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The Europeanisation of policy preferences: cross-national similarity and convergence 2014–2024

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ABSTRACT

Cross-national differences in policy preferences across the European Union (EU) are allegedly too large to warrant further political integration. The progressive deepening of economic and policy ties across EU member States, together with the deepening of the European public sphere in the years since the Eurozone crisis might have, however, catalysed convergence in the policy preferences of EU citizens. Are cross-country differences in policy issue positions large, and did they appreciably decrease across the EU in the last decade? The study uses the EES Voter Studies of 2014, 2019 and 2024 to examine over-time trends in policy issue positions across EU member States. It leverages mean tests, analyses of variance, dyadic distributional comparisons via the Earth Mover's Distance measure, as well as analyses of prediction accuracy scores from 'leave-one-country-out' random forest models. By introducing the first evidence of Europeanisation of policy issue positions, the study shows that the potential for a supranational political demos – and for majoritarian decision-making – is there for a number of policy domains.

KEYWORDS Europeanisation; comparative public opinion; predictive modelling; supranational democracy

Introduction

A core contemporary challenge of the European Union (EU) is democratising its decision-making processes. Born as an elite-driven international organisation propped up by citizens' 'permissive consensus', the EU has developed over time into a fully-fledged political system with more far-reaching policy competences and more intense political contestation (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). More majority voting and the weakening of intergovernmental decision-making could help address key EU's democratic deficits (Hix, 2013;

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Sorace, 2023). Many, however, are critical about the prospect of applying such reforms since they see preferences diversity as unbridgeable in *multi-demoi* (Cheneval & Schimmelfennig, 2013) supranational polities like the EU: applying majoritarian reforms in this context is likely to generate permanent minorities (Dahl, 2010; Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999; Weiler, 1999). But is policy preference diversity really that large across EU member States?

European Union member States' polities, policies and economies, furthermore, have been increasingly 'Europeanised', and particularly since the 2010s. In the fifteen years after the Eurozone crisis, citizens in the EU have gone through a total of six capacity and constitutional crises, which have resulted in an expansion of EU policy competences and salience (Boomgaarden & De Vreese, 2016; Schimmelfennig, 2024). EU publics increasingly identify as European, and display common EU support and EU issue voting trends (De Vries, 2010; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016b; Kuhn *et al.*, 2024). It can be speculated, therefore, that, as a result of these trends, policy preferences may be further converging across EU member States. A recent study, for example, Fortunato *et al.* (2024) shows how rising economic and political interconnectedness between two countries is associated with increased convergence in left-right self-placements among their publics.

This paper offers an in-depth descriptive overview of cross-country distribution and predictions of policy issue positions within and between the various EU countries, leveraging data from the 2014, 2019 and 2024 waves of the European Election Studies (EES) (Popa *et al.*, 2024; Schmitt *et al.*, 2022; Schmitt *et al.*, 2015). The analyses focus on salient policy issues, such as economic redistribution, state ownership, environmental/climate protection, immigration and same-sex marriage – spanning the two main axes of political competition and transcending broad ideological scales such as the standard left-right scale. Because of this, the study can examine which policy issues are more likely to exhibit convergence across EU countries, and whether policy preferences' similarity and convergence trends are issue-specific.

The analysis proceeds in two ways: the first set of analyses examines differences in preference distributions' central tendencies and spread looking at all EU country-dyads over the 2014–2024 period. In this first set of analyses, I leverage multiple means comparison tests and distribution overlap tests, such as the Earth Mover's Distance (EMD) measure (Lupu *et al.*, 2017). The second set of analyses, instead, approaches the research question as a prediction problem, and asks whether we can accurately predict survey responses from one member State using attitude models built from all other EU member States, and whether the accuracy of such a modelling strategy increases over the time period studied. Here, I leverage the random forest machine learning algorithm (James *et al.*, 2023), by sequentially leaving the member State which is the target of the prediction out of the model training stage (leave-one-country-out method).

I show that the variation between individuals within the same country is larger than the variation between countries: all member States display significant within-country spread of policy preferences. What is more, voters' policy preferences are *increasingly* similarly distributed across EU member States over the time period studied. This holds true for all policy areas, barring the environment/climate policy area where – over time – mean and distribution differences between countries have slightly increased instead. When it comes to the predictive modelling analysis, data from respondents from other EU member states generally predicts the target EU member state with - roughly – 15% accuracy on average (by comparison, the pooled model has an average of roughly 25% accuracy). However, predictive accuracy of the 'leave-one-country-out' models are increasing over-time in all policy areas, except for immigration. Policy preferences are, therefore, increasingly driven by similar predictors across EU member States. This particularly holds for first dimension issues, as well as for the environment/climate dimension. The prediction accuracy of the 'leave-one-country-out' model has, instead, declined for the immigration issue.

The inconsistent findings from the descriptive to the predictive analysis on the climate and on the immigration issue can be explained by the fact that the two analyses answer slightly different questions: the predictive modelling analysis offers a harder, but arguably more crucial, test of policy preference convergence since it tests whether the predictors of such preferences are increasingly the same across countries. If country preferences are driven by different underlying predictors, the differing cleavage politics playing out may hamper progress towards majoritarian reforms at the EU level. In contrast, variation in policy preference distributions across countries is not necessarily challenging if such preferences originate from similar political cleavage structures. The study, therefore, highlights that it may be still premature to Europeanise policy-making in the immigration domain, but that the Europeanisation of policy preferences is well underway for first dimension issues, as well as for the environmental/climate issue.

This paper provides original evidence that policy issue positions are increasingly similar across EU member States over-time, and particularly for first dimension issues. This is unsurprising given the stronger EU competences and deeper integration on economic issues (Craig & De Búrca, 2020; Fortunato *et al*., 2024), and given that the economic cleavage is long-standing and more established in party systems and media discourse (Bakker *et al*., 2014; Dalton, 1996; Ford & Jennings, 2020; Kriesi *et al*., 2008). Although some second dimension issues – and, particularly, the immigration issue – display important cross-national differences and divergence trends, the increasing convergence on civil rights and on climate issues (particularly when it comes to predictive convergence) are important signs that political and policy linkages among European publics can grow beyond the economic domain.

The analyses in this paper are of important significance for the emerging field of research on cross-country attitude comparability (Wolf *et al*., 2016: Chapter 4), and on cross-national public opinion (Anderson *et al*., 2021; Fortunato *et al*., 2024). The paper also represents a significant contribution to the Europeanisation literature by broadening its focus to policy issue positions. Furthermore, the findings have crucial implications for the academic and policy debates over the EU democratic deficit, and over the expansion of majority voting in EU decision-making. The findings show that there is the potential to apply majoritarianism to supranational decision-making, and particularly so for first-dimension issues where between-country differences – and thus the threat of permanent minorities - are vanishingly low. Legitimacy will not be sacrificed by such a move, as voters are likely to find similarity and familiarity with voters from other countries having the same outlook on the policy domain in question. In short, policy domains exist where between-member state differences are not irreconcilable, and where a supranational political demos can be forged.

