Exposure to democracy and MEPs attitude toward EU integration[*]

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the effect of exposure to democracy during adolescence and early adulthood on the pro-EU attitude of the members of the European Parliament. Relying on the psychological theory of 'impressionable years', we test whether members exposed to less democratic regimes at the age of 18 to 25 have a higher probability of voting against pro-EU instances in the roll-call-voting of the first six legislatures, from 1979 to 2009. Our results suggest that exposure to democracy increases the probability of voting in favor of pro-EU policies by about 2%-7%, depending on the legislature. We find that the effect is stronger in votes with a significant cleavage on EU instances, while it is irrelevant in votes that do not involve them. Our results take into account heterogeneity in political groups, country of election, year of birth, and legislature and resist several robustness checks.

Keywords: EU attitudes, exposure to democracy, impressionable years, European Parliament, NOMINATE

1 Introduction

With the rise of mass Euroscepticism (Brack, 2018b) European integration has become increasingly contested at the national and supranational level. The opposition to EU integration is not only a recent phenomenon. As early as the 6th legislature (EP6, 2004-2009) 163 MEPs (19%) displayed Eurosceptics voting behaviour (Brack, 2018a). Yet the 8th legislature (2014-2019) featured an unprecedented number of Eurosceptic parliamentarians (Hix et al., 2023). Eurosceptics political groups and national parties comprise 229 MEPs, amounting to 30% of the chamber (Brack, 2018a). In an era of permanent crises, the EU decision-making process has adapted to a 'new normal' of muddling through waning support for European integration and the rise of Eurosceptic parties at the national level and in the EP (Christiansen, 2020). The 2019 election cycle yielded the most fragmented European Parliament, with the two largest parties for the first time holding a seat-share below the majority (Brack et al., 2023). The threat of Eurosceptic parties within the EP has initially been dismissed as the institutional context of broad coalitions; their isolation by mainstream parties and their limited cohesion impede meaningful legislative impact (Brack, 2018a). Eurosceptic parties are rarely influential in determining voting outcomes because of the closer cooperation of pro-EU groups, indicating that the primary dimension of coalition building in the 9th legislature (EP9, 2019-2024) follows attitudes to EU integration (Brack et al., 2023).

As EU integration has become a central cleavage over time, what it captures has also evolved paralleling changes to the EU polity. European integration is a composite matter, potentially capturing a variety of issues ranging from the Union's constitutional and institutional dimension to its policies. The European project has grown in scale and scope with the accession of new Member States and the expansion of competences allocated to the EU level. EU integration has evolved from a primarily regulatory function to encompass core-state powers at the heart of national sovereignties. In parallel, the Maastricht Treaty marked a critical juncture for attitudes toward EU integration (Schäfer et al., 2021). The end of the era of 'permissive consensus' gave way to a growing (identitarian) 'constraining dissensus' over EU integration (Hooghe et al., 2009). A never ending series of crises — chiefly the Eurozone and migration crisis — fueled the rise of Euroscepticism (Van Elsas et al., 2016), in turn making EU integration increasingly salient within the political debate (Hooghe and Marks, 2018). Following the increasingly political nature of the Union post-Maastricht, cleavages over integration shifted toward a socio-cultural divide (Hooghe et al., 2002; Jackson and Jolly, 2021; Marks et al., 2021), aligning with the broader restructuring of political conflict away from the traditional left-right dimension and toward clashes over globalization, dividing moderate mainstream and populist parties (Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008). The divide contrasts support for globaliza-

tion with the defense of national sovereignty (Treib, 2021), which has found alternative definitions within the literature as a cleavage across integration and demarcation (e.g. Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008), transnational and national attachment (Hooghe et al., 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2018) or cosmopolitan and communitarian values (e.g. De Wilde et al., 2019). The common trait of this cleavage is its relation to a series of non-economic and strongly identitarian issues. In this context, attitudes can be characterized across a (GAL-TAN) spectrum that sees green, alternative and libertarian positions on one side and traditional, authoritarian and nationalist ones on the other (e.g. Hooghe et al., 2002; Jackson and Jolly, 2021; Marks et al., 2021).

EU integration has been part of political conflict within the EP since its early days as a directly elected legislature (Hix et al., 2003, 2006), complementing the dominant traditional left-right cleavage. Yet, its relevance has increased over time (Otjes and van der Veer, 2016). For topics that fit the GAL-TAN divide well, such as the Eurozone crisis, the predominance of EU integration over left-right cleavages is documented in MEPs' voting behavior during the 8th legislature (2014-2019) (Blumenau and Lauderdale, 2018). In this period, MEPs' preferences may be understood as falling within a single dimension encompassing EU integration, socio-cultural and economic issues (Hix et al., 2023). The growing centrality of the pro/anti EU dimension also emerges during the 9th legislature; increasingly often voting coalitions bring together pro-European parties against Eurosceptics (Brack et al., 2023). In this context, support and opposition to EU integration is analysed across European Political Groups (EPGs) and national political parties, as voting cohesion within the EP is high (Hix et al., 2009) and has been increasing over time (Hix and Noury, 2007). Yet preferences of MEPs can be highly heterogeneous within the EPG, especially after the 2004 enlargement and among certain political families (Hix and Noury, 2007, 2009; Lo, 2018). The individual characteristics of MEPs — for instance, considering gender divides in voting behavior (e.g. Ramstetter and Habersack, 2020) — have received limited attention.

