

# Do Voters Want Domestic Politicians to Scrutinize the EU?<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

The trade-off between local and national representation that Members of Parliament (MPs) face is well documented in the political science literature. Recent research focuses on the demand side and shows that citizens prefer a moderate balance of constituency and national policy work. However, even though MPs have little say they are also increasingly involved in supranational politics. This potentially creates a new trade-off between allocating effort to domestic and supranational affairs, respectively. We therefore examine how citizens perceive legislator involvement in supranational politics with a pre-registered conjoint experiment in Germany. Our results show that MPs are not punished for allocating effort to supranational affairs, indeed, MPs are rewarded for their reform efforts in supranational policy-making. In light of existing pressures on supranational institutions to demonstrate legitimacy, experts suggest that MPs should become more involved in supranational politics. Our study is the first to provide empirical evidence that MPs can fulfill this demand without being degraded by the electorate.

TOTAL WORD COUNT: 3929

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<sup>†</sup>The design of this study was pre-registered in the EGAP register. Please follow [\[this link\]](#).

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The European Union (EU) is under severe scrutiny by the European public as well as contemporary populist radical right parties (De Vries, 2018; Schneider, 2018). At least since the European debt crisis in 2009, the European population increasingly challenges the European project (e.g. in referenda such as Brexit), calls for a more democratic institutional framework, and urges domestic politicians to speak out and act against European policy-making. This has put enormous pressures not only on the European project but also on domestic politicians, who increasingly have to ask themselves if, and how much they want to engage in EU scrutiny.

Interestingly, while the question how to balance local and national representation has received a lot of attention in the political science literature (Pitkin, 1967; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina, 1987; Crisp et al., 2004; Shugart, Valdini, and Suominen, 2005; Butler, Karpowitz, and Pope, 2012; Vivyan and Wagner, 2015; Tromborg and Schwindt-Bayer, 2019), we know comparatively little about how much the balance between national and supranational representation matters both for voters as well as Members of Parliament (MPs). Research shows that citizens prefer a moderate balance of constituency and national policy work (Vivyan and Wagner, 2016), but how much do voters actually expect MPs to engage in the European project? And even more importantly, does this engagement matter when voters seek to make a decision between candidates at the ballot box?

MPs already review European Union (EU) legislation when they transpose EU policies into national law (Franchino and Høyland, 2009), deliberate about EU proposals in parliamentary committees (Winzen, 2017), and address the EU in debates and questions (Rauh, 2015). And as Figure 1 reveals, MPs involvement in European affairs is also ever more increasing. In total, MPs are increasingly involved in a wide range of time-consuming activities that deal with supranational policy-making. Also, experts and politicians welcome MPs' involvement in supranational politics because it adds legitimacy to supranational decision-making (Thomassen, 2009; Bellamy, 2019). Especially MPs' ability to enhance democratic accountabil-

ity through visible debates about multilevel governance is often highlighted (Rauh and De Wilde, 2018). In light of these normative claims it is quite surprising that we know nothing about how citizens view MPs' involvement in supranational politics.

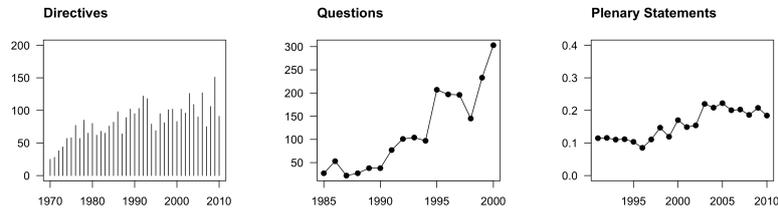


Figure 1: Development of MP involvement in supranational affairs

**Note:** The left panel shows the annual number of EU directives (legal acts that must be transposed by EU Member States) from 1970 to 2010. The center panel shows the number of EU-related parliamentary questions in the Danish Folketing from 1985 to 2000. The right panel illustrates the average share of EU references per plenary statement in the German Bundestag from 1991 to 2010.

