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Out of sight out of mind? Voter attitudes about cooperation with radical parties in Europe*

R. Daniel Kelemen [a], Jonathan B. Slapin [b], Michele Fenzl [c] and Pit Rieger[d]

[a]McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA; [b]Department of Political Science, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland; [c]Department of Politics, Maastricht University, Maastricht, Netherlands; [d]D-GESS, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Do voters view cooperation between mainstream and radical parties differently when it occurs at the European as opposed to national level, and if so, why? Using an original survey experiment with over 8000 respondents from Germany and Italy, this paper explores how voters react to cooperation with radical political parties at the national and EU levels once they are made aware that such cooperation is occurring. Our results show that voters react negatively to cooperation with radical political parties. We find that when voters are aware of such cooperation, they express similar levels of disapproval regardless of whether it occurs domestically or in the EU. These results have implications for our understanding of domestic and EU political processes, and point to the role of information as a fundamental factor enabling accountability at the European level.

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KEYWORDS Extremism; autocracy; coalitions; european politics; survey experiment

Introduction

The growing power of radical parties across Europe confronts mainstream parties with a fateful choice.[1] Do they ostracise or embrace them? Do they reject cooperation with radicals as a matter of principle, or do they form coalitions with them to advance their policy agenda? Mainstream parties

CONTACT Jonathan B. Slapin slapin@ipz.uzh.ch Department of Political Science, University of Zurich, Affolternstrasse 56, 8050 Zurich, Switzerland

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*This study has been pre-registered. An anonymous version of the pre-registration is available at: https://osf.io/xdc4a/?view_only=185733f4cc9d4154ad875f8de5f44660. The study was conducted in compliance with the relevant laws and received the necessary ethical approvals.

have reached different conclusions about cooperation with radicals, presumably having determined that their voters will react differently. For instance, in Germany mainstream parties have rejected such cooperation domestically, while in Italy parties have long engaged in it. But not only do decisions about embracing radicals vary across party and country, they also vary across levels of government. Some parties that have ostracised radicals at home have embraced them at the EU level.

Party politics in Europe today is practised not only at the national level, but also transnationally by 'Europarties'. These transnational coalitions of national parties engage in meaningful partisan politics (Hix *et al.*, 2003, 2005; Senninger *et al.*, 2021). They campaign in European Parliament elections, agree on common policies, and compete for policy-making influence. They also coordinate their representatives across other EU institutions and seek to place party members in leadership positions, such as the Presidencies of the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament. In the context of Europarties, mainstream parties sometime ally with radical parties of the sort they would never cooperate with at home. Yet we know little about voters' views about cooperation with radical parties at different levels of government. Do voters view such 'unsavoury alliances'[2] differently when they happen at the European as opposed to national level, and if so, why?

The case of Germany raises important questions in this regard. All German mainstream parties–including the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and their Bavarian sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU)–have sworn off cooperation with the radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The strength of the taboo on cooperation with the radical right was underlined following the 2019 election and subsequent coalition formation process in the state of Thuringia. When the CDU cooperated briefly with the AfD to elect a Minister President of Thuringia, it caused a political firestorm. Chancellor Angela Merkel immediately declared the move unacceptable and within days the leader of the CDU in Thuringia stepped down and Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer–the national leader of the CDU and Merkel's heir apparent –announced plans to stand aside. The CDU's U-turn seems to follow the idea of placing a 'cordon sanitaire' around extremist parties, as has been done in some other European countries (see Geys *et al.*, 2006; Jacobs, 2024).

But the CDU's stance on cooperation with radical parties at the EU level is strikingly different than its stance at home. For more than a decade, it maintained a close partnership with Fidesz, the party of Hungary's Viktor Orbán, as members of the same Europarty, the European People's Party (EPP). Fidesz not only espouses far-right views similar to those of the AfD but has also replaced Hungarian democracy with a form of hybrid authoritarianism.[3] It seems that the CDU's glaring double standards may be explained, at least in part, by party leaders' expectations of how their

voters will react (or rather, will not react) to such cooperation at the EU level. After all, the CDU's brief cooperation with the AfD in Thuringia prompted thousands of outraged citizens to take to the streets of several German cities. By contrast, the CDU's years of cooperation with Orbán's Fidesz sparked no such protests.

The German CDU is by no means the only party to embrace alliances with radicals at the EU level while rejecting them domestically. Many mainstream parties from across Europe–from Christian Democratic, Social Democratic, and Liberal party families–are aligned with radical parties through their Europarties, while they would never consider alliances with such parties domestically. For instance, the EPP has included the Slovenian Democratic Party and Bulgaria's GERB; and the Party of European Socialists has welcomed the Slovakian SMER and the Maltese Labour Party.[4] We know little about how voters view such unsavoury alliances at the EU level. Do voters react differently to cooperation with radical parties in EU-level politics than they do in the context of domestic politics?

These questions are of great theoretical and practical significance. If voters apply different standards when evaluating political alliances at the EU level, the increasingly important realm of Europarty politics may be subject to profoundly different dynamics than those observed in domestic party politics. If supporters of mainstream parties are more accepting of alliances with radical parties at the EU level than they are domestically, then efforts to strengthen the role of Europarties and partisan politics at the EU level (promoted in the name of strengthening EU democracy) may have perverse unintended consequences. Mainstream parties will have incentives to partner with radical parties who can deliver votes and seats to their Europarties, as they would not fear paying any political price from moderate voters for doing so. This could contribute to what Kelemen (2020) has labelled an 'authoritarian equilibrium' in the EU. By contrast, if voters do oppose such alliances at the EU level, but are simply unaware of their existence, then the outlook is rosier. Voters who acquire knowledge about EU party politics may apply pressure on parties to avoid alliances with radicals. The central question therefore becomes whether voters fail to punish mainstream parties for entering 'unsavoury alliances' at the EU level because they don't care about them, or simply because they don't know about them?

