PRE-REGISTRATION

CUEING AND POLICY LEGACIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION DURING COVID-19[1]

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Through which channels can elites influence public support for EU crisis policies? We identify two such channels: cueing ("words", i.e. how politicians talk about the EU influences citizens' policy attitudes) and policy legacies (memories of "deeds", i.e. policy interventions of the EU influencing such policy attitudes). In a pre-registered experiment, our paper asks whether cueing and policy legacies may be alternative mechanisms or, on the contrary, must complement each other in the EU to modify citizens' positions on policy. We look at a crucial policy which may have a lasting legacy: the adoption of the pathbreaking NGEU package during COVID. We operationalize policy legacy with past policy satisfaction and by priming individuals with information about the positive and negative effects of the policy. We operationalize cues by randomly assigning individuals to conditions where they are exposed to messages from their national government.

Keywords: Cues, Policy Legacy, Crisis Politics, European Polity Formation.

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Introduction: Words or Deeds in EU Crisis Management?

The European Union's (EU) repeated crisis responses in the past two decades are a high stakes political maneuver: can they be loyalty-building for European citizens, convincing them that the EU's management of output legitimacy is in good hands (Verdun and Christiansen 2000)? Through which channels can elites influence public support for EU crisis policies? Citizens' loyalty for the European political system have become very salient since 2008. Widespread protests against austerity programs and other policies like COVID-19 (Bojar et al. 2022; Oana, Kriesi, and Altiparmakis 2025) and the rise of Eurosceptic parties predominantly on the right of the political spectrum, and pro-Remain demonstrations in the UK provide anecdotal evidence for this.

In this paper, we try to provide more systematic evidence on two channels through which the EU's crisis policies reach voters in EU member states and whether they have a lasting institutional foundation: cueing (words) and policy legacies (deeds). These two channels participate in *polity maintenance*, "i.e. keeping the EU polity together, regardless of interest-based divisions" (Ferrera, Miró, and Ronchi 2021). One of our aims is to disentangle two facets of polity maintenance (the communicative discourse and policy legacies) and test the validity of both polity maintenance mechanisms as well as their interactions. In other words, we also look to explore how much agency (discourse) and structure (policies) contribute to maintaining a polity recursively under stress.

The first facet of polity maintenance is the discursive-institutionalist channel of cueing (Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007; Oana 2025; Oana, Truchlewski, and Moise, n.d.): politicians regularly give speeches that are reported, give interviews and write op-eds. During the EU's crises, national as well as EU decision-makers addressed the public at large directly, not only their parliaments to put out certain crisis narratives to which they proposed suitable countermeasures (Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Kyriazi 2024; Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023; Ferrera, Miró, and Ronchi 2021). The cueing of the public that national politicians do is typically partisan, appealing to key constituencies and does not necessarily avoid contestation. By contrast, EU cueing, even from national politicians, tends to be consensual, presenting issues as functional and reasonable to avoid veto players or national parliaments throwing sand in the wheels of common policymaking. It resembles more the cueing that the public receives from experts than from elected politicians.

The second channel of polity maintenance that we want to explore is known from historical institutionalism and concerns the legacies of policies on public opinion (Béland,

Campbell, and Weaver 2022; Busemeyer, Abrassart, and Nezi 2021; Hacker and Pierson 2014; Mettler and Soss 2004; Pierson 2000; 2004; 1996; 1993): repeated and highly visible interventions of the EU, from dramatic interest rate cuts and rises to coordinated fiscal intervention, have made even ordinary voters aware of the EU's policy capacity. Policy legacies can shape preferences for European polity formation: for instance, if European voters are satisfied with a policy response to crisis, they are more likely to support further polity development. Conversely, should voters become dissatisfied with policy responses, they become more skeptical of European polity formation (Oana, Moise, and Truchlewski 2025).

Our paper reviews the cueing and the policy legacy literature and suggests hypotheses why communication ('words') and the experience of policies ('deeds') may be alternative mechanisms or, on the contrary, have to complement each other in the EU in order to be effective.

