PRE-REGISTRATION

EXIT, VOICE AND POLITY:

Public Preferences for the Political Development of the European Union in times of Crisis

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Abstract

The European Union is an unprecedentedly ambitious experiment in multi-level governance, and has been labelled a 'post-national' polity, existing in a liminal developmental space between advanced international organization and emergent federal state. Still, despite much coverage of European policy integration, little is known of public perceptions of the essential logics driving post-national polity development and regionalization. This matters because the EU is an open-ended experiment, without a definitive *telos*, and its ongoing 'polity building' experience is shaped to a significant extent by mass public opinion. Based on Hirschman's 'exit-voice-loyalty' framework which inspired Rokkan's account of polity formation, we conceptualize four distinct constellations, or stylized potential European polity types, based on public preferences for EU levels of centralized 'binding authority' and 'boundedness' (exit constraints) on member states: a 'thick polity', with a stronger centre and boundaries; a 'thin polity', comprising both a weak center and boundaries; an 'arena polity' with a weak center but strong boundaries; and a 'club polity', strong-centered but with weaker boundaries. We propose a conjoint experiment embedded in a large European public opinion survey that explores aggregated preferences for different types of polities. Adapting established literatures on attitudes towards Europeanization for polity development, we lay out hypotheses and describe proposed our survey data collection and tests.

Keywords: Polity; Regionalization; Hirschman, Rokkan; Public Opinion, European Union

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1. Introduction

Albert Hirschman's 'exit-voice-loyalty' framework rests on a simple dialectic: the easier it is for an individual to exit an underperforming entity, the less inclined they will be to voice their dissatisfaction with it in the hope of improvement (Hirschman 1970). The parsimony of this framework, its adaptability to almost any institutional context, has led to widespread application. Stein Rokkan was an early convert, incorporating Hirschman's thinking into his own macro-study of the development of modern European states (Rokkan 1974). Rokkan argued that territorial closure, or 'boundary-building', encouraged a process of political institutional development – for example, taxation, juridical and administrative apparatus – that reflected the voice imperatives of bounded actors. Transposed from the micro-behavioural to the macro-state level, Rokkan (1974) saw regularity: consolidation of external boundaries reduces scope for exit and is key to voice-driven internal structuring in developmental polities. Rokkanian disciples have since applied and refined 'bounded structuring' to the European Union (EU), methodically surveying the different boundary and exit modalities that characterize this compound polity, its member states and their peoples (Bartolini 2005; Ferrera 2005).

While theoretically sophisticated, this literature has yet to confront how everyday citizens themselves think about the nexus. That is the point of departure for this paper. The EU is by far the most advanced example of a compound polity of nation states and has been in considerable developmental flux through recent successive major crises (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023). As such, it is a helpful case study for exploring citizens' intuitions on the role of exit and voice mechanisms in contemporary polity building and in an era of globalization marked both by durable regional integration projects and, increasingly, nationalist revanchist challenges to them (Walter 2021).[2] Contemporary EU debates strike at a broader tension in democratic transitions of power in projects of regional integration. Existential moments of crisis, such as Brexit and other shocks, prompt reflections as to whether the EU should strive for 'completeness', more closely resembling a federal state (Fossum and Jachtenfuchs 2017); or whether it might de-couple in some way and hand powers back to member states (Leruth, Gänzle, and Trondal 2019). Such decisions are often presented as a binary choice: more or less Europe; integration or disintegration. By contrast, we argue that aggregate preferences in a multi-level polity can be more complex, and that while citizens appear sanguine about state-like consolidation in some respects, they may still retain a preference for ultimate national discretion to exit and control membership. While differentiated preferences are known to apply to policy integration (Hobolt 2012), these mechanics are underexplored at the polity level.

Rather than focusing on integration, per most studies in EU public opinion, we examine the potential of everyday Europeans' 'polity preferences' to offer new purchase on potential developmental trajectories, limits, and opportunities for the EU. To chart this, we use a novel conjoint experiment fielded within a wider survey by the project ERC SOLID in 2025 by YouGov in 18 diverse member states. Due to space and time constraints, our conjoint was fielded only a subset of 9 countries representative of the EU (North, South, East, West, members new and old, rich and poor), namely: Germany, Hungary, Romania, Italy, Portugal, Finland, Netherlands, Ireland, Czech Republic.