To shed light on these questions, we employ an original survey experiment in which we provide respondents with information about hypothetical instances of cooperation between a national party they support and various types of radical parties, varying the level of government at which the cooperation occurs–either the national or EU level. The survey, with over 8000 responses, was conducted in two countries–Germany and Italy–selected because of their different domestic experiences in terms of partisan accommodation of extremism. In Germany, alliances with radicals have been

taboo domestically while in Italy mainstream parties have more readily accepted cooperation. These domestic experiences might influence how voters view cooperation with radicals at the EU level, and thus we examine voter reactions in countries with very different domestic experiences. Respondents read a vignette in which a party they said they support enters into cooperation with a hypothetical new challenger party espousing either radical left, radical right, or autocratic views that have been actually expressed by either Italian or German politicians in recent years. This hypothetical cooperation was presented as occurring at either the national level or at the European level. We then assessed the effects of these treatments on respondents' support for the cooperation and on their voting intentions.

Our results show that, first of all, voters have very little information about Europarties and EU party politics. Even respondents who are otherwise knowledgeable about EU institutions have difficulty associating the party they support with the correct Europarty. After receiving some information about Europarties through our survey instrument, though, respondents from both Germany and Italy reacted similarly negatively to cooperation between their preferred party and all three types of radical parties at both levels of government. These findings suggest that the apparent indifference we observe in contemporary European politics concerning cooperation with radicals at the EU level is more likely due to a lack of awareness than an underlying acceptance.

Our findings have implications both for the academic literature on party competition and political coalitions and for contemporary European politics. We add to the literature on how the coalitions that parties join influence voters' perceptions of them (e.g. Fortunato, 2019; Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013). We also add to recent literature on cordon sanitaire policies, showing that voters largely reject coalitions with radicals (e.g. Bolin *et al.*, 2023; Ekholm *et al.*, 2022; Van Spanje & Weber, 2019). Our results bolster recent findings that the appeasement of radical parties, especially on right, by mainstream parties is not an effective vote-winning strategy (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2019). Finally, they support results showing that citizens evaluate outcomes similarly regardless of whether they result from decisions taken by domestic or international institutions (e.g. Madsen *et al.*, 2022).

Coalitions, party support, and transnational cooperation

Mainstream parties have taken different approaches to handling the growing power of radical parties (Van Spanje, 2010). How they respond to the rise of such parties can have an important influence on policy and their own vote shares (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020), on the subsequent

electoral fortunes of both the challengers and mainstream parties (Art, 2007; Bale *et al.*, 2010; de Lange, 2012; Heinze, 2018; Meguid, 2008; Meijers & Williams, 2020; Mudde, 2014; Spoon & Klüver, 2019, 2020), on the polarisation of voters (Bischof & Wagner, 2019), and on the survival of liberal democracy itself (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

While mainstream parties may be tempted to ally with radicals to advance their policy agenda, research suggests that they pay an electoral price for doing so. An emerging literature on national party politics provides evidence that voters are influenced by 'coalition based heuristics'. In short, the coalitions that a party enters can influence voters' perceptions of and support for that party (Adams *et al.*, 2016; Fortunato & Adams, 2015; Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013; Klüver & Spoon, 2020; Lupu, 2013; Plescia & Aichholzer, 2017; Riera & Pastor, 2022). Because coalitions are easy to observe, they are a useful heuristic for voters when updating information on party positions.

A distinct but related literature on strategic voting suggests that voters take into account potential post-election coalitions and policy-making when choosing which party to vote for (Kedar, 2005; Gschwend *et al.*, 2017; Gschwend and Hooghe 2008; Meffert *et al.*, 2011; Herrmann, 2014). As Gschwend *et al.* (2017, p. 644) explain, 'If a voter dislikes the signalled coalition partner of her most preferred party, she might defect from her preferred party and instead cast her vote for a party that makes this coalition less likely'. Voters may not only update their beliefs about party positions but also directly punish parties for the coalitions they enter, or even consider entering. In turn, we would expect parties to avoid entering coalitions with parties that their voters dislike.

Interestingly, the existing literature largely overlooks the question of whether voters generally support cordon sanitaire policies. Recent literature on cooperation with radical parties has (1) investigated the electoral consequences of government coalitions between radical and non-radical parties, in particular on the radicals (e.g. Riera & Pastor, 2022); (2) analysed attitudes towards specific radical parties (Harteveld *et al.*, 2017); or (3), focussed on the effects of appeasing radical parties with respect to policy positions (Krause *et al.*, 2023). But this research focuses on the consequences of cooperation, and not whether voters support the notion of refusing to cooperate with radicals at the outset.

The aforementioned literature focuses on coalition heuristics, strategic voting, and consequences of cooperation at the national level. We cannot simply assume the same dynamics would play out in EU-level party politics. There are three reasons that we might expect voters' reactions to cooperation with radicals to differ at the EU level. First, literature from international relations suggests that, in the realm of international affairs, voters in democracies are not sensitive to the nature of the regimes their governments

cooperate with (Tomz & Weeks, 2021). If voters view EU level party politics as a matter of international affairs, they might be less likely to punish mainstream political leaders for cooperating with radicals at the EU level than they are domestically.

Second, voters might react differently because EU and national level cooperation differs in substantive ways. For example, Europarties do not need to support a government in the same manner that coalitions in national parliaments do; the stability of a government is not at stake. Alternatively, cooperation in larger, less well-known organisations may appear more opaque to voters, leading them to underestimate the political relevance of cooperation. Voters may view EU-level cooperation as less meaningful or impactful, reducing its salience, and leading them to care less about unsavoury alliances. This, however, does not mean that EU-level party cooperation is actually less important than comparable cooperation at the national level. Indeed, EU-level cooperation is more similar to cooperation at the national level than many suppose.

While Europarties may once have been merely loose affiliations of national parties, today cooperation within a Europarty is, in some sense, more intimate than cooperation between domestic coalition partners. At the EU level, parties from various member states do not simply negotiate coalitions between separate entities, instead they actually form a single entity–a pan-European political party. Even if mostly lacking strict party discipline, these parties work closely together to elect leaders, establish common electoral platforms, campaign in European Parliament elections, and form 'Political Groups' that develop common policies in the European Parliament.[5] The size and strength of Europarties has a direct impact on who takes up positions with executive authority within the Commission, including the Commission President.