What are the most likely citizen preferences over legislator effort allocation between domestic and supranational work? Simply put, there are good reasons to believe that ordinary citizens are less enthusiastic about MPs' allocation of effort to supranational politics than elites. First, MPs have very little say in supranational decision-making. Even though MPs have more rights to take part in supranational affairs than ever before, their main task is to review and scrutinize government actors who take decisions at the supranational level. It is likely that citizens consider MPs' involvement in supranational politics being a wasted effort and want them to focus on local and national affairs which they have a real impact on. Second, citizens elect Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who have the responsibility to represent citizens in supranational decision-making. Even though turnout at European Parliament (EP) elections is lower than at national elections citizens are well aware of the EP (European Commission, 2018b). The involvement of MPs in supranational affairs may be considered an unnecessary duplication of work given the existence and role of MEPs. Third, a recent EU-wide poll shows that citizens have very strong feelings of belonging to their country and place of residence, how-

ever, they feel relatively little attached to the EU (European Commission, 2018a). Citizens may feel that an MP who devotes a lot of time and effort to supranational politics is out of touch with reality.

In sum, we highlight three reasons why it is likely that citizens do not want their MPs to engage in supranational affairs. They lead us to conclude that MPs who prioritize supranational affairs face a high risk of being punished on election day. Our expectation is therefore as follows: *Voters punish MPs who become significantly involved in supranational politics*. Testing this expectation is important for two reasons. First, a mismatch between MPs effort allocation to supranational affairs and citizen preferences is likely to exist. However, we want to be certain about such a potential mismatch, not least because it may not only cause dissatisfaction with individual politicians but the political system more broadly. Second, knowing whether citizens actually punish MPs who engage in supranational affairs is relevant because it gives instructions to MPs who may wish to fulfill existing demands to legitimize supranational decision-making. If MPs know that they can become active in EU affairs without being punished on election day, we might observe more serious discussions about the EU at the national level. To overcome methodological concerns and carefully elucidate the causal relationship between MPs' effort allocation to supranational politics and voter preferences we designed a choice-based conjoint survey experiment to test our expectation.

## **Experimental Design**

Classical survey experimental designs are often seen as the 'gold standard' to study causal effects in surveys. However, such designs come with the drawback of identifying one-dimensional treatments only (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto, 2014). Employing such a design would limit us to a single dimension of MP effort allocation to supranational affairs – e.g., the amount of time that MPs spend on supranational politics. Yet, in reality engagement in supranational politics

is a multidimensional effort. Time, resources, and instruments can vary. Moreover, we do not only want to include varying dimensions of MP effort allocation but also other MP attributes that are important to voters – e.g., gender and party label. Conjoint experiments allow researchers to set-up such a multidimensional context without the need to turn away from drawing causal conclusions. The reason for this is that conjoint analyses identify the average marginal component effect (AMCE) for each of the attribute levels on the probability of choosing a profile. This means that one can estimate how much a given attribute level, on average, increases or decreases a respondents probability for choosing an MP profile containing that attribute level.

We surveyed 993 German citizens on March 6, 2019, with respondents drawn from the Clickworker online crowd. Our sample was designed to represent the German voting-age population in terms of age, gender, region. However, our sample is not a nationally representative population-based sample. For example, there are more male respondents in the sample than men in the population, our respondents are younger than the average of the German population, and respondents are more experienced than the general population in taking surveys.<sup>1</sup> Notice, however, that our design is not necessarily interested in effects on the entire population but rather on the causal effect of our treatment designs.

After an introductory screen, respondents were presented with five vignettes, each depicting a contest between two current MPs who run for re-election.<sup>2</sup> The two profiles randomly exhibit information about MP effort allocation to supranational affairs. First, it is shown whether an MP has most knowledge about local, national, or European problems. Second, the most common reason for absent days in parliament are presented. The three attribute levels are ‘meetings in the constituency’, ‘meetings in Berlin’, and ‘meetings at the EU-level’. Third, an MP’s personal effort to reform the Eurozone was indicated (‘none’, ‘little’, ‘much’). In sum, these three attributes represent a candidate’s knowledge about supranational politics, priorit-

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<sup>1</sup>We provide descriptive statistics about the sample in the Supplementary Materials.

<sup>2</sup>A screenshot is provided in Figure S1 in the Supplementary Materials.

zation of supranational affairs, and supranational policy engagement. By choosing the three attributes we provide relevant multidimensional information about MPs' effort allocation to domestic and supranational politics without presenting overly complex details.