We then proceed to provide evidence for these hypotheses by fielding a pre-registered survey experiment where we contrast the effects of governmental cues and policy feedback. We look at the crucial case of policy legacies with pathbreaking consequences (Schelkle 2021): NGEU during COVID-19. We operationalize policy legacy by priming individuals to remember something good or bad about past policies. We operationalize government cues by randomly assigning individuals to conditions where they see which positions their national government (in favor, against with a control of no cue) take vis-à-vis a new EU policy. We then contrast and compare the effects of the satisfaction prime and the government cues on support for the new policy, which forms our dependent variable. Finally, we consider heterogeneity in our treatment effects: specifically, we look at ideology, trust in the European Union and views on European integration as well as identity, and finally territorial differences.

Cueing and Policy Legacy in European Hard Times

In general, the literature on European polity formation looks at the relationship between governments and public opinion from one side, the postfunctionalist approach (Hooghe and Marks 2009). This is a bottom-up approach that is not unrelated to the two levels games problem (Putnam 1988) and the intergovernmentalist take on European integration (Moravcsik 1993): if governments are what drive the process of European integration and if they are constrained by their domestic winset, then public opinion does play an important role in

shaping this winset. Public opinion can be permissive, enabling or constraining, be in a consensus or in a dissensus (Ferrara and Kriesi 2022).

The relationship between governments and public opinion can be however approached also from a top-down angle: governments can "cue" their electorates over what positions to take (Zaller 1992), a mechanism that is amplified in environments which like the European Union the electorates have little to no information, simply because the issues at stake are not salient, too complex or both (Pannico 2019). Likewise, governments can also frame issues (Chong and Druckman 2007) to highlight one crucial aspect or simply to cobble together winning coalitions (Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023). The implication of the top-down approach, compared to the bottom-up approach, is that governments can seek to modify their domestic winsets through rhetoric, and that they are not necessarily condemned to have their hands tied by public opinion. The effectiveness and directionality of cueing and frame will depend on whether elites are unified or polarized (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013).

This division of the relationship between public opinion and elite between top-down and bottom-up is of course stylized. There is strong evidence to suggest that this relation is dynamic in the sense that both influence each other over time (Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007) and that there are spill-over effects between the European and national arenas of policymaking (Ares, Ceka, and Kriesi 2017; Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Harteveld, van der Meer, and de Vries 2013). This paper, however, looks at the second strand of literature (top down) and more precisely at cueing to explore the issues of system formation and loyalty building in the European Union in times of crises. It is indeed crucial for any polity to generate loyalty through policy initiatives that stabilize and build a political system, especially in hard times (Bartolini 2005). But for these initiatives to work and for a system to stabilize, public opinion must legitimize them, i.e., to accept them. This legitimation of crisis-fighting policies participates in the transformation of new policies into policy legacy whereby new initiatives at time 0 transform preferences for future policies at times 1, 2, 3 etc. This raises the question of how elites can influence support for EU crisis policies. Is the legitimation (or lack thereof) of stabilization policies operating through cues or through these policy legacies? Are there any interactions between the two channels?

Cueing and Top-Down Polity Maintenance

Cueing is a concept that is part of a literature that studies how public opinion is not an immovable monolith, but rather a malleable object that can change shape through the discourse

and signals sent by elites (Zaller 1992). In short, three main factors determine the state of public opinion: messages sent by elites, prior beliefs and salience. This is the basis of Zaller's "RAS" model: public opinion "receives" elite cues, "accepts" them based on prior beliefs and "samples" from salient events. Public opinion is thus the result of an interaction between elite discourse and individual predispositions.

Zaller's idea was further extended, but what is key for scholars of European polity formation is that the malleability of the public opinion on European issues is greater due to the low salience of these issues. Even when events are highly salient – such as the refugee crisis in 2015-16 or the Euro Area crisis in 2010-2015 – the complexity of the issues at hand, the lengthy and distant negotiation processes, the limited partisan involvement at the EU's center compared to the US (Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Schelkle 2023), as well as limited media coverage imply that, per Zaller's RAS model, the "receives" part gain importance in comparison with the "accepts" and the "samples" part (Pannico 2019). In other words, pre-beliefs about the European Union may be less entrenched, unless of course there are rooted in identities and other deep variables as postfunctionalism posits. The crux of the matter is to know which approach sheds more light on European public opinion.

