensen and Kristensen 2018; Manners and Rosamond 2018).

At the same time, research design debates in EU studies are largely grounded in principles deriving from stylised and relatively fixed methodological positions. Debates have almost exclusively been grounded in a series of divides on whether research into EU politics should be approached from a rationalist or constructivist methodology, theoretically or empirically driven and analysed on the basis of quantitative or qualitative methods and data. The literature includes numerous attempts at building bridges and breaking methodological silos between research design positions (Maggetti 2007; Vink and Van Vliet 2009; Hagemann 2015; Thomann and Sager 2017) offering mixed methods approaches (rather than simply using or combining multiple methods). Nonetheless, while these bridge-building attempts are commendable, dichotomies as described above are still present and persistent. Any bridge-building endeavour requires sufficiently well-defined scholarly positions to achieve its goal; otherwise, it risks either becoming a descriptive exercise or doing methods for methods' sake.

While not disregarding such debates, we move from in-principle to in-practice arguing and turn the attention to the practices of research design and the associated challenges. That is, rather than substantiating our arguments in normative standards on how research ought to be conducted, we ground our arguments in the current research practices characterising EU politics as a field of study. This is a crucial turn allowing us empirically to identify favouritisms and negligence in research design practices, thus moving beyond the principled positions of the past. Mapping research practices and their challenges helps us understand the richness of topics around EU politics and make sense of their impact on defining and containing the scope of this field of research.

Against this backdrop, our article maps out research design choices in the study of EU politics and whether a high degree of directional dependency exists. To that extent, we investigate whether these choices are automatic and determine whether they can have a longer or even damaging effect in the way we view the EU and design research around the EU. Such choices may not affect individual pieces or research, which as such may offer pluralism and innovation. At an aggregate level, however, does research design become a constraint or a facilitator of innovation in the field? We take our cue from Colin Hay (2002, p. 63; also, Manners 2011, pp. 240–245), who suggests that a 'directional dependence' exists between our research ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods. In other words, our research ontology tends to shape our epistemological and methodological choices and effectively our choices in research design preferences. At the same time, we recognise this directional dependency is not a deterministic one

necessarily, leading to fixed dichotomies. Nonetheless, the 'trap(s)' appear when directional dependencies become fixed and an automatic sneak into our research design choices and defy reflection of the research problem at hand.

Using a meta-analysis exercise to review research outputs on EU politics, we sketch out patterns and directional dependencies in research design; how the different paths operate; and whether and how deviations from those paths occur. The article is organised as follows: we start by elaborating on the concept of directional dependency in research design; we continue to outline our research techniques and data; followed by an investigation in the practice of research design in the study of EU politics and identifying directional dependencies; and finish by discussing their implications for research into EU politics and the opportunities of alternatives to the 'beaten tracks' of research designs. Our purpose is not to encircle the discipline or offer normative templates, promoting one or another way of doing this. Instead, our conclusions in the final section contribute to unlocking the potential of different pathways to political research outputs and understanding the richness of the field of EU studies that sits at the nexus of innovation, novelty and advancement of knowledge.

I. Research Designs and Directional Dependencies

How does the concept of directional dependency fit into a research design choice? The point of departure is the connection between ontology, epistemology and methodology that Hay (2002) brings forward. Modifying this pathway for the study of the EU, the way we as researchers conceive of what constitutes the EU as a political reality (i.e., ontological position) tends to shape the way we substantiate our knowledge and defend its production about EU politics (i.e., epistemological foundation), and by extension the way we go about uncovering this knowledge (i.e., methodological approach). This pathway typically affects our choice of preferred research methods and type of data that we utilise. The most common dependencies relate to the link between the research question and the choice of either qualitative or quantitative approaches to research, which has created almost safe pathways to political research outputs.

The notion of path dependency is commonly used to denote how past political choices have long term effects as the field of policy making settles in a path from which departures are rare (Pierson 2004). The power structures, constellation of actors, ideas and norms in place at the time of the establishment of a path have long lasting effects. This line of thinking is a useful metaphor for understanding directional dependency in research design choices. Choices taken early on in designing our research based on ontological positions and epistemological foundations can cast a long shadow on our methodology, methods and types of favoured empirical material. Reasons behind the establishment of such directional dependencies include our training in predetermined philosophy of science positions. In other words, we are trained in '*in principle*' arguments (cf. above), and we are typically highly specialised in our methodologies and, specifically, in ever more sophisticated methods of analysis and data collection. These positions have been probably formulated in significant ways during our formative years as aspiring researchers. Moreover, as individual researchers, we are a reflection of our area of research or subject of study and their associated research communities. These communities typically provide some room for manoeuvre, nonetheless they also tend to highlight a limited

number of paths for 'good research' through which we legitimise and make our research efforts acceptable and relevant for the community. And if that was not enough, over time the sunk costs of our research routines increase and progressively outweigh the benefits of, for example, investing resources in learning new ways of conducting research. We are in a sunk cost fallacy situation. However, we need not to be fatalistic about this since the practice of research design in EU politics tends to be at least slightly more nuanced – something we return to in our data analysis findings – just like we as researchers may push such practices. Paraphrasing Rosamond's (2000, p. 172) expression of the constructivist mutually constitutive understanding of the structure–agency relation to the topic at hand: our individual research design choices are bound by research environment structures, but we are also capable of shaping such structures through action, though in ways that are contained within the structures themselves.

