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Competition and legitimacy in the European Union

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Competition and legitimacy in the European Union

The politicization of the European Parliament's policymaking as a means
to enhance the empirical legitimacy of the European Union

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Introduction

The European Union is a singularly structured and relatively novel institution. It is less than 80 years old, and yet it has already achieved an unprecedented feat, becoming the only supranational entity capable of consistently exercising concrete sovereignty over more than two dozens of states. For this to be possible, the Union necessitates each of these states to recognize its legitimacy; otherwise, it would be but an empty construction, analogous to a number of supranational institutions from our recent past that, lacking legitimacy, could never exercise the powers they had been supposedly endowed with – such as, most noticeably, the League of Nations. The Union’s legitimacy is not something to be taken for granted. In fact, over the last two decades, its vulnerability has been exposed. A most serious threat is that of the withdrawal of European citizens and their representatives’ support: bereft of this, communitarian institutions would lose much of the concrete influence they have on the continent and beyond. Regrettably, there is a number of dynamics that testify to the progressive opening of such a wound, a most dangerous one being the growing popularity of Eurosceptic parties. Their leaders, who have grown more emboldened with Brexit, are succeeding in convincing ever larger portions of the European electorate that the EU is an aspiring Leviathan seeking control over their finances, borders, and even eating habits. On the eve of the 10th election to the European Parliament, we are faced with the concrete possibility of these parties’ entry into the governing majority, a telling sign of the extent of EU’s crisis of legitimacy.

It has been decades since it was first acknowledged that the Union’s unique constitution meant that its legitimization would have been no easy task. Scholars and politicians alike have long been trying to conceive mechanisms that might enhance EU legitimacy, but whether endeavors such as the constitutionalizing efforts of the first half of the 2000s have succeeded in doing so is highly debatable, to say the least; the same holds for those attempts aimed at enhancing legitimacy by making European citizens more involved in communitarian governance, such as the introduction of the European Citizens Initiative and of the *Spitzenkandidat* process. At the same time, thinkers of the caliber of Jürgen Habermas have pointed to a strategy that has received relatively little attention: the politicization of EU affairs. Its potential is most evident if one looks at the European Parliament: as I will be arguing, EP policymaking has been heavily depoliticized by the progressive establishment and enlargement of a coalition among mainstream party groups, to the point where one might doubt whether its representative function is being respected at all. Can the reversal of this trend contrast the erosion of the Union’s legitimacy? More precisely, can the politicization of the European Parliament’s policymaking result in the enhancement of the Union’s legitimacy? That is the question this thesis

seeks to investigate. In order to do so, I will argue that Eurosceptic parties have turned the politicization of EP policymaking – and EU affairs in general – into a prerogative of theirs, and that their recent success constitutes, at the same time, both a most evident symptom of the erosion of EU legitimacy and the signal of an opportunity to reinforce the latter. By doing so, I wish to contribute to the growing literature on the legitimacy of the Union and to offer a valuable perspective into how this might be changed for the better.

Chapter 1 – The Question of EU Legitimacy

1.1 – The notion of legitimacy

Legitimacy can be defined as a “shared expectation among actors in an arrangement of asymmetric power such that the actions of those who rule are accepted voluntarily by those who are ruled” (Schmitter, 2001: 2). As a matter of expectations, then, it is an issue that requires constant re-definition (Schrag, 2010: 33). Accordingly, scholars of EU legitimacy have categorized it in different ways. The most familiar distinction is the one between output, input and throughput legitimacy: the first depends on the quality of the outcome, on the extent to which policymaking results can be considered to be satisfactory of the “general will”; the second depends on the inclusiveness of the policymaking procedure, on the extent to which results can be considered to have arisen from the aggregated wills of the individuals they will affect; the third depends on the quality of the policy-making process in terms of transparency, accountability and efficiency (Scharpf, 1997; Schmidt, 2013; Katsaitis, 2015; Papadopoulou, 2017). A distinction that will be central to this thesis is the one between the normative and the empirical dimensions of legitimacy: the former corresponds to an institution’s “acceptability in the light of democratic standards”, while the latter depends on the support that the institution receives by the citizens that it governs (Hurrelmann, 2007: 17). Other distinctions have been devised, such as the one between constitutional and borrowed legitimacy (Andreev, 2007) and that between formal and social legitimacy (Weiler, 1992; Majone, 1998), but they are not going to be as relevant to this thesis as the ones that have been outlined so far .

1.2 – The problematic legitimization of the European Union

It has been argued that “[c]entral functions of electoral representation at EU level are only rudimentarily developed or are lacking *tout court*” (Kröger and Friedrich, 2014: 41). This condition resulted from a precise strategy of development, one that has propelled European integration since the early postwar days. A brief historical overview is necessary in order to explore the consequences that this has entailed for EU legitimacy.

1.2.1 – Integration by stealth and post-crisis technocratization

The *Schuman Declaration* first introduced the notion of “de facto solidarity”, the idea that “a common economic system [...] may be the leaven from which may grow a wider and deeper community” (European Commission, 2015: 17). This line of thinking evolved into Ernst Haas’ theory of neofunctionalism, “a touchstone for scholarship on European integration” which held “that the unintended consequences of integration, once launched, would be self-reinforcing” (Moravcsik, 1999: 13); in other words, that “achieving integration in one sector of common policy amongst sovereign states [...] would eventually lead to a ‘spillover’ into other policy areas” (Dunn, 2012: 1). This theory had its application in the “Monnet method” (from the name of its main promoter, the French politician Jean Monnet). Also referred to as “integration by stealth”, it “consist[ed] in pursuing political integration under the guise of economic integration” (Majone, 2014a: 190). With this goal in mind, early communitarian institutions were created to be insulated from public opinion’s fickleness (Petroni, 2020). This decision to resolve the trade-off between integration and democracy in favor of the former (Majone, 2010: 151) resulted in the absence of “the two primordial features of any functioning democracy [...] – accountability and representation” (Weiler, 2017: 366). Unsurprisingly, when the first Elections for the European Parliament were held in 1979, the public was already quite skeptical towards it (Caracciolo, 2016), as testified by Eurobarometer results from the end of that year (Schweiger, 2016: 8).

Further integration seems to have worsened the problem. While the Treaty of Maastricht enlarged supranational competences, it has been argued that it did not adequately address the issue of representation (*Ibid*: 26). Soon after, economic integration climaxed with the monetary union, but the constitutionalizing efforts that followed, on the other hand, did not really enhance the non-output dimensions of legitimacy in an equally significant way (*Ibid*, 2016: 53,54). Thus arranged, European institutions could not afford economic underperformance: “failure to satisfy promises or to meet expectations” would have seriously called into question EU’s capacity to deliver results, thus exposing it to the risk of losing the main – and possibly sole – source of legitimacy that had hitherto sustained it (Majone, 2014a: 313). The financial crisis that hit the Union at the turn of the decade turned this risk into a reality.

In 2009, the domestic economic liabilities of some European countries – mainly Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain – combined with the externalities of the US subprime mortgage crisis in triggering what came to be known as “eurozone crisis”. The policies that were produced in order to provide a timely response to the crisis “undermined the role of EU citizens more than ever before” (Longo and Murray, 2011: 669). As Jürgen Habermas feared (Habermas, 2013: 6), the mechanisms

through which the Union responded (e.g. Pact for Competitiveness, Stability Treaty) overlooked representation-related concerns and constrained national governments' autonomy so as to "reveal a willingness to sacrifice democratic legitimacy in order to rescue the monetary union" (Majone, 2014b: 1219-1222). Whereas "many expected to witness the empowerment of European representative institutions [...], the EU's response resulted in a weakening of representative institutions and processes" (Hobolt, 2018: 315). By doing so, the Union moved further away from enhancing its input legitimacy (Schweiger, 2016: 59). At the same time, the resulting hardship, which was particularly challenging for citizens of the economically weaker countries who had discovered themselves to be the relative "losers" of regional integration (Bengoetxea, 2015: 66; Magone, 2015: 54; Bouin, 2018: 36), also allowed to point to the absence of "definitive solutions for the crisis and its consequences" (De las Heras, 2015: 265). The crisis shook the economic stability under whose guise the project of regional integration had been moving forward, and turned "the connection between effectiveness, legitimacy, and systemic stability" (Majone, 2014a: 313) against the Union itself.

1.2.2 – The demand for democratization

The European Community was not originally conceived to be a democracy (Weiler, 2017: 373), but when the Treaty of Lisbon came into force in late 2009, Article 10A officially defined the Union as a "representative democracy" built on citizens' representation (Mair and Thomassen, 2011: 45,46). However, this was not accompanied by any significant improvement in the Union's representative dimension, neither in the immediate aftermath of the Treaty's ratification, nor in recent years. In fact, immigration concerns, Brexit, the Covid pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have made it so that "[s]ince 2010, [the EU] has operated almost continuously in crisis mode" (Ondarza, 2023: 7); as a result, "the expansion of [its] responsibilities has not been accompanied by an expansion of parliamentary participation" (*Ibid*: 33).

Conversely, the demand for such an expansion has been steadily growing, accordingly with what Giandomenico Majone had argued already in 1996: "doubts as to the legitimacy of nonmajoritarian institutions persist, and indeed increase in direct proportion to the expanding role of these institutions" (Majone, 1996: 286). The enlargement of supranational competences produced greater public awareness, (Menon and Weatherhill, 2002: 114; Andreev, 2007: 10; Longo and Murray, 2011: 673, 674), that resulted in more challenges to the Union's "democratic credentials" (Hurrelmann, 2007: 18). Furthermore, the rising tension between popular opinion's growing aversion to neoliberalist policies (Andreev, 2007:10) and the progressive neoliberalization of the EU

(Giannone, 2015: 116; Bouin, 2018: 33) produced a continuous transformation, broadening and increment of demands for democratization (Delanty, 2015).

1.3 – Enhancing EU legitimacy

Over time, the tension between the broadening of communitarian institutions' competences and the stagnation of political representation was problematized in a number of different ways. Consequently, a lively academic and political debate emerged among the proponents of different courses of action aimed at enhancing EU legitimacy.