And third, voters may react differently to EU and national level cooperation with radicals simply because they are not as aware of EU-level party cooperation. Indeed, as our findings discussed below demonstrate, they do not even know which national parties belong to which Europarties. This lack of awareness is crucial because the domestic politics literature on coalition-based heuristics and strategic voting in multi-party systems generally assumes that voters are familiar with the political parties in their country (Gschwend *et al.*, 2017, p. 643). In order to update one's belief about a party's position based on its coalition partners, or to punish a party for its partner's positions, a voter must both have a good idea about the position of the partner party and about the nature of cooperation.

No such familiarity can be assumed at the EU level. As Hobolt (2014, p. 1531) notes, 'despite the presence of traditional party politics at the European level, voters are generally unaware of this and Euro-parties have

traditionally played a limited role in EP election campaigns'.[6] Moreover, a well-established literature suggests that voters treat European Parliament elections as 'second-order national elections' (Hix & Marsh, 2007; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Van der Eijk *et al.*, 1996), viewing them as less important than national elections and using them to punish national governing parties and larger parties, rather than voting on EU-level issues. If voters are unaware of Europarties and of the national parties that comprise them, one would not expect those voters to punish national parties for partnering with a party they dislike in a Europarty.

But recognising this, a central question remains: Is the indifference among voters that we can observe in contemporary European politics when their party cooperates with a radical party at the European level because these voters do not object to cooperation with radicals at the EU level? Or is their apparent indifference simply because they are unaware the cooperation is occurring? In order to delineate between these alternative explanations we have fielded a survey experiment, described in much greater detail in the next section, in which we present respondents with vignettes about party cooperation at the national and EU levels. As part of the survey, some respondents were informed about the nature of Europarties and told that national parties cooperate with other parties across Europe within these Europarties. Others, in a control condition, were simply told about cooperation at the national level. By experimentally varying the nature of the cooperation partners and the level of government at which the cooperation occurs within survey vignettes, we raise awareness of European-level cooperation among the treated respondents and compare whether being told of cooperation with radicals at the EU level impacts their views of that cooperation. We are, therefore, able to determine whether and how the level of government impacts voter attitudes and behaviour when confronted with different forms of cooperation.

Based on these theoretical considerations, we derive two main hypotheses concerning how voters react when a party they support enters a partnership with various types of extremist parties at the EU and national levels. In all instances, support for cooperation with an extreme party is compared with a control condition in which cooperation occurs with a party expressing non-ideological and uncontroversial positions.[7]

First, at the most basic level, we expect voters to react negatively when a party that they support engages in cooperation with a party taking extremist views:

H_1: Respondents evaluate their preferred party's cooperation with an extremist party of any type (extreme left, extreme right, or autocratic) more negatively than cooperation with an uncontroversial party (control).

Second, we explore how the level of government at which the cooperation occurs impacts voter support for the cooperation. Based on the observation that many parties are willing to cooperate with extremists from other countries at the EU level when they are unwilling to enter such coalitions at home, our *a priori* hypothesis is that voters react more negatively towards cooperation at home than at the EU level. Support for this hypothesis would suggest that voters are less concerned about cooperation with extremists from elsewhere in the EU than they are with extremists at home.

In contrast, a lack of support for the hypothesis would suggest that voters do not necessarily view cooperation with extremists differently across various levels of government. The differences that we observe in contemporary European politics in how voters react to cooperation with extremists at the national and EU levels could instead be because voters are unaware of the nature of European-level cooperation, its consequences, or of the positions that foreign parties take.

H_2: Respondents react more negatively to cooperation with extremist parties at the national level compared with the European level.

In addition to these two primary hypotheses, we test secondary hypotheses related to the characteristics of the respondents and the parties they support. We examine the interaction between respondent ideology, gauged by the party the respondent says they support, and the ideology of the party that the respondent's party cooperates with.

We hypothesise that respondents will react most negatively when the party they support cooperates with a party that takes a position opposite to that of their own party (e.g. a left-wing party cooperates with the hypothetical far-right party). When it comes to autocratic statements, observational evidence provides us with reason to believe that the effects may be asymmetric across the political spectrum. Although parties on both the left and the right have cooperated with radicals within Europarty alliances, Sedelmeier (2017) argues that left-wing Europarties have demonstrated a stronger commitment to democracy and have been more willing to punish autocratic tendencies among their members (see also, Meijers & Van der Veer, 2019).

H_{3a}: Respondents supporting right-wing(left-wing) parties react the most negatively when the party they support is said to cooperate with a party expressing views associated with the extreme left(right).

H_{3b}: Respondents supporting right-wing parties react less negatively compared with other respondents when the party they support is said to cooperate with a party expressing autocratic attitudes.

We explore these hypotheses in Germany and Italy–two countries that have both had recent experience with the rise of radical parties, but in which the response of existing parties to these newcomers has been different. In Germany the response has been to build a 'cordon sanitaire' around the AfD, with the mainstream parties refusing to cooperate with it or accept its support. This tactic corresponds to similar experiences of other Western European countries, including France and Belgium with the cases of the National Rally or the Vlaams Belang (see e.g. Art, 2007). By contrast, in Italy, as in other countries such as Austria and Denmark, parties or leaders expressing extreme views have been treated as 'ordinary political opponents' and hence ended up participating in regional and national governments and legislatures (see Rummens & Abts, 2010).[8] Thus, Italians, unlike Germans, might be more accustomed to and comfortable with the idea that the parties they support cooperate with radicals. While AfD support for the election of Thomas Kemmerich in the German state of Thuringia sent a shockwave throughout Germany, Italian politicians with links to the far right have reached key positions with far less widespread outrage. Gianni Alemanno became minister for Agriculture in 2001 in the government led by Silvio Berlusconi and had in the past led the radical right youth organisation *Fronte della Gioventù* (often described as post- or neo-fascist by commentators and linked to the extreme right party *Movimento Sociale Italiano*). And even earlier, Alessandra Mussolini (granddaughter of Benito Mussolini) ran for Mayor in Naples under the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* flag, making it to the second round, only then to be defeated. She then became a member of the European Parliament in 2004 and later joined the *Popolo della Libertà*. These examples show how voters in Italy may have grown accustomed to the presence of extremist parties in 'ordinary' politics.