Guides and recommendations on how to make research design choices are plentiful. King et al.'s (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* is one of the most influential handbooks, supplying tools and techniques aiming at establishing descriptive and causal inference in social science research. The main argument there is that the value of 'good research' is obtained through: '*descriptive inference* – using observations from the world to learn about other unobserved facts. Or [...] *causal inference* – learning about causal effects from the data observed' (King et al. 1994, p. 8). Nonetheless, this handbook has been criticised for championing the research ideals of a post-positivist research paradigm while side-lining other widely acknowledged research purposes and paradigms (Rosamond 2015, pp. 18–19). Jackson (2011) moves beyond King et al.'s understanding of what 'good research design' is, by discussing the purpose and practices of different research paradigms – neo-positivism, critical realism, analyticism and reflexivity. He argues that research design choices should be assessed on the merits of the efforts of the research paradigm they specifically adhere to and the associated criteria for quality assurance of this paradigm. With the purpose of capturing the research design practices of EU politics research, this article adopts the latter view. Hence, we consider research design as a process involving a series of key – but frequently interdependent – choices, which cut across a variety of research paradigms.

In our quest, we follow Brady and Collier (2004) and trace the footprints of Exadaktylos and Radaelli (2009) for EU studies who highlighted six trade-offs. We focus on four of those trade-offs as being key research design choices: (1) 'cause of effects' versus 'effect of causes'; (2) concept formation versus measurement; (3) complex notions of causation versus singular linear causation; and (4) a mechanism- versus variable-oriented research design. It is important to highlight that viewing research design as reflected in a series of choices between trade-offs avoids *a priori* assuming any directional dependencies between ontological positions, epistemological foundations, methodological approaches and preferred research methods and types of data. That is, we approach 'directional dependency' in the construction of a research design as a non-deterministic one allowing research to cut across traditional divides. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that none of the research design choices above determines whether to adopt qualitative or quantitative data, or indeed a mixture, in our research endeavours, contrary to the classic traditions' division between the two approaches. Finally, all EU politics research is clearly far from drawing on vocabulary such as 'variables' and 'causation', just like individual pieces of research may well disagree on the meaning and implications of such

terms. Nonetheless, it is typically straightforward to identify research design choices following from these trade-offs.

Against this backdrop, a choice between the study of one or more 'causes of an effect' versus the 'effects of a cause' is typically the starting point for any type of inquiry (Choice 1). In other words, what is the goal of our inquiry: Is our research trying to determine how an observed phenomenon comes about, or is it attempting to examine the impact of an action, event or phenomenon? Of course, there can be designs attempting to do both, but this cannot happen at the same time; they are two separate lines of research inquiry. For example, our research design choice is one between studying the causes behind the institutional architecture of the Eurozone versus studying the effects of European integration on domestic choices for fiscal discipline.

The second choice is related to our ability to generalise, simplify and be diligent in our descriptive inferences. Thus, the problem is one of prioritising concept formation or focusing on developing measurement techniques (Choice 2). The ends of this research design choice are linked as concept validity tends to be a source of measurement error. It is also a direct outcome of the choice between theory-building and theory-testing. Using our two hypothetical examples, are we trying to conceptualise the meaning of the institutional capacity of European Union institutions or are we trying to develop ways of measuring the effects of European integration? In going for the former, we might then be interested in understanding the constellation of parameters developing out of the EU institutional capacity in determining the complex ways countries are bound by EU rules (complex causality). In going for the latter, we may wish to identify the role of a particular decision at the European level in determining a phenomenon, for example, the creation of the Copenhagen criteria in determining the 2004 enlargement.

The third choice relates to the exposure of the variety of different parameters in examining an observed phenomenon (Choice 3). To that end, we may seek to elucidate the variety of different independent variables or focus on the direct link between a single or a small set of independent variables to the dependent variable. For example, we may be interested in how the capacity of EU institutions are affected by financial means, in-house expertise, network centrality, management resources and leadership, and public legitimacy or rather how public legitimacy impacts on institutional capacity. On the other hand, we may want to isolate one or two variables leading to an effect. For example, whether political leadership shapes the responses of an EU institution or whether right-wing ideological positions are linked to high degrees of Euroscepticism. Regardless of the question, the choice between complex notions of causation versus singular linear causation is not necessarily one between a qualitative or quantitative approach, although it may signal a preference. This choice is more about the richness of explanation to avoid omitting variables or parsimony to avoid multi-collinearity, that is, being unable to separate the causal effects of two or more variables.

