

## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

During the last decades, we can observe a visibly more conflictual period over European issues. European integration has been the object of intensified political conflict in most of the member states of the European Union (EU). After the successful completion of economic integration with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, public controversies resulting from disagreement on fundamental questions on the scope and future direction of European integration intensified. These conflicts produced new divisions between member states and within political elites, and they mobilized citizens to a hitherto unknown extent. After a longer period of “permissive consensus” (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970) over European integration, one which had facilitated European integration in the post-WWII decades, dissent over different types of European issues started to unfold. This became apparent by the rise of Eurosceptic parties in numerous EU member states, the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in national referenda in France and the Netherlands in 2005, public protest against the austerity measures imposed by the EU in the Eurozone crisis in southern European countries, and not least the outcome of the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016. These developments have been reflected in a burgeoning literature on the politicization of Europe (de Wilde, 2011; de Wilde, Michailidou, & Trenz, 2014; Grande & Hutter, 2016; Hoeglinger, 2016; Hutter & Grande, 2014; Hutter, Grande, & Kriesi, 2016; Risse, 2014; Statham & Trenz, 2013; Zeitlin, Nicoli, & Laffan, 2019). Inspired by postfunctionalist integration theory (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), this literature shows that European integration has become a matter of mass politics (Bartolini, 2005) with a substantial amount of politicization in public and parliamentary debates, election campaigns and national referenda.

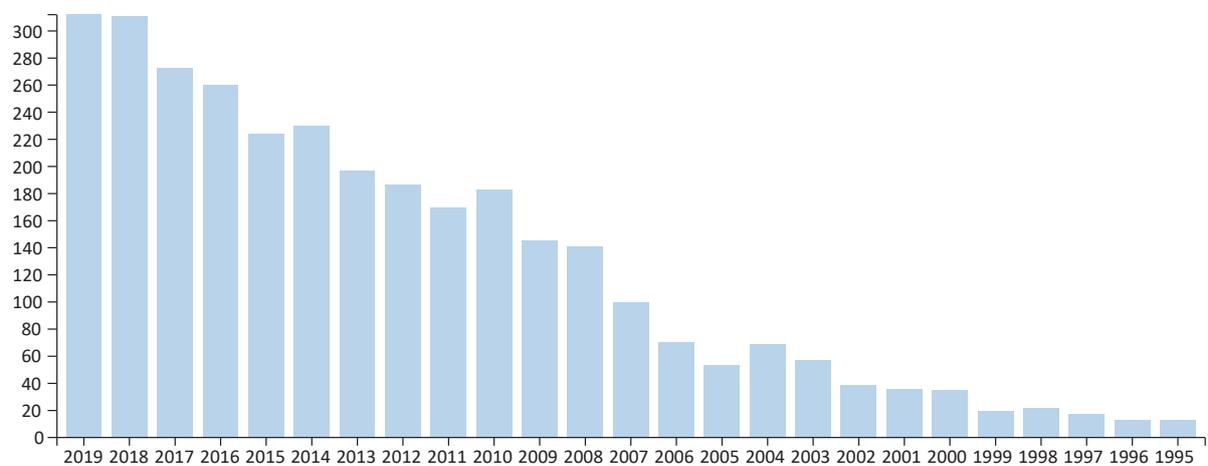
Against the background of such an impressive transformation as the politicization of the EU, together with an intensive period of multiple crises, particularly the financial and the refugee crises, as well as Brexit (Cotta & Isernia, 2020), an increasing amount of scholarly work has focused not only on EU governance but also on EU politics. Hence – and in fact not surprisingly – not just the character of the EU has changed fundamentally during the last two decades, but also the related field(s) of research. This has led to the dimension of politics becoming noticeably more relevant within the research field of EU studies, or as Laffan (2016, p. 922) aptly puts it, “The EU, long characterised as a system of multilevel governance, is moving to a system of multilevel and perhaps transnational politics.” This new shape of the Union is not only obvious when considering the changing focus towards more visible articles on politics in the leading field journals of EU studies, such as the *Journal of European Public Policy* (JEPP), the *Journal of Common Market Studies* (JCMS), and *European Union Politics*

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this section are taken from Braun et al. (2020), Braun and Grande (2021) and Schmitt et al. (2020).

(EUP), but can also be substantiated with strong empirical evidence from different subfields of EU studies. Whereas much of the research in EU studies in the past decades has focused on its *institutional development* (Dinan, 2010; Leuffen, Rittberger, & Schimmelfennig, 2013; Pinder, 2004), on *policymaking and policy dynamics* in the EU (Richardson, 2012; Wallace, Pollack, Roederer-Rynning, & Young, 2020), or on the EU's *political system* as such (Hix & Høyland, 2011), attention has recently shifted towards the *politics* of the EU (Lelieveldt & Princen, 2015; Magone, 2015). Accordingly, the overall dimension of politics is becoming visibly more relevant within the research field of EU studies (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Published articles on 'EU politics' in SSCC-listed journals



**Notes:** This figure, which has been published in Braun et al. (2020, p. 2), shows the total number of published articles per year with the topic 'EU politics' in academic journals covered in the Social Sciences Citation Index (1995–2019).

This so-called *politics turn* has been accompanied by the same shortcomings and problems as detected some years ago in terms of the *governance turn* in EU studies. Kohler-Koch and Rittberger (2006, p. 43) stated in this regard that “the wealth of descriptive and causal knowledge accumulated all over Europe has – as yet – not fed back into the conceptual debate on EU governance.” The same applies nowadays to the investigation of politics-oriented aspects of EU studies. A great deal of instructive research has been published over time: this ranges from the literature on the politicization of Europe (see above) to the different strands of literature regarding elections to the European Parliament (EP), such as studies resulting from the second-order election model (e.g. Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005a; Schmitt, Sanz, Braun, & Teperoglou, 2020; Schmitt & Toygür, 2016), political campaigning in EP elections (e.g. Adam et al., 2016; de Vreese, 2003) and party behaviour at the level of EU governance (e.g. Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Marks, Hooghe, Nelson,

& Edwards, 2006; Spoon, 2012). Although a great deal of scholarly work has been published to gain a better understanding of social and political phenomena occurring at the different levels within the EU multi-level system, these studies share one major shortcoming: they are prone to address the multi-level character of the EU inappropriately, ignoring the complex architecture of the political system of the EU and the diversity of the European integration process. There are, nonetheless, two important ways to address this research gap: first, by using empirical studies of electoral behaviour in EP elections, and second, by investigating interest group representation. These two fields of research share one important conceptual advantage: they consider appropriately the multi-level logic when studying their objects of investigation.