Survey design

We embed a vignette experiment within a short online survey of political attitudes. Through the market research firm Bilendi, the survey was fielded to online panels (matched to the national population with respect to gender, age and region using quota sampling) in Germany (N = 4330) and Italy (*N* = 3828) between 13 October and 11 November 2020. The general structure of the survey is shown in the flowchart in Figure 1. Prior to the vignette experiment, the survey asked respondents to state the party they would be most likely to support if an election were held in their country the next day;[9] their level of attachment to that party; their levels of political interest and political information with respect to European integration; their attitudes towards European integration; and other information.

Respondents were told of a hypothetical situation in which the national party they said they support has entered into a cooperative arrangement

with a new party of increasing prominence.[10] The experiment varied both the level of government at which the hypothetical cooperation occurs and the nature of political views espoused by the leader of this new party. The leader of the new party is said to have made statements that reflect either extreme left-wing, extreme right-wing, or autocratic attitudes. Additionally, we include a control condition in which the leader makes neutral and uncontroversial statements. All of the statements that we attribute to the new party leader are real or slightly adapted quotations spoken by politicians or political operatives from parties that have garnered substantial electoral support.[11] The statements appeared in media, and reflected narratives to which our respondents would have been exposed to in the 'natural environment' of German and Italian politics. At the end of the survey respondents were asked if the new party reminded them of any party currently competing within their country. Many respondents named parties that have, or could have, espoused the views given in our scenarios.

We constructed three different scenarios in which we vary the country in which the new party rises to prominence–at home or in another EU member state–and the type of the upcoming election–national parliament or EP. In the first scenario, the new party comes to prominence in the respondents' country before a national election–cooperation thus takes place exclusively at home. For the second scenario, the new party still comes to prominence at home, but the upcoming election is for the EP. In the third scenario, the new party rises in another EU member state and the election is for the EP.[12] Thus, we designed twelve experimental conditions to which

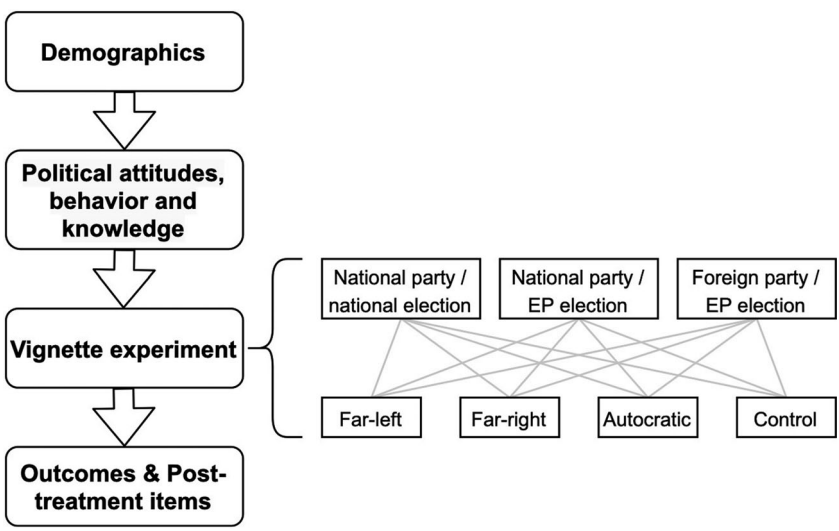

Figure 1. Outline of survey structure.

Table 1. Text of experimental vignettes.

Introduction	We would now like to ask you about a hypothetical situation regarding politics within [COUNTRY]. Please read the following scenario carefully. We will then ask you to answer several questions regarding the scenario.
Level 1	A national election is held in [COUNTRY] sometime next year. Prior to the election, a new party has come to prominence within [COUNTRY].
Level 2	An election to the European Parliament is held in [COUNTRY] sometime next year. Prior to the election, a new party has come to prominence within [COUNTRY].
Level 3	An election to the European Parliament is held in [COUNTRY] sometime next year. Prior to the election, a new party has come to prominence within another EU member state.
Treatment A [control]	The leader of this new party is attracting substantial support. He has taken various positions on different government policies. He has made statements such as 'we must look to find a common way forward' and 'if we make the wrong choices now, future generations will have to live with the consequences'.
Treatment B [far left]	The leader of this new party is attracting substantial support. He has taken controversial positions with respect to the wealthy. He has repeatedly complimented the accomplishments of Fidel Castro, and has made statements such as 'we won't shoot the rich, we'll just put them to useful work'; and then 'the free money for the banks is there but they tell us basic income is impossible. How can you still vote for these people?'
Treatment C [autocratic]	The leader of this new party is attracting substantial support. He has taken controversial positions with respect to media freedom and judicial independence that have led many observers to argue that he could pose a risk to democracy itself. He has made statements such as 'We must attack and abolish the print media and the public propaganda apparatus'. He has said that, 'the will of the people is above the law,' and that 'judges and public prosecutors are the cancer of our democracy'.
Treatment D [far right]	The leader of this new party is attracting substantial support. He has taken controversial positions with respect to immigrants and minority groups. He has made statements such as 'I would not condemn anyone who sets fire to an occupied asylum centre!'; 'we now have so many foreigners in the country that another Holocaust would be worthwhile'; and 'we should ethnically cleanse the faggots'.
Endorsement	[SUPPORTED PARTY] has joined together with this new party [to form a coalition government/in the same Europarty]. The leader of [SUPPORTED PARTY] has explained his willingness to partner with this new party saying, 'we believe this cooperation is very important to carry out the policies we believe in'.

respondents were assigned at random–three types of cooperation by four types of new party as shown in Figure 1. Table 1 presents the full text of the vignette.