The increasingly central GAL-TAN cleavage does, however, suggest that support for EU integration touches upon attitudes which can be expected to become enshrined at a young age. Indeed, the psychological theory of the 'impressionable years' suggests that life experiences at this critical age are highly significant in determining the formation of values and traits that remain mostly unchanged over a lifetime (Krosnick and Alwin, 1989). Past research has shown this time frame to be crucial for several values relevant to the GAL-TAN cleavage and the attitudes toward integration conceived as transnational trust and support for EU democracy. For instance, Borghi et al. (2020) show exposure to terrorism during this timeframe decreases social trust. Experiencing macroeconomic shocks in youth increases the propensity to vote for populist parties and decreases trust toward national and EU institutions (Gavresi and Litina, 2023). In parallel, we can

expect impressionable years to matter for the elite as well; Carreri and Teso (2021) show exposure to recessions shapes attitudes of the members of U.S. Congress. Of great relevance to this study, Acemoglu et al. (2021) shows growing up in a democracy increases the support for democracy itself in a sample of citizens in 110 countries. We may expect a similar relevance of the quality of institutions during youth for the supranational counterpart of support for EU integration. We consider this additional driver of pro/anti-EU voting in the EP, related to the individual preferences of MEPs. In particular, we study whether the level of democracy of institutions experienced in the past may shape MEPs' attitude toward EU integration. In order to answer the research question we rely on the institutional regime that MEPs experienced at the ages of 18 to 25. In particular, consistent with the literature, we expect that experiencing less democratic regimes in adolescence and early adulthood may shape the values and traits of individuals toward a more 'autocratic' inclination, hence developing less favourable attitudes towards international openness, integration, and the transfer of powers to supranational institutions. We contribute to this debate by exploiting panel data consisting of all votes cast by each MEP in the first six legislatures. Our results suggest that exposure to democracy increases the probability of voting in favor of pro-EU policies by about 6%-16%, depending on the legislature.

Given its transnational nature and heterogeneous national institutions the European Parliament offers an ideal case to test the impact of exposure to democracy during impressionable years to elite voting behavior. Findings add an additional facet to the debate on attitudes toward EU integration and the crucial challenges the Union faces today. The last decade has seen the growing saliency of socio-cultural cleavages in EU politics, with the migration and rule of law crisis in a context of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern European Countries. As cohorts exposed to non-democratic regimes' pre-accession age, findings turn the spotlight on the long-lasting consequences for the integration process of degrading the quality of institutions. A first concern relates to the rule of law crisis and democratic backsliding, as the degradation of the quality of institutions can represent a long-lasting challenge for the support of EU integration. Similarly, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine revamped the debate over enlargement with the granting of candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine in 2022, this work offers a word of caution as past regimes cast a persistent shadow, even when currently meeting accession criteria. Our findings also support the argument that the rise of populism and Euroscepticism is not just a matter of current but also past crises (Gavresi and Litina, 2023). The era of polycrisis — Eurozone, migration, Brexit, pandemic and war in Ukraine — that has invested the EU institution and the problematic track record of crisis management (Jones et al., 2016) may also leave a permanent scar for the younger generation.

We have described the most relevant economic and political science literature in this section. Next, we detail the empirical strategy and the dataset in Section 2. Results are displayed and discussed in Section 3. In the conclusion we highlight the relevance of our results, link them to the existing literature and explore possible extensions of the study.

2   Data and Empirical strategy

In the following section, we first describe the data. We then present our empirical strategy which builds on the impressionable years hypothesis.

2.1   Data

Support for EU Integration   We build our dependent variable on the basis of roll-call votes (RCVs)[1] in the EP1-6 covering the legislatures spanning over 40 years, from 1979 to 2009. This timeframe allows us to take into account the potentially relevant post-Maastricht turn toward a higher level of contestation of EU integration as well as periods that exclude the challenges of the big enlargement and the polycrisis, which have affected the Union from the Great Recession onward. Yet, analyzing support for EU integration in the EP over 40 years raises several challenges. The role of the EP within the EU political system evolved over time, from an almost solely consultative body to a powerful co-legislator, in principle, on the same footing with the Council. Similarly, the scope of EU competences expanded with subsequent Treaty reform. Accordingly, one can expect attitudes over EU integration to change over time, over procedure and subject matter. Arguably, non-legislative votes over procedural issues are less likely to be divisive, especially in attracting pro-/anti- EU polarization. Conversely, voting in certain policy areas, such as for instance migration and other policies relating to core (nation) state powers, is bound to be a privileged arena for contestation of EU integration.

Assessing the ex-ante relevance of EU integration in a given vote would be problematic. To address this issue we generate empirically for each vote a measure of pro-EU support and polarization. We base our measure on ideological preferences identified through NOMINATE, which has been broadly applied for scaling votes within the EP (Cavallaro et al., 2018; Hix et al., 2006; Hix and Noury, 2009; Hix et al., 2009; Lo, 2018; Martin, 2021; Ramstetter and Habersack, 2020). We consider the second dimension of NOMINATE, which represents support for EU integration, as calculated by Hix et al. (2006) for EP1-5 and we extend it to EP6.[2] We do not use MEPs'

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[1] Previous research shows bias in RCVs is limited and they can be reliably exploited in the context of the EP (Hix et al., 2018; Kaniok and Mocek, 2017).