***Electoral behaviour in EP elections:*** Since the roots of this strand of research go back to the US electoral context, it is not only scholars of EP elections who are familiar with the famous second-order election (SOE) model. But this model was explicitly proposed for the European framework by Reif and Schmitt (1980) in an effort to understand voter motivations and electoral outcomes in the first direct EP election in 1979. The authors identified this supranational election as another case of a low-stimulus election. One of their key observations was that the behaviour of voters in consecutive first- and second-order elections is far from independent. In other words, some voters may support party a in election B because they have supported party b in election A (and because the two elections differ in importance, among other things). All subsequent studies of EP elections carried out so far (and this applies mainly, but not exclusively, for the particular investigation of electoral behaviour) have built on this major insight into the interrelation and interdependence between elections at different levels of governance.

***Interest representation in Europe:*** In a similar vein, the field of interest representation within the European context is an exception to the above-described obvious lack of multi-level thinking in the scholarly work on EU politics. Whereas in earlier studies the national level was the focus in the investigation of interest representation, the research focus has moved more recently to the EU level (see e.g. Eising, 2004). But alongside that – and this is key to understand the multi-level argument – scholars have started to tease apart the different levels at play and to consider their complex interactions appropriately when studying interest representation (Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Braun, 2017; Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Statch, 2020; Eising, 2017; Klüver, Braun, & Beyers, 2015). These scholars are indeed able to show that the *level* where decision-making takes place makes a difference to the outcome (Binderkrantz & Rasmussen, 2015).

**Additional examples:** Although other strands of research do not refer so explicitly to the idea of multi-level politics, recent trends in this direction have been collected in the Special Issue on “Political Behaviour in the EU Multi-Level System” (Braun et al., 2020). Scholars have become, for example, more and more interested in the relationship between public opinion in EU member states and its consequences for EU politics (see C. E. de Vries, 2018; C. E. de Vries & Hobolt, 2016). Moreover, scholars are increasingly examining party competition (see e.g., Lefkofridi, 2020; Mühlböck, 2013; Wonka & Rittberger, 2014), party organization (Pittoors, 2020), and responsiveness (Lefkofridi & Giger, 2020) with a particular eye on the national and European levels and their interrelationships. Also, the idea of blame-shifting between national and European actors (Heinkelmann-Wild, Kriegmair, & Rittberger, 2020) makes the multi-level logic obvious and urges scholars to properly take this into account. Against this background it is also less surprising that new textbooks on EU politics refer to the interrelation between national and EU-level politics (see in particular, C. E. de Vries, Hobolt, Proksch, & Slapin, 2021; Lelieveldt & Princen, 2015) whereas previous ones mainly concentrated on politics at the EU level (see e.g. Dinan, 2010; Hix & Høyland, 2011).

To sum up, we can note that researchers from different subfields within the broader area of EU politics increasingly consider the multi-level logic when studying their objects of investigation. In view of these conceptual refinements in other major subfields, it is obvious that the study of party politics and party competition is still addressing the complex interactions and repercussions between national and EU level in an inappropriate and to some degree underspecified manner. Against this background, the aim of the present collection of articles of the *habilitation thesis* is twofold. First, it seeks to describe the above-mentioned lack in the literature of party politics in detail, and second, its major aim is to clarify the precise reasons why the study of EU multi-level party politics is relevant and insightful.

**Party politics:** Although political parties are as likely as, for instance, interest groups to be involved in this multi-level environment, the link between party politics and the specific constraints of the EU multi-level system is still relatively uncharted territory. This is astonishing insofar as political parties are generally considered key actors in representative political systems. They link citizens with political decision-makers, formulate party and election programmes, run for elections, and organize election campaigns. Moreover, representatives from these political parties are elected by voters to a particular parliament and thus stand for citizens’ views and positions. As (Sartori, 1976, p. 471) puts it, “Citizens in modern democracies are represented through and by parties.” Political parties are not only considered to be crucial actors at the national level, but also at the EU level of governance (see also Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999, p. 186). They have played an even more important role

since it has become evident that “EU politics is party politics” (Hix, 2005, p. 180). In the same way as in the case of interest groups, it is important to note that political parties behave differently in national and European politics, since “[i]nterest mediation in the multitiered system of the EU follows different paths” (Schmitt, 2005b, p. 148; but see also Deschouwer 2005). To name just one thinkable outcome of this very particular situation, decision-making in a multi-level system of governance “always leads to a greater variation in the way in which policies are produced” (Deschouwer, 2005, p. 88). This highly relevant idea, which only latently tagged along during two decades of studying EP elections as second-order contests, arose again quite recently when researchers were finally able to study electoral behaviour at different electoral levels, for example by applying more sophisticated statistical techniques (Carrubba & Timpone, 2005; Clark & Rohrschneider, 2009; S. Hobolt & Spoon, 2012; S. Hobolt, Spoon, & Tilley, 2009; S. B. Hobolt & Wittrock, 2011; Magalhães, 2016; Schmitt, Sanz, & Braun, 2009; Schmitt et al., 2020; Schmitt & Teperoglou, 2015; Weber, 2011). Nevertheless, these insights have not yet made their way into the systematic investigation of political parties within the EU multi-level system. Party politics and party competition are, instead, mainly studied at the national level or exclusively at the EU level, but without taking into account the possible interconnectedness between the different levels at play.

***EU multi-level party politics:*** To identify the conceptual shortcomings within this strand of literature more systematically, we start from some basic premises presented for decades in the study of EU politics. On the one hand, it is uncontested that Europe is a complex issue. Moreover, most scholars agree that the EU “is not simply a national political system writ large” (Ladrech, 2015, p. 586). On the other hand, and this is indeed a revelation in view of scholarly consensus around the complexity of the EU issue and the exclusivity of the EU political system, scholars tend to deal inappropriately with these two major presumptions. In the remainder of the introduction, I will outline in more detail these shortcomings in the literature, to clarify why and how the collection of articles of the *habilitation thesis* deals with these issues.