The literature suggests that, pace postfunctionalism and in line with Zaller's tradition, Europeans are willing to listen to their elites and change their opinion accordingly (if only at the margin). Some studies suggest that negative cues on European integration have a bigger impact on public opinion than positive cues (Maier, Adam, and Maier 2012; Avdagic and Savage 2021; 2024; Oana 2025; Oana, Truchlewski, and Moise, n.d.) whilst at the same time underscoring the malleability of European public opinion due to a lack of effect of political awareness on cueing (Gabel and Scheve 2007) and the limited effect of deeper variables like identity (Maier, Adam, and Maier 2012). It is perhaps this malleability that allowed the European Union to further proceed in pooling fiscal powers despite the reluctance of some key players (Stoeckel and Kuhn 2018; Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023). Even on such important issues as immigration where identitarian and economic variables play a crucial role, there is an effect of government cueing: it has been shown for instance that despite the deep stability of immigration attitudes (Kustov, Laaker, and Reller 2021), governments can still impact the preferences of their voters (Kriesi and Vrânceanu 2023).

These results of the literature suggest the following hypotheses:

- H1a: If there is a cue that the national government is for/against a policy proposed by the EU, support for this policy will increase/decrease in line with the cue.

- H1b: Negative cueing will have a bigger effect than positive cueing, as premised by prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Kahneman 2011, Chapter 26 for a summary) and as is illustrated empirically in the literature (Oana 2025; Oana, Truchlewski, and Moise, n.d.).

Policy Legacies and Crisis Politics in the EU

By contrast to cueing, policy legacy happens through the reality of implemented policies: in the words of a classic in political science, "new policies create new politics" (Schattschneider 1935). While he does not use the word of legacy, Schattschneider shows how certain policies like increased tariffs strengthen certain industries and interest groups which in turn become more organized and lobby for the continuation of these policies. Because tariffs create concentrated benefits for certain industries and diffuse costs for consumers, the spur the former to support them and the latter have little incentive to organize against them. This asymmetry mobilizes industries more than consumers, reinforcing policies favorable to the former and detrimental to the latter. Consequently, new policies enable those who benefit most to become the most politically influential, perpetuating the policy.

Fifty years later, policy legacy has been "rediscovered" by institutionalist researchers which sought to overcome the stronghold of behavioralists and structuralists on political science in the 1970s (Mettler and Soss 2004). The aim of the institutionalists was to show that the state itself created its own politics due to its very own structures and policies (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985), and that politics was not to be reduced to class power or individual voting behavior. The quintessential statements of this approach (Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol 1988; Immergut 1990; Pierson 1993) focused on developing mechanisms of policy legacy, further pushing the logic of Schattschneider. Pierson argued that on the one hand policies generate resources and create incentives for political actors through material benefits (e.g., protection due to higher tariffs, more social benefits or investments to compete) which alter the costs and benefits and political mobilization. On the other hand, policies provide information and shape identities that help interpret the political world. For instance, receiving benefits through a new, widely acclaimed program can destigmatize social welfare (e.g., veterans or mothers of soldiers) and reframes the politics of social spending. The same applies to framing spending on education as an investment into a more productive workforce in the future. This framing of initial policies at the initial stage feeds back into greater support later for the policy itself. New interest groups form with new identities, new policies become salient and mobilize voters, thereby increasing turnout.