Theoretically, we seek to map types of a polity that might emerge from different combinations of these two dimensions. We seek to understand whether public opinion across the continent maps onto the exit-voice dynamic that Rokkan, following Hirschman, identified in European polity development.

[2] We use the term 'polity building' rather than the classical 'state building' here, so as to remain agnostic about the trajectory of the EU, as the very openness of this question is the subject of our enquiry.

This pre-registration paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the state of the art, positioning the paper between literatures covering public opinion on European integration and depicting its neo-Rokkanian tensions as a historically novel project of polity building. Second, we sketch a conceptual framework based on this polity perspective, theorising potential combinations of bounding and binding polity preferences. Third, we follow with the pre-registration of our conjoint experiment and our hypotheses.

2. Regional Integration, the European Polity and Public Opinion

2.1 Europeans' views on EU Integration: the state of art

Regional integration is a key tenet of the international political economy and has accelerated not only in the wake of World War Two but even more so with the onset of the recent age of globalization (Mattli 1999; Schneider 2017). However, while most scholars focus on the determinants of regional integration, few study the preferences of its constituents for the emerging entity that experiments in regional integration might produce. Yet, public opinion is key to this unfolding process, just as it is to regional integration and disintegration more broadly (Walter 2021). This is best epitomized by the most advanced example of regional integration: the EU. While 'for decades European citizens were viewed as largely irrelevant to the process of integration', this is clearly not the case today (Hobolt and de Vries 2016, 415). Studies examining support for or opposition to European integration multiplied since the shift described by post-functionalism from 'permissive consensus' to 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks 2009) and now have a very good grasp on the main correlates of 'support or opposition to European integration'.

But what exactly is meant by this terminology? There is a large disparity in the way different studies measure and conceptualize EU support/opposition, with each approach better suited to capturing some aspects of the integration phenomenon over others. Some studies treat support for or opposition to integration as a one-dimensional concept, typically using survey questions such as the following, included in successive Eurobarometers: 'European integration has gone too far / should go further'. It has been increasingly acknowledged that citizens' EU-related attitudes are multidimensional, meaning that they fuse considerations of identity, utility, affection, performance and more (Boomgaarden et al. 2011).[3] This complexity has been approached in several ways. For example, de Wilde and Trenz (2012) usefully distinguish between support for the EU's design on the one hand and European policies on the other. This is intuitively appealing: one can support the EU by design as laid down in the treaties but still oppose a certain policy, and vice versa – though in practice it can be hard to clearly separate the two (Hobolt and de Vries 2016). Also going beyond the 'more or less integration', 'exit or remain' binary, Goldberg and collaborators examine attitudes towards the EU's long-term development, asking respondents to rank several future scenarios and showing that these preferences form three distinguishable clusters (Goldberg et al. 2021a; Goldberg et al. 2021b). Another approach to understanding of 'what kind of Europe citizens want' has been the recent advances in empirical measures of public opinion on differentiated integration (Leuffen, Schuessler, and Gómez Díaz 2022; Schäfer, Treib, and Schlipphak 2022), i.e., opinions about

[3] The simple pro-EU/contra-EU dichotomy was problematized earlier on the supply side. For example, in a pioneering analysis of political parties' programmatic statements, Jachtenfuchs et al. (1998) identified four ideal-typical polity ideas based on varying modes of legitimation of EU integration: intergovernmental cooperation, federal state, economic community, and network. From a different perspective, Hooghe and Marks distinguish between two ideal types of multilevel governance to capture patterns of the reallocation of authority beyond the central state. While they have sought to characterize the nature of European integration as it happens, we focus on how publics see the EU (Hooghe and Marks 2003).

the idea that integration can take place in multiple speeds and/or individual member states can enjoy opt-outs in certain fields.