(a) ***The complexity of the EU issue:*** Although most scholars are aware of the fact that Europe is a complex issue, they treat European integration frequently as a single, unidimensional political issue. That is, they do not differentiate between particular aspects or types of European issues. More specifically, the literature tends to focus on only one particular aspect of European integration: the ‘constitutive’ side of integration. This is surprising since the complexity is well known and there is a range of differentiated concepts available. The main distinction is drawn between conflicts over constitutive matters and those surrounding policy-related European issues. According to Bartolini (2005, p. 310), the former centre on fundamental features of

the EU polity, namely membership, competencies and decision-making rules. The latter, in contrast, refer to policy questions in fields where EU institutions are involved in daily policymaking.

This major shortcoming is reflected theoretically and investigated empirically in the following articles in appropriate detail:

- Braun D, Hutter S and Kersch A (2016) What type of Europe? The salience of polity and policy issues in European Parliament elections. *European Union Politics* 17(4): 570-592.
- Braun D, Popa S A and Schmitt H (2019) Responding to the crisis: Eurosceptic parties of the left and right and their changing position towards the European Union. *European Journal of Political Research* 58(3): 797-819.<sup>2</sup>

(b) **The exclusivity of the EU political system:** Most scholars agree that the EU is “in many ways, a unique experiment in intergovernmental and supranational forms of governance” (Ladrech, 2015, p. 586) – in short, a system of multi-level governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Marks, 1996). Accordingly, political actors within EU member states increasingly operate within a multi-layered context which is an inherent feature of the complex EU multi-level system. They are therefore forced to act within at least two different contexts simultaneously: the national and the EU level (see also Wolinetz, 2015, p. 470). In fact, the contexts can be even more numerous when we think for instance of the local or the regional level (Gross & Jankowski, 2020). This implies that political actors at the EU level may act and perform in the same way or differently than they would do at the national level. They may refer to the other political level or ignore it. Since domestic actors have increasingly incorporated the EU level in their repertoires of political action, the national level is strongly influenced by EU politics – as well as the other way around (Caramani, 2012). These ideas are certainly not novel. A similar claim emanates from scholars of multi-level governance (Grande, 1996; Hix, 1998; Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Marks, 1996) as well as from the literature on Europeanization (Ladrech, 2002, 2010). But, again, as in the case of the complexity of the EU issue, the available conceptual ideas are rarely taken up in empirical scholarly research. This, in turn, leads to the fact that important empirical questions have remained unstudied for a long time: How do political parties behave under the constraints of the EU multi-level system? How does party competition work in a multi-level system such as the EU? Do political parties behave in the same way as

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<sup>2</sup> All authors have contributed equally to each of these articles.

in national political systems? Do they compete in the same way at each of the levels of the EU multi-level system?

These and related questions have been investigated empirically in the following articles in appropriate detail:

- Braun D (forthcoming-a) The Europeanness of the 2019 EP elections and the mobilizing power of European issues. *Politics*.
- Braun D and Grande E (2021) Politicizing Europe in Elections to the European Parliament (1994–2019): The Crucial Role of Mainstream Parties. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Online first: doi/10.1111/jcms.13168.
- Braun D and Popa S A (2018) This time it was different? The salience of the Spitzenkandidaten system among European parties. *West European Politics* 41(5): 1125-1145.
- Braun D and Schäfer C (submitted) Issues That Mobilize Europe. The role of key policy issues for voter turnout in the 2019 European Parliament elections. *European Union Politics*.
- Braun D and Schmitt H (2020) Different emphases, same positions? The election manifestos of political parties in the EU multilevel electoral system compared. *Party Politics* 26(5): 640-650.
- Braun D and Schwarzbözl T (2019) Put in the spotlight or largely ignored? Emphasis on the Spitzenkandidaten by political parties in their online campaigns for European elections. *Journal of European Public Policy* 26(3): 428-445.<sup>3</sup>

Altogether we can sum up that, despite the profound transformations in the Union, its member states, and the field of research, most scholars of party competition are still tempted to adhere to traditional (in other words, mainly national) concepts and overhauled definitions (for example, that of Europe defined as a unidimensional notion). Accordingly, the vagueness of some major concepts (like the definition of Europe and of specifically EU issues) accompanies an inappropriate application of national political systems where parties compete among one another for power and influence. In the following sections, I will first outline in detail the reasons why the traditional definition of Europe is misleading in the case of party politics and will clarify the implications of this practice (section 3). In a second step, I will give some empirical examples on how researchers can deal appropriately with the idea of multi-level party politics (section 4). Before starting this inquiry, however, I will start with an outline of those data sources that are most useful for studying multi-level party politics (section 2). The concluding section summarizes the major findings and offers insights on how future studies should deal with party politics in multi-level systems. The articles which are part of the *habilitation thesis* combine three major ongoing debates: party competition, political behaviour in complex political systems, and the future direction of European integration.

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<sup>3</sup> For co-authored articles: All authors have contributed equally to each of these articles.

## 2. METHODS AND DATA: HOW CAN WE STUDY PARTY COMPETITION IN THE EU MULTI-LEVEL SYSTEM EMPIRICALLY?

Before I start outlining the reasons why the traditional approaches can be misleading and how we should appropriately deal with both the definition of Europe and the multi-level logic in the case of party politics, one basic step needs to be taken first. I will offer some answers to the question of how to study party competition in the EU multi-level system empirically. At least five different data sources are publicly available in this regard: (1) party manifesto data, (2) expert surveys, (3) public opinion surveys, (4) media-generated data, and (5) data generated from Voting Advice Applications (see also Carter, Keith, Sindre, & Vasilopoulou, forthcoming). In addition, several complementary (though not always publicly available) data sources, such as social media data, can be envisaged. The following section briefly describes the available data sources before I present the reasons for the chosen data source to measure party competition at different levels of governance.

**(1) Party manifesto data:** To measure issue salience and party positions, party manifesto data is the traditional data source at hand, since the collected data reaches back to the mid-1970s. At least two major datasets are available – the dataset compiling information on national party manifestos all over the world and for a long period of time (Volkens et al., 2015) as well as the Euromanifestos dataset (Schmitt, Braun, Popa, Mikhaylov, & Dwinger, 2018), which is available for all EP elections between 1979 and 2014.<sup>4</sup> To study party positions at different levels, this data source is invaluable: for the national and the EU level, data is accessible for free but, for subnational levels of governance, researchers can also make use of publicly available data (Alonso, Gómez, & Cabeza, 2013; Gross & Jankowski, 2020).