[2] We do not include EP7 in line with finding of changed dimensionality in the political space, which does not allow for a clearcut detection of attitudes toward EU integration

NOMINATE scores directly as they are not robust to comparisons across legislature (Lo, 2018). Conversely, we leverage scores to (i) detect if voting in favor or against is a pro- or anti-EU stance and (ii) whether EU integration is a relevant cleavage.

In detail, we compute the average score of the second dimension of NOMINATE among all the MEPs voting yes or no, separately, and we compute the difference, which is vote-specific. If the vote is somehow related to the second dimension of NOMINATE (i.e. EU integration), we expect the difference to be large (in absolute value), meaning that MEPs' votes are clustered according to their attitude toward EU integration. Conversely, when the difference in the second dimension of NOMINATE is small, votes and NOMINATE scores are uncorrelated and the voting behavior of MEPs is independent from the attitude toward EU integration. The sign of the difference allows us to determine whether yes or no are pro- or anti-EU.[3] We construct our dependent variable starting from a dummy taking value 1 when MEPs vote takes a pro-EU stance and 0 for those votes that can be classified as going against EU integration.[4] The next step is the selection of salient votes, those with a larger cleavage on the second dimension of NOMINATE. We test our results at different thresholds of polarization: we repeat the analysis only selecting votes where the absolute value of the difference between scores of yes and no votes as outlined above exceed each threshold level. As the polarization threshold increases, the sample size of contested vote decreases. Taking the case of the first legislature, considering only those votes with (absolute) differences above 0.2 yields 653 out of the 886 votes as contested. Considering a 0.5 polarization threshold conversely leads to 294 contested votes. Keeping as a reference the 0.5 threshold, contested votes increase to 474 in EP2 reaching 2189 votes in EP4, respectively amounting to 22 and 64% of the votes. We expect to find significant differences only when polarization is sufficiently high. Finally, we take the average of the voting behaviour for each MEP within each legislature on the election of votes across each threshold of polarization. This procedure allows us to routinely detect and select only those votes with a meaningful cleavage over the pro/anti-EU integration dimension and detect which voting behavior is pro/anti-EU, independent of the type of vote and on the nature of the procedure. Our approach allows us to avoid any predetermined selection of when and where contestation over EU integration may be expected. Conversely, we consider empirically whether contestation has taken place.

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distinct from other cleavages (Hix et al., 2023).

[3]More in details, if the average of NOMINATE scores of MEPs voting yes is positive, then yes are pro-EU and no are anti-EU, while the opposite is true if the average of NOMINATE scores of MEPs voting yes is negative.

[4]Alternatively, we construct the dependent variable weighting pro-/anti-EU stances for each vote by the level of polarization of the vote.

Exposure to Democracy We build our measure of exposure to democracy on a measure taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database (Coppedge et al., 2021). The V-Dem dataset is the most comprehensive source measuring the level of democracy across all countries of the world. The latest version of the V-Dem dataset covers more than 200 countries from 1789 to 2020. The V-Dem dataset provides four different measures of democracy: liberal democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, and egalitarian democracy. Each item is assessed by an expert and ranges from 0 (low level of democracy) to 1 (high level of democracy). We take the average of these four indicators as a broad measure of democracy in each country every year. In order to measure the average exposure to democracy during the impressionable years of each MEP, we compute the average democracy score when the MEP is aged 18 to 25 in the country in which they are elected. Therefore, we can exploit heterogeneity both across countries and over time, since only MEPs elected in the same country and born in the same year have the same exposure to democracy.

It is important to notice here that there is no data available on the country of residence of MEPs when they were aged 18 to 25. However, we collected data both on the country of election and on the country of birth, so that we are able to make different assumptions about the institutions MEPs were exposed to when 18 to 25. We are also able to identify those MEPs who were born and elected in the same country, thus with a higher probability of being exposed to the institutions of that country.

We retrieve other information on MEPs from the public archives on the website of the European Parliament (Michon and Wiest, 2021). In detail, information on date of birth, gender, national party, and EP group are used as control variables in the regression analysis.

Table A.1 shows the descriptive statistics of the main variables, Table A.2 shows the levels of exposure to democracy in each legislature, while Table A.3 displays the sample composition and the fixed effects variables used in the regressions. As the descriptive statistics show, the mean level of exposure to democracy increases by around 15 percentage points, going from 0.44 in the first legislature to 0.60 in the sixth legislature. Also, more than 75% of the MEPs in our sample were born before 1950.

2.2 Empirical Strategy

We aim to test whether exposure to democracy increases pro-European attitudes among MEPs. Uncovering a causal relationship between exposure to democracy and pro-European attitudes is surely a challenge since there are many confounding factors that can explain such a relationship. To overcome the usual difficulties when investigating individual attitudes, we build on the impressionable years hypothesis (Krosnick and Alwin, 1989).

According to the impressionable years hypothesis, people form their po-

litical attitudes while aged between 18 and 25. To the extent that the state of the political institutions is exogenous to the individual MEPs when they are between 18 and 25 years old, the impressionable years hypothesis allows us to test whether or not politicians exposed to higher democratic contexts are then more willing to support integration across EU member states.