1.3.1 – The “democratic deficit” and input legitimacy

Much of the academic debate has revolved around the clash between the two main schools of thought that have been dealing with the subject of the so-called “democratic deficit” (Magnette, 2003). Although this notion is almost ubiquitous in the literature, there is not really a single definition capable of encompassing all of the meanings that have been given to it (Follesdal and Hix, 2006: 534). The term usually implies that the pursuit of European integration produced a disequilibrium between greater supranational executive power and reduced domestic parliamentary autonomy, exemplified by the weakness of the EP and citizens' disinterest in EU affairs (*Ibid*: 534-537). These concerns have prompted a large number of scholars to call for a strengthening of the EP's role and more European citizens' direct involvement in decision-making procedures (e.g. Habermas, 2013; Hill, 2013; Borrell, 2015; De las Heras, 2015: 270; Papadopoulou, 2017: 91). Other scholars have wholeheartedly rejected (e.g. Moravcsik 2006, 2008, 2020) or strongly criticized (Ward, 2010; Schrag, 2010) the notion of democratic deficit itself, with some arguing that the EU is already sufficiently democratic – albeit in a unique way that differs from that of nation-states (Magnette, 2003; Andreev, 2007; Bellamy, 2011; Mair and Thomassen, 2011).

1.3.2 – Politicization and EU legitimacy

Other perspectives ought to be taken into consideration. Most interestingly, some have argued that a major obstacle to the legitimization of the EU is the fact that the policies it chooses to adopt are routinely presented as inevitabilities, as if they were not the result of negotiations and compromises, which are often hidden from the public (Magnette, 2003: 152; Schweiger, 2016: 260). To this end, it

has been argued that EU's "most worrying symptom is [the] apparent exhaustion of political debate" (Bengoetxea, 2015: 66). The term that most adequately captures this phenomenon is *depoliticization*, which was defined as the act of "taking away or hiding the controversialness [of policymaking], excluding possible actors and denouncing the fact that something is political" (Wiesner, 2021: 22). It has been argued that, over time, "integration by stealth" and technocratic interventions have countered the politicization of EU affairs (*Ibid*: 29), to the point where EU integration as a whole can be considered to have been purposefully depoliticized (Kauppi and Trenz, 2021: 155). Some scholars have pointed to the necessity of reversing this trend and instituting a proper space for political competition at the communitarian level (Follesdal and Hix, 2006). This requires the exposure of the policymaking procedure: the actors involved in it should disclose the alternatives at their disposal, motivate their choices and illustrate the compromises through which the final decision is eventually reached (Magnette, 2003: 156). By doing so, policymaking could be "extricated from the pallid abstraction of administrative measures and technical discourse: in other words, [...] *politicized*" (Habermas, 2011: 24,25; emphasis added).

There are reasons to believe that efforts in this direction would prove beneficial for EU legitimacy, especially along the throughput dimension. Throughput legitimacy entails the adequate translation of legitimate inputs into legitimate outputs (Schmidt, 2013), and thus constitutes "an invaluable complement" of both input and output legitimacy (Schmidt, 2020: 87). It is determined by efficiency, accountability, transparency, openness and inclusiveness (Schmidt, 2020). Efficiency is about conducting each "proceeding in a competent and efficient manner, whatever the outcomes" (*Ibid*: 69,70), and thus constitutes the goal of throughput legitimacy itself. Besides its classical understanding, that is, the possibility of holding political actors accountable for their choices, accountability "is also about making [these choices] public" and sanctionable via electoral proceedings (*Ibid*: 76). Transparency requires that citizens be informed about policies as well as about the policymaking process itself, so that political actors' "discourse can be measured against their actions" (*Ibid*: 78). Finally, openness and inclusiveness ensure, respectively, political actors' engagement with citizens and the fair and balanced consideration of the latter's opinions (*Ibid*: 82).

Further politicization, if properly implemented, could improve the European Union's performance with respect to some – if not all – of these dimensions: it could make the policymaking process more transparent, allowing citizens to be informed on the entirety of it, rather than solely on its result. The choices of EU political actors, thus made public, would be more likely to have electoral repercussions, enhancing accountability. Furthermore, the scrutiny of the policymaking process would reveal the extent of its openness and inclusiveness: interest groups could make sure that their opinions have been properly considered and verify whether an eventual turndown was due to

compromise or negligence. Indeed, previous research has found that politicization has so far been beneficial to supranational policymaking: it ensured that European citizens were provided with meaningful political alternatives vis-à-vis EU affairs and it encouraged policymakers “to become more responsive to their constituencies”, thus “potentially strengthen[ing] the link between citizens and their representatives” (Anders, 2021: 179,180).

However, the question remains of whether citizens would perceive and appreciate this sort of enhancement of legitimacy. Hurrelmann’s distinction between normative and empirical legitimacy implies that one cannot assume that a normative improvement along one of the dimensions of legitimacy will result in the empirical acknowledgment of said improvement by the citizens: “[i]f this is not the case, institutional changes at the EU level are unlikely to affect citizens’ legitimacy assessment” (Hurrelmann, 2007: 32). Some scholars have referred to the empowerment of the European Parliament as an example of a case in which the enhancement of normative input legitimacy has failed to produce an increase in empirical input legitimacy: as Giandomenico Majone put it, there has been “a continuous expansion of the power of the European Parliament (EP) without any noticeable increase in democratic legitimacy” (Majone, 2010: 150); in other words, “[t]he more powers the European Parliament, supposedly the *Vox Populi*, has gained, the greater popular indifference to it seems to have developed” (Weiler, 2017: 368). Although it seems reasonable to assume that politicization has the potential to enhance EU throughput legitimacy from a normative standpoint, we do not know whether these results would be reflected onto the empirical dimension. This is no trivial question: if the enhancement of EU throughput legitimacy that the politicization of the Union’s policymaking might allow to achieve were not accompanied by European citizens’ empirical acknowledgement of the improvement, politicizing efforts might prove futile or even counterproductive. Thus, one must ask: can the politicization of EU policymaking enhance the Union’s empirical legitimacy?

1.3.3 – Empirical legitimacy in the European Parliament

Several EU bodies participate in the policymaking process. The limited framework of a master thesis requires that this investigation be restricted to one of them. When it comes to the study of the effects of politicization, the European Parliament seems to be the most appropriate choice for at least two reasons. First of all, “the EP party system is the matrix of [...] politicization”: if the party groups that compose it were “encouraged to clarify their own positions and the extent of their disagreement [...], European policies would appear not only more coherent, but also more open, and could generate public interest and civic mobilization” (Magnette, 2003: 156). Secondly, it is in the Parliament that,

with their votes, European citizens can most eloquently react to political efforts aimed at enhancing the legitimacy of the Union and, by so doing, signal whether a certain initiative could produce empirical legitimacy. This research will thus seek to answer the following question: can the politicization of EP policymaking enhance the Union's empirical legitimacy?

In recent years, a first wave of politicization of the European Parliament “has arrived first and foremost in the form of the larger presence of populist representatives” (Schmidt, 2020: 118). Among these populist representatives, the ones that belong to Eurosceptic parties constitute the link between the two main elements that this research is interested in: the politicization of policymaking, and its effect on empirical legitimacy. On the one hand, “the presence [...] of these [Eurosceptic] parties can be seen as a proxy for the politicization of European integration” (von Sydow, 2013: 22); on the other hand, the support that these parties have been receiving from the European electorate is indicative of a growing capital of empirical legitimacy: voting behaviors are the means through which citizens can most eloquently express their potential support for a cause (in this case, politicization), thus testifying to the availability of an opportunity to enhance empirical legitimacy.

In order to determine whether politicization can contribute to the enhancement of EU legitimacy, a theoretical model is going to be presented in the next chapter. It will be hypothesized that European citizens, dissatisfied with the progressive depoliticization of EP policymaking, have been responding to it by means of their voting behavior, rewarding Eurosceptic parties' politicizing efforts.

1.4 – Potential implications

Politicization is not unambiguous. Several scholars have claimed that it constitutes a serious threat to the stability of the EU. Andrew Moravcsik defined it as a “self-inflicted wound” and held that “[a] better strategy [...] would be to *depoliticize* European constitutional evolution” (Moravcsik, 2006: 237). Christian Schweiger pointed out that the neglect of the traditional pro-integration posture could result in a “spiral of disintegration” (Schweiger, 2016: 71).

Notwithstanding this, there are at least three considerations that are necessary here. First of all, politicization is “here to stay” (Schmidt, 2020: 128), regardless of whether it will result in the enhancement of EU legitimacy or in the disintegration of the communitarian project. Secondly, the depoliticized landscape in which EU policymaking has been hitherto conducted is not adequate for a representative democracy, which the Union (c)laims to be: “[o]nly if competing approaches on European integration become discernible, does democratic choice become viable” (Anders, 2021:

187). This brings us to the third point worth recalling: politicization is not inherently negative: it can certainly prove disruptive if piloted by ill-intentioned political actors (Kauppi and Trenz, 2021: 169,170), but it is important to distinguish its anti-democratic variant from the sort of politicization that is, in fact, foundational for democracy (Wiesner, 2021).

It has been argued that “[t]he consequences of politicization would, of course, be transformed, if the underlying preferences of the citizens were to change” (Hooghe and Marks, 2008: 22). This thesis is an attempt to demonstrate that mainstream parties across the European Union are being presented with a choice: transforming politicization into a productive force by engaging in political competition, and thus capitalizing on the opportunity to enhance EU legitimacy that is being presented to them, or leaving this powerful means for anti-system parties to control, exposing the Union to a potentially fatal threat.

Chapter 2 – The theoretical model

I have come to suppose that an attempt at enhancing EU's throughput legitimacy via a responsible politicization of EP policymaking might bring an improvement along the empirical dimension of legitimacy. In support of this thesis, this chapter presents a theory that holds that the politicizing efforts in which Eurosceptic parties have engaged in response to the depoliticization of EP policymaking have significantly contributed to their recent electoral success. This theory is founded on three hypotheses that require validation. The following sections illustrate them, evaluate their robustness and, by doing so, identify an opportunity to conduct an empirical test that might validate the theory.