The fourth choice relates to producing correlations or exploring causal mechanisms. Here, the issue is not necessarily one of trade-off but rather a choice of prioritising the role of variables in an observed relationship over the role of mechanisms in determining the observed relationship (Choice 4). Therefore, this priority is about avoiding downplaying the role of mechanisms or neglecting the conditions through which these mechanisms are triggered (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2009). Using one example, one could focus on whether political leadership style affects policy decisions at the European level (variable

oriented) or explore the cognitive, learning and socialisation mechanisms that are at play in allowing political leadership styles to affect decision making in the EU.[1]

From the discussion above, it is evident that the trade-offs and the associated research design choices influence, but are not always determined by, each other in a sequential way. In the context of our argument, we focus on how Choice 1 may lead to Choice 2, which in turn may lead to Choice 3, and directly affects or can be interlinked to Choice 4. This is the 'in-principle' logic based on the literature but that does not have to be a strict application of it. Based on those design choices, we have mapped out two directional dependency pathways between our research design choices which can dominate the field of study. The starting point for the two pathways is Choice 1, effect-of-causes versus cause-of-effect, normally connected to our research questions, and we continue with the logical sequential steps for the remaining three choices. Hence, Path 1 begins with the effect of causes, measures that effect, uses a sparse number of variables and focuses on the relationship between those variables. Path 2 on the other hand, starts with the cause of the effects observed, and attempts to conceptualise this relationship, opening up the range of different factors that can be involved and increasing complexity, thus focusing on the mechanisms of interaction between those factors in determining an outcome. Figure 1 demonstrates how directional dependency is theorised in terms of the sequence of the four trade-offs we described above. Fast-forwarding to some of our data, an example of Path 1 is the article by Baumgartner and Mahoney (2008) looking at individual level framing and collective issue definition in the EU. The authors argue that different framing leads to different policy decisions, and they set out to measure this effect, connecting directly the two frames with the dependent variable (policy decisions). Schmidt (2008), on the explanatory power of ideas and discourse, is a typical example of Path 2. Starting from looking at institutional change as an effect, Schmidt tries to locate the cause of this change to the role of ideas and discourses. This in turn leads to the expansion of the concepts around discursive institutionalism looking at the complex nature of cognitive and normative ideas, hence detecting how ideas create meaning and how these mechanisms of interaction can explain how institutions change or persist.

The question then becomes how much EU politics research is bound by the constraints of directional dependency and how much room exists within the field for directional diversion. In other words, what are the points where a research design can deviate from the direction prescribed in Paths 1 and 2. If we deviate, what kind of innovation do we gain? And of course, the interesting finding would be the degree to which this directional dependency actually exists among studies of EU politics and whether the field has successfully managed to avoid the traps of directional dependency to produce innovative research.

We argue that the pathways are not deterministic as such; we consider them to be extensions of the logical flow of the research design process. This means that deviations are

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[1]Exadaktylos and Radaelli (2009) reflect on two more trade-offs. The first is between a rich set of variables versus parsimony. We fold this choice under Choice 3, as more frequently than not, the choice between a complex and linear notion of causation involves the active investigation of many versus few variables/factors (98% of our sample). For the purposes of our exercise, we took this as one of our assumptions. The second concerns the use of time in determining political outcomes (cf. discussion on temporality by Pierson 1996, 2004) and the impact of critical junctures mainly by identifying breaking points in a timeline and exploring their role as watershed moments in EU politics (e.g., European financial crisis). We did not investigate this choice as this is dependent upon the choice of topic and focus of a question.

Figure 1: Directional dependency in research design. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
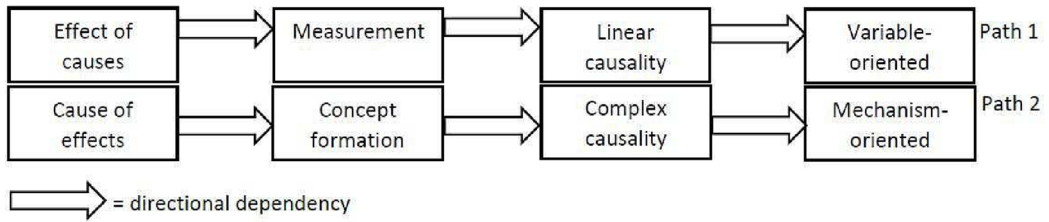
actually possible, and we demonstrate further that from our empirical reading of the literature there are examples of innovative designs creating a host of different pathways, combining non-conventional choices. We extend this view to carve out a room for more innovative research designs, enabling researchers to cut across traditional divides and counter research traditionalism, enhancing their insights into the complexities of EU studies as a field of research. Particularly when the object of our study, the EU, finds itself entangled in crises (e.g., the coronavirus pandemic), being able to cut across traditional divides in research design is especially vital. Crisis periods do not target single issues, but they affect all policy sectors and have the capacity to influence the very constitution of politics, institutions and identities. Hence, innovation in designing research is critical in helping us understand and respond to the multidimensional and complex societal changes.