Public opinion Europeanisation: What we do and do not know

The scholarship on Europeanisation chiefly focuses on the role of EU membership, policies and institutions in influencing domestic policies and institutions, and in reducing member States' policy and institutional divergence. Only in a second phase the Europeanisation literature has branched out to analysing EU-driven changes in domestic party politics, identities and attitudes (Graziano & Vink, 2006).

In the second phase of Europeanisation research, studies have chiefly investigated: (a) the Europeanisation of the public sphere (i.e., media and elite discourse); (b) the Europeanisation of identities and/or the evolution of Euroscepticism; and (c) the role of the EU issue dimension for domestic and European Parliament (EP) election results. The Europeanisation of policy issue positions has not been examined in depth so far.

Studies on the European public sphere find that both the visibility of EU policies, actors and institutions and the 'Europeanness' of the news contents' frames has significantly increased since the mid-1990s across all EU countries, and particularly spiked after the Eurozone crisis and the ensuing Treaty reforms and deepening of EU integration. This scholarship concludes that a common EU-wide communicative space now finally exists, and particularly for the policy areas where the EU has stronger competence and/or that were thrown into the spotlight by recent crises (i.e., post-2009) (Boomgaarden & De Vreese, 2016; Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Risse, 2014, 2015; Rivas-de Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022).

Studies on the Europeanisation of identity find that EU citizens are increasingly likely to hold both national and European identities. Albeit chiefly of the

civic type, the sense of European identity is strengthening over-time, particularly after periods of increased European integration, and for groups that have more direct experience of EU policies, actors and institutions (Bruter, 2005; Herrmann *et al.*, 2004; Kuhn, 2015; Kuhn *et al.*, 2024). This strand of research is intimately linked to that on attitudes towards EU membership/integration: identification with Europe, in fact, is associated with more Europhile positions, and EU identities and attitudes are highly endogenous to one another (De Vries, 2020). The literature on Euroscepticism finds that member States display common trends towards increased Euroscepticism starting from the Maastricht Treaty (De Vries, 2020; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016b; Hobolt & Tilley, 2021), as well as common drivers of Eurosceptic attitudes: EU salience and performance trigger Euroscepticism in similar ways across countries (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016a; Hobolt *et al.*, 2009). Equally, across various member States, groups that reap higher economic and personal benefits from EU membership tend to be more supportive of the EU (Gabel, 1998; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016b). Some important country differences still exist, however, as Euroscepticism is more pronounced in countries that can 'afford' a break from the EU (De Vries, 2018).

Finally, studies on the role of the EU issue dimension for parties' electoral success (both domestically and in EP elections Hobolt & Spoon, 2012) have demonstrated that voters do increasingly consider the EU issue dimension when deciding who to vote for – a phenomenon called EU issue voting (De Vries, 2007, 2010). Across various EU member States, and keeping all other vote-choice predictors constant, as the distance between the voter and the party on the Euroscepticism dimension decreases, the likelihood to support the relevant party increases. EU issue voting has risen in importance both in EP and national elections, and it has become an increasingly central dimension of domestic and EU party competition, and, again, particularly so after the Eurozone crisis (Carrieri *et al.*, 2024; Kriesi, 2016).

What the study of public opinion Europeanisation lacks is an assessment of over-time trends and convergence in specific *policy* preferences across the various member States. A relevant set of analyses by Caughey *et al.* (2019) showcases some stark cross-country similarities in ideological dimensions across various European countries and over-time. However, the study chiefly measures broad ideological dimensions rather than specific policy issue preferences, and it does not cover all EU member States. The aim of their study was never a deep exploration of EU member States ideological convergence and how it changed over-time. Caughey *et al.* (2019)'s paper is chiefly about outlining and extensively validating a new method to cumulate survey responses from different data sources in the absence of consistent survey question wording. Another important recent study – by Fortunato *et al.* (2024) – studies convergence in the general left-right scale between country dyads across 30 European democracies. It finds that more

economically interconnected countries have similar left-right positioning, and that rising trade and political connectedness among them further strengthens their left-right position similarity. Again, they leverage very broad attitudinal constructs in the analyses (the left-right dimension), and are chiefly focussed on the role of economic globalisation for public opinion convergence, rather than issue-specific variation. This study explores policy issue preferences in more depth, and it can also test whether there is scope for cross-country convergence on second-dimension issues.

Since the field of research on cross-national public opinion convergence and policy issue positioning within Europeanisation is still in its early stages, there are not strong theoretical frameworks to draw upon. The recent paper by Fortunato *et al.* (2024) develops a theoretical hypothesis that paints cross-national public opinion convergence chiefly as a response to increasingly common economic stimuli. Borrowing from this, and given the steep increase in economic globalisation and trade interconnectedness since the mid-1980s, I expect that *economic* policy issue positions – i.e., state intervention and redistribution – should display stronger cross-national similarities and convergence than second-dimension issues such as immigration and same-sex marriage, where policy integration at transnational level has been slower or non-existent. EU-level cooperation is stronger for the economic dimension than for other policy areas, as most EU exclusive competences are purely economic in nature (Craig & De Búrca, 2020). The EU was born as, and it still is, primarily an economic union. It has also legislated quite strongly on the environment domain, but it has only recently started to exercise policy competences in the immigration regulation domain. Party competition on economic policy issues, furthermore, is more established and long-standing than political contestation on second-dimension issues (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Inglehart, 1984). Transnational similarities among political elites and party families are particularly pronounced for the economic dimension of political competition (Bakker *et al.*, 2014; Ford & Jennings, 2020; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008). Due to the reinforcements provided by the increasingly similar global macro-economic context, by repeated exposure to class-based political contestation, and by stronger EU competences in economic policies I postulate that:

> **H1**: *Issue position Europeanisation is more pronounced and rises faster in the case of first-dimension issues (state intervention, redistribution) than for the second-dimension issues (and, particularly, immigration and same-sex marriage).*

Expectations for the environment/climate domain are more mixed, and therefore not formally included in the hypothesis above. The EU has been a powerful and prolific legislator on environmental and climate protection issues since the 1970s (Craig & De Búrca, 2020): one might expect, therefore, that the common policy frameworks and externalities in this domain should

have fostered cross-national similarities in policy preferences. On the other hand, the environment/climate issue is part of a relatively more recent political cleavage, where party families – and particularly mainstream ones – are not showing cross-national coherence to the same extent (Farstad, 2018; Fisher *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, in the 2014–2024 decade there was no particular EU integration trend on this issue, except maybe towards the end of the decade, with the flurry of binding regulations in this area following the EU Climate Law and the European Green Deal of 2021.