2.1 – Theorizing the effect of politicization on empirical legitimacy

At the core of this thesis is the idea that the observation of European citizens' electoral behavior can lead to the identification of opportunities to enhance the EU's empirical legitimacy. Indeed, empirical legitimacy is determined by popular support, and voting behaviors, in turn, constitute a sort of unit of measurement for the latter, insofar as they are the means through which citizens can most eloquently express their support towards parties, ideas and institutions. Therefore, voting behaviors can function as signals of political opportunities: when political actors adopt innovative strategies (in this case, that of politicization in a historically under-politicized landscape) which are positively received – and said parties rewarded – by the electorate, one can think of the institutional incorporation and normalization of such strategies as a chance to increase the institution's empirical legitimacy. In our case, Eurosceptic parties' electoral success could be indicative of an opportunity to increase the empirical legitimacy of the European Parliament – thus, of the EU – by politicizing EP policymaking.

Three hypotheses sustain this theory. *Hypothesis 1* (H1) holds that mainstream party groups in the European Parliament have been converging, provoking the depoliticization of EP policymaking; *Hypothesis 2* (H2) holds that Eurosceptic parties have exploited the political space that was produced by this convergence by presenting themselves as concrete alternatives to the depoliticized status quo; *Hypothesis 3* (H3) holds that, over time, these parties have grown ever more successful. Figure 1 proposes a schematic representation of the interplay between the three

hypotheses. If each of these is found to be true, the theory becomes plausible. Only then can an empirical test be devised in order to try and validate it.

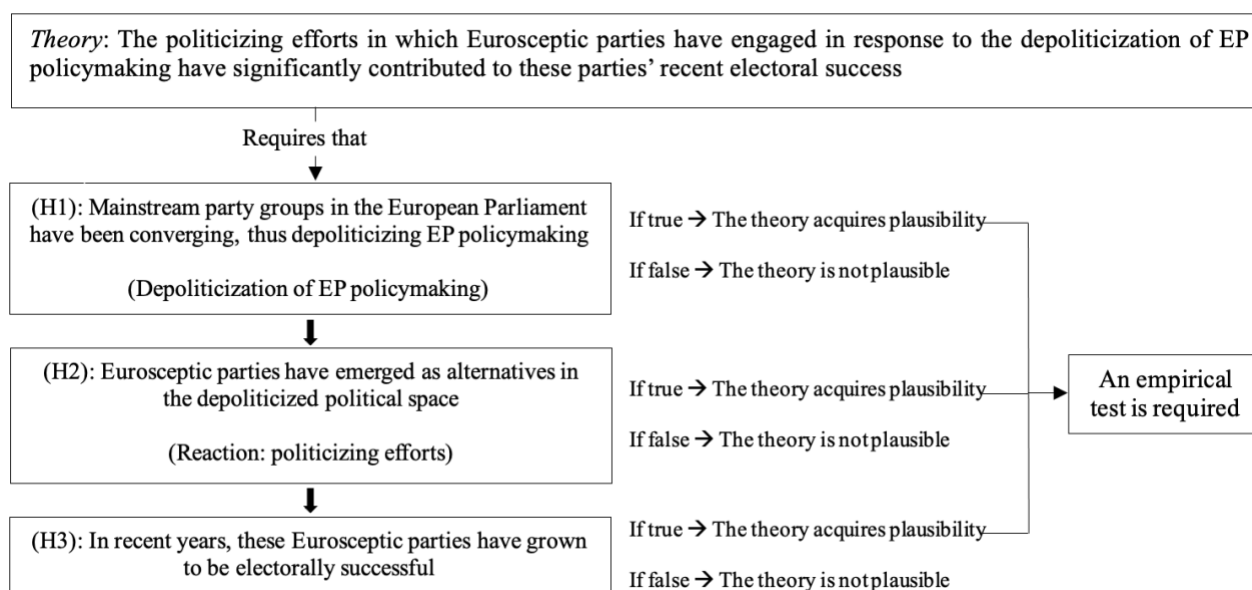


Figure 1

2.2 – (H1) The depoliticization of EP policymaking by mainstream party groups

This first hypothesis holds that the progressive convergence of mainstream party groups in the European Parliament has resulted in the depoliticization of EP policymaking (Kriesi, 2016: 32,33). It has been argued that the prioritization of EU integration among mainstream party groups (Rose and Borz, 2013) has led these to downplay the differences that exist between their positions on other subjects (Berman and Kundani, 2021: 24-26). Mainstream centrist parties have coalesced around the goal of furthering EU integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2008: 21), establishing a situation of “institutionalized consensus” (Benedetto in Brack et al., 2023: 126) which was encouraged by several conditions, such as: “the pressure to overcome the high majority requirements [...]; a common desire to have a unified and strong position vis-à-vis other institutions; [and] a common interest in controlling the EP” (Brack et al., 2023: 126,127).

According to some, this resulted in a “grand coalition” or “cartel” (Hix, 2003: 318), a habit of cooperation among mainstream party groups which allowed them to dominate EP policymaking (Russack, 2019: 54). Under such conditions, “[w]hatever their views, the majority of European voters are not offered the opportunity of voting for parties that will represent their views” (Rose and Borz, 2013: 492). The progressive decline in political competition between party groups and the continuous harmonization of their positions might have enabled efficient policymaking but, on the other hand, it

also provoked the subordination of the representative function to the requirements of governance. The process that led to this situation can be divided into three phases, each characterized by the form that the coalition assumed in those years.

2.2.1 – The coalition between Christian-Democrats and Socialists (EP1-EP6)

Between 1979 and 2019, two party groups have been holding the majority of the seats¹: the Christian-Democrats of the European People’s Party Group (EPP), and the Social Democrats of the Socialist Group (SOC), then Party of the European Socialists (PES, then S&D since EP7). An early pattern of cooperation can be identified by observing the number of times that these two groups have voted together: during EP1, this occurred in 60.8% of the cases; after the 1984 elections, however, the percentage increased to 68.2%, only to remain stable between 69 and 71% until 2012, midway through the sixth legislature (Hix et al., 2005: 220,221; Rose and Borz, 2013: 490).

Furthermore, in those years, policymaking was being increasingly informalized: the widespread habit, among MEPs, to negotiate and seek compromises outside of the Parliament caused “divisions and partisan battles amongst the main three political groups” to be “settled long before bills [got] to the floor” (Bowler and McElroy in Martin, 2019: 15), something that clearly occurred “to the detriment of accountability as well as transparency” (Schmidt, 2020: 80). Evidence of this comes from the increase in the number of first reading agreements, which “soared from 29% in EP5 to 85% in EP7” (Bressanelli, 2016: 92). In a legislative arena characterized by the convergence of the largest actors, this behavior signaled “growing ‘carelisation’, with the major parties capitalizing on informal politics to gain both influence over policy and control over their members” (*Ibid*: 109).

2.2.2 – The enlargement of the coalition (EP7-EP8)

During the 7th and 8th legislature, the EPP-S&D coalition expanded and included the Liberals, grouped in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), then Renew Europe (RE) since 2019. Simon Hix found that between 2006 and 2015 the positions held by the three party groups towards sociocultural matters were becoming ever more similar (Hix, 2024: 164). Moreover, the three dimensions that, until then, had characterized competition in EU politics (sociocultural, socioeconomic, and integration-related concerns) were aligning: the EU political space was being reduced to a single dimension in which the positioning of a party group on one of the three issues was

¹ This thesis uses data on the allocation of seats in the European Parliament from the website of Laurent de Boissieu, see “De Boissieu” in References

strongly related to the groups' posture with respect to the other two (*Ibid*: 168,169). The cohesion around sociocultural matters and EU integration could thus have easily prevailed on the disagreement vis-à-vis socioeconomic questions.

At the same time, as will be seen, Eurosceptic parties were experiencing a relevant success across several EU countries. Under the threat posed by the emerging opposition (Schmidt, 2020: 119), the EPP-S&D coalition was encouraged to expand. Therefore, the “2014 elections perpetuated the long-term trend of close cooperation between pro-integrationist parties at the centre of the political spectrum” (Russack, 2019: 58), with the addition of the “increase in the pivotal role played by the ALDE” (Maurice et al., 2019). By 2016, the three-way coalition had become the strongest in the EP in terms of co-voting agreements (Cherepnalkoski et al., 2016: 17,18). It is also worth noticing that “the EPP and the S&D found common ground in 90% of the final votes in 2017, but only in 62% of the ‘non-final’ votes” (Maurice et al., 2019). We can thus notice that, midway through the 8th legislature, the EPP-S&D coalition was voting together 76% of the times while also enjoying the support of its new partner, ALDE. The coalition had not ceased to exist, it had only grown larger.

2.2.3 – Persistence and further enlargement of the coalition (EP9)

By the time of the 2019 elections, EP politics had clearly “come to be organized around the big party groups that reflect the traditional European ideologies and that work in a rather consensual atmosphere towards broad legislative packages” (Crum, 2020: 94). However, in June 2019, the EPP-S&D coalition finally lost its majority: during the 9th legislature the two groups would have only controlled 44.7% of the seats; still, some predicted that the “pro-integration centrist coalition” would have retained the control of decision-making in the following five years (*Ibid*: 107), a hypothesis that was eventually proven to be true. Indeed, the trends which had emerged during the previous legislatures persisted: for instance, it was found that “the EPP and the S&D have been voting together more often since 2019 than previously” (Brack et al., 2023: 132,133) and that the Liberals have become an ever more relevant component of the coalition (Hublet et al., 2023: 5). The three groups “have established a culture of cooperation” rooted in a “consensus-seeking logic” (*Ibid*: 12). The coalition has not only persisted, but it also expanded, with the main beneficiary of this expansion being the group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA), which, during the 9th legislature, has been consistently aligning with the mainstream coalition (Brack et al., 2023: 138). The end of the EPP-S&D majority has not led mainstream parties to re-politicize their positions; conversely, these two party groups, together with RE and the Greens-EFA, have “systematised their collaboration in order to reduce the legislative influence of Eurosceptic groups and to avoid any

deadlock of the institution” (*Ibid*:141), with the result that “coalitions are now more consensual and inclusive than before” (*Ibid*: 144).

2.2.4 – Getting a picture of the overall trend

The empirical analysis operated by Aaron Martin (2019), and the one conducted by Nathalie Brack, Olivier Costa, and Awenig Marié (2023) are most useful in order to get a sense of the consequences that the consolidation of the coalition has had on the positions held by mainstream party groups. Martin has measured the variation in the EPP-S&D Agreement Index between the 1st and the 6th (included) parliamentary legislature: the greater the score, the more similarly the two groups have voted. Brack, Costa, and Marié, on the other hand, have computed the variation in the EPP-S&D RICE Index between the 6th and the 9th (included) parliamentary legislature: the lower the score of the coalition, the more the two groups have been agreeing. Figures 2 and 3 show the respective results of this analysis.