**(2) Expert surveys:** To measure political parties' positions on a great number of different policy dimensions as well as issue salience, expert surveys have been an important data source for more than three decades. Data gathered from expert judgements, such as the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al., 2015), or the Rohrschneider-Whitefield expert survey on Central and Eastern Europe (Whitefield & Rohrschneider, 2015) have been widely used by researchers into party platforms (for a good description, see Meijers & Wiesehomeier, forthcoming). To study party positions or party issue emphasis at different levels, this data source is, however, less useful than others because most of the available expert surveys do not explicitly differentiate between different electoral contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> Data for the 2019 EP elections is currently being processed under my supervision as part of the new ProConEU project funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research between 2021 and 2023.

**(3) Public opinion surveys:** Party positions can also be measured via public opinion surveys (see e.g. Netjes & Binnema, 2007). On the one hand, public opinion surveys such as the European Election Study (EES) or the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) can be invaluable for investigating political parties' policy positions as perceived by respondents to these surveys. On the other hand, it is a difficult task to discern whether the perceived policy positions pertain to the national or to the EU level. But a major advantage of these surveys is that they map public opinion in addition to the perceived policy positions, which can generate fruitful insights for the study of multi-level politics.

**(4) Media-generated data:** During the last decades, numerous researchers have started to study policy positions (and hereby also political parties' policy positions) via the analysis of media data. The respective datasets have been constructed through the manual coding approach of core sentences (Kleinnijenhuis & Pennings, 2001). To study party positions at different levels, this data source is also highly appropriate. Extensive data is available for the national level (Grande et al., 2020; Kriesi et al., 2020), but also for the EU level: particularly the European Election Campaign (EEC/EEC\_EU) data (see Braun & Grande, 2021).

**(5) Data generated from Voting Advice Applications:** Voting Advice Applications such as the EU Profiler/euandi longitudinal dataset (Reiljan, Ferreira Da Silva, Cicchi, Garzia, & Trechsel, 2020) are mainly used to map parties' policy positions in multi-dimensional political spaces. It has been developed to overcome some of the limitations of other data sources that measure parties' policy positions. Accordingly, they can be best used to complement insights gained by expert surveys and parties' declared positions via party manifestos (for an extensive discussion, see Marschall & Garzia, 2014). To study party positions at different levels, this data source is, however, less appropriate than others because data is only partly available for the different governmental levels/elections. Whereas the EU level is covered well by the EU Profiler/euandi longitudinal dataset (Reiljan et al., 2020), data at the national level is only available for some, but not all European countries (for example, *VoteMatch* in the United Kingdom, and *Wahl-O-Mat* in Germany).

It is certainly true that different political outlets, such as party manifestos and public debates in traditional or new social media, follow their own communication logic. Moreover, expert or citizen judgements may be based on either official party documents or media reporting or both. This leads ultimately to the fact that it may make an important difference whether we take our findings from manifesto, media, expert, or public opinion data. Accordingly, the choice of data source is crucial and needs to be chosen with an eye to the research question. To investigate the idea of multi-level party politics, we definitely need a

data source which offers the measurement of issue salience and party positions over different levels of governance. This is the case for both manifesto and media-generated data, although manifesto data is available for a longer time period and for a broader set of countries. Consequently, the majority of articles which are part of the *habilitation thesis* refer to manifesto data (Braun & Grande, 2021; Braun, Hutter, & Kerschler, 2016; Braun & Popa, 2018; Braun, Popa, & Schmitt, 2019; Braun & Schmitt, 2020).<sup>5</sup> The final paragraph of this section describes in more detail this data source and introduces the first article of the *habilitation thesis*.

One of the most obvious strengths of manifesto data lies in its long-term and cross-nation availability, which is ideal for studying research questions over time and across countries. Accordingly, manifesto data is available – in particular for the national and European level of governance – that covers a long period and is comparable across timespans and countries (worldwide comparability in the case of MARPOR data and European-wide comparability in the case of EM data). Moreover, manifesto data mirrors parties' self-positioning towards key policy issues. Issues that are emphasized by political parties in their manifestos are to a large extent consistent with those policies they advocate in parliaments and governments (Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, & Tannenbaum, 2001; Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994). Compared to expert surveys, manifesto data thus maps the official preferences of parties towards political issues that are deemed to be relevant in an election. This speaks in favour of the objectivity of this data source. However, one also has to take into account that these official documents are campaign instruments and are thus written with an eye to strategic considerations. Additional pros and cons of these types of data source are discussed at length within my chapter "Party Manifestos" which will appear in the "Routledge Handbook of Political Parties" (Carter et al., forthcoming). In my opinion, however, the strengths of this data source far outweigh its weaknesses, since this data enables us to study the official preferences of political parties over a substantial period of time and across many countries. Moreover, we can act on the assumption that party manifestos as official party documents offer objective information on party policy statements, and this is certainly less clear in the case of other data which is used to study party politics. For instance, media-generated data shares the issue of possible gatekeeping effects. Finally, because it covers both the national and the EU level of governance, the decision to mainly refer to manifesto data to study multi-level party politics in Europe seems well justified.

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note, however, that some of the articles which are part of the *habilitation thesis* also draw on different data sources – depending on the research question to be answered. Braun and Grande (2021) for example make additional usage of media-generated data, Braun (forthcoming) and Braun and Schäfer (submitted) have used different types of public opinion survey data, and Braun and Schwarzbözl (2019) draw on social media data.

**Braun (under contract)** seeks to provide an overview of how to study parties' policy preferences using manifesto data. Moreover, the chapter provides exhaustive insights into the text analysis of party manifestos. In a first step, the methods and data of manifesto projects (see also Braun 2020) as well as some pertinent examples of scholarly work are presented. In doing so, this contribution focuses on data from MARPOR (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, Budge, & McDonald, 2006; Volkens, Bara, Budge, McDonald, & Klingemann, 2013) and the Euromanifestos project (Schmitt et al., 2018), which can be considered as the core assessment studies of manifestos that cover two main levels of governance over a long period. In a second step, the avenues for future manifesto research are then discussed in the light of criticisms raised with regard to the text analysis of manifesto data. Finally, the merits but also limitations of manifesto data are discussed.