II. Research Strategy and Data

Focusing on the practices of EU politics research, we conduct a meta-analysis assessing the most cited EU politics journal articles. The most cited articles have been chosen as representing mainstream EU politics research with an ability to shape the direction of travel of research agendas, subfields of research within EU politics studies and provide key parameters in the way EU politics is studied as a subject. Clearly, citation norms may reflect such phenomena as traditions, curriculums, and accessibility, just like 'mainstream' EU politics research is difficult to define. Still the most cited articles are viewed as having some degree of centrality to the research community and act as a rough indicator of widely accepted or popular research design practices in the field. The literature is scored, based on the research objectives along the following lines as identified by Exadaktylos and Radaelli (2009, pp. 199–200): (1) cause-of-effects or effects-of-causes, (2) concept formation or measurement, (3) complex notions of causation or singular linear causation and (4) mechanism-oriented or variable-oriented analysis (Data S1). Against this backdrop, we identify the four most common paths of research design choices and scope degrees of directional dependencies.

We employ a meta-analytical set of principles in building our sample of research articles from the literature. Meta-analysis has been used in a number of bibliometric exercises, and we follow its standard practice (Jensen and Rodgers 2001; Dunlop et al. 2012; Jensen and Kristensen 2018). Approaches of non-analytical value have been excluded, and we have

focused only on the most cited pieces, not as a benchmark of quality but rather as a milestone of use by the research community. We acknowledge however that citations may take time to build; hence, naturally articles published in the beginning of our sampling period may have more pronounced citation numbers than those which have been more recently published. Nonetheless, we apply additional principles in our method of building the sample. We limit our collection to peer-reviewed international journal articles, excluding monographs, book chapters and edited collections which are published under different conditions, premises and purposes and where research design choices may be covered in other sections or material within a monograph or an edited book or in a lighter way depending on the purposes of such publications. We also limit our discussion of EU politics to political science and international relations including articles that cross into other disciplines, such as public administration, political economy, political sociology and political psychology, but we avoid including studies that strictly belong to another related field only (e.g., strictly sociological, legal, environmental studies or historical articles).

A systematic review of the literature, following the principles of meta-analysis, attempts to identify patterns within this selected set of research articles, specifically 'interviewing' them on the trade-offs and associated research design choices outlined in the previous section. Hence coding was conducted on the basis of the article as a whole, that is, as the unit of our analysis. Following Lipsey and Wilson (2001), meta-analysis is not helpful for analysing theoretical papers, research reviews, policy briefs and other similar types of research output. We focused only on elements of research design as this is the scope of this article: to determine the directional dependency trap(s) based on explicit and implicit research design choices. In turn, we do not comment on the quality of the research output nor are we interested in making normative judgements about how the articles in the sample should look like. Due to the nature and size of our sample, complex quantitative analysis is not possible.

In recent years, the presence of a rigorous research design has become very prominent in empirical research articles in top international journals, presenting advances in methodological, data collection and data analysis techniques, creating a sophisticated approach for the study of the political world that goes beyond classic or traditional ways of doing things. Nonetheless, causal analysis or causal inference remains at the core of our discipline in addition to rigorous interpretative analysis.

We used the Social Science Citation Index via the Web of Science to extract our sample on EU politics. It is the most comprehensive database at our disposal as a repository of peer-reviewed articles in international journals. Admittedly, our search of 'European Union' AND 'Politics' AND 'Polic*' yielded an overwhelming volume of results (1258 of which 857 are classified as political science and sister disciplines (68.9%). We took an open definition of EU politics to allow for other sister disciplines to slip into the sample. A bibliometric exercise becomes a self-selection process as naturally a number of key journal outlets will dominate the field, with certain journals finding it difficult to break the publications glass ceiling. Researchers are also accentuating this element by seeking to publish in these outlets as opposed to others based on rankings and quartiles of classification. There is of course variation across countries and over time, which is where defining a time period is important. Hence, in our sampling quest, citation metrics become very useful. Considering the citation build-up and the time it takes to propel that number, we searched for articles between 2007 and 2018. The time-period is important as articles take