Brexit, the ultimate member state opt-out, injected further impetus to public opinion research on the EU, moving it forward in two main directions. On the one hand, a series of studies examine the extent to which Brexit itself has carried the risks of contagion, potentially feeding into other departures from the EU (Hobolt 2016; Walter 2021). On the other hand, a focus has been lent to the extent to which preferences for exit analogous to those that led to Brexit in the UK context may exist elsewhere in Europe (Ejrnæs and Jensen 2022; Gastinger 2021). We are interested not so much in explaining why respondents may wish for their own country to leave, but their conception of sensible procedures governing the exit process in general. This is a critical distinction: It may well be that respondents who do not wish for their country to leave the EU nonetheless support an easy exit mechanism for those who wish to use it. While the EU has seemingly successfully siloed off the fallout from the UK's departure (Schelkle et al. 2024), its internal membership crisis driven by increasingly authoritarian governments in Hungary and Poland is arguably harder to contain. In other words, there are currently member state governments in the EU that do not necessarily view exit as a viable option, but that nonetheless contest EU authority from within. Finally, arguments are being raised about a much-needed expulsion mechanism, particularly in old EU member states which seek to address democratic backsliding in Central Europe (Theuns 2022). This renews in fact an old discussion that was triggered by the Eurozone crisis and where the possibility of expulsing Eurozone members that do not respect common rules was seriously debated - in no less a key institution than the European Central Bank (Athanassiou 2009). The same question emerged in the wake of negative referendum in Ireland on the Lisbon Treaty in the 2000s. This drives home the point that polity contestation is not only about degrees of integration in this or that policy field, but rather about alternative and even competing visions of the EU polity.

In this paper we build on and seek to advance the core themes of this literature. On the one hand, we examine the extent to which public attitudes on the EU polity are associated with crises, and if so how. While Brexit is naturally relevant as the first and presently only member state withdrawal, we extend our investigation to the further possible relevance of several shocks impacting the EU since the 2008 financial crisis. Bringing together these shocks gives our study additional comparative leverage, given that major studies on the effects of crises on public opinion have hitherto treated them separately (Hobolt and Wratil 2015; Stockemer et al. 2020; Kyriazi, Ronchi, and Pellegata 2023). On the other hand, we wish to integrate opinions about exiting or remaking the EU into a broader theoretical framework. While studies on EU public opinion abound, little is known about attitudes towards such first-order, structuring principles behind polity integration. Our survey questions have been specifically developed to explore Hirschman's foundational insight, that exit and voice are alternatives, which has never been empirically tested at the level of public attitudes. Do citizens prefer a more intergovernmental form of regional integration with easy exit options and a weak organization, or a more ambitious quasi-federal project with a strong centre and no exit options?

2.2 An Alternative View: The Polity Approach

Originating in the work of Hirschman (1970) and Rokkan (1974), the basic analytical insight is that the formation of any polity – defined as 'a territorially demarcated field of social interaction endowed with a permanent and legitimate authoritative hierarchy, underpinned by a set of social bonds' (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023) – can be disaggregated into two constitutive processes: the foreclosure of exit options; and the development of channels of

voice, i.e., institutions of authority[4] and representation as well as adherence to common values, exercised within this territory.[5] Based on Hirschman's insights Rokkan and other scholars who have adopted a polity-perspective on the EU (Bartolini 2005; Ferrera 2005) theorize that the (un)availability of exit options impacts voice, positing, more specifically that external closure (the outer boundaries of the polity) is a key condition for internal structuring (creation of mechanisms of voice to govern the system).

According to this logic, polities can be characterized by the position occupied on a continuum of "polity thickness". A combination of external closure and internal structuring giving rise to a *thick* polity, more closely resembling a state. Individuals ascribing to this polity model are expected to support both strong closure and voice (upper right quadrant of Figure 1). A *thin* polity, conversely, would be the opposite in that both dimensions would manifest less strongly: more exit options, accompanied by low levels of support for voice in the form of central authority and a tolerance for different values. This polity constellation would most closely resemble an international organization (IO). These have limited binding authority and easy exit options, both in terms of voluntary departure (e.g., the decision of the Trump administration to pull out of the World Health Organization) and expulsion (the Charter of the United Nations expressly provides for the possibility of a member being expelled for persistently infringing the principles of the Charter).