As mentioned before, the vignettes include additional MP features that have shown to be of high importance to voters (Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto, 2018). These include gender, party label, years in parliament, and motivation for candidacy. A candidate was either 'male' or 'female' and could be attached to either 'SPD', 'CDU/CSU', 'Die Linke', 'FDP', 'AfD', or 'Die Grünen'. The years in parliament were '2', '6', '10', and '14'.<sup>3</sup> The values for a candidate's motivation to run were 'to serve the party', 'to represent ordinary people', and 'to impact personally on political decision-making'. The presentation of the various levels of these additional attributes also varied randomly. Respondents were asked to read the characteristics of both candidates carefully and state which candidate they would vote for. We use a manipulation check to assess respondent attentiveness to our multidimensional manipulation (Kane and Barabas, 2019).<sup>4</sup> In the Supplementary Materials we illustrate how our results are unchanged when using the subsample with a successful manipulation test only. Finally, respondents were asked to answer several questions about national and European politics as well as their socio-economic and political background.<sup>5</sup> To address the potential trade-off between priming vs. post-treatment biases (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres, 2018), half of the respondents were randomly presented the vignettes along with the choice task after they have answered the additional questions. In the Supplementary Materials we show that the results

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<sup>3</sup>For candidates attached to the party 'AfD' the value was fixed at 2.

<sup>4</sup>We opt for a factual manipulation check using a single question that is asked of all participants in the experiment, specifically about the experimental material, and has factually correct or incorrect answers (Kane and Barabas, 2019). After respondents have completed the five choice tasks, we ask: "Which of the following characteristics was not presented in the previous five choices between two possible candidates?" Respondents can choose between four different answers of which only one is correct. We use three different items that were not presented in the experimental material, namely education, nationality, and marital status. The appearance of each of the three items is randomized. The items representing the incorrect answers (that is characteristics that were presented) are fixed. We use party, engagement in the reform of the Eurozone, and motivation to run for election. In the main part of this manuscript we analyze data from the full sample.

<sup>5</sup>The full text of our survey is part of the Supplementary Materials.

of the two samples are substantially the same.

In sum, our study yields ten observations per respondent, one for each MP profile which respondents engage with across their five choice tasks, leading to a total of 9,993 observations. Needless to say, our survey experimental design cannot replicate a real-world vote choice, but we made efforts to maintain external validity by using a multidimensional and reasonably realistic choice setting.

## Results

We first examine the average effect of MPs' effort allocation between domestic and supranational work. Thereafter we investigate how this effect varies across subgroups. Figure 3 (right panel) presents AMCE estimates for the levels of attributes that were included in our conjoint experiment. The top three attributes show estimates related to an MP's involvement in supranational affairs. For each level of the attribute, the dot indicates the point estimate for the effect of that level relative to the baseline level. The baseline levels are *constituency* for the first attribute, *meetings in the constituency* for the second attribute, and *none* for the third attribute. The error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

The results show that German voters do not base their voting decision upon MPs' awareness of problems nor MPs' most common reasons for absent days in parliament. We observe no significant differences between the baseline levels and the remaining levels of the two attributes. However, in other words this means that voters do not punish MPs who allocate effort to supranational politics as they are not more likely to prefer candidates who know most about local and national problems over candidates who know most about European problems. Similarly, voters do not prefer MPs who are absent from parliament because of meetings at the local and national level over MPs who are absent because of meetings at the EU level.

Turning to the third attribute which indicates an MP's effort to reform the Eurozone there is a clear aversion among voters toward having an MP who shows no

policy engagement at all. Compared to an MP who shows no policy engagement, MPs who engage ‘little’ or ‘much’ are preferred by voters. These estimated effects are statistically significant and substantial in magnitude. Furthermore, the effect of policy engagement appears to be linear. An increase in MPs’ policy engagement from the baseline level *none* to *little* leads to a moderate increase in the probability that an MP profile is preferred between 1.1 and 6.0 percentage points. The point estimate indicates an increase of 3.6 percentage points. However, an increase from the baseline level *none* to *much* leads to a substantial increase between 9.6 and 14.5 percentage points. The point estimate indicates an increase of 12.0 percentage points.