time to be cited, and we wanted to avoid making a judgement on recently published work on the basis of the number of citations. Hence, our starting point is where Exadaktylos and Radaelli (2009) left off, and we are picking up the thread from them. Our ending point is justified on the basis of a decade's worth of scholarship that is likely to inform current scholarship. We used the h-index as a cut-off point and took the same number of articles above and below the h-index to account for citation lags. Our h-index at the time of sampling was 65, giving us a total of 130 articles above and below that point. We cleaned up the sample based on relevance, excluding statistical artefacts and articles that simply contained those keywords but studied something different (for instance, a domestic issue with reference to one EU directive). Following the clean-up of our dataset and considering only international peer-reviewed top-ranking journals (as per the Web of Science), we ended with a sample of 99 articles (see Data S1). Articles were scored by the two authors with intercoder reliability of 0.92. Articles where a discrepancy was noted or questions on the coding emerged, a reconciliation process took place between the two authors. As mentioned, in our quest to code for research design practices, while most articles had a prominent research design section or statement, there was a small number where that information was scattered in the full text.

Previous exercises have demonstrated a low awareness of research design choices, indicating automation, and how diversity of choices can lead to more innovative knowledge in narrower fields of our discipline. Thinking about the field of European studies in comparison to mainstream political science, we are inspired by the way Exadaktylos and Radaelli (2009) discussed those research design indicators in the context of Europeanisation studies. In their article, the purpose was to determine the distance between a subfield of European politics – Europeanization – and the wider EU politics literature and by extension, how well-defined and unique Europeanization was as a distinct field of study. Their findings suggested that in this narrower field of study, researchers were not aware of their research design choices and focused more on measuring the Europeanization effect, complex notions of causation and on mechanism-oriented designs. This set of studies differed from a core group of EU politics studies, which at the time tended to be more parsimonious and variable oriented. Their research found that innovative ideas and insights on how mechanisms work for Europeanization stemmed out of these methodological and research design choices.

Similarly, in a previous exercise (Exadaktylos and Lynggaard 2016), we focused on an even narrower field of study, research around the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which offered also interdisciplinary insights for coherence, transparency and nuance of a growing body of literature. The meta-analysis concluded that consciousness of choices in research design can increase the rigour in circling our research object and simultaneously increase innovation. Understanding the dichotomy of research design choices is important in consolidating case selection justification, defining the research objectives, connecting research traditions and helping us navigate complex political and social phenomena and processes. We return to these research design choices, bringing in focus the field of EU studies as we aim to determine the degree of directional dependency in the wider field within our discipline.

All journal articles in the sample were coded according to the four research design choices outlined in this section. The table of the individual articles scores is available in Data S1.

III. Directional Dependencies in EU Studies Research Design

Zooming into the sample of articles that we scored, it is evident that in the most cited articles of EU studies, the discipline leans not only towards studies investigating the causes of the effects but also towards those seeking to develop new concepts in the field, while appreciating the complexity and richness of different factors prominent in the study of EU politics. More than a decade after the book 'Research Agendas in EU Studies: Stalking the Elephant', edited by Michelle Egan, Neil Nugent and William Paterson (Egan et al. 2010) the discipline is still trying to define what the elephant in the room looks like. Our sample suggests that researchers are attempting a deeper dive into the complex mechanisms around the production of politics and the creation of new polities.

Table 1 presents the aggregate results from our scoring exercise, and Data S1 gives additional information on the coding process. The table already indicates that a certain degree of non-directional paths exists, albeit not as popular as the mainstream ones, which goes back to the idea of safe choices against what is expected by our discipline itself in terms of the 'mainstream'. Hence, while different combinations exist, four paths dominate our sample, creating by extension, certain schools of thought or directions of travel. Looking across the sample of the most cited articles, there is a large skew towards research focusing on the cause of effects (78%), concept formation (71%), complex notions of causality (75%), and research driven by mechanism-oriented designs (74%).

Despite the overall skews and some evident preferences in terms of research choices, all articles start off on the basic choice between Path 1 and Path 2 as per our theoretical scheme in Figure 1. The starting point to treading a path is the research design choice between the study of the effect versus the study of the causes in EU politics. However, we notice that a good number of articles do not follow one of the two dominant paths as we expected from our theoretical discussion and the sequential link of the research design choices. We view the pathways as non-deterministic journeys and therefore, we do not suggest alternative paths. Instead, we offer a discussion on individual choices and suggest the possibility of different pathways stemming out of the deviations from the sequential move from one research design choice to the other. Hence, looking closely at the sample, we found articles that were deviating into – what we label as – Path 1a and Path 2a, which we discuss in detail below. In essence, while Path 1 and Path 2 are still valid trajectories as per Figure 1, if we add the two alternative Paths 1a and 2a, the vast majority of articles in our sample (84%) follow one of these four paths identified. Figure 2 shows how the sample is split between the four directional dependency paths and the percentage of articles moving in sequence from one choice to the other.