However, for the sake of argument we propose to take the two dimensions as theoretically independent from each-other, or in other words unbundle the nexus theorized by Hirschman and Rokkan, but nonetheless retain the useful analytical insight that types of political organization can be reduced to the combination of bounding and binding. This opens a two-dimensional space, which, in our view covers all attempts of higher-order political organization and the resulting political entities. More specifically, two additional mixed constellations emerge, which were not considered in the original formulation of the framework (upper left and lower right quadrants of Figure 1). One would be comparable to a *club*: a combination of a facilitated exit option, coupled with strong voice, i.e., authority and common values. Sovereignty can be exercised in terms of voluntarily joining *and leaving* the club, but while one is a member, they are expected to ascribe to the club's values or otherwise be liable to its authority. This is fundamentally different from the aforementioned 'thick polity' model, which affords full expression of sovereignty at the moment of joining an organization and does authorize something more closely approximating secession thereafter. In this case it is thought that 'once a State decides to enter an organization it is no longer free, and its own wishes are no longer decisive' (Feinberg 1979, cited in Athanassiou 2009: 14).

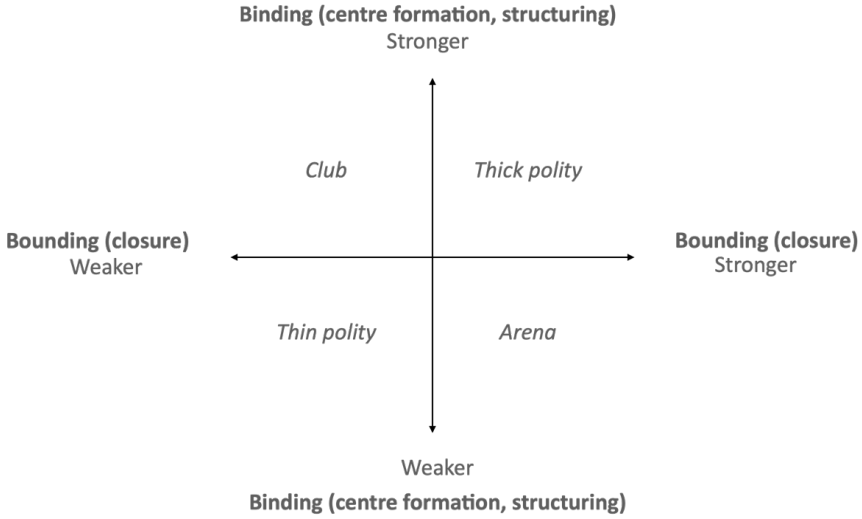
A final possible constellation is what we termed *arena*, resulting from the consciousness of closure, but weak authority. This ideal type of political formation rests on geographic closeness that is likely to give rise to shared spatial identity spurring some countries to form coalitions, which are nonetheless endowed with only weak voice channels. Blocks of regional alliances, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Latin American and Caribbean States Community, the Benelux countries, the Visegrád Four, the

[4] There have been various attempts to systematically collect quantitative data on the authority of international organizations, including the EU. Two prominent examples either conceptualize authority as delegation and pooling (Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019), or unpack authority into the dimensions of autonomy and bindingness (Zürn, Tokhi, and Binder 2021). The survey questions we have at our disposal do not neatly map into the sophisticated indicators elaborated in these ambitious projects, but they still allow us to capture relevant aspects of the authority concept within the limitations of space and cognitive demands on our respondents.

[5] A third polity dimension in the neo-Rokkanian models refers to the role of a modicum of shared identity and the development of socio-economic solidarity (Ferrera 2023). This corresponds to the concept of loyalty in Hirschman's framework, which has however been notably exposed to criticism. E.g., Barry convincingly argued that 'voice […] is already built into the concept of loyalty' (Barry 1974; 98). We exclude it from this analysis to retain a simplified operationalisation of the essential exit-voice dichotomy.