Data and Research Design

The analysis leverages the 2014, 2019 and 2024 voter studies of the European Election Studies (EES). The EES is a post-election study carried out after the European Parliament elections in each EU member state. CATI and CAWI are the most used data collection approaches, and 1000 respondents are randomly sampled (with stratification) for each country, except for Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta where the sample size is 500. Samples are representative of the voting age population in the countries covered, and the descriptive analyses below will leverage the analytical weights provided (based on socio-demographic weighting on gender x age, region, urbanity and education).

The EES Voter Studies typically include around 100 survey items, including some core items that have been asked since 1989. The analyses below will leverage five 0–10 policy preference scales, which have been asked in identical format since 2014 (see Appendix – Section 1 for details on the survey questions). The time-window of the study starts in 2014 chiefly to maintain comparability and mitigate differential item functioning[1]. The state intervention issue question was not asked in the latest (2024) EES Voter Study wave, so the 2024 analyses will only rely on four – rather than five – issue questions. For all policy preference scales, higher values indicate more right-wing and conservative positions.

Distribution Analysis

The first set of analyses relies on between vs. within-variance tests, pairwise mean tests and distribution overlap tests. They offer a deep descriptive overview of policy preference similarity and over-time convergence between country pairs, leveraging central tendencies and probability distributions. Here, I leverage multiple means comparison tests, as well as distribution plots and overlap tests – in particular, the Earth Mover's Distance (EMD) test (Lupu *et al*., 2017). The EMD test measures the amount of 'work' needed to transform one probability distribution into another.

The boxplots below (Figures 1–5) depict the distributions of weighted country means for each policy issue and for each EES year. They show that

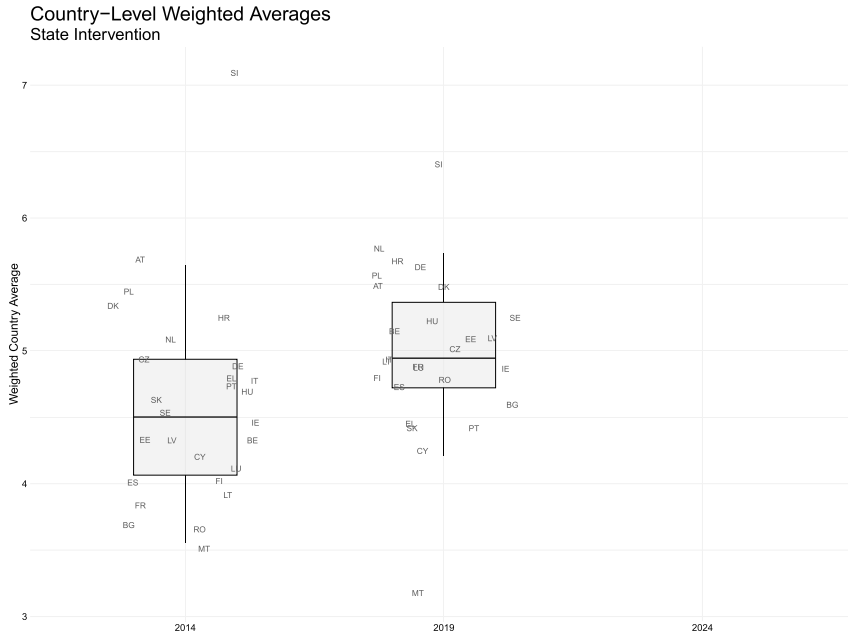

Figure 1. Country Weighted Average Over Time – State intervention.

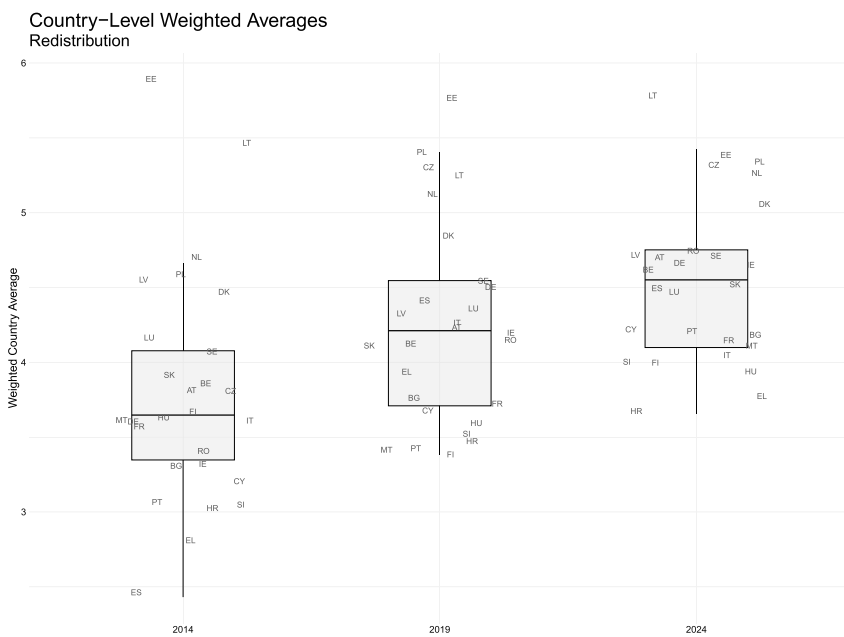

Figure 2. Country Weighted Average Over Time – Redistribution.

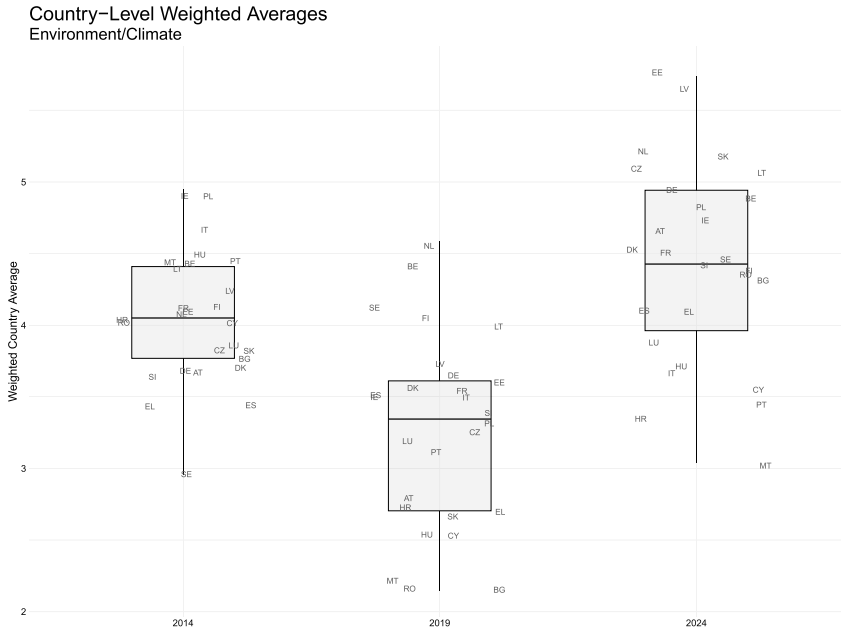

Figure 3. Country Weighted Average Over Time – Climate change.