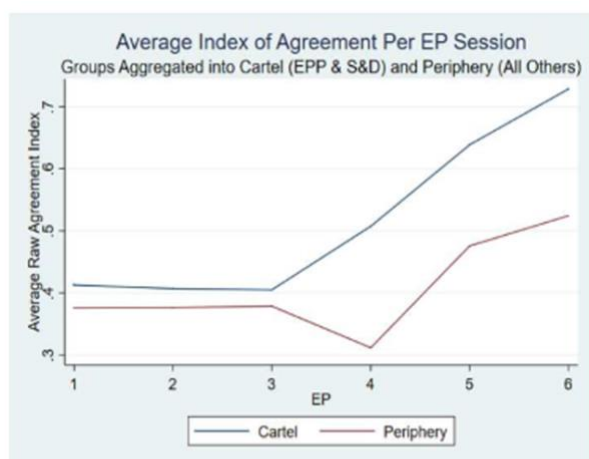


Figure 2
EPP-S&D Agreement Index 1979-2009 (Martin, 2019: 19).

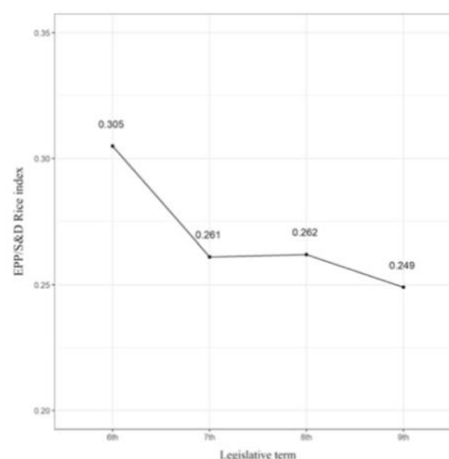


Figure 3
EPP-S&D RICE Index 2004-2023 (Brack et al., 2023: 131).

The fact that the authors resorted to different measurements is unimportant, as long as no attempt at comparing the absolute results of one test with the ones of the other is made. It is instead useful to focus on the relative trends that the two graphs depict. Figure 2 eloquently illustrates that, in the years between the beginning of the 4th legislature (1994) and the end of the 6th (2009), the voting behaviors of the two party groups have become increasingly more similar. Figure 3 shows that, except for the five years of the 8th legislature, this trend has continued until 2023.

2.2.5 – *Implications*

The data presented in this section shows that the two largest party groups in the European Parliament have been quite steadily converging ever since 1994. Rather than being dismantled, the coalition has expanded to include at least two more groups: ALDE (RE) and the Greens-EFA. Meanwhile, the decision-making procedure has become ever more informal, at least until 2014. It seems reasonable to affirm that these trends have contributed to the depoliticization of EP policymaking: the continuous alignment of the voting behaviors of the EPP and the S&D renders the difference between the two almost undetectable in the practical dimension, despite the fact that the electorates that these groups are supposed to be representing are quite distinct from one another. Because of this, some voters might have decided to support less prominent groups such as ALDE and the Greens-EFA; indeed, both of these parties have experienced an almost twofold increase in their seats share between 1994 and 2019. However, over time, they too have become members of the centrist coalition. As Sheri Berman and Hans Kundani pointed out, convergence is not inherently problematic, but it becomes so when “mainstream parties offer little to choose from on crucial issues and fail to listen to what citizens want” (Berman and Kundani, 2021: 34,35). In the context of EP policymaking, this seems to be exactly the case.

2.3 – (H2) Eurosceptic parties’ politicizing efforts

The second hypothesis holds that Eurosceptic parties have exploited the political opening produced by mainstream party groups’ convergence in order to present themselves as contesters in the depoliticized environment of the EU, and that their opposition has resulted in the politicization of EU affairs. Depoliticization could not have served the needs of mainstream party groups indefinitely (Kriesi, 2016: 33): Ernst Haas had once argued that the strategy of “integration by stealth” would have eventually ceased to be viable, resulting in the “turbulence [...] of public opinion and political parties” (Schmitter in Hooghe and Marks, 2008: 6). So did Peter Mair, who argued that depoliticization would have inevitably led the emergence of a radicalized opposition in the form of skepticism (von Sydow, 2013: 19,20), and Simon Hix, who held that “as long as the main party families form a pro-Integration cartel, there will be an incentive for anti-European forces to mobilise” (Hix in Martin, 2019: 18). Since mainstream party groups’ convergence had been largely driven by the widespread consensus on EU integration, it is unsurprising that the radical parties engaged in contestation turned out to be “more likely to politicize European integration in Eurosceptic terms”

(Hutter and Kriesi, 2019: 1013). By contesting the very principle around which mainstream party groups had coalesced in the first place, “the Eurosceptics [...] turned out to be the main drivers of the politicization of European integration” (Kriesi, 2016: 32).

2.3.1 – The politicization of EU affairs

It has been argued that contestation can produce politicization by “expanding” three variables: political salience, the range of actors involved, and the polarization among these actors (Biedenkopf et al., 2021: 327,328). The emergence of Euroscepticism has resulted precisely in this sort of expansion: first of all, by responding to depoliticization, Eurosceptic parties have consolidated their role within national parliaments and, eventually, within the EP itself, thus enlarging the range of political actors involved in EP policymaking, as testified by the growing number of parliamentary political families (Brack et al., 2023: 126). Rather than converging towards the integration-driven consensus that characterized the centrist coalition, radical parties aggregated in groups that – albeit to different degrees – contested the prioritization of EU integration (e.g. the groups now known as Identity and Democracy or The Left in the European Parliament). The emergence of Eurosceptic parties resulted in a hitherto unprecedented polarization of the spectrum of actors involved in EP policymaking (Crum, 2020: 107). Consequently, the debate around integration and EU affairs has grown ever more salient: “[t]he clearest indication that voters were more concerned with European issues was [precisely] the surge in popularity for political parties that proposed radical reform of, or even exit from, the EU” (Kriesi, 2016: 35).

This politicization had some most noticeable consequences on EP elections. It has often been argued that, despite being European elections, these have been routinely approached by national parties as opportunities to compete on purely domestic matters, rather than to discuss EU affairs (e.g. Follesdal and Hix, 2006: 535; Majone, 2010: 156). Eventually, the increased relevance of EU issues in national politics should have thus spilled over to the communitarian dimension; indeed, recent findings have demonstrated that “the intensity and scope of conflict over European issues have been increasing in EP elections campaign”, which “are [now] biased towards European issues” (Braun and Grande, 2021: 1132;1134). The increasing political salience of EU affairs has turned the latter into a significant subject in the context of EP elections. As Hooghe and Marks had argued already in 2008, there is no longer any viable basis from which to claim that EP elections are only “popularity tests for national government”, unrelated to communitarian concerns (Hooghe and Marks, 2008: 267).

2.3.2 – *Mainstream party groups' response*

Over time, the electoral success enjoyed by radical parties allowed the formation of “challenger governments” (governments that “contest the normative function of the post-Maastricht EU” [Hodson and Puetter, 2019: 1159]) which, in turn, resulted in an increase in “the readiness of mainstream parties to tolerate violations of the EU’s normative consensus as long as they do not jeopardize the day-to-day functioning of key areas of EU politics” (*Ibid*: 1165). In other words, the position held by Eurosceptic parties were progressively normalized. To this end, Hanspeter Kriesi made a particularly significant remark:

With the expected ‘mainstreaming’ of eurosceptic parties the politicization of the European integration process is likely to shift from the debate between principled support [...] and principled opposition [...] to the conflict concerning the kind of European Union that we Europeans wish to construct (Kriesi, 2016: 45).

Moreover, not only have mainstream parties struggled to contain the “mainstreaming” of the positions held by Eurosceptic ones, but they also seem to have had a hard time adapting to this increasingly politicized space themselves (Hix, 2024: 155): while these parties have somehow been responsive to depoliticization – albeit to a limited extent and within specific policy areas (Persson, et al., 2023: 102) –, their response has been largely confined to changes in their tones and postures; however, “posturing is not policy” (Hodson and Puetter, 2019: 1160), and indeed the two key actors of the mainstream bloc, EPP and S&D, have not become less pro-integration in response to the rise of Euroscepticism, but have in fact maintained their pro-integration stance (Hix, 2024: 160). This obstinacy, however seems to have been rather harmful: the decreasing popularity of the EPP-S&D coalition, most eloquently testified by the loss of the parliamentary majority, demonstrates that “the spread of conflict over European integration in electoral campaigns normalizes the view of Eurosceptic parties and provides them with a popularity boost, which, on the whole, Europhile and moderate parties are not positively affected by” (Beaudonnet and Gomez, 2024: 17).

2.3.3 – *Implications*

The arguments presented in this section have validated the second hypothesis. It has been possible to see that Eurosceptic parties have turned EU politicization into “a form of status politics” (Kauppi and Trenz, 2021: 165), producing a redefinition of the communitarian political space: “EU’s

‘policy *without* politics’ [...] has now been replaced by ‘policy *with* politics’ in the EU’s more contentious areas” (Schmidt, 2020: 122). The salience acquired by EU affairs in the context of the European elections and the decreasing popularity of traditional party groups are strong signals of this changing political landscape.

2.4 – (H3) Eurosceptic parties’ electoral success

The third hypothesis holds that European voters have grown to be more supportive of Eurosceptic parties. This section is going to illustrate how the electoral support toward Eurosceptic parties has increased over time by analyzing both domestic and EP electoral results, separately.

2.4.1 – Eurosceptic parties’ performance in national elections

Figure 4 reports a graph produced and published by *The Guardian* in 2020 with data from the *PopuList* dataset. It can be seen that the vote share of Eurosceptic parties across Europe first increased between 1989 and 1994 (EP3). The share remained quite stable until 2005, when a significant growth was recorded, only to be followed, however, by a relatively noticeable decrease in 2007. Since then, the share has been steadily increasing. Another graph, published by Statista Research Department in 2024 (Figure 5), reporting the vote share of Eurosceptic parties in national elections across EU countries, describes a similar picture: a relatively stable situation until the mid 2000s and a progressive increase until 2022, characterized by a particularly sudden growth between 2011 and 2013.