Nordic Council, and so on, would fall into this category. This constellation serves as a reminder that, while a lack of exit might be a necessary condition for the development of voice at the centre, it need not automatically generate this reaction. Like the aforementioned examples, external closure can be limited to create a 'container' for social and economic transactions, perhaps giving rise to a community of values, and/or issue-based coalitions, but not necessarily to a more robust central authority.

Figure 1: Binding, Bounding and Potential Ideal Type Polities



2.3. Public preferences for polity constellations in the EU: conceptualization and measurement

Having mapped out the different ideal-typical polity types, we now seek to apply this scheme to the EU, as a historically novel form of regional integration, and one that stands alone among IOs in the manner it has deeply penetrated and pooled its member states' sovereignty. Occupying a fuzzy status between intergovernmental IO and nascent state, the contemporary EU is unusual in both its depth of supranational integration but also its offer of an explicit exit right. This volatility is perhaps best illustrated by the series of existential policy crises that have called into question the status of the EU polity in recent years (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2016). Below we further characterize and operationalize the bounding and binding dimensions, with the use of more intuitive, real-world policy initiatives included in our conjoint experiment. (summarized in Table 1 below).

Starting with exit, every polity rests on a demarcation of inside from outside but this can be of variable strength. The EU's boundary configuration is novel, comprising weak internal boundaries allowing for the free movement of people, goods, and services, but also comparatively weak external boundaries, enforced and controlled largely by member states themselves rather than the 'center' (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023). As noted, the EU is by far the most deeply integrated IO in world politics, and yet it is also peculiar for the fact that it offers states a constitutional mechanism for exiting (Huysmans 2019). Article 50 of the Treaty of the EU (TEU), the constitutional clause granting members sovereign right of departure conducted in a proceduralized manner, was first used in the Brexit process. According to one of its architects, it was designed as a kind of emergency pressure release valve allowing a 'dictatorial regime…to storm out' (Gray 2017). Indeed, Article 50 was thought to be a theoretical device, and its authors did not envision it ever being used (ibid.). However, in the wake of Brexit, scholarly debates about the ease of exit under Article 50 its implications have

surfaced (Hillion 2018; Closa 2017). From a Hirschman/Rokkan perspective, the inclusion of the exit clause has introduced a breach into the EU polity, denigrating voice incentives (Closa 2017). We thus partially gauge boundary thickness preferences with reference to whether the EU should maximally facilitate exit for a member state wishing to leave.

Next comes the question of what we call polity porousness, i.e. how easy it is to exit the polity once an exit right has been granted. This is a key question for compound polity formation as it suggests a trade-off. On one hand, members of a polity can change their preferences for the polity due to endogenous or exogenous reasons. Endogenously for instance, a growth model may just be inadequate and fit poorly within the polity (Baccaro and Bulfone 2021; Copelovitch, Frieden, and Walter 2016; Regan and Johnston 2014), leading to high adaptation costs. The varieties of capitalism approach suggests that indeed some countries may benefit more economically from European integration than others due to different political-economic institutions (Hall 2013; Hall and Gingerich 2009; Hall and Soskice 2001). Exogenously, a shock and the EU's response to it may highlight fragilities that EU governance could exacerbate. For instance, COVID-19 highlighted that some political economies were more vulnerable than others (Truchlewski et al. 2025 chapter 8) and that the initial EU's response using the European Stability Mechanism met with a quick pushback from Southern countries and Italy in particular (Baccaro, Bremer, and Neimanns 2021). The cost in terms of public opinion was that preferences for exit in Italy soared dramatically after the proposal of a bail-out package implying some conditionality. Therefore, some countries may want an exit way out to limit the costs of adaptation to a supranational polity that favors different domestic institutional configurations (Ganderson et al. 2024). On the other hand, making exit easy creates incentives for member states to blackmail the center, forcing out concessions if for instance the perception of the exit payoffs seem less costly for the leaver than for the European polity. It can thus be rational to prefer avoiding easy exits processes even if they are granted to keep a modicum of stability in the polity and avoid self-undermining political dynamics (Sunstein 1991; Chen and Ordeshook 1994; Huysmans 2019).