In brief, we estimate the model

$$VoteEU_{igctp} = \alpha + \beta Exp_{igctp} + \lambda Fem_{igctp} + \gamma_c + \delta_p + \theta_g + \eta_t + \varepsilon_{igctp} \quad (1)$$

where $VoteEU_{igctp}$ measures the probability of voting for pro-European stances of MEP i elected in country c in the p-th legislature, belonging to parliamentary group g, and born in year t, and γ, δ, θ and η are the respective fixed-effects. Exp is the democracy index described above and ε_{igctp} is the idiosyncratic error term. Since some MEPs are elected in more than one legislature and their behavior is clearly not independent across legislatures, we cluster the standard error at MEPs' level. Fixed effects allow us to control for time-invariant characteristics related to country, legislature, parliamentary group and year of birth that may influence the behavior of individual MEPs. As a control, we also include a binary variable, Fem indicating the gender of the MEPs.

For our strategy to be valid, we need a certain degree of variation of exposure to democracy both within and between countries, so the sample of countries and EP used to estimate the relation above becomes crucial. As a benchmark, we employ the most consistent sample over time, that is, the group of EU-12 countries.[5] As a robustness check, we also include Austria, Finland and Sweden, which joined the EU with the fourth Parliament. We decide not to include the ten countries that joined the EU on May 1st, 2004 as they are observed only in EP6 and their contribution would be absorbed by the fixed effects.

3 Results

Table 1 shows the main results focusing on votes with a medium level of polarization (set at 0.70, as defined in Section 2.1) over legislatures. Overall, our findings suggest that MEPs exposed to higher levels of democracy while aged between 18 and 25 are more likely to vote for pro-European stances, controlling for gender, birth year, country of election, legislature and EP group. Interestingly, we observe that such effect declines both in magnitude and in significance with the inclusion of more recent legislatures. Indeed, the average exposure to democracy increases in younger cohorts, while the variance of the exposure reduces over time. Essentially, MEPs elected in the last legislatures in the sample of EU-12 countries have all experienced very

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[5] Belgium, Denmark, France, Federal Republic of Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom

high levels of democracy, as emerges from Figures A.1 and A.2, which show an increase in the average of exposure to democracy and a decrease in its variance.

Table 1: Main Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	EP1	EP1-2	EP1-3	EP1-4	EP1-5	EP1-6
	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se
Democracy index at age 18-25	0.224***	0.158**	0.163***	0.129***	0.089**	0.058**
	(0.085)	(0.067)	(0.057)	(0.045)	(0.038)	(0.025)
Female dummy	0.032	0.001	-0.000	0.001	0.004	0.010
	(0.032)	(0.018)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.006)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.82	0.61	0.68	0.72	0.72	0.72
N	490	1071	1643	2232	2827	3438

Standard errors clustered at MEP in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70.
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

As previously discussed, the effect we test depends crucially on the level of polarization or contestation of the votes. Figure 1 shows the coefficients and standard errors for several sets of regressions: each panel represents a different set of legislatures, and each point represents a different cleavage threshold. From the figure it is clear that the magnitude and the significance of the coefficients increases as contestation increases. However, for very high thresholds we do not find significant differences. This may be both because of the smaller sample size and higher discipline of MEPs when cleavages across political groups are substantial and the vote itself potentially is more salient. Another trend emerging from Figure 1 is that the effect declines by adding more recent legislatures. As said above, such a trend is consistent with the decline in the heterogeneity of exposure to democracy, since younger cohorts have experienced more consolidated democracy (see Table A.2).

The size of the effect is not negligible: the effect of a 1 st.dev. variation in the democracy indicator (that is about .24 p.p. in the V-dem) on the probability of voting for pro-EU stances ranges from 1.4 to 5.3 p.p., that is about 2%-7% of the average. It is important to highlight that this effect is additional to all other determinants of voting behavior that are potentially correlated to exposure to democracy and included in the regression, such as EPG affiliation.

Robustness checks First, we consider an alternative specification of the dependent variable overcoming the simple classification of votes as pro- or anti-EU. In the benchmark model, we rely on a dummy variable taking value 1 if the vote is pro-EU and 0 if the vote is anti-EU. On the one side,

Figure 1: Different polarization thresholds.
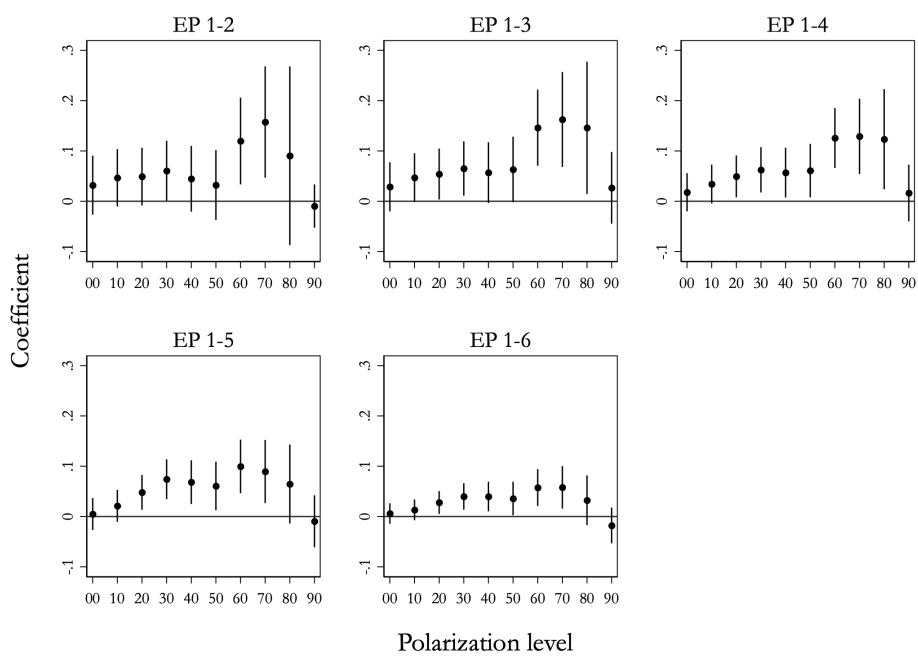
The figure plots the coefficients of interest and the related confidence intervals (at 10%, on the vertical axis) from different regressions, in which the dependent variable is computed using different polarization levels (horizontal axis). Each panel refers to a different set of legislatures.