Studies looking at effects of causes (22% of sample) can invite two distinct choices between developing concepts to define the effect and measuring the effects. That is, two almost equally sized paths in research design – Path 1 and Path 1a – set out to study the effect of causes (respectively 8% and 9% of sample). Path 1 articles go on to formulate concepts and contain a complex notion of causality, while focusing on mechanisms. Path 1a articles on the other hand go on to measure the effects, while having a linear notion of causality and focusing on variables. Compared with Path 2, both Paths 1 and 1a allow for some variation; however, when a research design choice is made as to whether to develop concepts or measurements, further deviations from the paths are non-existent.

Table 1: The methodological and research design choices of our aggregate sample.

Trade offs	Choice 1		Choice 2		Choice 3		Choice 4	
	Cause of effects	*Effects of causes*	*Concept formation*	*Measurement*	*Complex notions*	*Linear causation*	*Mechanism oriented*	*Variable oriented*
Totals	77	22	70	29	74	25	73	26
% of sample	77.8%	22.2%	70.7%	29.3%	74.7%	25.3%	73.7%	26.3%

Figure 2: Directional dependency in EU politics studies. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
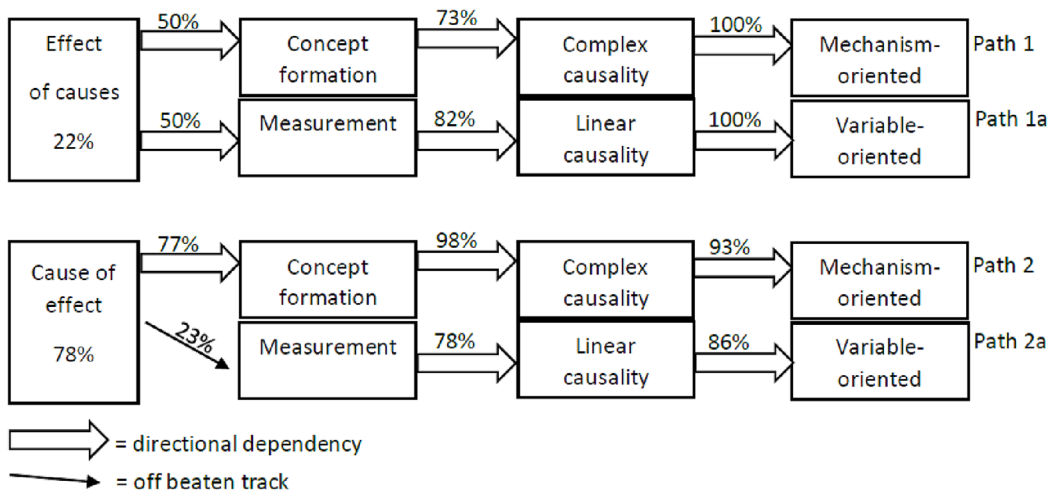
Paths 2 and 2a set out to study the cause of effects, which is also the most shared analytical ambition among the most cited articles (78% of the total sample). The most common path of the two and by far the most common path of all is Path 2 (77% of the articles under Choice 1 of Path 2, or 55% of the total sample), on which articles go on to formulate concepts and contain a complex notion of causality, while focusing on mechanisms. Path 2 research designs also exhibit a high degree of, and the strongest, directional dependencies among these four paths, where departures from the beaten track are rare.

Path 2a is one of those deviations (23% of articles under Choice 1 of Path 2 deviate here, or 12% of the sample). This pathway also starts with research designs setting out to study the cause of effects, but then break out to measurements, while having a linear notion of causality and focusing on variables. Compared with Path 2, Path 2a allows for more variation, however, when research designs on this path have gone on to develop measurements (Choice 2), the majority proceed along the beaten track.

We explored whether these results follow temporal academic trends or are affected by specific publication outlets. Frequently, at the start of a hot topic academic scholars fight for their place in the sun, or certain journals within their aims and scope prioritise particular research traditions or publish impactful special issues.[2] During the period investigated (2007–2018), we did not observe any significant clustering over time, and no noteworthy variations across journals – reflecting that the sample is based on article citations rather

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[2]A good example is the European financial crisis which generated a set of studies on Europeanization (e.g., Cacciatore et al. 2015; Leontitsis and Ladi 2018), impact on European integration (e.g., Schimmelfennig 2014) and attitudes to Europe (e.g., Hobolt and De Vries 2016) or on specific countries, such as Greece (e.g., Vasilopoulou et al. 2014), or specific institutions (e.g., Hodson and Peterson 2017). At the time of writing, there is a burgeoning scholarship on the policy responses at the European level (supranational or comparative across Member States) following the pandemic of Covid-19 (some early examples: Camous and Claeys 2020, Capano et al. 2020, Zahariadis et al. 2021; Zahariadis et al. 2022).

than publication outlets but also that these reflect longer-standing research trajectories and not temporary phenomena.