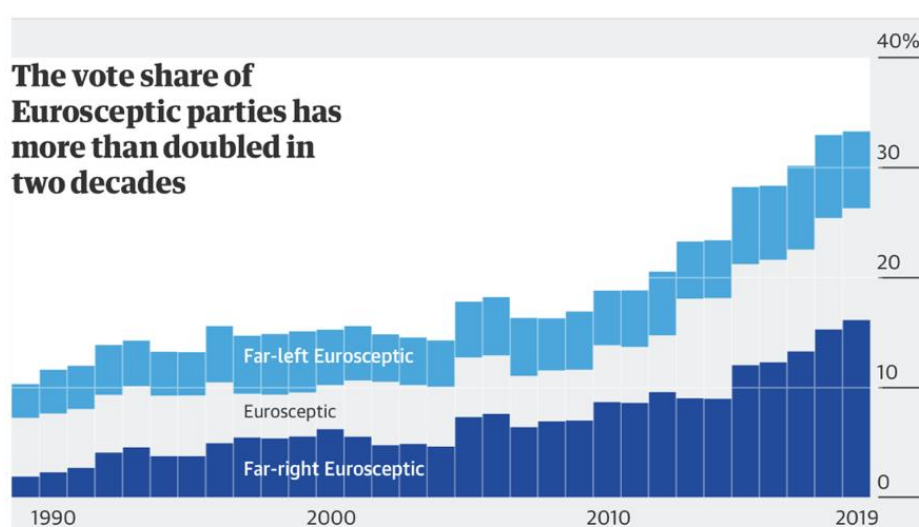


Figure 4

Vote share of Eurosceptic parties across EU countries from 1989 to 2019 (Henley, 2020).

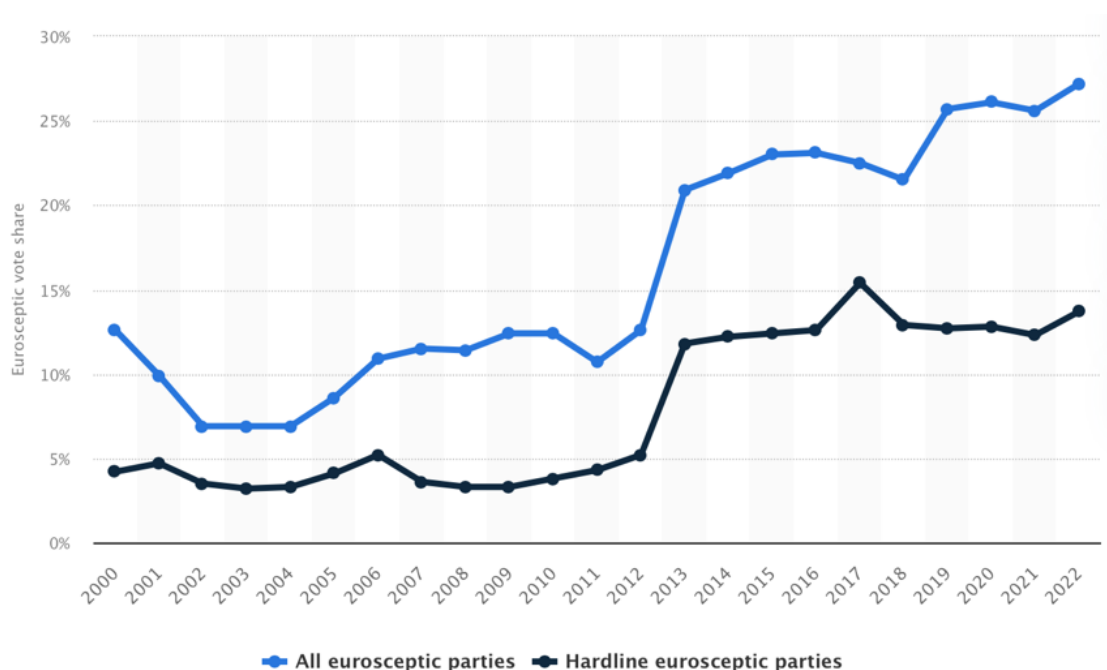


Figure 5

Vote share of all Euroseptic parties and hardline Euroseptic parties in national parliamentary elections in the European Union from 2000 to 2022 (Statista Research Department, 2024).

Overall, the period in which the continuous success of these parties seems to have been most significant is the one between 2004 and 2022, in which their vote share experienced a four-fold increase, rising from 6.9 to 27.2%.

2.4.2 – Euroseptic parties' performance in European elections

Figure 6 presents the variation in Euroseptic party groups' seat share at the European Parliament. The green line marks the trend in the seat share of right-wing Euroseptic party groups: European Conservatives and Reformist (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID); the blue line marks that of the Confederal group of the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL); the orange one the aggregated results. In order to follow the performances of these party groups (here as well as in Chapter 3), which have long histories of fragmentation and rebranding, I relied on Adam Trunečka's reconstruction of the development of political groups in the European Parliament (Trunečka, 2021) and on Laurent de Boissieu's measurement of EP seat shares (De Boissieu). Data for the tenth legislature was produced by drawing from *POLITICO*'s projections dated May 13th, 2024 (*POLITICO*).

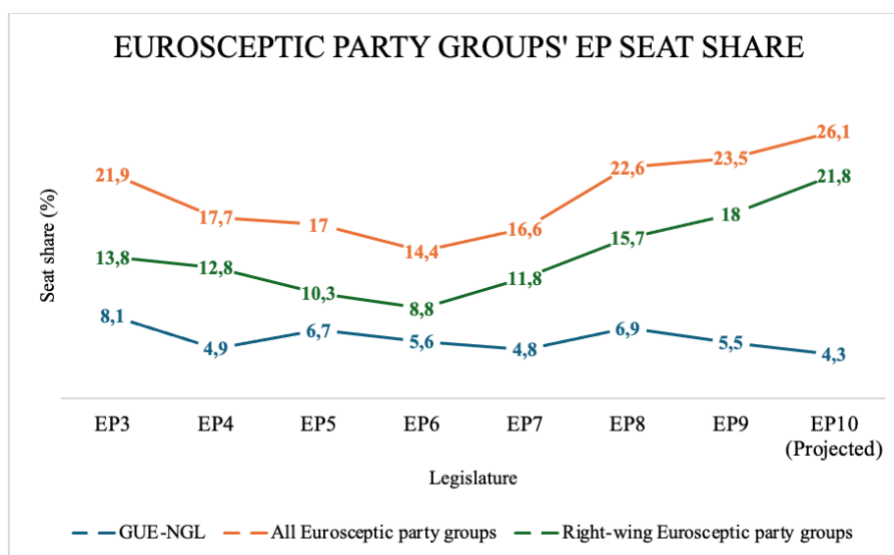


Figure 6

Seat share of Euro-sceptic party groups in European elections from 1989 to 2024 (projected).

It can be seen that, between 1989 and 2004, the presence of Euro-sceptic party groups in the European Parliament decreased significantly, as they lost more than a third of the seat share they once held. However, between 2009 (elections to EP7) and 2024, their seat share has increased, reaching unprecedented levels in 2014 (elections to EP8), only to then keep growing ever since. During the tenth legislature, according to the projections, right-wing Euro-sceptic party groups will hold almost 150% of the seat share that they held during the sixth legislature. On the other hand, the GUE-NGL, whose seat share has been decreasing since 2019, is projected to have its smallest seat share ever during the tenth legislature, at 4.3%.

2.4.3 – Implications

The data reported in this section has testified that Euro-sceptic parties have grown to be ever more successful across the EU, at both domestic and communitarian level. Two distinct waves of increasing popularity can be identified: one in the early 1990s, at national level, and another one following the mid 2000s, at both national and communitarian level. Right-wing Euro-scepticism, however, seems to have been largely more successful than its left-wing counterpart.

2.5 – The plausibility of the theory

The analyses presented in this chapter have validated the three hypotheses that had been presented in section 2.1. The available literature confirms that indeed, at least since the beginning of

the 4th European Parliamentary legislature, mainstream party groups have converged in such a way as to depoliticize EP policymaking. It also shows that Eurosceptic parties have been contesting this trend by engaging in politicizing efforts, and that their success in domestic elections across the EU has been steadily increasing over time. Finally, my analysis of EP elections' results shows that, for some of these parties, this success has been replicated at the supranational level. The validation of the three hypotheses grants my theory a satisfactory degree of plausibility, such that it may now be reasonable to conduct an empirical test in order to try and demonstrate its efficacy.

Some of the data that has been presented in the previous sections has served a twofold function: on the one hand, it contributed to the validation of the respective hypothesis; on the other hand, it exposed a viable strategy for the empirical testing of the theory as a whole. As illustrated in paragraph 2.4.2, left-wing Euroscepticism has been rather unsuccessful in the European Parliament, especially so if confronted with the achievements of its antipodal counterpart. Over those same years, another phenomenon was defining EP politics: the progressive enlargement of the centrist coalition, which was discussed in section 2.2. As this expansion was predominantly oriented towards the left end of the political spectrum, one cannot but wonder whether left-wing Euroscepticism was somehow affected by it: has the GUE-NGL been as engaged in politicizing efforts as right-wing Eurosceptic parties have been? A negative answer to this question might explain the difference between the two blocs' supranational electoral performances, thus demonstrating that politicization has been a key determinant of right-wing Eurosceptic party groups' success. Chapter 3 is going to be dedicated to this last part of the investigation.

Chapter 3 – The empirical test

The analysis conducted in the previous chapter brought to light two dynamics that have, for some time, been defining politics in the European Parliament: the leftward expansion of the centrist coalition and the divergence between right- and left-wing party groups' electoral performances over the last few decades. The first development emerges from the observation of the secondary evidence presented in section 2.2: in its original form, the coalition only included the S&D (center-left) and the EPP (center-right); over time, it grew to include ALDE, a centrist party positioned to the left of the EPP (Crum, 2020: 103; Hix et al., 2024: 164), and, most recently, the Greens/EFA, the second leftmost group in the parliament. The second development is evident from the illustration of EP elections results (see paragraph 2.4.2): although right-wing Eurosceptic party groups only held the 8.8% of parliamentary seats in 2004, they currently hold the 18%, and recent projections have them at 21.8% for the upcoming legislature; on the other hand, the seat share held by the GUE-NGL – the only leftist Eurosceptic group – has been stagnating around 5% for decades, and June 2024 elections project a 4.3% which would be the worst result ever obtained by the group.