Given that a member state has the option of voluntary exit, a corresponding right of expulsion could also be contemplated (Athanassiou 2009). While a constitutional state expulsion mechanism is without clear historical precedent,[6] and is far from existing in the EU, a debate over the issue surfaced in relation to Greece's E(M)U membership during the most acute phase of the Euro crisis and has recently intensified in light of rule of law concerns around Hungary and Poland (Hausteiner 2020). We draw on this concept to gauge European publics' tolerance for supposedly deviant states, and to assess the extent to which membership boundaries should be controlled by other member states, and not just those signalling an intent to leave. As we describe below, some European leaders have responded to challenges to liberal norms by stating that illiberal states should not be in the EU, and this measure offers an indicator of whether there is appetite for this sentiment to be formalised. Given the rareness of both exit and expulsion mechanisms in IOs, they combine to offer insight on preferences for boundary-cum-membership consolidation.

This takes us to two further concepts which reflect the structuring of voice in the EU polity or binding, in our conceptual apparatus. First, no polity can exist without at least some degree of constriction, i.e., an authority that safeguards compliance. However, in practice the EU's authority is contested and co-produced with its strong member states, and this has evolved over time to be commensurate with integration (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023). In particular, Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (Lisbon) allows for the suspension of certain voting and other rights for a member state found by the others to be consistently

[6] The only potential example concerns Singapore's departure from Malaysia. But even this is generally understood as a secession (Hausteiner 2020).

breaching the EU's foundational adherence to 'human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights' (TEU, Article 2). In response to recent rule of law concerns in some member states, the European Commission has sought to create a link between this authority and European structural funds (Blauberger and van Hüllen 2021). We operationalize authority as the capacity to sanction states that breach EU rules and regulations, and link this to the presently contentious example of withholding (structural cohesion) funds. Note, however, that lack of sanctions does not, by itself, diminish the binding effect of EU law for, conceivably, legal rules and sanctions are independent from one another (Athanassiou 2009, 36).

Second, for binding in a polity to be operational, it is important for it to speak with one voice on external matters, lest it be perceived as a weak and divided actor. The capacity to speak with one voice in the EU has been studied extensively in trade (Meunier 2005; Bradford 2020) and monetary policies (Frieden 2004; Truchlewski and Glöckler 2011), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has underlined the cost of differentiated national approaches to external policies and veto power by smaller nations like Hungary (Moise, Truchlewski, and Oana 2025; Oana et al. 2025) for the coherence of sanctions packages and the credible commitments to deterrence. However, because foreign policy is a core state power (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014) underpinned by powerful identity politics, public preferences for unity may be less unified than theory would assume (Oana, Moise, and Truchlewski 2025). There is thus a legitimate case for have more than one voice on foreign policy: this would reflect respondents' preferences for sovereignty and their views on the limits to a centralized, state-like European "thick polity". This polyphony of European voices on the world stage is not in itself a drawback: the EU can exploit this feature of the polity to build coalitions, voice different messages and preferences at the same time and signal that it can be accommodating in international negotiations if need be.

All these five dimensions are displayed in Table 1 giving an overview of our proposed conjoint experiment:

Table 1. Proposed Conjoint Experiment

Factor	Level 1 (L1)	Level 2 (L2)
Exit: When a member state has serious differences with the EU	it's better for both sides if they try to resolve them without leaving.	it's better for both sides if the member state leaves.
Porousness: If a member state decides to exit the EU, it's better for the EU to make	the process demanding.	the process easy.
Expulsion: When a member state persistently breaks common EU rules	the EU should have the power to expel it.	the EU should not have the power to expel it.
Rules: EU common rules	should never be broken by member states.	can be broken by member states when they disagree.
Unity: Foreign Policy	the EU should speak with one voice, even when some member states have disagreements.	member states should speak for themselves, when they disagree with the rest of the EU.