In general, Pierson argues, policy legacy happens when policies are very salient for the public, when policies create concentrated benefits for particular groups, when policies generate large-scale effects over time and when policies establish new institutions or administrative capacities. In the case of the European Union in times of crises, these criteria very much apply. First, new policies implemented during crises are in general very salient: from the Euro Area crisis (Truchlewski and Schelkle 2024) to the refugee crisis (Kriesi et al. 2024), policies were very much discussed among experts, politicians, decision-makers and the European publics. Covid-19 for instance was probably one of the most salient policy episode since World War II (Kriesi and Bojar 2023). While technical, the saga of the failure of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and the success of Next Generation EU (NGEU) was very much followed by European publics (Baccaro, Bremer, and Neimanns 2021; Truchlewski et al. 2025). Second, these policies are in general very beneficial specifically for countries struggling to cope with crises and in a more diffuse manner for countries benefitting from upholding the European polity (think about for instance the returns on investment for creditor countries from sustaining their export base, the destinations where their surplus can be reinvested and the single market in general). Third, EU policies in times of crisis can generate large scale effects over time, COVID-19 through NGEU (Schelkle 2021) and rebalancing the level playing field (Armingeon et al. 2022; Truchlewski et al. 2025) or refugee crisis policies through external rebordering and deep politicization of refugee quotas (Kriesi et al. 2021). Fourth, crisis policies in the EU did establish or expand new institutions and administrative capacities. In the case of the refugee crisis, Frontex did get significantly reformed through a process of "institutional redirection" (Streeck and Thelen 2005): while at its origins in 2005 Frontex boasted 45 staff in Warsaw with a budget of 5.5 million Euros, in 2021 Frontex had 1513 agents for a budget of 543 million Euros. Likewise, NGEU created massive capacity at the center of the European polity with an envelope of 750 billion Euros (in 2019 Euros).[3]

The four conditions allow us to see the EU's crisis responses through a historical institutionalist lens in the sense that they are likely to provoke positive and negative legacies, increasing or decreasing returns as well as lock-in effects (Pierson 1996; 2000). The long-term dynamics of EU integration are likely to be shifted by these new policies which can trigger self-reinforcing mechanisms of polity formation. Already some voices advocate for a permanent status of NGEU (Truchlewski et al. 2025). Likewise, while refugee quotas were

[3] According to the yearly Frontex report in 2021, Frontex caught 46 750 909 smuggled cigarettes (see https://www.frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/briefreport2021/).

initially a failure which further polarized Central European member states away from their continental peers, redistribution of refugees is now standard operating procedure when a large migratory influx threatens to overwhelm the receiving country: see for instance how Ukrainian refugee seamlessly moved from Poland to Germany and other countries in 2022.

However, even if these conditions for studying policy legacy at the EU level are met, we need to note the specificity of the EU concerning policy legacy. Contrary to other polities where policies create direct vested interests through a state-citizens linkage which generates vested interests – think for instance about how citizens benefit *personally* from the welfare state through unemployment benefits or education – in the European Union such a direct linkage between the European polity and its citizens does not necessarily exist and it is instead rather indirect. Funding and spending from the EU budget is either allocated to states through reinsurance mechanisms (Schelkle 2005; 2014; 2017; 2022), regional and local governments through structural funds, bank loans to firms or grants to NGOs but very rarely in form of benefits to European citizens themselves. In other words, contrary to Trump's America, European citizens did not receive personal cheques with von der Leyen's signature. Consequently, we cannot test for direct policy legacy, but we can test for indirect policy legacy through priming. For these reasons also, we do not speak of policy feedback (because those establish a direct link between state policy and individual beneficiaries) but rather of policy legacies, i.e. broad EU policies and bargains that aim at solving a problem without necessary establishing a direct link (like e.g., a payment or a benefit) between the EU and its citizens (with the notable exception of the Common Agricultural Policy).

Thus, we formulate the following hypotheses:

- H2a: Policy legacies have an effect on support for European policies. Negative legacies decrease such support, whereas positive ones increase it.
- H2b: positive policy legacies on NGEU will be more substantial in Southern and Central European countries than in Northern creditor countries, while negative policy legacies on NGEU will be higher in Northern creditor countries than in beneficiary countries.