A question emerges quite spontaneously from this analysis: has the GUE-NGL, being closer to the coalition, engaged less in politicizing efforts than its right-wing counterparts? If so, one could argue that politicization has significantly contributed to the success of the other Eurosceptic party groups. Before delving into the analysis of the data through which this question can be answered, it will be useful to briefly discuss the available literature on some determinants of Eurosceptic parties' success, including politicization. The methodological section, the analysis, and the conclusions will follow.

3.1 – Alternative explanations for Eurosceptic parties' success

Several factors that have determined Euroscepticism's growing popularity. This section is going to discuss some of the ones that Hooghe and Marks have reputed to be particularly relevant (Hooghe and Marks, 2007), namely: individual economic satisfaction, salience of the Eurozone crisis, attachment to communitarian institutions, and trust towards domestic and communitarian institutions. The available scholarship points to a number of other plausible contributing factors (e.g. immigration- and enlargement-related concerns). A remarkably comprehensive analysis of the different degrees and determinants of Eurosceptic parties' success across EU countries can be found in *Euroscepticism and the future of Europe: views from the capitals*, a 2021 edited work by Michael Kaeding, Johannes

Pollak, and Paul Schmidt. However, there is a simple reason underlying the choice of the limited set of alternative explanations presented above: among the available ones, they seem to be the most relevant for this thesis, since they are all products of the individual perception that European citizens have of the institutional reality surrounding them. Thus, they appear to be most appropriate for an analysis whose focus is the enhancement of empirical legitimacy, which depends precisely on the extent to which citizens choose to be supportive of the institutions that govern them.

3.1.1 – Economic concerns and eurozone crisis

Many scholars have found a causal relation between greater economic concerns and the increasing support for Euroscepticism (e.g. McLaren, 2007; Bouin, 2018: 50; Schmidt 2020). In this context, a *perceived* situation of hardship has been found to be a more significant explanatory variable than the actual economic reality (Castells, 2018: 241). Data from Eurobarometer surveys shows a worsening trend in the perception of national economies among EU citizens in correspondence of the onset of both the first and the second wave of Euroscepticism's success, respectively at the turn of the 90s (European Commission, 1995: 2), and between 2007 and 2008, when the share of Eurobarometer respondents who perceived their national economies to be "good" dropped by 32 percentage points, plummeting to a historical minimum; it was not until 2017 that the number of positive answers surpassed that of negative ones, but the trend quickly reversed back at the end of 2019, and since then the gap between the two shares has been growing larger (European Commission, 2024: 122). It is clear from this data that the Eurozone crisis must have played a significant role in this dynamic. Indeed, several scholars have found that the perceived and actual effects of the eurozone crisis strongly contributed to the success enjoyed by Eurosceptic parties after the mid 2000s (e.g. Kriesi, 2016; Schmidt, 2020; Berman and Kundani, 2021).

3.1.2 – Trust towards domestic and communitarian institutions

The relation between citizens' opinion on national and communitarian institutions and Euroscepticism's success is not as transparent. On the one hand, it is clear that feelings of distrust towards one's domestic institutions tend to have an impact on the perception of the EU and its bodies; on the other hand, several explanations for this impact exist (McLaren, 2007), depending on the way in which citizens reflect the perception they have of their domestic governments upon communitarian institutions (Abts et al. 2009). Eurobarometer data shows that a steep decrease in citizens' trust towards both domestic and European institutions began a few years before the eurozone crisis and

was only reversed around the mid 2010s; since then, however, the trend has been one of improvement (European Commission, 2024: 40). When it comes to the late 1980s and early 1990s, the sporadic availability of Eurobarometer data does not really allow to discern precise patterns with respect to this issue. Overall, the opacity of the relation might explain the relatively low interest that the issue has received by the scholarship in recent times.

3.1.3 – Identification as EU citizens

More attention has been paid to the role of identitarian attachment. Several studies have found that the more citizens conceive of their identity as of something that is defined exclusively by their nationality – thus, the less they think of themselves as EU citizens – the more Eurosceptic parties have a chance to prosper (e.g. McLaren, 2007; Abts et al. 2009; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2021). Nonetheless, if one observes Eurobarometer data related to the subject (i.e. the percentage of people feeling “nationality only” and the percentage of people feeling that they are EU citizens) from the late 1990s and early 2000s (European Commission 1999; 2000; 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006), and confronts it with the trends of the last 15 years (European Commission, 2024: 26), it is evident that, since 2013, the number of respondents who thought of themselves as “EU citizens” has been steadily increasing, eventually reaching historical heights, while the opposite can be said for the number of respondents who thought of themselves exclusively in terms of their national identity. It would thus seem reasonable to ask whether the relation between identitarian feelings and Euroscepticism’s success needs further investigation.

3.1.4 – Implications

Although brief, this overview clearly shows that Eurosceptic parties’ success has been the result of a combination of different causes. Among these, a quick observation of Eurobarometer surveys seems to lead to the hypothesis that the Eurozone crisis, and economic concerns more in general, have been particularly significant. Nonetheless, neither of these two factors (nor any of the others) seems capable of explaining the stark difference between the performances of left- and right-wing Eurosceptic parties. This becomes all the more puzzling if one recalls that it is precisely the left-wing parties that tend to act more empathetically on economic concerns (Wagner, 2022). One would thus expect them to have benefitted from the trends of EU citizens’ dissatisfaction with the economy. Conversely, European elections have seen right-wing party groups succeed against GUE-NGL’s worsening results. In light of what has been reported in this section, it seem reasonable to assume that

an explanation for this difference has yet to be provided. The remainder of this work will be dedicated to try and determine whether the answer lies in politicizing efforts.

3.2 – (De)politicization: a necessary and sufficient condition for Euroscepticism’s success

In 2021, Zack P. Grant formulated the “crisis and convergence model” in order to investigate the combined role played by economic crises and mainstream parties’ ideological convergence in enabling the success of anti-system parties – the ones characterized by their opposition to institutionally established norms and practices. His results demonstrated that “[a]nti-system parties have clearly performed strongest, on average, when the economy is doing worse and the mainstream parties have converged: but especially when these two factors are simultaneously present” (Grant, 2021: 1273). He concluded that none of the two determinants, in his study, had proven to be particularly significant unless they were both present together (*Ibid*: 1278,1279). Figure 7 repropose a table that he used in order to illustrate the predicted vote share that anti-system parties would obtain under different conditions.

	<u>Mainstream Convergence</u>	<u>No Mainstream Convergence</u>
<u>Economic Crisis</u>	14.3 % (11.3 – 17.3)	9.1 % (7.2 – 10.9)
<u>No Economic Crisis</u>	10.4 % (7.4 – 13.4)	9.8% (7.5 – 12.2)

Figure 7

Percentage of predicted anti-system vote share (*Ibid*: 1274)

It is evident that, in the absence of economic crises, mainstream parties’ convergence has a weaker effect. However, the difference between the effect caused by economic crises in a situation of mainstream parties’ convergence and in one of competition is even greater. Moreover, in the absence of convergence, the effect of economic crises seems to be reversed, with anti-system parties’ performance predicted to be weaker during crises. This counterintuitive transformation of the results does not occur in the opposite situation. In light of this, it seems reasonable to ponder whether mainstream parties’ convergence might be capable of playing a role on its own. The investigation of this possibility would be particularly important in the context of the European Union because, as we have seen, Eurosceptic parties’ success began more than a decade before the crisis of the Eurozone.

Göran von Sydow's research explores precisely the fifteen years-period (1984-2009) that preceded the crisis, and its focus is restricted exclusively on EU countries. His investigation on the causes of Eurosceptic parties' success led him to hypothesize that

[...] voters may perceive an increase or decrease in the level of polarization among the established parties and may protest against an increasing collusion on the main conflict dimension by choosing parties that, in some respect, challenge the mainstream party convergence (Von Sydow, 2013: 197).

Indeed, this proved to be exactly the case, as he found that “highest levels of establishment collusion are a *necessary and sufficient condition* for increasing support of Eurosceptic parties” (*Ibid*: 199, emphasis added); more precisely, “the *only* singularly necessary and sufficient condition” that he identified (*Ibid*: 235; emphasis added).

This section shows that the depoliticization of EP policymaking has presented Eurosceptic parties with a significant opportunity to improve their electoral performance. We know that, in the EP, right-wing party groups have been most capable of capitalizing on this opportunity. If it can be proven that their politicizing efforts have determined the difference between their electoral performance and GUE-NGL's one, it would be possible to claim that politicization constitutes an opportunity for the enhancement of EU's empirical legitimacy.

3.3 – Methodology

The objective of this empirical test is going to be that of verifying whether the difference between left- and right-wing Eurosceptic party groups' electoral performances can be traced back to differences in their politicizing efforts. GUE-NGL, ECR and ID's respective seat shares are going to constitute the dependent variable. As for the independent one, it will be necessary to devise a way to measure each of these groups' politicizing efforts within EP politics.

3.3.1 – *Quantifying politicizing efforts*

In order to quantify and measure Eurosceptic party groups' politicizing efforts, I am going to resort to the *VoteWatch Europe* dataset (Hix et al., 2022), which reports the votes by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in all 36.844 roll-call votes recorded between July 2004 (beginning of

EP6) and June 2022 (midway through EP9), distinguishing between six values: 0 for “not an MEP at the time of the vote”, 1 for “in favor”, 2 for “against”, 3 for “abstained”, 4 for “absent”, 5 for “did not vote” and 6 – only in EP6 – for “motivated absence”. The analysis presented in this section is going to be done separately for each of the legislatures between the 6th and the 9th, via the software *R*.