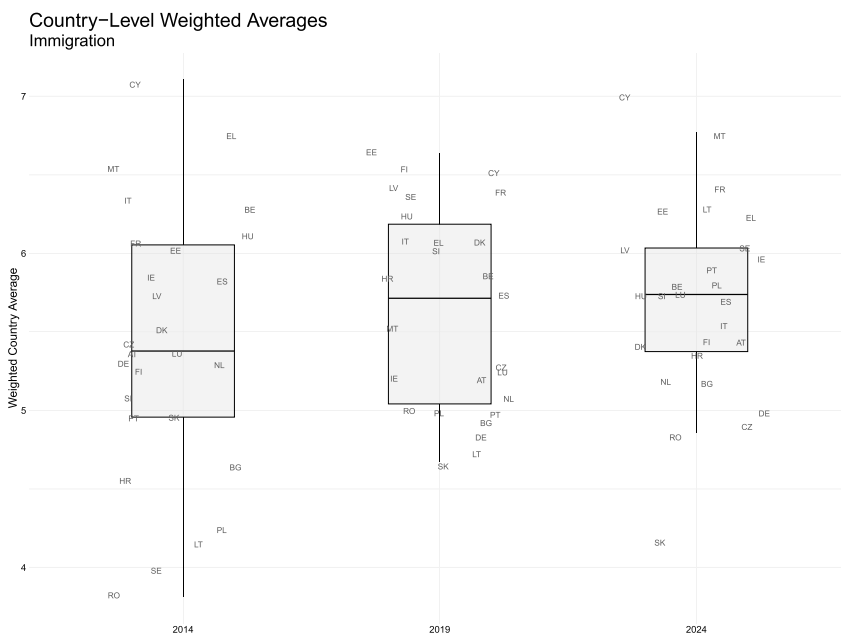

Figure 4. Country Weighted Average Over Time – Immigration.

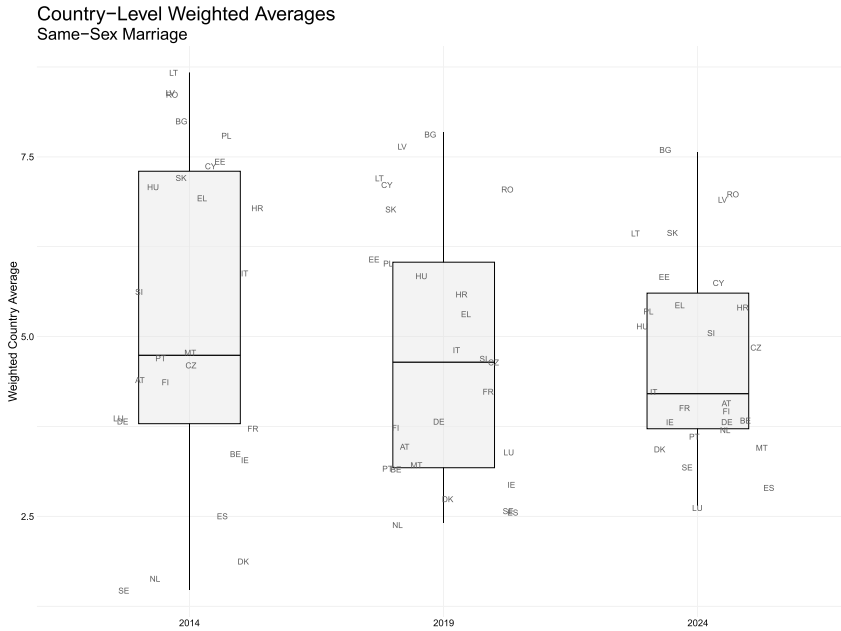

Figure 5. Country Weighted Average Over Time – Same-sex marriage.

for all issues – except the environment/climate issue – the between country variation in average country preferences has appreciably shrunk over-time.

For the first dimension issues (state intervention and redistribution), countries increasingly tightly cluster around economically centrist positions. Southern European countries started from more economically left-wing positions in 2014 and have broadly caught up with Eastern European and North-European countries. For the immigration issue, member States increasingly cluster together on right-wing positions instead. Southern European countries started on a more restrictive immigration position in 2014 than Eastern European and North-West European countries, which then caught up with their Southern counterparts, as the refugee and asylum crisis started to bite. On the same-sex marriage issue, member States now cluster around more left-wing positions. North-Western European countries started out with the most liberal positions on gay marriage, and hardly changed them. Eastern European and Southern European countries followed suit, and increasingly converged with Nordic positions over-time. The environment/climate issue shows, instead, increased dispersion of country means, with a stark pro-environmental turn in 2019 and then a return to 2014 positions by 2024. This 'V-shaped trend' is particularly stark in North-Western European countries, who even overshot their 2014 positions moving further to the right in 2024. Austria, Germany, the Netherlands,

Denmark and France are stark examples of this: these are cases where the environment/climate issue has been strongly politicised by their radical right challenger parties.

To formally test whether the 5-year time changes in country-dyads mean differences are statistically significant, I ran a dyadic regression with dyad fixed effects and a continuous time trend capturing the years 2014, 2019 and 2024. The coefficient plot below summarises the results of the regression models, plotting the time trend coefficient. Coefficients below zero indicate that, on average, pairwise country differences in mean positions on the issue have statistically significantly decreased over-time. Coefficients above zero indicate they have increased instead. The plot also shows, in grey, the dyadic cluster-robust standard errors, using the multi-way decomposition model described in Aronow *et al.* (2015), and implemented via the `dyadRobust` R package (Figure 6).

The results show that the average policy preference differences among member States are statistically significantly decreasing in magnitude over-time. Again, the environmental/climate issue dimension is an exception: mean differences between countries are statistically significantly increasing over-time for the environment/climate issue instead.