### 3. PARTY COMPETITION OVER EUROPE

In the introductory part of the thesis, I have put forward the argument that although it is uncontested throughout the literature that Europe is a complex issue, most scholars do not deal with its complexity in sufficient detail. This is in particular true for scholars of party competition in and over Europe. To gain a closer understanding of this, the subsequent section firstly examines the traditional literature, and in a second step identifies a lack in the literature of the topic of EU issue salience, its positioning in the context of EU issues, and its respective determinants. In a final step, I introduce two more articles from the collection of the *habilitation thesis* which tackle this shortcoming.

**EU issue salience:** A lot of scholarly work has been produced on party competition in Europe and over European issues. Scholars of EU politics increasingly put the spotlight on the salience of Europe in party competition. The fact that they focus on different country selections and rely on various data sources, such as expert surveys (e.g. Steenbergen & Scott, 2004; Whitefield & Rohrschneider, 2015), media coverage (e.g. Helbling & Tresch, 2011; Kriesi, 2007) or party manifestos (e.g. Popa & Dumitrescu, 2015; Spoon, 2012), leads to diverse, sometimes even contradictory, empirical insights. Although the conventional wisdom still holds that "EP elections are fought not as 'European elections' but [...] are in fact about national political issues" (Hix & Høyland, 2011, p. 157), numerous case studies (Brunsbach, John, & Werner, 2012; Guinaudeau & Persico, 2013; Kritzinger, Cavatorta, & Chari, 2004; Senninger & Wagner, 2015) illustrate that European issues are perhaps not the key issues, but parties do put strong emphasis on them. European-wide comparative studies finally reveal that EU issue salience in EP elections is indeed higher than expected (Spoon, 2012).

Alongside that, a major insight of this literature is that parties emphasize issues on which they hold distinct and strong positions which offer them an advantage over their competitors (C. de Vries & Hobolt, 2012; S. B. Hobolt & de Vries, 2015). Translated to European issues, most contributions to the debate expect political parties to profit the most from emphasizing Europe in their discourse if they have a clear Euro-critical position and face no major intra-party dissent over Europe. By challenging the pro-European consensus of mainstream parties and the political elite more generally, Euro-critical parties are seen as the strongest force driving the salience of Europe in party politics. The dominant role of Eurosceptics in integration conflicts is explained not least by the fact that European issues cut across the traditional left–right dimension, thus producing intense intra-party conflict within mainstream parties. For this reason, mainstream parties are expected to dismiss such issues with the aim of neutralizing internal conflicts.

***Positioning towards Europe:*** Not only has the salience of European issues been widely researched, but also the positions political parties take towards these issues. Initially, EU party stances were explained based on the left or right position of parties on the political spectrum as well as the party family they belong to. Liberal as well as Christian Democratic party families have been identified as pro-European parties, whereas parties on the far right and far left are described as anti-European parties (Hix & Lord, 1997; Marks, Wilson, & Ray, 2002). But more recently, together with the conceptualization of the GAL-TAN dimension (Hooghe, Marks, & Wilson, 2002) and the integration–demarcation cleavage (Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008) it has become clear that European issues cut across the traditional left–right dimension. Parties that are centrist on this dimension are known to have more pro-European stances, whereas parties from the extremes tend to be characterized by anti-European positions (Hix & Høyland, 2011). Although these findings are part of a wider scholarly debate (Prosser, 2016; Schäfer, Popa, Braun, & Schmitt, 2021), we can take the famous “inverted u-curve” (Hooghe et al., 2002) as one of the most stable insights on European party competition. When it comes to the specific determinants of party positions over European integration issues, two main thoughts are prevalent (Bakker et al., 2015). On the one hand is the smallest-distance model of electoral behaviour, according to which parties position themselves on relevant issue dimensions where they can expect to maximize their support (Downs, 1957; Enelow & Hinich, 1984). On the other hand, cleavage-based models put forward the idea that party responses towards European integration are integrated into the pre-existing ideological framework of political parties (Marks & Wilson, 2000; Marks et al., 2002).

The previous sections delineate unequivocally a vast range of research into how political parties deal with European issues. However, this strand of literature has not so far

taken into account the multi-dimensionality of Europe and its implications for party competition over Europe. This is unfortunate because the far-reaching developments in European politics that have occurred, such as the end of the noted “permissive consensus” among the European citizenry (Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007) and the ensuing “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), call for a broader and more precise understanding of the European integration issue. Interestingly, the European integration issue, which is frequently described as a “moving target” (Marks, 2004, p. 258), has undergone some conceptual refinements in the past by seminal scholars of party competition (Bartolini, 2005; Schmitt, 2008; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999). In addition, scholars of political attitudes have argued for the need to view orientations towards European integration as multi-dimensional (Anderson & Hecht, 2018; Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas, & de Vreese, 2011; Braun & Tausendpfund, 2014; Tausendpfund, 2013). In summary, we can conclude that scholars of European party systems have published numerous empirical studies on how political parties deal with European issues. Moreover, several studies have hinted that the European integration issue is a compound and multifaceted political issue. Nonetheless, this has not often been taken up in the literature on party competition in and over Europe. To overcome these major shortcomings, I have attempted to address this lack in the literature and have published two major articles (for an additional perspective, see also Hutter, Braun, & Kerscher, 2016) to demonstrate empirically that the multi-dimensionality of Europe is relevant for the field of party politics.

**Braun, Hutter, & Kerscher (2016)** show that, also from the perspective of political parties, Europe is a compound political issue. The article highlights the crucial difference between constitutive and policy-related European issues. Using data from the Euromanifestos project (Schmitt et al., 2018), we first show that Europe is much more salient in European Parliament elections than previously assumed when considering not only constitutive, but also policy-related European issues. Second, our empirical analysis reveals that different explanations come into play once we bring in the polity-vs.-policy distinction. These insights have important implications for our understanding of party competition on European integration.

**Braun, Popa, & Schmitt (2019)** investigate how Eurosceptic parties of the left and the right have responded to the multiple crises of the EU. To study the presumed changes in party positions towards Europe, we conceptualize different types of European issue: EU polity, EU economic, and EU immigration issues. The empirical analysis of Euromanifesto data (Schmitt et al., 2018) shows a general anti-European shift among Eurosceptic parties of both the left and the right and (somewhat less so) among mainstream parties between 2009 and 2014. Far-right parties become more critical across the board – that is, in terms of EU

polity, EU economic issues and EU immigration issues. In contrast, far-left parties become more critical in terms of both the general principles of the EU polity and of EU economic issues. In an additional analytical step, our findings show that the changes in the EU polity tone are not determined by issue-based repercussions of the multiple crises, but by the EU-related evaluation – the polity mood – of the national citizenry. The differing reactions with respect to these crises on the left and on the right as well as the differences revealed in terms of different types of EU issues and their determinants have important implications for the future path of the EU multi-level system.