After reading the vignette, respondents were shown questions capturing several outcome measures. All outcome measures were captured on 0-10 scales.[13] Before answering these questions, respondents were instructed to consider their party's decision to cooperate with the new party when answering the questions. First, respondents were asked to rate their support for the cooperation, second to rate how close they now felt towards the party they said they supported,[14] third to rate how likely would they be to participate in the next election, and fourth, how likely they would be to vote for the same party again.

Following these outcome measures, respondents were presented with manipulation checks, an attention check and other questions to gauge how they viewed the cooperation. First, they were presented with a list of eight policy statements–two meant to represent policies the far left would likely support, two meant to capture policies of the far right, two meant to be anti-democratic policies, and two with no real ideological content. For each policy statement, respondents were asked to state whether the hypothetical new party would be 'likely', 'unlikely', or 'neither likely nor unlikely' to support the stated policy. They were also offered a 'do not know' option. Second, they were asked to place the new party on a general left-right scale. Third, they were given a list of adjectives and asked to select up to three that describe the new party. Fourth, they were asked if the party reminded them of any party in their political system and, if so, which one. And finally, they were asked to rate the likelihood of such cooperation in real life. An analysis of the manipulation checks provides evidence that respondents understood and interpreted the treatments as intended (see Appendix C).

Results

We start with an overview of the effects of each one of our treatments and our control condition across all four dependent variables. We begin by focussing on the type of hypothetical party with which cooperation occurs and then we turn to cooperation at different levels of government afterwards. We focus our attention on our outcome measuring respondents' support for the

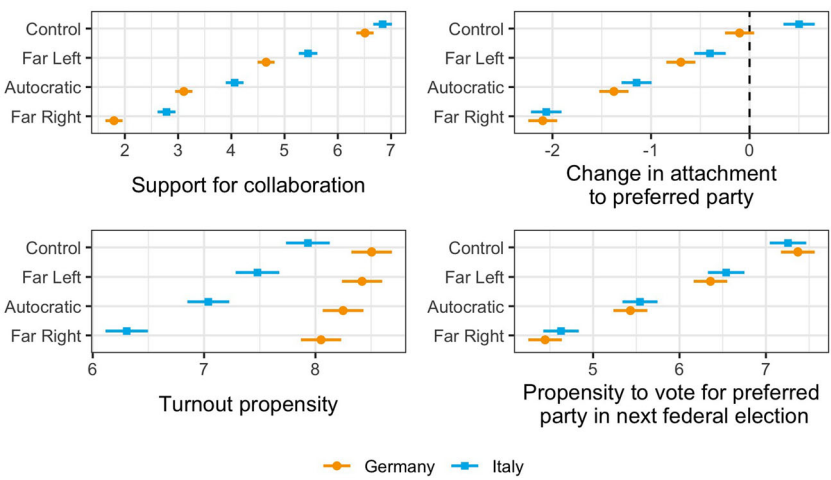

Figure 2. Group means across dependent variables and treatment groups.
Notes: Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

decision of their party to enter a coalition. Whenever we do not report results for the other outcome variables in the main text, they can be found in Appendix H. With few exceptions (discussed in greater detail below), the main results do not significantly differ across outcome measures.

Our results clearly indicate that respondents react negatively to all treatments compared to the control condition. Figure 2 shows the treatment and control group means across the dependent variables for both German and Italian respondents. As hypothesised, respondents disapprove of cooperation between their preferred party and any type of radical party (H_1). Negative reactions are not limited to mere disapproval of the coalition. Respondents also report a decrease in their attachment to the preferred party and in the likelihood of voting for it. Interestingly, even if the effect is weaker in magnitude, cooperation with radicals also appears to discourage turnout in general. Not all radical views, however, elicit the same response. Cooperation with radical right-wing parties, or at least those expressing extreme anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric, is evaluated more negatively than cooperation with parties expressing autocratic views (second lowest ranking) and radical left-wing views (third in terms of negative impact). These results are consistent with recent research showing that (1) mainstream parties are often unwilling to enter into coalition with populist parties, and (2) right-wing populist are more likely ostracised (see Jacobs, 2024).

While these results hold in both Germany and Italy, we do find two differences between the cases. First, German respondents' propensity to turn out in the next national election is less affected than Italians. Second, Italian respondents' attachment to their preferred party increases when cooperation takes place with our uncontroversial control party, while German respondents remained unaffected in the control condition. A plausible explanation for this effect in our Italian sample is the fact that the Italian party system has lacked a clearly centrist party in recent years. When presented with the prospect of a moderate political party, Italian respondents may have considered it as an welcome alternative in their polarised context.

Do voters tolerate cooperation with radicals in EP elections?

We turn now to our main research question: Are European voters more likely to turn a blind eye to collaboration with radicals when it occurs at the EU level? To answer this question we examine the effects of our treatments under the three different scenarios: (1) cooperation occurring at the level of national politics; (2) cooperation at the European level between their preferred party and a radical party from their own country; and (3) cooperation at the European level between their preferred party and a radical party from a different country. These scenarios can be viewed as a continuum of 'degrees of separation' between voters and the radical party.

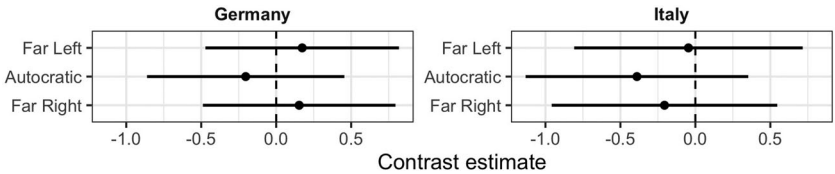

Figure 3. Difference between treatment effects of cooperation at the national level and cooperation with foreign party at the european level.

Notes: Treatment effects refer to the dependent variable measuring support for collaboration and are relative to the control treatment at the respective level of cooperation. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals with Bonferroni-Holm correction.