3. Expectations

This section sketches out a series of exploratory expectations about what results the fielded conjoint might produce. We want to stress at this point that, to best of our knowledge, our innovative framework has never been tested on survey data and remains a theoretical approach in the making. Therefore, we do not specify hard hypotheses, but rather a set of expectations. We group them by theme and unit of analysis.

3.1 Polity Attributes

Before discussing individual-level heterogeneity, we first outline and discuss hypotheses for each of our five two-level attributes.

H1a: Exit: given that European polity formation involves the transfer of core state powers (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014), conflicts can arise over the sovereignty of subnational units (Ganderson et al. 2024). Exiting may be preferable to protracted conflicts with ambiguous benefits. Additionally, members engaged in protracted conflicts with the polity undermine and lose support from the other member states (Oana and Truchlewski 2024). We thus expect the condition allowing for exit from the polity ("it's better for both sides if the member state leaves") to increase support for a polity option.

H1b: Porousness – given that exit should raise the profile of a polity option, its easiness should also increase the preference for a polity option. We base this hypothesis on a theoretical argument and on empirical evidence. First, benchmarking theory in the EU (De Vries 2017) assumes that respondents pay attention to what is happening in other EU countries and will certainly have seen how complex the Brexit process was for the UK. Porousness, i.e. easiness of exit, would help a leaving country to negotiate an exit deal but would weaken the EU. Second, empirically, we found in a previous survey that respondents from most countries support ease in the exit clause (Truchlewski, Kyriazi, and Ganderson 2023).

H1c: Expulsion – in recent years, countries breaking fundamental EU rules have become more salient and undermine the EU's legal order through what is called "partial exits": i.e., countries stay within the European Union, but apply – selectively at best – its legal order or even

challenge it. Both elites and public opinion have started thinking about the legitimacy of an expulsion mechanism to protect the European polity from partial exits (Kelemen 2020; 2017; Sadurski 2019; Theuns 2022; BBC News 2021). On the other hand, however, expulsion mechanisms can severely constrain the sovereignty of a nation and go against the will of its people. In Hungary and Poland, for instance, elites maybe "euroskeptic" but citizens staunchly support the European Union. Furthermore, while sanctions for breaching EU law may seem as legitimate, expulsion mechanisms may be a step too far for many respondents. Finally, given that the expulsion attribute mixes both binding and bounding this complicates any predictions. We thus remain agnostic on this attribute.

H1d: Rules – compliance with European legislation is key to sustain the polity, but records have been highly heterogenous over time, across countries and between policy domains (Börzel 2021; Hodson 2011; Hallerberg and Bridwell 2008). Arguably, the need to comply with rules clashes with sovereignty concerns and the problem of transposing rules agreed by a majority (the issue of minority consent). These two forces suggest that rules can have a bidirectional effect, positive or negative, on the probability of supporting a polity profile. The effects can be heterogenous, in territorial and functional terms: on one hand, respondents from countries that are favored in general by EU rules because their political-economic institutions fit the EU (Northern wealthy countries) will be more likely to accept a polity profile when sanctions are present, while respondents from countries where institutions and polities do not have a tight fit the EU will be less likely to accept a polity profile with sanctions to maintain rules .

H1e: Unity – in any polity the capacity to speak with one voice is key for the credibility of the center on the world stage, and its support means that binding, our conceptual terms, is stronger. Put differently, the center holds political sway in a core state power over the subunits. Again, this attribute can both increase and decrease the likeability of a country profile. On one hand, respondents concerned with the EU's geopolitical power will be more likely to support a polity profile with a unified foreign policy, while respondents with more concern for sovereignty will be less likely to support a polity option with a unified foreign policy. However, recent survey evidence suggest that respondents staunchly support a stronger European polity in foreign policy, especially given the context of Russian, Chinese and American threats (Mader, Gavras, et al. 2024; Mader, Neubert, et al. 2024; Truchlewski, Natili, and Oana 2025).