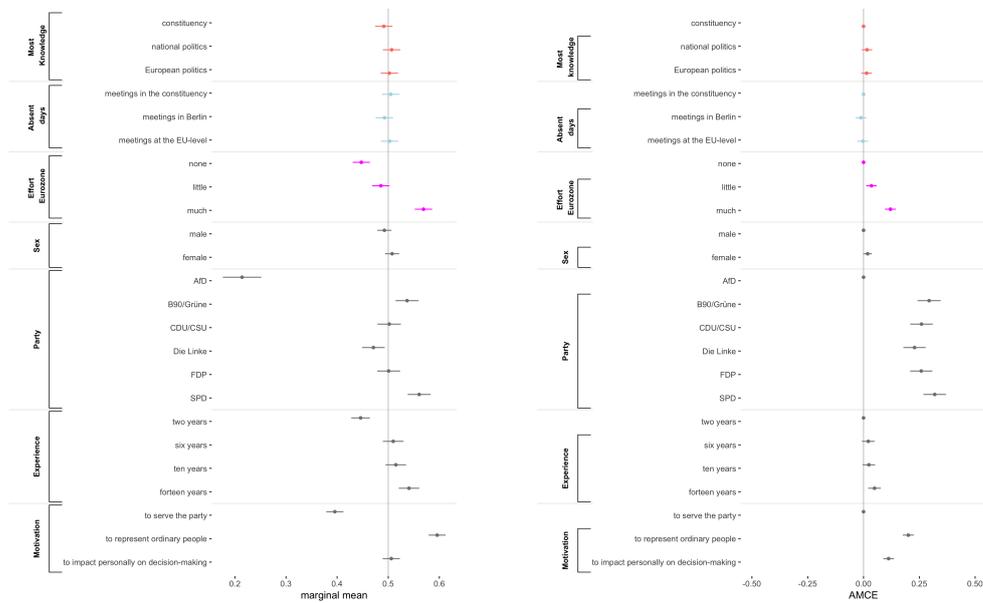


Figure 2: Marginal Means (left panel) and AMCEs (right panel)

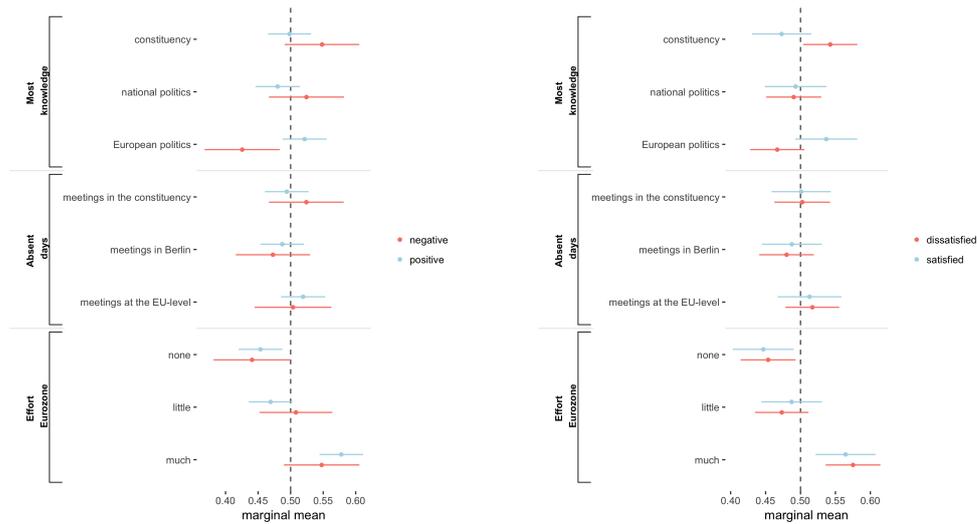


Figure 3: Conditional marginal means - EU support (left panel) and satisfaction with democracy in EU (right panel)

In addition to attributes indicating MP effort allocation between domestic and supranational work respondents are presented with a range of attributes that have proven to be very important in previous studies, including gender, party label, experience, and motivation for running for re-election. We find evidence that party label, experience, and a candidate's motivation matter to voters. For example, an increase in experience from the baseline level *two years* to *fourteen years* leads to an increase in the probability of choosing the candidate containing that attribute level between 2.1 and 7.8 percentage points. The point estimate indicates an increase of 4.9 percentage points. Furthermore, an MP profile that contains the motivation *to impact personally on decision-making* compared to the baseline *to serve the party* leads to an increase in the probability of choosing that profile between 8.8 and 13.6 percentage points.

AMCEs are relative quantities requiring that patterns of references are expressed against a baseline. Choosing a baseline is often arbitrary and can be misleading at worst. The reporting of marginal means provides a good alternative (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley, 2018). Marginal means describe the level of favorability toward profiles that have a particular feature level, marginalizing across all other features.