Compared with the Exadaktylos and Radaelli (2009) study, our findings suggest on the one hand, a return to prioritising and defining the ever-changing nature of EU politics, but on the other, a continuation of a preference towards complex notions of causality. In our findings, there is a persistence on mechanisms, which as a deviation, could be linked to the turmoil in European politics following the 2009 financial crisis. Our findings support the idea that research traditions are not set in stone – we encountered different pathways – but there is a degree of directional dependency. We return to this argument in our discussion in the final section.

Compared with the earlier exercise we did (Exadaktylos and Lynggaard 2016) on a very narrow field of research in European politics, the ENP, we had found articles mostly starting on Path 2 but deviating into Path 2a, focusing on analysing EU public policy, EU foreign policy instruments and governance approaches, and international relations. Yet, we had found a dipping out back to Path 2, as ENP scholars focused on the complex nature of the policy, its implementation and impact on the countries of the ENP. The nature of the subfield hence also informed the final choice, where studies were split between mechanism- and variable-oriented designs. This suggests, based on our treatment in this article, that breakaways from the beaten path are possible, which in turn can generate innovation in the research output linked to the intricacies of the object of study.

Finally, when we look at the current state of play in this sample, we confirm that certain elements of directional dependency have been strengthened over time, suggesting a directional trap both 'in principle' and effectively 'in practice', as deviations from the path either do not always manage to find enough followers or researchers prefer the safety of the beaten track in new research.

IV. What Does This Tell Us About EU Politics Research?

Our analysis helps us gauge the state of the art in the study of the EU. First, EU politics research is characterised by an important degree of traditionalism. That is, the lion's share of EU politics research exhibit pronounced directional dependency in their research designs. Traditional approaches in research are by no means all bad and there are advantages associated with a shared research paradigm, as it favours, among other things, knowledge aggregation and puzzle-solving. At the same time research traditionalism – or 'normal science' – disfavours and occasionally even fends off insurgent and innovative research (cf. Kuhn 1996 [1962]). Furthermore, if we acknowledge – as we do – that the way we design our research efforts impacts our portrayal of the EU as a political reality, then the state of play in EU politics research reduces pluralism and multidimensional views of the EU.

Second, explorative research (Manners et al. 2015, p. 315) fares less well in the academic world of EU politics. That is, there is a strong tradition in EU studies for formulating research questions and developing research designs directed at identifying the reasons behind observed implications of EU politics. Research pieces aimed at encircling new research questions, agendas and identifying previously downplayed aspects of EU politics are less common. There may well be sensible reasons for exploratory research not being on par with explanatory ambitions. However, allowing more exploratory approaches of

EU politics holds the potential of a more vibrant and innovative research agenda. One example of such potential being released is the special issue of the *Journal of Common Market Studies* on 'Another Theory is Possible: Dissident Voices in Theorising Europe' presenting a selection of almost exclusively exploratory articles and research often labelled as critical and normative with the ambition of 'polyphonic engagement' with dissident voices outside the EU politics mainstream (Manners and Whitman 2016). A rare example of more exploratory research from our sample is Menon and Salter's (Menon and Salter 2016) 'initial reflections' on the reasons and implications of 'Brexit', which essentially outlined a series of key research topics and pointers that still keep EU politics researchers occupied.

Third, studies directed at generating theoretically parsimonious knowledge are few in EU politics research; rather, the vast majority of research adopts rich sets of variables allowing to capture and understand the complexity of EU political phenomena. This comes as no surprise: EU politics research is very much in the realm of applied political science. However, it comes at the expense of basic research being much less common. Underprioritised research includes areas such as experimental research, addressing the fundamentals of individual preference formation and attitudes (some notable exceptions include Curtis and Nielsen 2018; Cram and Patrikios 2015). Such research is characterised by an investigation into limited variables and directed at illuminating or challenging basic assumptions on attitude and preference formation on EU matters. Knowledge ambitions aiming at theoretically parsimonious conceptions of EU politics do not equal claims about the 'bigger picture' of EU politics. However, this type of research often adheres to wider points about the mechanisms of European integration, the role of the EU in the world, or on the impact of the EU as a polity on domestic politics. One rare example included in our sample, which adheres to both theoretically parsimonious knowledge and makes at least subtle generalised claims, is the study by Savage and Verdun (2016) using principal-agent theory to suggest that the EU Commission is still a driver of European integration, even on the back of the 2009 financial and subsequent economic crisis (for another example, see Eckhardt and Poletti 2016). While generalised and simplified analytical claims can be, and often are, challenged on a shortage or lack of empirical correspondence, theoretically parsimonious research holds the potential of formulating new research agendas and making claims about the wider dynamics and implications of EU politics.