#### 4. EU MULTI-LEVEL PARTY POLITICS

In the introductory part of the thesis, I have put forward the argument that although it seems uncontested that the EU “is not simply a national political system writ large” (Ladrech, 2015, p. 586), most scholars deal inappropriately with the exclusivity of the EU political system. This is in particular true for scholars of party competition. To gain a closer understanding of this, the following section examines current themes in a first step, explains in a second step the lack in the literature, and finally presents the remaining articles of the collection of the *habilitation thesis* which finally deal appropriately with this shortcoming.

“[T]he behaviour of both party elites and voters in one arena is not independent of what happens in another” (Golder, Lago, Blais, Gidengil, & Gschwend, 2017, p. 2). This insight is certainly not novel. Disparate strands of research point to such a logic of multi-level interdependences. One important strand of literature in this regard is the study of electoral behaviour in elections to the European Parliament (EP). Numerous articles on the second-order nature of EP elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) illustrate that electoral behaviour in second-order EP elections depends to a large degree on decisions taken in the first-order arena. To put it differently, individuals decide to vote for a party in EP elections depending on their electoral behaviour in national elections or, and this is even more noteworthy, they behave differently, but always in relation to the first-order electoral system. This results in a remarkable voting pattern driven by both strategic and sincere motivations. To give an example: a French voter decides to cast her ballot for the green party *Europe Écologie-Les Verts* in EP elections, although she voted in national elections for *La République en Marche!*. The reasoning behind this decision would be that in second-order EP elections less is perceived to be at stake than in first-order national elections. A vote is thus more valuable in national elections, and can be allocated more easily (and this can happen for strategic and/or

sincere reasons) to a less promising party (in terms of its probability of obtaining a higher vote share) in EP elections.

Whereas voters seem to adapt intuitively to this situation, the same cannot be observed in the case of political parties. The fact that the EU multi-level system requires a more complex and more differentiated structural basis from political actors raises particular problems for political parties and interest groups (Grande, 2000: 20-21). But why is the required step of adaptation such a particularly difficult task in the case of political parties? One of the main reasons for this lack of adaptation seems to lie in the nature of the multi-level architecture itself. While multiple political actors need to cope with and compete within this multi-level setting, “political parties are constrained in a number of ways” (Ladrech, 2010: 395). They do not benefit in the form of direct financial resources from the EU; besides votes and policy, political office is one of the more valuable currencies in party competition and, at the EU level, party representatives are appointed rather than their jobs being contested in competitive elections (Ladrech, 2002, 2010).

This pattern has changed at least to some degree in recent times. On the one hand, through the introduction of the lead candidate system (“*Spitzenkandidaten*”) which was put in place for the first time in the 2014 EP elections, EP elections were intended to become more visible to potential electorates (Christiansen, 2016; S. B. Hobolt, 2014). Accordingly, political actors such as parties were expected to increase their competition over major political issues in these elections. On the other hand, in view of the fact that parties can be characterized by their strategic behaviour, some parties have more incentives to engage in the debate over European issues than others; mainstream parties are for instance perceived to have fewer, and challenger parties more, incentives to increase party competition over European issues (Lefkofridi, 2020). Although we can indeed observe some trends of adaptation of political parties and party competition to multi-level requirements, these changes are relatively incremental. “[T]he degree to which this interwoven relationship between the EU and member states is not reflected in the competitive politics of member states nor in the organisational structure of the parties themselves” (Ladrech, 2002, p. 48) is rather astonishing. The incentives for *national* political parties – which are still the most influential party organizations compared to EP party groups or European parties – to adapt to the EU multi-level structure are limited. The EU itself has no direct influence on national political parties, national election rules, or national parties’ organizational statutes (Ladrech, 2010, p. 134). This in turn has important consequences for (multi-level) party politics: first, we can observe low levels of Europeanization in this field, and second, “the lack of a partisan discourse about the EU policy orientation in the public domain” (Ladrech, 2007, p. 957) is evident. The upshot is:

[...] a situation in which national party politics continues to be practised as if the EU had no bearing at all in national politics and elections, as if the distinction between domestic politics and foreign policy [...] was one of complete separation, rather than one of interdependence” (Ladrech, 2012, p. 53).

To sum up: (1) The behaviour of political actors in one arena is not independent of what happens in another; (2) These interdependencies lead to low-incentive structures for political parties which are inherent to EU multi-level systems; (3) The combination of such low-incentive structures and parties’ strategic orientations result in a situation which obviously makes a durable adaptation to the multi-level structure for (the majority of) political parties not very attractive. In the following, I will briefly outline the ways in which I have dealt with this intriguing and highly important question of interdependence of political levels or arenas in some of my articles in the collection of the *habilitation thesis*.

#### 4.1 DIFFERENTIAL ISSUE EMPHASIS IN EP AND NATIONAL ELECTIONS

As mentioned above, parties are purposeful and highly strategic political actors. Therefore, one major aim was to study how this strategic behaviour comes into force within the complex background of the EU multi-level system. Accordingly, **Braun and Schmitt (2020)** investigate the consequences of multi-level electoral systems on party behaviour. The article examines party manifestos for EP elections and compares them with party manifestos for national elections. Using manifesto data and covering 15 EU countries between 1979 and 2014, we focus on European issues and ask whether parties’ issue emphasis and the positions they take are the same in both kinds of document and respectively at both levels of the MLES. We show that although parties put more emphasis on EU issues in EP than in national elections, they behave sincerely regarding their position towards the EU – these are very similar irrespective of the electoral context. The main finding of the empirical study thus is that parties devote much more attention to European issues in EP than in national elections. In contrast, they do not differ to a large degree regarding their position towards European issues since they need to be credible to their voters – one of the most important requirements of political parties in order to gain votes. This noteworthy finding is highly relevant for the so far fragmented literature exploring the strategic behaviour of political parties within the EU multi-level system. It confirms that the behaviour of political actors in one arena is not independent of what happens in another.