Marginal means have a direct interpretation as probabilities. A marginal mean of 0 indicates respondents select profiles with that attribute level with probability zero, while a marginal mean of one indicates respondents select profiles with that attribute level with probability one. Figure 3 (left panel) presents marginal means and underscores that MP who become engaged in the reform of the Eurozone are selected with a higher probability. We now turn to the presentation of subgroup differences using conditional marginal means.

In the left panel of Figure 4, each dot and error bar represents the conditional marginal mean and 95 per cent confidence intervals for citizens who perceive the EU being negative (combining the categories *very negative* and *fairly negative*) and being positive (combining the categories *very positive* and *fairly positive*). It shows that respondents belonging to the two groups differ in their probability of choosing MPs who know most about European problems, respectively. However, the display also highlights just how similar the two groups react to the remaining attribute levels. Most importantly, both pro-EU and anti-EU voters prefer MPs who allocate effort to supranational policy-making over MPs who do not. We observe a similar picture when comparing subgroups by their level of satisfaction with democracy in the EU. Both citizens who are dissatisfied (combining the categories *little* and *not at all* satisfied) and citizens who are satisfied (combining the categories *very* and *fairly* satisfied) with the way democracy works at the EU level prefer MPs who engage in supranational policy-making over those who do not.<sup>6</sup> In sum, we find evidence that an MP's reform effort in supranational policy-making matters to voters even when other important candidate attributes are present (e.g., party label, gender, motivation for candidacy) at the same time.

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<sup>6</sup>Additional Subgroup Analyses are included in the Supplementary Materials.

## Discussion

Our findings provide new input to the ongoing discussion about the role of national MPs in supranational politics. On the one hand, it is suggested that MPs should become more actively involved in supranational policy-making (Bellamy, 2019). By creating visible debates and offering policy alternatives they have the potential to add legitimacy to supranational decision-making and may resolve the democratic deficit problem of the EU. On the other hand, it is suggested that mainstream political parties which focus on supranational politics are likely to experience electoral defeat and therefore often de-emphasize the issue at the domestic level (De Vries, 2010). Breaking the latter argument down to the individual level, an MP's involvement in supranational affairs may constitute a risky business. Obviously, citizen preferences over MPs' effort allocation are important in the discussion about the pros and cons of MPs involvement in supranational affairs, however, so far they have not been explicitly considered.

Our study is the first to examine citizen preferences over MPs' involvement in supranational affairs using experimental data. We point to several reasons why citizens are likely to oppose MPs who become involved in supranational politics. Because MPs have no real impact on supranational decision-making and supranational affairs is of low priority it is suggested that voters do not want their MPs to become significantly involved in supranational politics. However, our results from a pre-registered conjoint experiment in Germany show that MPs are not punished for allocating effort to supranational affairs. This holds true for MPs who know most about European problems as compared to local and national problems as well as for MPs who prioritize meetings at the EU-level. This is important information for MPs who may want to spend more effort on supranational affairs but have not dared to do so because of the risk of being punished on election day.

Even more important is our result regarding citizen preferences over MPs' engagement in supranational policy-making. We find that citizens generally prefer MPs who become involved in supranational policy-making over MPs who keep out

of it. The finding suggests that citizens are tired of ‘politics without policy’ at the national level (Schmidt, 2006). The process of Europeanization has shifted more and more policies to the EU level, thereby removing them from the national political arena and de-politicizing them at the same time. Our findings suggest that voters try to pull policies back to the national level by demanding engagement of MPs in supranational policy-making. This finding relates to recent research showing that citizens demand responsiveness of their national representatives when negotiating at the EU level (Schneider, 2018). The involvement of national MPs in supranational policy-making might be the preferred strategy of citizens to guarantee a high level of responsiveness in supranational decision-making.

In light of our results and the EU being in limbo future research could elaborate on three important aspects. First, we need to know what kind of legislator involvement in supranational affairs citizens prefer. Do voters want their MPs to review, discuss, and explain supranational policies or do they also want them to become involved in the decision-making process? Second, future studies could examine whether MPs’ involvement should be limited to a few salient policy areas or whether citizens want their MPs to become involved in a broad range of supranational policies. Finally, given that citizens want MPs to become more involved in supranational policy-making it is important to know whether citizens would accept a reduction of local and national policy work in return.

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