In the Online Appendix (Sections 2, 4 and 5) I further present violin plots, multiple comparison tests (via Tukey's HSD method) and results from the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC). These analyses confirm

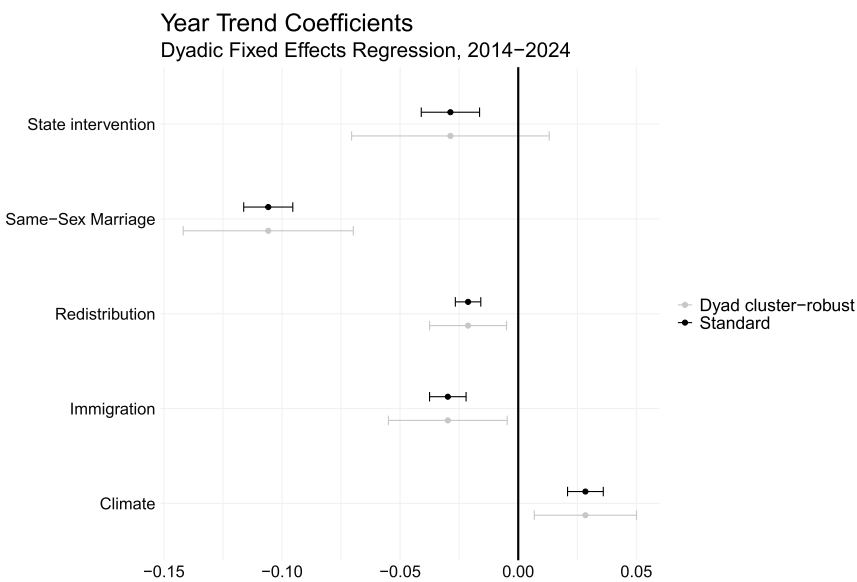

Figure 6. Dyadic Regression – Pairwise Mean Differences – Election year trend. Regression table available in the Online Appendix - Table A2.

that (a) distributions of policy issue positions show higher within-country variability than between-country variability; (b) mean differences between countries are decreasing over-time (except for the environment/climate issue). Within-country variation in issue positions is substantial: the ICCs clearly demonstrate that the variation that is explained by the country grouping is below 10% consistently for all issues (except for the same-sex issues where, in 2014 only, 20% of the variation was explained by the country clusters) and the variation explained by the country grouping is generally decreasing over-time: the country clusters explain merely 3 or 4% of the variation in issue positions in the 2024 survey. All in all, the average voters of the various member States are not considerably different in their policy preferences, and these differences among average country respondents are broadly decreasing over the time period analysed (except for the climate/environmental protection issue). Distribution shapes, furthermore, also look increasingly similar across countries over-time, with a trend towards bell-shaped curves centred at 5, particularly for economic issue positions.

To formally test the cross-country similarity of the *entire* country-dyads' distributions, each country pair is compared (for each EES wave) via the Earth Mover's Distance (EMD) measure. EMD measures each country-dyads' distribution overlap. The score captures the minimum 'work' – or steps – required to transform country A's probability distribution into country B's probability distribution. It is derived by evaluating all possible data transfers to make the two distributions identical (Lupu *et al.*, 2017). Larger values indicate larger between-country differences in policy preferences' distributions, while values closer to 0 indicate minimal amount of distance between two distributions. The average EM distances across all country dyads [2] in 2014 are higher than 2019 and 2024 ones for all issues, except for the environmental dimension, where differences across countries appear to have increased – and not decreased – over-time.

I ran the same dyadic regression model specification as above with dyad fixed effects and the EES year trend, but using the pairwise Earth Mover's Distances as the dependent variable. The coefficient plot (Figure 7) below reports the time trend coefficient. The grey coefficients have corrected standard errors as per Aronow *et al.* (2015).

The regression results demonstrate that, over the 2014–2024 time period, pairwise distributional differences between EU countries have statistically significantly declined for all issues, except for the environment/climate protection issue. The differential trends for the environmental/climate issue were therefore captured in all of the distributional analyses. The counter-finding for the environmental dimension may be attributed to the relative novelty and niche nature of this policy area. Albeit one where the EU has legislated extensively, it is an area that political

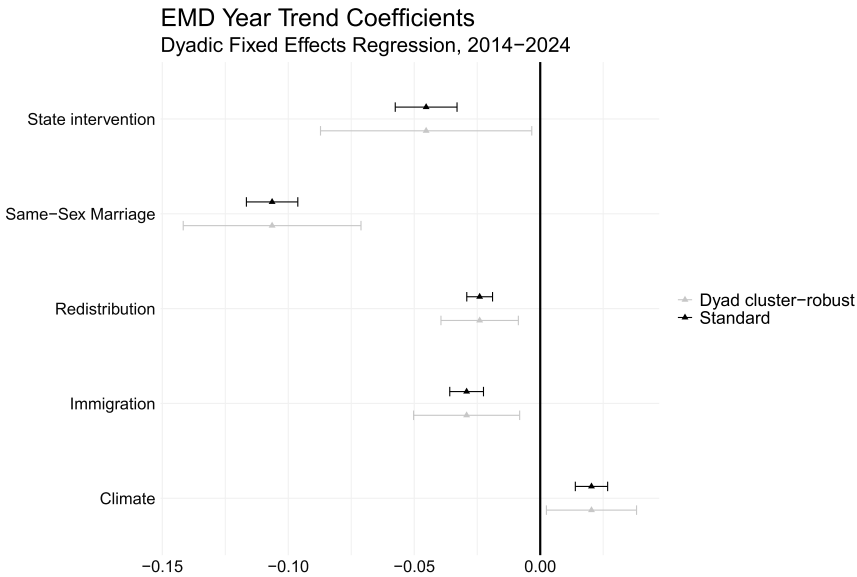

Figure 7. Dyadic Regression – Pairwise Earth Mover's Distances - Election year trend. Regression table available in the Online Appendix.

entrepreneurs and challenger parties are recently starting to strategically exploit for electoral gain (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020), and may thus be more dependent on the relative strength of challenger parties, and of their supporters, in each country.

Predictive Modelling

The distribution analyses above have shown that within variation in attitudes appears larger than between-country variation, that mean differences between countries are narrowing over-time, and that distributions are increasingly similar over-time, with the notable exception of the environment/climate dimension.