this measure is very simple and intuitive; on the other, it does not take into account the 'intensity' of support for integration. As our classification consider the difference in NOMINATE we can place each vote along a spectrum by weighting every vote by the same indicator we employ to identify polarized votes. Results are reported in Table A.4 and show that the significance of the coefficients is the same as in the benchmark model, but the magnitude of the coefficients is greater, meaning that the effect of exposure to democracy is stronger if we account for the extent to which votes represent pro-/anti-UE cleavages, consistently with the increasing effect for higher thresholds.

In parallel, we test another key element of our analysis, which relies on the impressionable years hypothesis. One may think that the impressionable years theory is not a relevant mechanism in this case and that other variables correlated to the year of birth are driving the results. We test the effect of exposure to democracy on attitudes toward EU integration using different age spans. Table A.5 shows that exposure to democracy at a stage of life later than the impressionable years does not change the attitude of pro- or anti-EU. Conversely, exposure to democracy during adolescence does have an effect on MEPs behavior. Overall, our results are consistent with the psychological literature suggesting that political attitudes are formed during adolescence and young adulthood.

A crucial assumption for our analysis rests on the country of reference for exposure to democracy of MEPs in their youth. One possible limitation of the study is that we do not know the country where MEPs lived during their impressionable years. In the previous models, we assume for simplicity's sake that MEPs were exposed to the level of democracy of the country where they are elected. An alternative assumption is that MEPs were exposed to the institutions of the country where they were born.[6] Panel a of Table A.6 reports the benchmark model under this alternative assumption. We can observe that the results are mostly unchanged, supporting the stability of our findings. A more conservative strategy relies on the fact that individuals who were born and elected in two different countries are more mobile and more likely to have spent their impressionable years in a third country. Table A.6 (panel b) shows the preferred specification estimated only on the subsample of MEPs that were born and elected in the same country. Also in this case, there are no substantial differences in the results; the main conclusions of the analysis are confirmed.

Another potential concern regards the limited sample of EU12 countries, selected in the benchmark model to provide the most consistency over time. Our approach requires (i) a reliable identification of EU cleavages and (ii) sufficient variation in exposure to democracy across countries and legislatures. Given the changing context of cleavages regarding EU integration in

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[6]Slightly less than 10% of MEPs in EP1-6 were born in a country different from the one where they are elected.

more recent legislatures and the changed dimensionality of political conflict within the EP — as captured by NOMINATE — extending the analysis beyond EP6 is problematic. As a result, we cannot extend the analysis to CEE countries and more generally the 2004 enlargement as these Member States are only observed in EP6. However, we can test whether results are sensitive to the extension to the EU-15 by including the three countries joining the EU in 1995 (EP4); Austria, Finland, and Sweden. The last three columns of Table A.7 show that results are substantially unchanged after the inclusion of these three countries.

In addition, we consider that the inclusion of fixed effects and the choice of clustering standard errors may influence the results. Table A.8 displays the results of the benchmark model without standard error clusterization. The newly computed standard errors are slightly higher, but the significance level of the coefficients is unchanged. Table A.9 reports how the results change after the subsequent inclusion of fixed effects. Also in this case the expectations are confirmed: belonging to a specific parliamentary group explains a relevant share of the pro-EU behavior. Still, exposure to democracy remains statistically significant and with a positive effect on pro-EU voting. All of the results and checks described above are invariant to the inclusion of the gender of the MEPs.

We also follow Carreri and Teso (2021) and we include in our specification the cohort trends by interacting MEPs' birth year and legislature so as to control for the possibility that MEPs experiencing a certain level of democracy may differ in specific trends correlated with political behavior. Table A.10 shows that the results are basically unchanged once cohort trends are controlled for.

Another threat to our identification strategy comes from the fact that the second dimension of the NOMINATE does not capture pro/anti-EU preferences alone. The literature has indeed shown that -in addition to preferences for EU integration- the second dimension of the NOMINATE in the EU parliament correlates with government-opposition conflicts (Hix et al., 2006). Since our dependent variable builds on the second dimension of the NOMINATE, we need to ensure that our results are not driven by spurious correlations between exposure to democracy and other political preferences possibly correlated with pro-EU preferences. To this aim, we first run a placebo test by building our dependent variable on the first dimension of the NOMINATE. In other words, we select MEPs' votes depending on the cleavage of the first dimension of the NOMINATE. The first dimension of the NOMINATE captures the classic left-right dimension. If our main results are driven by spurious correlations between exposure to democracy and political preferences in general, we should find some significant associations also when we use the first dimension of the NOMINATE to build our dependent variable. Table A.11 shows that there are no significant correlations between exposure to democracy and our dependent variable based on the first dimension of the

NOMINATE, suggesting that our main results do uncover a causal relationship between exposure to democracy and attitude towards EU integration.