First of all, it will be necessary to divide voting data into sub-datasets, one for every party group. For each of these, it will then be possible to compute a vector illustrating what might be called the “within-mode” values: a sequence that illustrates the modes, that is, the most recurrent vote among the single party group’s MEPs for every roll-call vote held in that legislature. For example, the vector [1; 3; 2] would tell us that most of the MEPs in the party group being observed have voted in favor (1) of the item discussed in the first roll-call, while in the second most have abstained (3) and in the third most have voted against (2). The within-mode is significant because it is illustrative of the line adopted by the party group on the item being discussed: for example, if the most recurrent position among a party group’s MEPs was “in favor” of item *x*, then the party group as a whole is going to be considered to have been in favor of that item. Voting data in the original dataset is ordered chronologically, so that columns in the dataset show how the different MEPs have voted in subsequent roll-calls. Since this order is not altered in the making of the sub-datasets, and since all within-mode vectors are of the same length (each value corresponds to a roll-call, none was excluded), we are certain that to the same position in all party groups’ within-mode vectors corresponds the same roll-call vote: for example, if the value recorded in the *n*th position along the ID vector corresponds to the group’s within-mode for the first roll-call vote held on September 17th, 2021, then the S&D’s within-mode score for the first roll call held on September 17th, 2021 is also going to be found at the *n*th position along the respective vector, and the same is true for all other party groups.

In a second moment, *R*’s “which” function is going to be used in order to confront each Eurosceptic party group’s within-mode vector with that of each mainstream party group. The function will produce, for each pair of groups being confronted, a new vector of increasing values, that correspond to the coordinates of the positions along the two party groups’ original vectors in which the within-mode values were found to be the same for both of them. For example, if the vector produced by the confrontation between ID and S&D is [2; 4; 8], it means that the two groups have the same within-mode score in the 2nd, 4th and 8th position along the respective within-mode vectors. Since we know that each position along a within-mode vector refers to the same roll-call vote for all groups, giving this prompt essentially corresponds to asking the software to identify all roll call-votes in which the general lines of two party groups (a Eurosceptic and a mainstream one) have coincided. It will be enough to look at the length of the resulting vectors to discover how many times this has been the case for each of the Eurosceptic-mainstream couples under observation. This will allow to

determine, for example, that during the 7th EP legislature ID and S&D have “voted together” – meaning that the prevalent choice of vote among their MEPs has coincided – n% of the times. For the sake of representation, it will be useful to give this score a simple name: “Euroseptic-Mainstream Alignment (EMA) Score”. It is going to be necessary to measure this score for all of the couples composed by each Euroseptic party group (GUE-NGL, ECR, ID) and each of the groups that can be said to have belonged to the mainstream coalition over those years (accordingly with data from section 2.2): EPP and S&D in EP6; EPP, S&D and ALDE in EP7 and EP8; EPP, S&D, RE and Greens-EFA in EP9. Since, as was argued in section 2.2, mainstream party groups have been progressively converging, it is unlikely that, when it has not voted in accordance with one of these, a Euroseptic group has ended up supporting another one.

However, it would be wrong to assume that mainstream party groups are always behaving as a coalition. It is thus of crucial importance to note that every time a Euroseptic party group voted differently from a mainstream one, only one of two things can have happened: either mainstream groups were acting as a coalition – and this would mean that the Euroseptic group has voted in such a way as to *not* support the coalition – or not – and this would mean that the Euroseptic group has *not* voted together with the coalition, since there was none. Thus, independently from the coalition’s behavior, a smaller EMA Score testifies to a greater politicizing effort by the Euroseptic party group involved. In these terms, the extent to which a Euroseptic party group has engaged in politicizing efforts can most adequately be determined by observing its Average EMA Score, that is, the average among the scores it obtained when paired with each of the coalition’s groups. For example, if during the 6th legislature the ID-S&D EMA Score has been 40%, and the ID-EPP EMA Score has been 60%, the ID group will receive an Average EMA Score of 50% for that legislature. The score indicates the number of times that, on average, the general line held by ID’s MEPs has coincided with that of at least one among the mainstream party groups of that legislature. All other cases, as was argued, are signals of politicizing efforts.

3.3.2 – EMA Score and seat share confrontation

Once all available Average EMA Scores have been computed, it will be possible to observe how the score of every Euroseptic party group has varied between the 6th and the 9th legislature, and then confront these trends with the ones that illustrate the variations in the respective seat shares. On the grounds of the theory that has been presented in Chapter 2, I would expect the findings to present a negative correlation between Average EMA Scores and seat share values. The correlation coefficient between the two variables is going to be computed via *R*, but it will most likely be

statistically insignificant given that a mere 12 values – that is, one for each party group (3) in every EP election being considered (4) – are available for the seat share measurement. Notwithstanding this, some significant conclusions may still be drawn.

3.4 – Results

Tables 1 to 4 report the EMA score of all the Eurosceptic-mainstream party group couples that have been taken in consideration for this analysis. It should be pointed out that, in some cases, the single party group’s within-mode score has been 4, 5 or 6, meaning that the most recurrent position among the group’s MEPs on that item was, respectively, “absent”, “did not vote” or “motivated absence”. It is clear that, for our purpose, these position are less significant than “in favor”, “against” and “abstained”. This has happened 29.2% of the times for the groups considered in EP6, 13.3 for EP7, 5.5. for EP8 and 0.4 for EP9. This means that some of the times that a couple has *not* voted together do not necessarily correspond to instances of stark opposition between the two groups. However, since 4, 5 and 6 within-mode scores were by far most prevalent among Eurosceptic party groups, it could be possible to interpret them as a form of politicizing effort. I will return to this in the closing analysis.

Group	EPP	S&D	AVG.
GUE-NGL	41,8	62	51,9
ECR	80,7	62,9	71,8
ID	43,6	33,5	38,4

Table 1
EMA Scores EP6.

Group	EPP	S&D	ALDE	AVG.
GUE-NGL	44,7	60	51,1	51,9
ECR	59,4	43,5	55,6	52,8
ID	58,6	46,8	50,6	52

Table 2
EMA Scores EP7.

Groups	EPP	S&D	ALDE	AVG.
GUE-NGL	40,2	60,6	49,9	50,1
ECR	66	48,9	59,5	58,1
ID	33,6	35,9	34,2	34,6

Table 3
EMA Scores EP8.

Groups	EPP	S&D	ALDE	GREEN	AVG
GUE-NGL	51,1	72	65	81	67,3
ECR	63	46,5	52,3	38	49,9
ID	45,7	33,7	37,2	29,2	36,4

Table 4
EMA Scores EP8.

Figure 8 reports each Eurosceptic party group's Average EMA Score between the 6th and the 9th legislature. Figure 9 reports their seat shares over the same period.

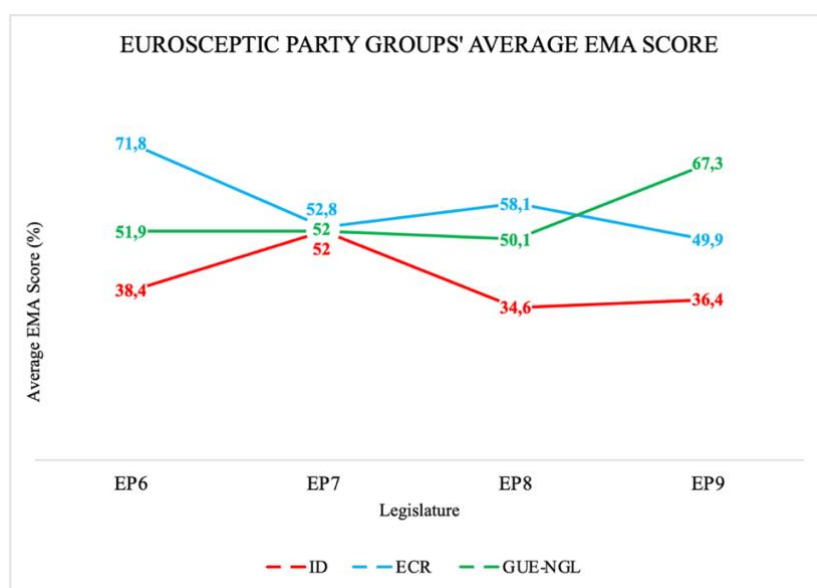


Figure 8
Eurosceptic party groups' Average EMA Score between EP6 and EP9.

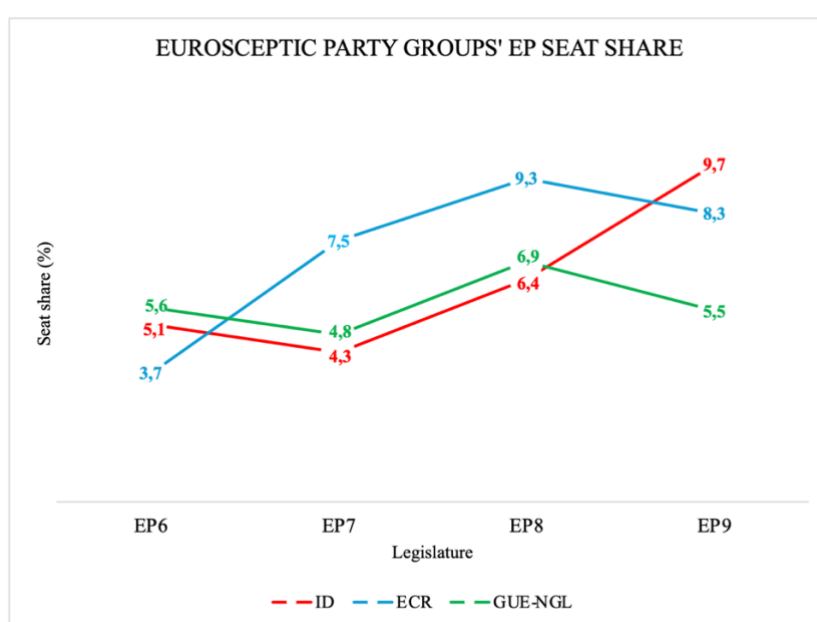


Figure 9
Eurosceptic party groups' seat share between EP6 and EP9.