In this second analysis, the question over whether policy preferences are Europeanising is recast as a prediction problem. Rather than stopping at the 'superficial' distributions of policy issue positions across the member States, the study turns to predictive accuracy. I measure here whether the accuracy of predicted positions for a target country, built from a model trained on all other countries in the sample, is increasing over-time. This answers a slightly different question than the question underlying the distribution analysis study above, which was chiefly concerned with whether policy position *distributions* are increasingly similar across EU countries over-time. Arguably, the predictive modelling analysis offers a deeper test

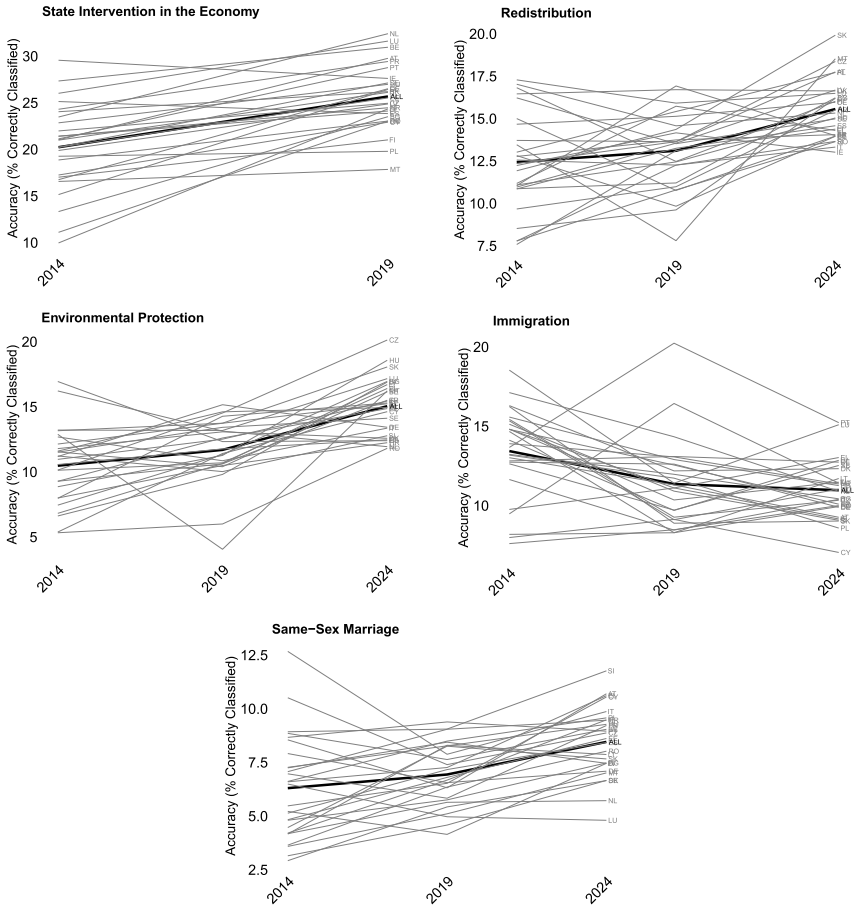

Figure 8. Prediction Accuracy Over-Time – Random Forest Model, Leave-One-Country-Out Method.

of issue position convergence, since it establishes whether the political and socio-demographic model of attitudes built from all other EU countries fits each target country. You might still have different distributions across countries, say, due to differing relative proportions of various political/socio-demographic groups, but at the same time the factors underlying policy position-taking may be increasingly similar, which would mean that data from other EU countries is gradually more and more useful in predicting data from a selected member State. Similarly, the distributions might look increasingly similar, but this would just be superficial convergence, as the predictors of policy positioning might be different in different countries. By way of example, the approach chiefly quantifies whether it is increasingly possible to, for example, predict the issue position of a female, young, economically

insecure, rural respondent from a given country using results for females, young, economically insecure, rural respondents from all other countries.

To address this question, the analysis leverages a machine learning predictive modelling approach. The predictive modelling analysis is applied separately to all three waves from the EES and all policy issues. The quantity of interest in this analysis is prediction accuracy, and the study aims to test whether it increases over-time and for which issue dimension(s). The machine learning model chosen is a random forest 'leave-one-country-out' model, which predicts each respondents' position on the various policy issues only using respondents from *other* EU countries. If prediction accuracy is increasing over time, this will be further evidence that Europeans are increasingly similar: it will mean that over-time it has become easier to predict, say, an Italian respondents' policy position based on the policy positions of demographically and politically similar respondents *from all other EU member States*.

Random forest is a popular machine learning algorithm for both binary and multi-class prediction which is less prone to over-fitting and bias while being computationally tractable at the same time (James *et al*., 2023; Muchlinski *et al*., 2019) [3]. The random forest algorithm learns from a training dataset (in this implementation: all responses from member States other than the target member State) by randomly sampling data points from the training dataset and by randomly sampling the covariates to test from the main model (the list of covariates is in the Online Appendix – Section 4.1). These random splits in both the data and the features space are called *trees*, and are run independently from one another. The average (for scaling problems) or majority (for nominal classification problems) prediction from all the trees is then taken, a method that significantly minimises prediction error (Hastie *et al*., 2017; James *et al*., 2023; Jordan & Mitchell, 2015). Random forest models integrate the outcomes of multiple decision trees to come up with the final (classification or scaling) predictions. Each decision tree is composed of random data sub-sets, carved on the basis of predictors' values which maximise information gain. The final predicted score per respondent is thus an average (scaling), or the majority vote (classification), of the predictions from each tree.

This analysis is, therefore, purely a prediction exercise, and that is why a 'black box' machine learning approach, such as random forest modelling, was chosen: measures of prediction accuracy for each country and over-time are the key quantities of interest. We want to predict each respondents' issue positions, rather than interpret exactly what the role of each specific predictors is in explaining policy positions [4]. The key parameters of the random forest model – i.e., the number of trees, or iterations, and the number of nodes, or the amount of 'splits' or thresholds to use to break-up the covariates used for prediction – were chosen via tuning using a series of different

parameter values [5]. The parameters that yielded the highest performance were then used in the main random forest models. In terms of predictors, the models use: education, age, gender, rural-urban residence, social class, religion, work station, living standards, political interest, and party ID (for details on the measurement level of each predictor please see the Online Appendix – Section 7.1). This is a very simple, standard socio-demographic and party ID model, which overall has a prediction accuracy of between 20 and 30% (depending on the policy preference dimension examined). Such accuracies were derived both cross-validation check and the out-of-bag (OOB) error rate measure (see the Online Appendix – Section 7.2). Importantly, the classification accuracy and OOB error rates are broadly constant over-time: any increase/decrease in prediction accuracy of the leave-one-country-out predictive models will therefore not be due to the underlying demographic-party model performing better or worse over-time.

The random forest model was fit sequentially for each country, leaving the target country's respondents out of the model training step. I then evaluate the classification accuracy of the model for each target country. The various confusion matrices compare the predicted policy preference scores to the actual issue preference scores volunteered in the survey by respondents from each target country. Higher (and increasing) accuracy scores would indicate that public attitudes from individual in one member State can be (and increasingly) well predicted from data coming from all other member States, indicating an emerging political demos in terms of attitude predictors' similarity.