## 4.2 INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS AND MULTI-LEVEL PARTY POLITICS

As outlined in detail above, political parties so far have very low incentives to adapt to the complex EU multi-level setting. Their main motivation to compete with other parties originates from the national political arena. This low-incentive structure has been revealed by the role of political parties within the novel “lead candidate” system in EP elections. Although the 2014 elections aimed at increasing their visibility through European-wide lead candidates, this major goal remained unfulfilled. The findings of two empirical studies which are part of the collection of the *habilitation thesis* highlight these multi-level constraints as a major obstacle to this innovation at the EU level of governance.

**Braun and Popa (2018)** investigate how national political parties have reacted to this new institutional setting. Using data from the 2014 Euromanifesto study (Schmitt, Braun, Popa, Mikhaylov, & Dwinger, 2016), the article examines if and under what conditions political parties put emphasis on the *Spitzenkandidaten* system in their party manifestos and whether they take positive or negative stances when talking about it. The findings reveal that parties put little emphasis on the issue. Moreover, the factors promoting the *Spitzenkandidaten* system suggest that parties decide strategically upon emphasizing that topic or take a positive stance on it if they expect to benefit from this. This benefit is strongly related to the national electoral arena. Consequently, the findings clearly illustrate that EU party competition so far is determined to a large degree by national party preferences.

**Braun and Schwarzbözl (2019)** study the debate about the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* in the 2014 EP election. Focusing on parties’ efforts to make the candidates visible to voters, the article argues that the multi-level character of these elections creates large differences concerning individual parties’ incentives to promote the *Spitzenkandidaten* in their campaigns. Analysing a novel dataset of campaign communication on Facebook, we find that only a few parties highlighted them, while many did not. In line with our theoretical argument, this variation is systematic and can be attributed to an absence of incentives for most parties. Especially nominating a candidate at the European level only has a modest positive effect on national parties’ willingness to put the candidates in the spotlight. This lack of commitment to the nominated candidates strikingly highlights the constraints on party competition which are prevalent in multi-level systems.

To sum up, the implementation of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure in EP elections clearly illustrates that party competition in EP elections is anchored to an important degree at the national level. Moreover, the case of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is highly insightful for the particular constraints of multi-level systems on political parties.

#### 4.3 THE CASE OF ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The idea of low-incentive structures is not only pertinent in terms of political parties, but also for elections and the electorate. In EP elections, national political parties compete for votes among their respective national electorates. In order to be successful in convincing this national electorate, one can easily imagine that – not least because national incentive structures are at play – they run an election campaign that is promising in terms of gaining votes. In doing this, political parties frequently run election campaigns that are not so different from the national election campaign, and certainly not a European one. All of this resonates in the vast scholarly research on second-order elections (Reif, 1984; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt et al., 2020). The remaining three articles of the collection of the *habilitation thesis* investigate the idea of low-incentive structures and nationally shaped opportunity structures from the point of view of voters, but beyond the second-order election model – that is, with an additional eye to the Europeanness of these elections (Braun, forthcoming-a), the politicization of these elections (Braun & Grande, 2021), and the mobilizing policy issues in these elections (Braun & Schäfer, submitted).

Accordingly, **Braun (forthcoming-a)** offers an alternative view on EP elections investigating their “Europeanness” and the related implications for voter participation in these elections. The article studies the Europeanness of the public debate in the run-up to the 2019 EP elections and the mobilizing power of European issues in these electoral contests. The findings of the empirical analysis of media and survey data indicate that the elections to the EP were more European contests than ever before in the history of these elections – yet this is not true in the same way for all the countries under consideration. Moreover, the Europeanness of electorates, measured as genuine orientations towards EU politics, matters for electoral participation and thus has the power to mobilize citizens. Nonetheless, national factors still play an important role in these elections. For the following reasons, these findings are quite insightful for the scholarly debate over multi-level electoral politics in Europe: in the same way as the personalization of the election campaign at the EU level of governance did not result in significantly higher turnout rates, because (national) political parties did not push *their* lead candidates in their election campaigns and did not even have any incentives to do so (Braun & Popa, 2018; Braun & Schwarzbözl, 2019), orientations towards EU politics are not meant to be the only means of mobilizing citizens to vote in EP elections. Consequently, in the EU multi-level system, we always have to bear in mind both national and EU-level factors.

**Braun and Grande (2021)** investigate the politicization of European issues in European elections between 1994 and 2019. Contrary to scholarly expectations, the findings

of this article show a higher level of politicization of European issues compared to national elections. However, politicization was declining in both electoral arenas from the early 2000s until 2014 despite the increasing visibility of radical Eurosceptic parties. This paper suggests that this decline in politicization is a consequence of relatively low levels of emphasis put on EU issues by mainstream political parties. It argues that Eurosceptic parties have had a paradoxical effect on politicization, since mainstream parties have responded to the former's mobilizing efforts by de-emphasizing European issues rather than pursuing a confrontational strategy. This finding is corroborated by the 2019 elections, where we observe remarkably high levels of politicization in those countries where mainstream parties have been forced to open up the debate around European issues. From the perspective of multi-level party politics, this paper thus shows most importantly that national and EP elections are linked to each other. Moreover, it has become clear that, particularly in later elections, political parties are seemingly starting to overcome the constraints of the multi-level system and to engage in party competition over Europe, especially because mainstream parties have had more incentives to do so in recent times.

**Braun and Schäfer (submitted)** explore whether different types of European policy issues had a mobilizing effect in the 2019 EP elections. We argue that EU citizens had a higher tendency to participate in these elections because they attributed a greater relevance to one of the four central European policy issues of "climate change and environment", "economy and growth", "immigration" and "European integration". Moreover, we maintain that people were more likely to turn out when their subjectively most relevant policy issues were also systemically salient in their country. We empirically test these propositions using two different datasets. The findings reveal the key role of major European policy issues for political participation in EU politics. The implications of this study for multi-level electoral politics can be summarized as follows: although European elections can still be considered second-order national elections, there is empirical evidence for their increasing politicization and mobilization in these elections. Accordingly, and in line with the two articles presented above (Braun, forthcoming-a; Braun & Grande, 2021), "Europe" appears to matter in present-day EP elections.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The increasing politicization of Europe, together with an intense period of multiple crises faced by the EU and many of its member states, has clearly illustrated that the character of the EU has changed fundamentally during the last two decades. And together with this

important transformation, the related field(s) of research have changed, too. Particularly, the dimension of politics has become visibly more relevant within the research field of EU studies. Despite these profound transformations of the Union, its member states, and the field of research, however, most scholars of party competition still adhere to traditional concepts and definitions that have since been overhauled. Against this backdrop, the collection of articles presented in the previous sections has demonstrated why these obdurate approaches are inappropriate for the present-day investigation of party and electoral politics in Europe.