Figure 10 illustrates the correlation between the two variables and reports the Pearson correlation coefficient and the related *p* value. On the one hand, the coefficient confirms the theoretical expectations: at -0.36, it indicates that an increase in the Average EMA Score, thus a smaller engagement in politicizing efforts by the Eurosceptic party group being considered, implies a reduction in said group's seat share. On the other hand, as expected, the *p* value being 0.25 testifies to the fact that these results are not statistically significant. A discussion on the interaction between the two variables should be possible nonetheless. In order to allow for it, Table 5 reports how each Eurosceptic party group's Average EMA Score and seat share have varied between subsequent legislatures. The couples of cells that are highlighted in yellow correspond to the instances that differed from the theoretical expectations, that is, periods in which the two variables seem to have been positively correlated.

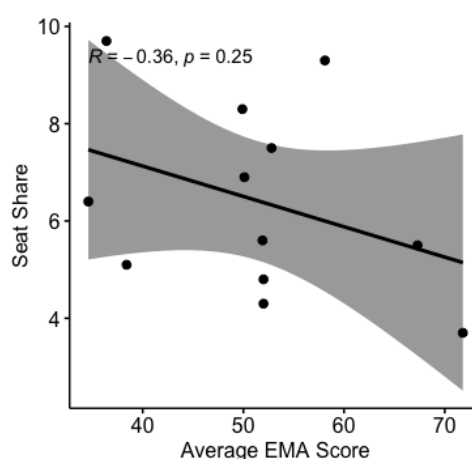


Figure 10
Average EMA Score-Seat Share correlation.

	EP6-EP7		EP7-EP8		EP8-EP9	
GUE-NGL	+0,1	-0,8	-0,9	+2,1	+17,2	-1,4
ECR	-19	+3,8	+5,3	+1,8	-8,2	-1
ID	+13,6	-0,8	-17,4	+2,1	+1,8	+3,3
	EMA Score (%)	Seat Share (%)	EMA Score (%)	Seat Share (%)	EMA Score (%)	Seat Share (%)

Table 5
Paired variations in Average EMA Score and Seat Share.

3.5 – Analysis of the results

The objective of this test was that of verifying whether the difference between left- and right-wing Eurosceptic party groups' electoral performances can be traced back to differences in their politicizing efforts. In order to do so, politicizing efforts have been quantified by computing each

group's Average EMA Score: the greater the score, the lower the engagement in politicizing efforts, and vice-versa. We can now analyze the results obtained for each of the three Eurosceptic party groups.

3.5.1 – GUE-NGL

Figure 8 shows that the Average EMA Score of the only left-wing Eurosceptic group in the European Parliament was stationary around 50% between EP6 and EP8, and that it only rose to 67.3% during EP9. As reported in Table 10, between EP6 and EP8 the GUE-NGL actually recorded small variations in the Average EMA Score, which were accompanied by variations in the seat share held by the group that confirm the theoretical expectations: increases in the Average EMA Score have occurred together with decreases in the seat share, and vice versa. This has also been the case in the last period observed, when the variation in the group's Average EMA Score was most significant. However, it should be pointed out that there seems to be no proportionality between the variations in the two variables.

3.5.2 – ECR

Figure 8 shows that, at 71.8%, ECR's Average EMA Score for EP6 was the highest among the ones recorded. Following a sudden decrease that brought it to 52.8% in EP7, it rose again to 58.1% in EP8 and finally decreased to 49.9% in EP9. Table 10 shows that the variation in the seat share occurred accordingly with the theoretical expectation only between EP6 and EP7. The remainder of the data contradicts my theory. Just as in the case of the GUE-NGL, there seems to be no proportionality between the variations in the two variables.

3.5.3 – ID

Figure 8 shows that ID has always been the Eurosceptic party group that was least aligned with groups from the mainstream coalition, despite an increase in its the Average EMA Score that, in EP7, matched that of GUE-NGL, before decreasing steeply to 34.6% and remaining relatively unchanged ever since. The variation in the seat share held by the group has occurred accordingly with the theoretical expectations in two out of three cases. As in the previous analyses, there seems to be no proportionality between changes in the two variables.

3.5.4 – Implications

There are three points that require clarification. First of all. It should be noted that the sudden increase in GUE-NGL's Average EMA Score between EP8 and EP9 is evidently due the fact that the Greens-EFA, the group together with whom the GUE-NGL has obtained its highest EMA Score, was considered to be part of the coalition during the last legislature; this has probably also affected ECR and ID's scores for EP9. However, the enlargement of the coalition could not be ignored: these results, although relatively atypical, are not misrepresentative. Secondly, if one considers absenteeism as a form of contestation, the progressive decrease in the number of absences recorded in the within-mode vectors (which, as argued in section 3.4, came most prevalently from Eurosceptic party groups' data) could be a signal of a change in the politicizing efforts themselves, which, one might then argue, have become more direct. The verification of this supposition requires a more dedicated research. Finally, it has to be pointed out that, during the 7th legislature, ID merged with a small group that would have later joined the ECR family (see Trunečka, 2021), therefore a relatively less radical one. It does not seem unreasonable to suspect this to be the reason behind ID's anomalously high Average EMA Score for EP7.

I am of the opinion that it would a mistake to dismiss my theory as a whole on the grounds of the regression coefficient's statistical insignificance and of the lack of proportionality between the variations in the two variables. It should be recognized that the scarcity of data on EP elections has probably hampered the robustness of the results. Still, the question was worth exploring, and the investigation has indeed brought to light more than one empirical observation that can sustain the theory. I think that there are at least four which are worth pointing out:

- I. Six out of the nine cases reported in Table 5, encompassing, noticeably, the four largest variations in the independent variable, respected the theoretical expectations.
- II. Furthermore, as attested by Figure 9, the group that most consistently engaged in politicizing efforts (ID) is precisely the one that, between 2009 and 2019, went from being the least to being the most popular Eurosceptic party group in the EP, amidst the worsening of the others' electoral performances.
- III. It is also telling that, as reported in Table 5, GUE-NGL's sharpest increase in Average EMA Score has been accompanied by its greatest loss in terms of seat share, and that the group appears to have been the only one that never experienced a significant decrease in its Average EMA score, that is, the only one that never attempted to significantly increase its politicizing efforts.

- IV. Finally, Figures 8 and 9 show how ECR's sudden distancing from the mainstream bloc in EP7 has been accompanied by a noticeable electoral success, which, however, was slowed down and eventually reversed as the group settled on a position more similar to the one held by GUE-NGL.

3.6 – Conclusions

The European Union is a most interesting and relatively successful case of enduring international cooperation, but it is far from perfect. Its recent history demonstrates that something of its originally technocratic configuration, albeit transformed, has lingered to this day. The years of the eurozone crisis have been symptomatic of an unresolved tension between the desire to consolidate integration and the need of abiding by the prerequisites of a democratic institution. Over time, this tension has turned detrimental to the domestic legitimacy of the Union, prompting a number of scholars to try and devise mechanisms that might enhance it. Although much of the debate revolved around the question of whether such an improvement could be achieved by strengthening the role of the European Parliament and increasing European citizens' direct involvement in decision-making procedures, other approaches exist. This thesis has sought to contribute to this evolving literature by exploring whether the politicization of EU affairs might constitute a valuable strategy.

To this end, I have argued that politicization could improve EU policymaking in such a way as to enhance the Union's throughput legitimacy, and that, by doing so, it might stimulate European citizens' acknowledgment of such an improvement. In this way, the enhancement would affect not only the normative but also the empirical dimension of EU legitimacy, thus ensuring a concrete progress instead of one that would risk being nullified by its own partiality. My investigation, focused on this last thesis, required that the analysis be restricted to the European Parliament: this guaranteed that the research be feasible within the limited extension of a master thesis and that the focus be directed on the EU body in which the interplay between politicization and empirical legitimacy is most pronounced. I supposed that, since changes in voting behavior can signal opportunities for enhancing empirical legitimacy, the increasing electoral success of those EP party groups that have been undertaking efforts to politicize EU affairs could be a telling phenomenon. On these grounds, three hypotheses have been formulated: that mainstream party groups have progressively depoliticized EP policymaking, that Eurosceptic parties, in response, have presented themselves as concrete alternatives to the depoliticized status quo, and that, over time, they have grown ever more successful. In validating these hypotheses, I exposed two crucial dynamics: the leftward enlargement

of the coalition between mainstream party groups and the discrepancy between left- and right-wing Eurosceptic party groups' electoral performances. The fact that available explanations could not make sense of this discrepancy encouraged the formulation of a theory according to which the latter could be traced back to the different extents to which left- and right-wing Eurosceptic party groups had been engaging in politicizing efforts. If this were to be confirmed, the theory according to which politicization determines electoral success, and can thus lead to an enhancement of empirical legitimacy, would have been significantly corroborated. An empirical test was necessary to find evidence that might justify this conclusion.

This required that Eurosceptic party groups be compared in terms of two variables: their EP seat share, as an indicator of electoral success, and their Average Eurosceptic-Mainstream Alignment (EMA) Score, that I devised as an indicator of their tendency to align with the behavior of mainstream party groups during parliamentary roll-call votes. The analysis of the available data produced some useful results. The four considerations presented in the closing of section 3.5 testify to the relevance of my theoretical model: politicizing efforts seem to have played a role in determining the discrepancy between the electoral results of Eurosceptic party groups positioned at the opposite ends of the political continuum, especially so if one considers the two most radical groups, that is GUE-NGL and ID. At the same time, the weakness of the correlation coefficient and the lack of a detectable proportionality between variations in the two variables demand that these results be taken with a grain of salt. If it will ever be available, a more comprehensive dataset on EP roll-call votes is sure to lead to more statistically significant results that might further corroborate or ultimately dismiss my theory. In the meanwhile, it seems reasonable to argue that EU legitimacy could benefit from the dismantling of the mainstream coalition – and so could the party groups that compose it.

There are no grounds to think that, by sticking to their coalition, mainstream party groups could produce an enhancement of EU's legitimacy along any of its dimensions; in fact, this attitude would likely allow right-wing Eurosceptic parties to persist in their politicizing efforts, and thus – as far as my theory holds – gain ever larger seat shares, hence likely hampering the efficiency that the mainstream coalition should be able to grant. Since this last risk would also be entailed if the coalition were to be disbanded – that is, if mainstream party groups were to engage in politicization themselves –, the only substantial difference between the two scenarios is that a “coalition-less” European Parliament – as far as my theory holds – has the potential of producing an enhancement of EU legitimacy and a reduction of the seat share held by radical right Eurosceptic party groups. To my eyes, this would be largely preferable.

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