A score of 100 means that 100% of responses were correctly predicted. This is a very high bar: as mentioned above, the pooled standard demographic-party ID model generally shows overall accuracy rates between 20 and 30% (see section 7.2 of the Online Appendix), which should be the realistic benchmark here. The line plots below report accuracy scores over-time for all issue dimensions and separately by country predicted, as well as averaging prediction accuracy over all EU countries (for the same analysis using F1 scores, see Figure A31 in the Online Appendix).

The analysis shows that, and particularly for the economic dimension, respondents' issue preferences are increasingly predictable by attitude models built using survey responses from all other EU countries. Accuracy rates (i.e., the proportion of respondents' issue preferences correctly predicted) across countries approach the 20%–30% benchmark more easily for the state intervention and redistribution dimensions, whereas overall accuracies are quite low (below 10%) for the immigration and same-sex marriage dimension. The 'leave-one-country-out' models do not mirror the 20–30% figures of the pooled random forest model, but in the economic dimension they get very close. What is crucial is that prediction accuracies are going up over-time for the state intervention, redistribution, environment

dimensions, and, to some extent, for the same-sex marriage dimension as well. This is evidence that we can *increasingly* predict Europeans' issue positions by simply leveraging the issue positions of demographically and politically similar citizens from other European Union countries.

In the case of the immigration issue, however, we see the opposite trend: in most countries we see a constant, outright decline in the predictive performance of the 'leave-one-country-out' random forest models: Europeans from different member States appear to be further diverging from each other on predictors of immigration attitudes. While average positions and distributions started to converge across European countries towards more restrictiveness, the data shows that the drivers of such restrictiveness are increasingly different in different countries. Different demographic and partisan groups develop anti-immigration attitudes in the different EU member States, particularly after the large asylum and refugee influxes post-2015: the predictors of attitudes towards migrants are thus further diverging across countries over this time-period.

The environment/climate protection dimension does better in terms of convergence using the predictive accuracy measure than in the distributional analysis. The distributional analysis showed that countries' distributions are increasingly different across-countries over-time. The predictive modelling analysis shows, however, that key predictors of such attitudes are increasingly similar instead. The variable importance plots (see Online Appendix - Figure A28) offer a clue: over-time, party identification has become more and more important for the environment/climate protection dimension. Since different parties have different electoral strength in different countries (and particularly so for niche parties who are more likely to take on the climate issue than mainstream ones) it is more likely that different overall distributions by country might occur, when political characteristics and the actions of political entrepreneurs chiefly predict an attitude. It is notable, for example, that for issue dimensions that are increasingly converging both in terms of distributions and predictive accuracy – i.e., state intervention and redistribution – political predictors (party identification, political interest) have decreased in importance as an explanatory factor, while socio-economic characteristics have increased in importance.

Section 7.4 in the Online Appendix tests – via a simple OLS regression model – whether the over-time changes in the prediction accuracies of the 'leave-one-country-out' models for each country discussed above are statistically significant, finding that they are. All in all, we can *increasingly* predict Europeans' issue positions by simply leveraging the issue positions of demographically and politically similar citizens from other European Union countries, and especially so for the first dimension of political competition – i.e., the economic dimension. Attitude formation processes in terms of

economic and environmental policies (and, to some extent, civil rights issues) are increasingly similar in different European countries: this is further evidence of an emerging political demos.

Robustness: A Eastern Europe Story?

It might be argued, particularly for the over-time changes analyses, that the convergence trends reported here might be entirely due to the 2004–2013 wave of EU enlargement, which admitted thirteen new Eastern European countries.The new entrant countries may be entirely driving the convergence patterns due to floor effects: having followed a different historical and political course they might have started with very different policy positions to begin with, and thus have more space to move and converge. The dyadic regression model below is an exploratory test which interacts the yearly trend with a dummy capturing whether one country in the dyad is a Eastern European country (dyads without any Eastern European country or where both countries are Eastern European are coded as zero) (Table 1).

The interaction effects are mainly non-significant, except for the two second-dimension issues of immigration and same-sex marriage: for these, it is clear that convergence is strengthened when the pairwise comparisons include an Eastern European country. Broadly, however, interactions are non-significant: both Eastern and non-Eastern European country dyad comparisons show similar trends in convergence over this decade, as also demonstrated by the multiple means comparison tests excluding Eastern European countries (see Online Appendix, section 4.1). In terms of policy preference *distributions*, where the country is placed – geographically and historically – in the EU does not seem to matter much for the convergence

Table 1. Dyadic Regressions – Mean Differences: Eastern Europe Interactions.

	Dependent variable: Mean Difference				
	State Intervention	Redistribution	Climate	Immigration	Same Sex Marriage
Year	−0.021**	−0.021***	0.023***	−0.022***	−0.089***
	(0.009)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.007)
EE dummy	28.828	2.726	−23.339	32.320**	70.882***
	(25.386)	(11.105)	(15.565)	(15.903)	(21.278)
Year*EE dummy	−0.014	−0.001	0.012	−0.016**	−0.033***
	(0.013)	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.011)
Dyad FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	44.080**	41.675***	−44.751***	45.068***	180.582***
	(17.976)	(7.864)	(11.022)	(11.261)	(15.067)
Observations	702	1053	1053	1053	1053
R^2	0.781	0.737	0.359	0.495	0.861
Adjusted R^2	0.561	0.605	0.036	0.241	0.792
Residual Std. Error	0.417	0.364	0.510	0.522	0.698
F Statistic	3.543***	5.581***	1.111	1.950***	12.361***

Note: $^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Dyadic Regressions – EMD: Eastern Europe Interactions.

	Dependent variable: EMD				
	State Intervention	Redistribution	Climate	Immigration	Same Sex Marriage
Year	−0.038***	−0.022***	0.018***	−0.020***	−0.090***
	(0.009)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.007)
EE dummy	29.742	9.867	−11.205	36.660***	70.587***
	(25.221)	(10.545)	(13.218)	(13.738)	(20.884)
Year*EE dummy	−0.015	−0.005	0.006	−0.018***	−0.033***
	(0.013)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)
Dyad FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	77.064***	43.891***	−34.588***	41.608***	181.906***
	(17.859)	(7.467)	(9.360)	(9.728)	(14.788)
Observations	702	1053	1053	1053	1053
R^2	0.754	0.707	0.435	0.524	0.860
Adjusted R^2	0.506	0.560	0.151	0.284	0.789
Residual Std. Error	0.414	0.346	0.434	0.451	0.685
F Statistic	3.044***	4.801***	1.532***	2.185***	12.204***

Note: $^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$.

story: every region is displaying convergence patterns in this time period (Table 2).