The first major issue identified within the literature on EU politics was the lack of systematic consideration of the multi-dimensionality of Europe together with its implications for party competition over Europe. The conventional, unidimensional conceptualization of Europe is confusing and sometimes even misleading in the case of party politics. To address these shortcomings, I have contributed to this literature and published two main articles (Braun et al., 2016; Braun et al., 2019; for an additional perspective, see also Hutter et al., 2016) to empirically demonstrate that the multi-dimensionality of Europe is highly relevant for the field of party politics. The second major issue was the lack of a multi-level perspective in the majority of scholarly work on EU politics. The literature review revealed that the behaviour of political actors in one arena is not independent of what happens in another. As a theoretical framework, I therefore argued that these interdependences lead to low-incentive structures for political parties, and offered a diverse set of empirical examples for how to deal appropriately with the idea of multi-level party politics in Europe. The argument of persisting interdependences and low-incentive structures has been tested in three published articles (Braun & Popa, 2018; Braun & Schmitt, 2020; Braun & Schwarzbözl, 2019) and shown to apply. Against this background, I have argued that the idea of low-incentive structures is not only relevant for political parties. Accordingly, I also investigated the role of elections and the electorate. The innovation here was to go beyond the mere second-order election model and to acquire research findings that complemented the theoretical insights of this model. In three more published and submitted articles, I have thus studied EP elections and the European electorate with an additional eye to Europeanness (Braun, forthcoming-a), politicization (Braun & Grande, 2021), and mobilization (Braun & Schäfer, submitted).

The collected theoretical and empirical insights of these studies finally permit an answer to the question of whether and how party competition is constrained by the EU multi-level system. First of all, party competition (as well as the related field of electoral politics) is constrained by the EU multi-level system. We can observe a marked interdependence between the different levels within which political parties are competing. In the same way, different electoral arenas and their respective electorates participate in electoral processes that are strongly interconnected and thus interdependent. As a matter of course, this is true

for all levels of governance at play: in federal states for instance, such interdependences are prevalent between the national and the subnational level (Gross & Jankowski, 2020; Hijino & Hideo, 2021; Klingelhöfer, 2014; Müller, 2013). Nonetheless, within the EU multi-level setting such interdependences have been less studied so far (for a recent example, see however Talving & Vasilopoulou, 2021). Accordingly, the presented findings add to a highly relevant and still growing literature that aims at linking subnational, national, and supranational levels (Golder et al., 2017). In this view, the last paragraph seeks to point out some interesting routes for future investigation.

Unequivocally, in view of the presented findings, the future study of EU politics needs to consider more systematically the interdependences between the different levels of governance at play appropriately. Important contributions in this regard are two recent textbooks on European politics which offer analytical frameworks for understanding both domestic and EU-level politics in Europe (C. E. de Vries et al., 2021; Lelieveldt & Princen, 2015) within a single perspective but not in a separate manner. From a more research-oriented perspective on the particular theme of EU multi-level *party* politics, the future of the European party system seems a very intriguing topic for future research. The European party system was for a long time mainly perceived as the subset of national party systems in Europe without a greater degree of interaction between the parties at a more European level – albeit with a trend towards convergence of party systems in Europe (Caramani, 2012). Similarly, political parties have been characterized by their incapability or unwillingness to adapt to the requirements of the multi-level system. The national style of party competition was more or less imposed on the EU level and this had significant consequences. It resulted in low levels of Europeanization in this field (Ladrech, 2015) and a lack of a partisan discourse about European issues (Ladrech, 2007). And in the most extreme case, it could even result in a “so-called hollowing out of party competition” (Ladrech, 2012, p. 52). Nevertheless, the following indicators point to the fact that this field has been set in motion and that party competition finally seems to be transforming and adapting increasingly to the particular requirements of the EU multi-level system.

- *Changes in national party competition by mainstream and Eurosceptic parties:* The fact that some parties (namely, Eurosceptic ones) have more incentives than others (that is, mainstream parties) to engage in a debate over European integration (Green-Pedersen, 2012; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2015; Lefkofridi, 2020), has ultimately led to higher levels of politicization (Braun & Grande, 2021). This in turn is presumed to result in a greater degree of Europeanization.
- *Changes in national party competition by pan-European pro-EU parties:* For the first time in the history of EP elections (if we leave aside the Pirate Party and *Libertas*), in

2019 *pan*-European parties, namely Volt and DiEM25, entered the political stage. The main characteristics of these pan-European parties are their transnational, pro-EU objectives not just to overcome conventional domestic debates and national party competition, but also to initiate a new vision for Europe (Braun, forthcoming-b). Although the electoral success of these parties was quite low in the 2019 EP elections, these parties could nevertheless have the potential to form a new counterpart to the Eurosceptic challenger parties and to increase party competition over European policy issues. Again, higher levels of politicization and a greater degree of Europeanization would be expected in a subsequent step.

- *A more transnational dimension of EU party competition*: Operating under the premise that representative democracy in the EU can only function if parties mobilize beyond borders, Lefkofridi and Katsanidou (2018) are able to show that European party groups (EPGs) compete with each other – “especially on left–right issues, the kind of issues where the EP has policy competence” (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2018, p. 1478). Specifically, they show that the transnational EPGs are coherent in terms of most political issues where the EP has policy competence. This finding shows that we might be on our way towards a more transnational dimension of EU party competition.

In summary, we seem to be currently living in a period when long-term trends, such as the gradual convergence of party systems since the 1970s (Caramani, 2012), might be reinforced through the continuation of certain patterns so far observed. This tendency has been boosted by the multiple crises (financial and economic crisis; perceived immigration crisis; Brexit; Covid-19) that have assailed Europe and which make the necessity for political parties to compete and mobilize beyond borders even more crucial than ever before in “normal times of European integration”. These current transformations of European party systems can be interpreted as a chance for political parties to find a path out of their incapability or unwillingness to adapt to the requirements of the multi-level system and to prevent the above-mentioned “hollowing out of party competition” (Ladrech, 2012). In any case, it is uncontested that these developments will offer a wealth of intriguing research questions for future scholars of party competition in Europe.

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