Fourth, while the general picture of research design practices in EU politics research is one of directional dependency and traditional approaches, we observe interesting research departures from the beaten tracks. We have already seen how exploratory research identifying and investigating implications of key events or trends is less common in EU politics research, but even more rare are studies which, in addition to their exploratory element, adopt a complex notion of causal relations and mechanism-oriented research designs. Such rare studies, however, tend not only to explore or challenge existing understandings and concepts, but also offer nuances or alternatives to the current state of play. One highly illustrative example from our sample is Dunlop and Radaelli (2013), who review a key area of research in EU politics (policy learning) and go further to offer a nuanced typology, essentially paving the way for meta-theoretical developments (another illustration is de Goede 2008). For any research to be published in a highly ranked outlet, it is pretty much a requirement to challenge existing knowledge. However, research

designs studying the implications of events or trends (whether empirical or theoretical), while at the same time adhering to an ambition of both capturing complexity and identifying broader mechanisms in politics, allow for bracketing key challenges to the state of play and offer distinct theoretical pathways.

In a similar vein, another path-breaking research design stands out which, in addition to searching for the reasons behind certain effects, highlights both measurements and identifies a wide-ranging set of mechanisms behind EU politics. The research output often takes the form of an analytical approach in principle applicable to a broad range of trends and topics in EU politics. While typically not promoted as a theoretical framework, the analytical approach on offer disentangles otherwise complex issues into a series of research questions, analytical dimensions and tools. Rather than offering 'empirical evidence' and insight into specific policies and events, such studies make use of empirical illustrations in support of more general arguments. Examples from our sample include a 'political economy' approach to EU economic governance (Copelovitch et al. 2016), a deliberative intergovernmental approach for the study of the role institutional actors (Puetter 2012), a narrative approach illustrated by several case areas such as 'green Europe', 'economic Europe', 'social Europe' and 'global Europe' (Manners and Murray 2016). This set of studies is indicative of developing an approach of actively pursuing alternative research design choices to generate innovative research outcomes and offer alternatives to mainstream explorations.

Conclusions

EU politics is a multifaceted and vibrant area of research. However, our study of research design practices and choices also reveals preferences embedded in this area that favour traditional approaches and discourage certain types of research including exploratory research, theoretically parsimonious research and research highlighting time as a key factor in understating EU politics. None of this is problematic as such, however, the implication for how EU politics is portrayed is potentially significant. Research design does not only matter for the way we study the European Union, but also for the way our research community perceive of the EU as a political reality. This impacts the way researchers elaborate on research design practices, a kind of structural conditioning, which inevitably restricts certain research questions, analytical units, research methods and data collection and analysis. To stretch this argument, we risk entering a morphogenetic cycle (Archer 1995) leading to a stasis by reproducing existing paradigms. The findings are not *per se* surprising, as the traditional way of aligning the elements of research (ontology, epistemology and methodology) follow the reproduction of research paradigms – but that does not offer revolutionary ways forward (which is Kuhn's argument). In fact, in our case, we are surprised that directional dependency is not higher; this finding showcases that a degree of innovation always finds room to emerge and create new research clusters and approaches.

Yet, innovation does not mean 'anything goes'. We suggest that true innovation presumes our ability to test-drive combinations in research design choices and actively making those choices on the basis of rigour, transparency, widely accepted guidelines and understandings of what our choices entail. The two earlier exercises that we reflected on in the context of the article (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2009, Exadaktylos and Lynggaard

2016) suggested that research design awareness was either low or of limited diversity due to the very nature of the topic in focus. Our findings suggest that, while trends of staying on the beaten track are evident and lead to a directional trap in principle, research can be trapped to in-practice directional dependencies, limiting the scope of innovation.

Finally, in looking for the root causes of this directional dependency, we need to highlight the drive for mass production of research from within our institutional academic structures. The pressures within the discipline to produce quick research and the shortcuts for what is considered 'high quality' research may push researchers to stay within their comfort zone. In essence, we are investing on templates that can open doors to highly ranked journals, rather than look at the innovation of the findings regardless of the method or design. The existence of predetermined notions of what constitutes rigorous research creates the conditions for falling into the directional dependency trap, leading to saturation of research in our discipline.

Again, we do not wish to make an argument around the quality of the research output, but rather around the fact that some paths are preferred or promoted more than others with the caveat of constraining the very element that makes EU politics research interesting: the diversity of EU politics as a field of current affairs. Effectively, embracing the diversity of our research practices and encouraging the production of innovative research from across the spectrum of methods and designs can shed light into the multifaceted and complex nature of the very phenomena we seek to study. Increasing consciousness of other research traditions among the community and offering opportunities for coming to contact with less traditional approaches helps us appreciate the contribution of such traditions in the advancement of knowledge. Additionally, it helps us make conscious choices of research design with the vision of the end result clearly in mind. While acknowledging that not all methods and designs are applicable to all types of research questions, acknowledging the value and contribution of all traditions in our understanding and exploration of socio-political phenomena in EU politics and embedded relations is vital.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Data S1. Supporting information.