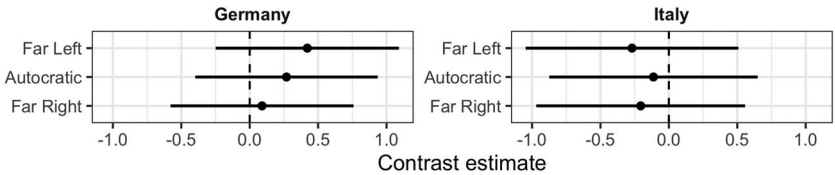

Figure 4. Difference between treatment effects of cooperation at the national level and cooperation with domestic party at the european level.

Notes: Treatment effects refer to the dependent variable measuring support for collaboration and are relative to the control treatment at the respective level of cooperation. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals with Bonferroni-Holm correction.

Our empirical results offer no evidence that voters turn a blind eye to cooperation with radicals occurring at the EU level compared to such cooperation in national politics. In fact, the magnitude of treatment effects at the EU and national level is strikingly similar. Figures 3 and 4 visualise the difference between the effects of a given treatment relative to the respective control at the two levels.[15] Positive estimates reflect a smaller decline in support for collaboration at the EU level and thus evidence for our *a priori* hypothesis (H_2). None of the contrasts show a statistically significant difference.

However, null findings can also arise due to low statistical power. Although we completed power analyses based on small effect sizes and collected samples that would ensure sufficient statistical power, we address the issue in two ways. Each supports our conclusion of a null finding. First, we employed an approach based on 90% confidence intervals for equivalence testing (Rainey, 2014). Put simply, we demonstrate that the true population effect is likely negligible by employing the interpretation of confidence intervals as regions of plausible values for an estimate (*in ibidem*). To make this argument as compelling as possible, we maximise the effective sample size by pooling the German and Italian samples as well as the three treatment groups. These pooled estimates along with their corresponding confidence

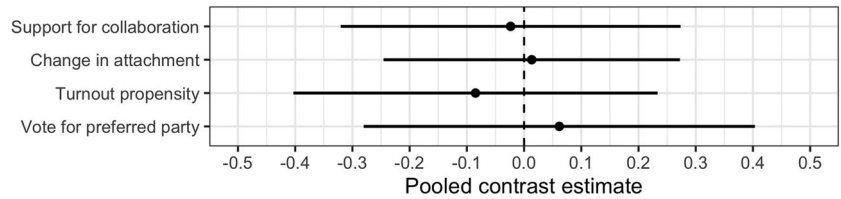

Figure 5. Difference between pooled treatment effects of cooperation at the national level and cooperation with foreign party at the european level.

Notes: Estimates were obtained analogously to Figure 3 after pooling all treatment groups into a binary indicator of treatment and control from the pooled sample of German and Italian respondents. Lines indicate 90% confidence intervals.

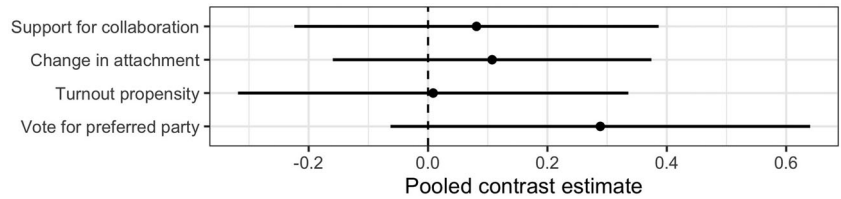

Figure 6. Difference between pooled treatment effects of cooperation at the national level and cooperation with domestic party at the european level.

Notes: Replication of Figure 5 for cooperation with a domestic party before an EP election. Estimates were obtained analogously to Figure 4 after pooling all treatment groups into a binary indicator of treatment and control from the pooled sample of German and Italian respondents. Lines indicate 90% confidence intervals.

intervals are shown in Figures 5 and 6 for all dependent variables. Unsurprisingly, they remain scattered around zero. More importantly, the confidence intervals lie entirely within a reasonable region of 'negligible effect sizes'. Given the dependent variables' range of at least 11 units,[16] we argue that while there still may be a true effect in support of the hypothesis, its magnitude is likely negligible.

Second, we conduct an additional post-hoc analysis of statistical power using estimated standard deviations and the actual sample sizes from our study. Detailed results are included Appendix I and agree with the power analysis conducted prior to data collection: Our tests were indeed adequately powered. This finding is further corroborated by the sheer number of tests exhibiting the same null effect: among a total of 24 highly powered tests (three treatment groups by four dependent variables in two countries) all but one test fail to reach statistical significance. The single test that reaches statistical significance is the difference in the treatment effect when considering the change in party attachment for Italian respondents, subject to the autocratic treatment.[17]

Does voter ideology influence support for alliances with radicals?

Our previous analysis showed that European voters negatively evaluate cooperation between their preferred party and another party exhibiting extremist views of any type. The patterns are strikingly similar in both the domestic and European contexts. However, it could be argued that this is only true for voters that support more moderate political parties in the first place, or when cooperation occurs with a political party that is ideologically distant from the voter (our Hypotheses 3a and 3b). More ideological voters could, on the contrary, be supportive of their parties when they enter in coalitions with other ideologically extreme political parties that hold similar views.

To investigate the role of party support and voter ideology, we examine whether supporters of different parties vary in their reaction to cooperation with different types of radicals. In particular, we are interested in whether reactions vary between supporters of mainstream parties and those who already support a radical party.[18] Results appear in Figure 7. Party-specific differences are more pronounced in the autocratic and far-right treatment groups, while they are smaller in the far-left treatment. All respondents expressed negative views when their preferred party cooperated with a radical partner, but the degree of disapproval varied depending upon which they party they support at home and the nature of the radical partner. We hypothesised (H3a) that respondents react most negatively