The story is broadly similar for our predictive modelling analyses: the interactions between the time trend and the Eastern European country dummy are mostly non-significant, except for the redistribution and climate issues, where it does seem that the increasing similarity in attitude predictions is stronger in Eastern Europe. However, in the case of redistribution, over-time predictive convergence is also stronger for Southern European countries, and therefore it is hardly a new entry effect. Interestingly, while the headline predictive accuracy analyses show an overall downward trend for the immigration issue, the interactive model shows that it is easier and easier, over-time, to predict Southern European member States positions from all other EU member States. All in all, as also demonstrated by the regional cluster plots in the Online Appendix (Figure A32), the main inference apply broadly unchanged across all EU regions (Table 3).

Discussion and Conclusion

Can we talk of Europeanising policy preferences? Have between-country differences in policy issue positions and their predictors appreciably decreased in the last decade across the EU? The Europeanisation literature has recently turned to questions of identity, EU system-support and voting behaviour, finding important convergence trends, particularly since the Eurozone crisis and the watershed 2009 Lisbon Treaty. Starting with the Eurozone crisis of 2008, citizens in the EU have gone through a period of 'poly-crisis' and have witnessed a total of six capacity and constitutional crises until 2024. These crises have enhanced the EU's salience in public discourse, and elicited common EU policy responses (Boomgaarden & De Vreese, 2016;

Table 3. OLS Regressions – Predictive Accuracies: Country FE and Year-region interactions.

	Dependent variable: Predictive Accuracy				
	State Intervention	Redistribution	Climate	Immigration	Same Sex Marriage
Year	1.098***	0.034	0.192*	−0.341***	0.163**
	(0.260)	(0.081)	(0.100)	(0.096)	(0.061)
Year * EE	0.035	0.509***	0.537***	0.044	0.096
	(0.360)	(0.112)	(0.138)	(0.133)	(0.085)
Year * SE	−0.107	0.325**	0.210	0.346**	0.058
	(0.425)	(0.132)	(0.163)	(0.157)	(0.100)
Country FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	−2,188.910***	−53.435	−373.563*	700.072***	−321.423**
	(524.725)	(163.086)	(201.593)	(193.823)	(123.597)
Observations	54	81	81	81	81
R^2	0.841	0.709	0.684	0.594	0.717
Adjusted R^2	0.648	0.543	0.505	0.363	0.555
Residual Std. Error	2.909 (df = 24)	1.806 (df = 51)	2.233 (df = 51)	2.147 (df = 51)	1.369 (df = 51)
F Statistic	4.361*** (df = 29; 24)	4.284*** (df = 29; 51)	3.814*** (df = 29; 51)	2.574*** (df = 29; 51)	4.447*** (df = 29; 51)

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

Schimmelfennig, 2024). It can be speculated that, as a result of these trends, Europeans may have increasingly converged in their policy preferences too. Public opinion convergence on *policy-specific* matters across EU member States is, however, still largely unexplored, despite having crucial implications for the debate over majoritarian decision-making reforms to EU institutions, and over the EU *demos*.

This study leverages the 'poly-crisis' decade of 2014–2024 to test whether, throughout this momentous period of renewed EU integration and increased EU salience in the European public sphere, policy attitudes display convergence trends. Furthermore, the study explores the potential for dimension-specific variation in convergence trends. Since most EU exclusive competences are purely economic in nature (Craig & De Búrca, 2020), since EU member States are particularly interconnected in the economic and trading sphere (Fortunato *et al*., 2024), and since political contestation on first dimension issues is more long-standing and well established (leading to cross-national similarities among party families) (Bakker *et al*., 2014), I hypothesised stronger cross-country similarity and over-time convergence trends for the redistribution and state intervention issues.

Using data from the 2014, 2019 and 2024 European Election Studies (Voter Studies) and analysing it via dyadic mean tests and distributional overlap tests (Earth Mover's Distance), as well as via predictive modelling (random forest leave-one-country-out models), I find significant cross-national similarity and increasing convergence in policy preferences even in this relatively short space of time, and particularly for first dimension issues. The predictive modelling analysis shows that predictors are increasingly similarly related to

issue positions across the different EU countries and that it is, therefore, easier and easier to predict Europeans' issue positions by simply leveraging the issue positions of demographically and politically similar citizens from other European Union countries. Again, this holds particularly well for economic issues, as well as for environment/climate. As environmental/climate protection is an area where the EU has legislated quite extensively (Craig & De Búrca, 2020), this finding is not particularly surprising. I find that, however, in the case of immigration policy talk of Europeanising preferences might be premature: the results from the predictive modelling analysis reveals that Europeans' attitudes towards immigration policy are not driven by the same socio-demographic and political features across the different countries: the risk of permanent minorities is still quite high in this particular domain.

This study has crucial implications for the debate over democratic reforms to EU institutions, and over the potential for a EU *demos*. The paper shows important evidence of an emerging European demos, albeit one based on political contestation [6]. It furthermore highlights the potential for democratic reforms (such as simple majority voting) to be uploaded at the EU level – particularly on first dimension policy issues, where between country variation is minimal and has substantially declined over-time. The paper advances the study of cross-country attitude comparability and supranational public opinion, demonstrating that voters from different nation-states, when increasingly bound by common institutions and policy externalities, can exhibit significant similarities in policy preferences.

Notes

1. I have also carried out differential item functioning (DIF) tests – see Online Appendix, section 3. The test shows DIF is not an issue in this analysis and the core inferences of this paper do not change when using DIF-corrected scales.
2. Country-specific EMD averages are available in the Appendix - Figures A21–A27
3. While boosting tree methods further minimise prediction error when compared to the random forest algorithm, the gains are often marginal and boosting is significantly less computationally efficient (James *et al*., 2023; Muchlinski *et al*., 2019).
4. This said, the variable importance plots in the Online Appendix – section 7.3, offer a glimpse of what predictors (from the pooled model) are most important in predicting the various policy issue positions in the three EES waves.
5. 100,200,400 and 800 for the number of trees and 10,20,40,80 for nodes
6. Notably, democratic theorists studying democracy's boundary problem recognise the political demos as the most important pre-condition in the formation of a *demos*, as they reject the conflation of *demos* with *ethnos* (Abizadeh, 2012; Jolly, 2005; Miller, 2020)

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Data availability statement

The analyses presented in this article are based on data from the 2014, 2019, and 2024 European Election Studies – Voter Studies. These datasets are publicly available and can be accessed through GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences at: https://www.gesis.org/en/services/finding-and-accessing-data/international-survey-programs/european-election-studies. Complete replication materials, including all code and documentation necessary to reproduce the findings reported in this article, are available at: https://github.com/miriamsorace/miriamsorace.github.io/tree/main/FILES/jepp25_replicationfiles.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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