Interactions of Cues and Legacies

We now theorize how legacies and cues interact. When they are both positive/negative, cues and legacy amplify each other. These two hypotheses are represented on the North-West to South-East diagonal of table 1. The interaction effects of negative and positive legacy/cues are more complex (South-West to North-East diagonal of table 1). Let's start with negative cues

and positive legacy. On one hand, legacy effects from the EU are in general weak due to low information, low political awareness and the indirectness of the legacy mechanisms, even during salient episodes like the COVID-19 crisis (Truchlewski et al. 2025). On the other, negative news have always more influence on people than positive news (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982), an effect which is demonstrated in the EU on the issue of migration and the welfare state (Avdagic and Savage 2021; 2024). Let's move onto the case of negative legacy and positive cues: research has shown that positive cues have little effect (Maier, Adam, and Maier 2012) while negative experiences have much more chances to be ingrained in memory (Kahneman 2011). As a result, negative legacy should overcome positive cues. In other words, words and deed matter more when they are negative. Table 1 summarizes these expectations. We note however, that these are theoretical expectations based on prospect theory. We thus propose a caveat for these hypotheses which differentiates legacies from cueing: in general, one could also expect cueing to have a stronger effect than legacies due to several factors. First, legacies are, to a certain extent subjective and dependent on memories *of the past*, while cues happen *in the present*. Consequently, respondents may be dynamically inconsistent and discount both temporalities differently and give more weight to the present (in the same way that the tend to give more weight to the present compared to the future – (Thaler 1981)). Thus, it can be that positive cues can overcome negative legacies ("let bygones be bygones"). However, we still believe negativity bias overcomes other effects (i.e., negative legacy > positive cue) due to established theories and recent evidence on this issue (Oana 2025; Oana, Truchlewski, and Moise, n.d.). To summarize, here are our hypotheses on interactions between cueing and legacies:

- H3a: Negative/positive cues and negative/positive legacies amplify their effects on our dependent variables when in the same direction (i.e., both negative, both positive, see number 1 and 5 in Table 1).
- H3b: Negativity bias suggests that the negative amplification effect (number 5 in Table 1) will be higher than the positive amplification effect (number 1 in Table 1).
- H3c: Negativity bias suggests that when the legacies and cues have an opposite direction (one is positive and the other negative), the negative one (whether cue or legacy) will have a larger effect (number 2 and 4 in Table 1).
- H3d: Alternatively, dynamic inconsistency suggests that greater weight would be given to the *present* as opposed to the past and as a result, cues should always have a bigger effect than legacies when the two go in opposite directions (number 3 and 4 in Table 1).

Table 1. Interaction effects of legacy and cueing

		Legacy (L)	
		Positive	*Negative*
Cues (C)	*Positive*	1. L * C: amplification positive interaction	2. Prospect theory: L > C 3. Alt: Temporal discount: L < C
	Negative	4. L < C	5. L * C: amplification negative interaction

Heterogeneity effects

Finally, we consider heterogeneity in our treatment effects: specifically, we look at ideology, trust in the European Union and views on European integration as well as identity, and finally territorial differences.

- H4a: Negative cues, negative legacies, and negative amplification effects have stronger effects *among right-wing respondents* (left-right self-placement).[4]
- H4b: Negative cues, negative legacies, and negative amplification effects have stronger effects *among populist respondents than in mainstream voters* (vote intentions).[5]
- H4c: Negative cues, negative legacies, and negative amplification effects have stronger effects among respondents with lower trust towards the EU and lower EU integration preferences.[6]
- H4d: Territorial heterogeneity – respondents from Southern debtor European countries have a higher level of support for our DV (Spain, Greece) than respondents in the Northern creditor and Central countries (Austria, Sweden, Denmark) irrespective from the legacies and cueing group they are assigned. We expect France, Poland, Latvia and Belgium to fall between these extremes.

[4] To measure ideology, we ask a simple question in our survey: [POL3] "In political matters, people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". How would you place your views on this scale?" (Left: 0, Right: 10)

[5] We formulated vote intentions as follows: [POL6] "If there were a general election held tomorrow, for which party would you be most likely to vote?"