To further check whether our dependent variable measures attitudes towards EU integration, we show in Table A.12 our results when controlling for the national party fixed effect, so to control for government-opposition conflicts. Again, the results are similar to our main findings.

Finally, we investigate whether the conclusions of our analysis are driven by some specific component of the V-Dem indicator. Table A.13 reports the results of a model in which the V-Dem has been replaced by each of its four main components. In general, the positive and significant effect of V-Dem on pro-EU attitude is confirmed for all the components, although it appears stronger for participatory democracy and weaker for egalitarian democracy.

4   Discussion and Conclusion

Democracies have been found to increase living standards among the general population (Acemoglu et al., 2005, 2019). However, the effects of exposure to democratic institutions on individuals' attitudes have been investigated only recently (Acemoglu et al., 2021). In this paper, we show that higher exposure to democratic institutions pushes MEPs to support European integration. We combine data on the roll-call votes in the European parliament with data on the level of democracy by country-year. To uncover the causal channel between exposure to democracy and support for European integration, we rely on the impressionable years hypothesis (Krosnick and Alwin, 1989). According to this hypothesis, individuals form their political attitudes while aged between 18 and 25. To the extent that the quality of institutions is exogenous to the individual MEP, the impressionable years hypothesis is an appropriate strategy to shed light on the relationship between exposure to democracy and support for European integration.

Firstly, our results indicate that the long-lasting impact of the quality of institutions extends to elites and their voting behaviour. Our findings suggest that alike economic crises (Carreri and Teso, 2021) also those relating to the rule of law have implications that can extend to policy making and policy outcomes, contributing to current debates on the sustainability of democracies.

Additionally, our analysis extends our understanding of such implications for the EU polity and political system. The legacy of democratic exposure for political behaviour raises questions relevant for debates on enlargement and democratic backsliding. As the the invasion of Ukraine returned enlargement to the policy agenda, our findings suggest the legacy of exposure to democracy well exceeds the quality of institutions at the time of the assessment of conditionality in relation to accession. Similarly, democratic backsliding within the EU has pervasive effects on the pro-EU attitudes of

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young generations and may challenge the further deepening of integration.

Finally, we contribute to the analysis of voting behaviour in the EP. Individual characteristics of MEPs receive limited attention as voting cohesions is high, especially among mainstream groups. Yet, adding to evidence on gendered voting on environmental issues (Ramstetter and Habersack, 2020), we show this is also the case for support for EU integration. Such a finding is of particular sgnificance as the centrality of this cleavage has grown over time (Otjes and van der Veer, 2016) and has become predominant (Hix et al., 2023). While our identification strategy limits the extension of the analysis to the latest legislatures, our findings suggest quality of institutions in youth should be also considered in relation to the rise of Euroscepticism among citizens and elites. In addition, results can inform further research in domains beyond support for EU integration — such as for instance migration, environmental and gender equality policies — where we can expect GAL-TAN cleavages and experiences in youth to be relevant.

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A Appendix

Table A.1: Summary statistics of variables of interests

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Pro-EU votes index	0.744	0.301	3438
Pro-EU votes index (weighted)	0.428	0.506	3438
V-Dem (age 10-17)	0.46	0.253	3438
V-Dem (age 18-25)	0.526	0.241	3438
V-Dem (age 26-33)	0.597	0.212	3438
Female	0.218	0.413	3438

Table A.2: Summary statistics of exposure to democracy by EPs

Variable	Mean	Std. dev.	N
EP 1	0.449	0.225	494
EP 2	0.444	0.258	577
EP 3	0.512	0.243	573
EP 4	0.552	0.231	590
EP 5	0.578	0.227	597
EP 6	0.603	0.214	607
Total	0.526	0.241	3438

Table A.3: Sample composition of the baseline model

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Country		
Belgium	173	5.03
Denmark	105	3.05
France	615	17.89
Germany	459	13.35
Greece	185	5.38
Ireland	101	2.94
Italy	563	16.38
Luxembourg	42	1.22
Netherlands	181	5.26
Portugal	151	4.39
Spain	358	10.41
United Kingdom	505	14.69
Cohort		
1901-1910	24	0.70
1911-1920	150	4.36
1921-1930	552	16.06
1931-1940	752	21.87
1941-1950	1147	33.36
1951-1960	619	18.00
1961-1970	157	4.57
1971-1980	37	1.08
Legislature[a]		
1$^{\text{st}}$	494	14.37
2$^{\text{nd}}$	577	16.78
3$^{\text{rd}}$	573	16.67
4$^{\text{th}}$	590	17.16
5$^{\text{th}}$	597	17.36
6$^{\text{th}}$	607	17.66
Parliamentary group		
Anti-Europeans	57	1.66
British Conservatives and allies	170	4.94
Christian Democrats and Conservatives	973	28.30
French Gaullists and allies	222	6.46
Liberals	310	9.02
Radical left	225	6.54
Non-attached members	139	4.04
Italian Communists and allies	24	0.70
Regionalists	78	2.27
Socialists	1074	31.24
Green	137	3.98
Radical right	29	0.84

[a]The number of MEPs is larger than the available seats in each legislature because of (high) turnover during the parliamentary term.