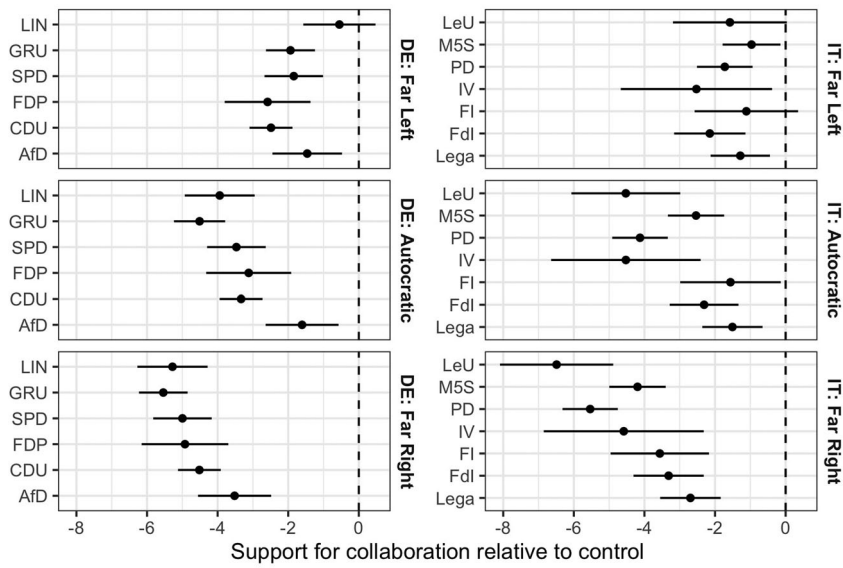

Figure 7. Treatment effects across groups of party supporters.

Notes: Lines represent 95% confidence intervals with Bonferroni-Holm correction.

when their party cooperates with a party from the opposite end of the political spectrum. Supporters of left or far left parties are consistently least supportive of cooperation with far right and autocratic radicals. Right and far right respondents, on the other hand, do not seem to follow this same pattern. They also react least negatively to cooperation with the far-left, even though they are more willing tolerate cooperation with the far-right than other party supporters. In fact, AfD supporters view cooperation with a left party relatively positively. This result is in line with findings that AfD voters often previously supported left parties (e.g. Hansen & Olsen, 2019; Olsen, 2018).

Still, we find evidence that right-wing voters express less negative views than other respondents for cooperation with autocratic parties (H3b). Figure 7 shows that for both the autocratic and far-right treatments, party supporters can be arranged neatly along a left-right dimension with disapproval for cooperation with radicals decreasing as we move from left to right.

Finally, we hypothesised that our findings would be stronger for voters with higher levels of knowledge about the EU. Highly knowledgeable respondents should react more negatively when they are informed that their preferred party announces its collaboration with a radical party. We find support for this, but we find no difference between reactions at the EU and national levels when we control for respondents' knowledge.[19] If these more sophisticated respondents, who generally react more negatively to our treatments, do not react differently to cooperation at the EU and national levels, we can be even more confident of our null finding. Similiarly, we conduct a number of robustness checks for pre-registered subgroups in our sample. The results are discussed in Appendix E) and corroborate the findings presented here.

Conclusion

Why are mainstream parties that are unwilling to enter coalitions with radical parties domestically often willing to enter such coalitions in the EU? The literature on coalition heuristics and strategic voting suggests that a principal reason parties avoid coalitions with extremists is that they anticipate voters' punishment. One might infer that parties are more willing to engage in such coalitions at the EU level than domestically because they do not anticipate the same sort of voter punishment. And indeed, in contemporary European politics, voter reactions–or rather the lack thereof–suggest that mainstream parties pay little to no price for joining with radicals in Europarties. But this observation leaves a central question unanswered: do voters fail to punish mainstream parties for entering 'unsavoury alliances' at the EU level because they don't care about them or because they don't know about them?

It is nearly impossible to distinguish between indifference and ignorance as explanations for voters' treatment of alliances with extremists using observational methods alone. Therefore, we fielded a vignette survey experiment that enabled us to assess how voters react to cooperation between their preferred party and radical parties at the EU and national levels of government. Using actual statements from European politicians, we developed an experimental design able to closely replicate the stimuli to which European voters are naturally exposed. These stimuli allowed us to ensure that our participants were fully aware of cooperation, and that this cooperation was salient when they were evaluating the domestic parties they support.

Our findings suggest that the absence of voter reaction to 'unsavoury alliances' at the EU level between mainstream parties and extremists is more a product of ignorance than of indifference. We find that once voters are presented with equivalent information about cooperation between their preferred party and extremist parties of various types, they react very negatively to this cooperation regardless of whether it happens at the national or EU level. The magnitude of treatment effects for cooperation with radical parties are strikingly similar at different levels of government. Moreover, voters not only evaluate such cooperation negatively, but it leads them to decrease their attachment to their preferred party and their likelihood of voting for it in upcoming elections. These results are consistent for voters across the ideological spectrum.

Nevertheless, readers might raise two criticisms of our study. First, our design presents respondents with vignettes that treat the salience of cooperation identically, regardless of level of government. This, despite the fact that a theoretically interesting difference between national and EU politics is voter awareness. And second, our treatments use particularly extreme statements, making it harder for respondents to accept cooperation with a party expressing these positions.

With respect to the first concern, ideally we would have varied the salience of cooperation independently of the level of government. Unfortunately, we are unaware of any research design capable of this. We attempt to alleviate this concern in two ways. First, our design varies information about cooperation with radicals both across and within levels of government. Respondents in our baseline control condition receive no information about cooperation with radicals and only answer a few questions about European integration in the context of a longer survey. Our treatment groups receive information about cooperation with radicals at the national level, with radicals at the EU level, and with moderates at the EU level. Thus, we can separate out the differences between support for cooperation in general, support for cooperation with radicals, and support for cooperation with all types of partners at the different levels, again assuming that salience is held constant. Second, we know that voters' *a priori* information about

European politics and Europarties varies, and we take advantage of this. Our findings hold among both voters with higher levels of EU information and lower levels.

With respect to the second issue, the choice of statements involves a trade-off. If we had chosen less extreme statements, respondents may not have identified the parties as particularly radical–they may not have taken the treatment. As it is, our subjects are able to identify the parties as extreme, and accurately describe the nature of their extremity. The downside of our design choice is that we should be very cautious in interpreting the overall level of support for cooperation with radicals. Had we chosen less extreme statements, we may have seen more willingness among respondents to accept cooperation. However, so long as respondents react similarly to extremism across levels of government, this shift in level of support due to extremism does not interfere with our inferences regarding differences across levels of government. It would only become problematic if respondents react very differently to very extreme statements at the national and EU levels, in other words, if there were an interaction between extremity and level. Unfortunately, this is not something that we could investigate.