[6] Our questions on trust and preferences for European integration are formulated in the following way: [POL2] "Generally speaking, how much do you personally trust each of the following institutions?**"** (0: Do not trust at all, 10: Trust completely) ; [POL9] Some say European integration should be pushed forward. Others say it has already gone too far. How do you feel about this? Select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means "European integration has already gone too far" and 10 means "European integration should be pushed further".

Data and Design

The current literature on cueing and policy legacies in the European Union has made large advances in the last two decades (Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007; Gabel and Scheve 2007; Kriesi and Vrânceanu 2023). However, our experimental design aims at addressing several limitations of past studies. Some have focused on one country only (Torcal, Martini, and Orriols 2018) while others have mostly relied on large but observational datasets (Gabel and Scheve 2007; Kriesi and Vrânceanu 2023). Some studies combined the best of both worlds –large samples and experiment design (Maier, Adam, and Maier 2012) and we seek to build on them.

Given effects of two channels of polity maintenance, our experimental survey will be quite complex, as already mentioned. By design, we thus need to simplify it and evacuate certain crucial questions (EU cueing, polarization of elites, variation of policy legacies). We thus retain one crisis (COVID-19), with three primings each (control, negative and positive) and three cueing conditions (control, positive and negative): as a result, we have 12 experimental groups (2x3x2=12). Table 2 presents our pre-registered experiment.

Table 2: *Cueing-Legacy Experiment*

#Experiment 1: to be fielded in: France, Poland, Austria, Spain, Greece, Sweden, Belgium, Latvia, Denmark

Factor 1:

1. *#Level 1:* Thinking about the COVID-19 crisis, what things do you remember?
   #to scripting: small script
   Write a few sentences.

#open ended with a large box + Don't know option

2. *Level 2:* Thinking about the ***EU crisis response to the COVID-19 crisis***, what **positive** things do you remember?
   #to scripting: small script
   Write a few sentences.

#open ended with a large box + Don't know option

3. *Level 3:* Thinking about the ***EU crisis response to the COVID-19 crisis***, what **negative** things do you remember?
   #to scripting: small script
   Write a few sentences.

#open ended with a large box + Don't know option

Factor 2:

1. *#Level 1:* **[**no text**]**
2. *#Level 2:* The [NATIONALITY] government announces it strongly disapproves of the measure.

3. *#Level 3:*: The [NATIONALITY] government announces it strongly approves of the measure.

#PAGE_1

 # ask France, Poland, Austria, Spain, Greece, Sweden, Belgium, Latvia, Denmark
 # single grid
[Exp1_Step 1] At the time of the COVID-19 crisis, how concerned were you with the crisis?
#small script
Select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Not concerned at all" and 10 means "Strongly concerned".

0 – Not concerned at all	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 – Strongly concerned	99. Don't know

[Exp1_Step 2] *#[FACTOR 1]randomize the 3 levels*

[Exp1_Step 3] How satisfied are you with the EU crisis response to the COVID-19 crisis?
#small script
Select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means " Completely Dissatisfied" and 10 means "Completely Satisfied".

0 – Completely Dissatisfied	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 – Completely Satisfied	99. Don't know

[Exp1_Step 4] In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU has agreed on Next Generation EU, a temporary package to support EU member states to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Imagine the EU now announces that it will make New Generation EU permanent.

[Exp1_Step 5] *#[FACTOR 2]randomize the 3 levels*

[Exp1_Step 6] Under this scenario, to what extent do you approve of the European Union's announcement?
#small script
Select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Strongly Disapprove" and 10 means "Strongly approve".

0 – Strongly Disapprove	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 – Strongly approve	99. Don't know

Our design allows us to estimate the impact of policy legacy effects based on individual, micro-level, attitudes towards previous policy, as well as differentiate between self-reinforcing and self-underming legacy mechanisms that result in wanting to maintain the status quo or enhance

the policy (Busemeyer, Abrassart, and Nezi, 2021). We contribute to the policy legacy literature by showing how attitudes towards past policies interact with elite cues in a multilevel polity.

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