Table A.4: Robustness checks: Weighted dependent variable

	(1) EP1 b/se	(2) EP1-2 b/se	(3) EP1-3 b/se	(4) EP1-4 b/se	(5) EP1-5 b/se	(6) EP1-6 b/se
Democracy index at age 18-25	0.358***	0.238**	0.252***	0.202***	0.136**	0.089**
	(0.134)	(0.104)	(0.090)	(0.073)	(0.061)	(0.043)
Female dummy	0.050	0.004	0.003	0.005	0.007	0.019*
	(0.050)	(0.028)	(0.020)	(0.015)	(0.012)	(0.011)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.82	0.61	0.70	0.74	0.73	0.73
N	490	1071	1643	2232	2827	3438

Standard errors in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70.
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Table A.5: Robustness checks: Other Age Ranges

	(1) EP1-6 b/se	(2) EP1-6 b/se	(3) EP1-6 b/se	(4) EP1-6 b/se	(5) EP1-6 b/se	(6) EP1-6 b/se	(7) EP1-6 b/se	(8) EP1-6	(9) EP1-6	(10) EP1-6
Democracy index at age 0-6	0.002									
	(0.022)									
Democracy index at age 2-9		0.006								
		(0.023)								
Democracy index at age 6-13			0.031							
			(0.025)							
Democracy index at age 8-15				0.058**						
				(0.025)						
Democracy index at age 10-17					0.066**					
					(0.026)					
Democracy index at age 14-18						0.055*				
						(0.033)				
Democracy index at age 26-33							0.031			
							(0.021)			
Democracy index at age 34-41								0.025		
								(0.023)		
Democracy index at age 42-49									0.029	
									(0.033)	
Democracy index at age 50-57										-0.028
										(0.064)
Female dummy	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.004	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.011
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.72	0.72	0.72	0.72	0.72	0.72	0.72	0.72	0.72	0.72
N	3438	3438	3438	3438	3438	2827	3438	3438	3438	3380

Standard errors in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70.
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Table A.6: Robustness checks: Country of birth

	(1) EP1 b/se	(2) EP1-2 b/se	(3) EP1-3 b/se	(4) EP1-4 b/se	(5) EP1-5 b/se	(6) EP1-6 b/se
Panel a						
Democracy index at age 18-25	0.156**	0.105**	0.095**	0.083**	0.055**	0.032
	(0.061)	(0.050)	(0.045)	(0.033)	(0.027)	(0.022)
Female dummy	0.034	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.004	0.010
	(0.032)	(0.018)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.82	0.61	0.68	0.72	0.72	0.72
N	487	1066	1638	2226	2821	3431
Panel b						
Democracy index at age 18-25	0.227**	0.138**	0.169***	0.130***	0.086**	0.059*
	(0.090)	(0.069)	(0.060)	(0.048)	(0.041)	(0.033)
Female dummy	0.034	0.008	0.005	0.005	0.007	0.013*
	(0.034)	(0.019)	(0.013)	(0.010)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.82	0.61	0.68	0.72	0.72	0.72
N	456	1002	1535	2083	2639	3188

Standard errors in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70. In Panel a the democracy index is that in the country of birth instead of the country of election; Panel b includes in the sample only MEPs born and elected in the same country.
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Table A.7: Robustness checks: EU-15

	(1) EP1 b/se	(2) EP1-2 b/se	(3) EP1-3 b/se	(4) EP1-4 b/se	(5) EP1-5 b/se	(6) EP1-6 b/se
Democracy index at age 18-25	0.224***	0.158**	0.163***	0.122***	0.086**	0.055**
	(0.085)	(0.067)	(0.057)	(0.045)	(0.038)	(0.025)
Female dummy	0.032	0.001	-0.000	0.005	0.005	0.011
	(0.032)	(0.018)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.006)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.82	0.61	0.68	0.72	0.72	0.72
N	490	1071	1643	2333	2993	3668

Standard errors clustered at MEP in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70.
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Table A.8: Robustness checks: Unclustered standard errors

	(1) EP1 b/se	(2) EP1-2 b/se	(3) EP1-3 b/se	(4) EP1-4 b/se	(5) EP1-5 b/se	(6) EP1-6 b/se
Democracy index at age 18-25	0.224**	0.158**	0.163***	0.129**	0.089**	0.058**
	(0.090)	(0.076)	(0.060)	(0.046)	(0.039)	(0.028)
Female dummy	0.032	0.001	-0.000	0.001	0.004	0.010
	(0.027)	(0.019)	(0.014)	(0.010)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.82	0.61	0.68	0.72	0.72	0.72
N	490	1071	1643	2232	2827	3438

Standard errors in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A.9: Robustness checks: Fixed effects

	(1) EP1-6 b/se	(2) EP1-6 b/se	(3) EP1-6 b/se	(4) EP1-6 b/se	(5) EP1-6 b/se
Democracy index at age 18-25	0.206***	0.559***	0.183***	0.179***	0.058**
	(0.024)	(0.031)	(0.041)	(0.035)	(0.025)
Female dummy	0.080***	0.074***	0.048***	0.032***	0.010
	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.006)
Country FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	No	No	No	No	Yes
R^2	0.04	0.24	0.31	0.53	0.72
N	3443	3443	3438	3438	3438

Standard errors in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A.10: Robustness checks: Cohort Trends

	(1) EP1 b/se	(2) EP1-2 b/se	(3) EP1-3 b/se	(4) EP1-4 b/se	(5) EP1-5 b/se	(6) EP1-6 b/se
Democracy index at age 18-25	0.224***	0.154**	0.153***	0.119***	0.080**	0.053**
	(0.085)	(0.067)	(0.057)	(0.045)	(0.038)	(0.025)
Female dummy	0.032	0.001	0.001	0.002	0.005	0.010
	(0.032)	(0.018)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cohort Trends	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.82	0.62	0.68	0.72	0.73	0.72
N	490	1071	1643	2232	2827	3438