Despite these caveats, our findings suggest that today's double standards in coalition politics at the national and EU levels may be ameliorated through efforts to better inform voters. If mainstream parties can embrace ideological extremists and autocrats at the EU level with impunity because their voters are largely unaware that cooperation is happening, then efforts to increase awareness about Europarties, perhaps through reforms such as the creation of transnational lists for EP elections, a functional Spitzenkandidaten process, or more active Europarty campaigning, may discourage alliances with extremists in the future.

Notes

1. By radical parties, we refer to ideologically extremist parties on the far right and far left and to authoritarian parties which, regardless of their position on the ideological spectrum, attack core values of liberal democracy. See Rooduijn *et al.* (2017).
2. We define an unsavoury alliance as some form of political cooperation (e.g., within a coalition government or a pan-European party) between a mainstream party and a radical party.
3. See Lührmann *et al.* (2020). The CDU's partnership with Fidesz ended in March 2021, when EPP leaders moved toward expelling Fidesz from their Europarty, prompting Orbán to announce Fidesz's departure. Fidesz began as a centrist liberal party, but shifted to the right and grew more radical over time. Although cooperation between the CDU and Fidesz pre-dated Fidesz's far-right, autocratic radicalism, the CDU continued its cooperation for many years after Orban's positions became known. More recently, the CDU has contemplated

cooperation with parties in the EPP, namely Fratelli d'Italia, whose radical views have been clear from the outset.

4. See Appendix J for a description of such coalitions at the European level.
5. Generally, political groups in the European Parliament correspond directly with a sponsoring Europarty. The center-right European People's Party (EPP) is represented by the EPP Group, and the centre-left Party of European Socialists by the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.
6. Our survey asks respondents a set of questions to gauge their level of EU knowledge. We further ask them to match their most preferred party with the correct Europarty. The detailed results are shown in Appendix B and justify this assumption about voters: even the most knowledgeable respondents have difficulty identifying their preferred parties' Europarty with less than 50% and about 25% of respondents giving the correct answer in Germany and Italy, respectively.
7. A pre-registered pre-analysis plan is available at https://osf.io/xdc4a/?view_only=185733f4cc9d4154ad875f8de5f44660. Deviations from the PAP are discussed in Appendix A.
8. Note, our experiment was run even before Giorgia Meloni became Prime Minister.
9. The question showed respondents a list of the main political parties competing in national elections and asked them to rank the three parties they would support, indicating the party they would be most likely to vote for if an election were held tomorrow. Information on the sample can be found in Appendix D. Appendix tables A5 and A6 show that our party support measure is similar to polling done at the time. 6% of Germany respondents and 6.9% of Italians fail to name a party. These respondents were removed from analyses that take into account party affiliation. However, they are included in other analyses and we present the vignette to them as if they were CDU supporters in Germany and Forza Italia supporters in Italy.
10. 6% of respondents in Germany and 6.9% in Italy fail to name a party that they support. These respondents were removed from analyses that take into account party affiliation, but included in other analyses. We present the vignette to them as if they were CDU and Forza Italia supporters in Germany and Italy, respectively.
11. Details on the origins of the quotes are provided in Appendix F.
12. It is relatively infrequent that two parties from the same country belong to the same Europarty. Nonetheless, we included the scenario in the survey and it shows similar results to scenario three.
13. An 11-points scale helps to address concerns over social desirability bias. The strength of our statements could have pushed our respondents to opt for negative evaluations of the hypothetical scenario. This would have been a concern with a reduced scale in which participants could only choose from one or two negative items, e.g., 'Do not support at all' and 'Do not completely support'. With a wider scale participants were able to express a negative (more socially desirable) view while having the freedom to choose an intensity level more linked to their true feelings towards the described scenario.
14. We also asked this prior to administering the treatment. This enabled us to look at change in party attachment due to the treatment for each respondent.
15. These estimates were obtained via contrasts, i.e. ‚linear combinations of regression coefficients. To illustrate, the estimate for the left treatment in the left panel of the figure c_{left} is a difference of differences $c_{left} = \hat{\Delta}_{national} - \hat{\Delta}_{ep}$,

where $\hat{\Delta}_k = (\hat{\mu}_{k,control} - \hat{\mu}_{k,left})$ denotes the difference between the control group mean at level k and the left treatment group mean also at level k.

16. Note that the change in attachment, defined as the difference between the pre- and post-treatment party attachment items, has a 21-point range.
17. However, the direction of the effect is counter to our hypothesis.
18. For Germany, we consider voters of the AfD as supporters of the radical right; the CDU/CSU and the FDP as center-right/right; the SDP and Greens as center-left to left; and Die Linke as radical left. In Italy, we consider voters of the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia as supporting the radical right; Forza Italia a more moderate right; the Democratic Party and Italia Viva as the moderate left; and Movimento Cinque Stelle and Liberi e Uguali as supporting a more radical left. As specified before, we only included political parties that achieved at least 3% of votes in the last national election (2018). We then also included Italia Viva due to the fact that the former Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, founded this new party after the 2018 election and it was included in the government coalition at the time of the data collection in Italy.
19. See Appendix G for more details.

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Notes on contributors

R. Daniel Kelemen is McCourt Chair at the McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University. He is also Professor of Law (by courtesy) at Georgetown Law.

Jonathan B. Slapin is Professor of Political Science and Chair of Political Institutions and European Government at the University of Zurich.

Michele Fenzl is Assistant Professor of Disinformation and European Democracy in the Department of Politics at Maastricht University.

Pit Rieger is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Humanities, Social and Political Sciences at ETH Zurich.

ORCID

R. Daniel Kelemen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0622-8036
Jonathan B. Slapin http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6237-2868
Michele Fenzl http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3769-1744

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