Standard errors in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A.11: Placebo on Nominate First Dimension

	(1) EP1 b/se	(2) EP1-2 b/se	(3) EP1-3 b/se	(4) EP1-4 b/se	(5) EP1-5 b/se	(6) EP1-6 b/se
Democracy index at age 18-25	0.033	-0.023	0.063	0.027	0.010	0.021
	(0.069)	(0.049)	(0.043)	(0.033)	(0.027)	(0.016)
Female dummy	0.009	0.000	-0.001	-0.004	-0.011**	-0.011**
	(0.021)	(0.013)	(0.008)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.64	0.67	0.71	0.73	0.73	0.73
N	490	1055	1628	2215	2805	3383

Standard errors in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A.12: Robustness checks: National Party Fixed Effects

	(1) EP1 b/se	(2) EP1-2 b/se	(3) EP1-3 b/se	(4) EP1-4 b/se	(5) EP1-5 b/se	(6) EP1-6 b/se
Democracy index at age 18-25	0.267*	0.095	0.134**	0.131***	0.139***	0.110***
	(0.147)	(0.063)	(0.056)	(0.045)	(0.039)	(0.027)
Female dummy	0.078*	-0.011	-0.009	-0.003	0.003	0.008
	(0.046)	(0.016)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Party FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.64	0.67	0.71	0.73	0.73	0.73
N	490	1055	1628	2215	2805	3383

Standard errors in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70.
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Table A.13: Components of V-Dem score

	(1) EP1-6 b/se	(2) EP1-6 b/se	(3) EP1-6 b/se	(4) EP1-6 b/se
Egalitarian democracy index at age 18-25	0.051*			
	(0.028)			
Deliberative democracy index at age 18-25		0.050**		
		(0.023)		
Participatory democracy index at age 18-25			0.080***	
			(0.029)	
Liberal democracy index at age 18-25				0.052**
				(0.023)
Female dummy	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parliament Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.72	0.72	0.72	0.72
N	3438	3438	3438	3438

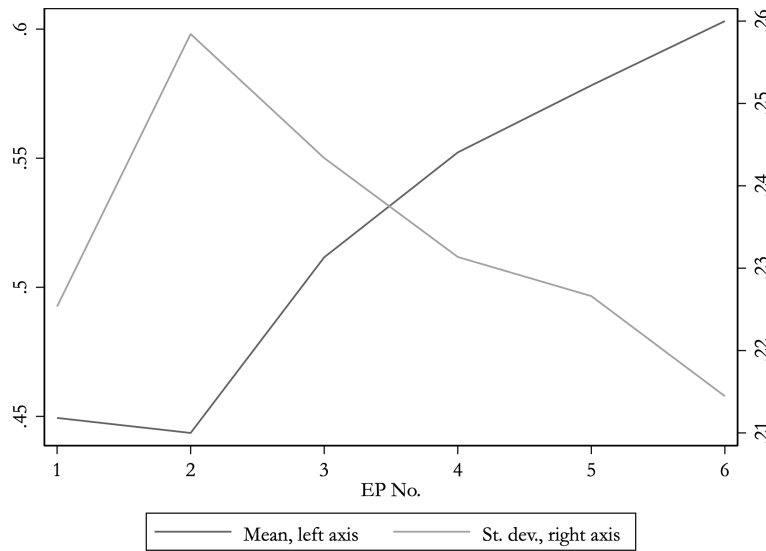Standard errors in parentheses. Polarization: 0.70.
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Figure A.1: Exposure to Democracy
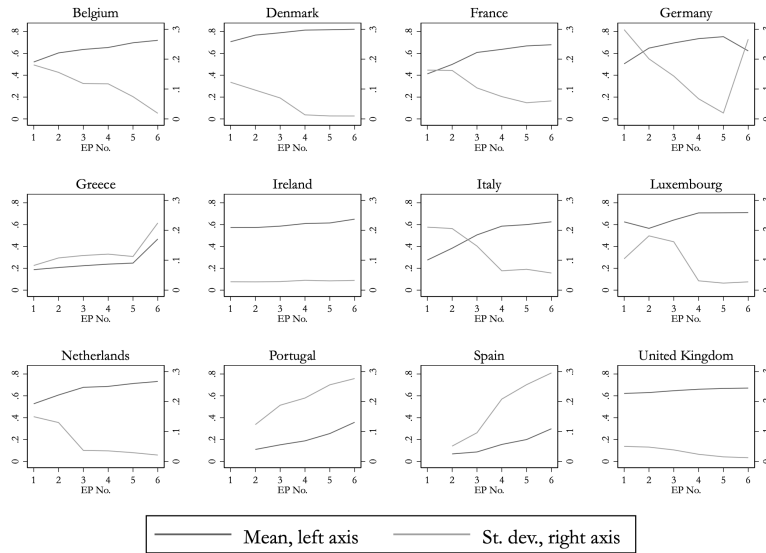
Notes: The figure shows mean and standard deviation of exposure to democracy by EU-12 country.

Figure A.2: Exposure to Democracy

Notes: The figure shows mean and standard deviation of exposure to democracy for all EU-12 countries.