3.2 Relative Importance of Factors (Polity Attributes)

Following the literature on conjoint experiments, we seek to understand which polity attributes is relatively more important (Allenby and Rossi 1998; Oana, Pellegata, and Wang 2021; Moise et al. 2025; Train 2009): in other words, which attribute of the two polity options displayed is considered more important by respondents? The relative importance measure quantifies how heavily a particular attribute weighed on respondents' decision making when choosing between the political programme profiles in the conjoint experiment. A higher relative importance for an attribute indicates that respondents focused more on that policy dimension and it played a bigger role in determining their choice of programme. Put differently, the importance measure quantifies whether and how much a particular attribute (as compared to the other attributes) was the deciding factor when choosing between the different polity options. We expect that the bounding options relative to exit, porousness and expulsion will be more salient as they truly touch on the sovereignty of a subunit of a polity while the respect of common rules and a unified external voice are more functionalist attributes of a polity.

Table 2. Polity Type Preference Combinations – Attributes-Levels

Polity Type	Preference Combinations (Attributes-Levels)
Thick	+ Bounding: Exit L1, Porousness L1 + Binding: Rules L1, Unity L1
Club	- Bounding: Exit L2, Porousness L2 + Binding: Rules L1, Unity L1
Thin	- Bounding: Exit L2, Porousness L2 - Binding: Rules L2, Unity L2
Arena	+ Bounding: Exit L1, Porousness L1 - Binding: Rules L2, Unity L2

This fifth attribute, Expulsion, is a hybrid and exploratory dimension inserted to gain a richer understanding of respondents' polity preferences. It combines both bounding and binding dimensions, and so does not feel as neatly into the juxtaposed combinations shown in Table 2.

3.3 Individual Level Heterogeneity

In the EU integration literature it is common practice to distinguish between three major sets of determinants of opinion formation: self-interest, identification, and cue-taking/benchmarking (for a review, see: Hobolt and De Vries 2016; for a recent discussion and application, see Ejrnæs et al. 2022) to which we add a crisis satisfaction literature which is key to the Hirschman-Rokkan model of polity formation (Truchlewski, Natili, and Oana 2025). From a utilitarian, interest-centred standpoint, the extent to which individuals support or oppose European integration depends on the extent to which they receive and/or perceive benefits from it. As such, for this group, support for integration and membership is *contingent* on the EU delivering continued dividends to its beneficiaries, and we expect this group to prefer strong binding-rules while retaining an ease-of-exit preference for those states that prefer not to be part of the project.

> **H1: Individual – Utilitarian:** Pro-EU attitudes related to EU membership benefits will be associated with *club* polity preferences (Exit L2, Porousness L2 / Rules L1, Unity L1)

The 'winners' of a liberalized European market tend to be individuals in relatively higher income brackets and/or with higher educational attainment and skill levels (Gabel 2009). We therefore expect that levels of education, urban residence, and agreement that the country has benefitted from EU integration to be positively associated with a preference for a more binding set of polity.

Second, from an identitarian standpoint what is paramount is not necessarily the extent to which one benefits from integration, but rather the degree of personal identification with Europeanness vis-à-vis one's member state. Explanations focus on individuals' attachment to their 'nation', i.e., whether it is exclusive (to either the state of Europe) or whether it allows for multiple, nested identifications with either nationality or the state being the sole beneficiaries (McLaren 2007). Individuals who feel threatened by the erosion of their national community as the primary locus of collective identification and political organization are more likely to oppose integration (Hooghe and Marks 2005). Conversely, and in contrast to contingent utilitarian calculations about the EU's design, feelings of Europeanness should be associated

with a sense of common purpose, identity and destiny, working towards a 'polity of fate' that does not accept boundary openness. Therefore, a stronger identification with Europeanness is the more likely they are to also support a *thick* polity.

H2: Individual – Identitarian: European identity will be associated with *thick* polity preferences (Exit L1, Porousness L1 / Rules L1, Unity L1)

Finally, the cue-taking/benchmarking approach to public opinion formation on the EU draws attention to proxies on which citizens rely to overcome information shortfalls given the complexity and remote nature of the EU (Hobolt and de Vries 2016). These proxies/cues/benchmarks come from various sources, such as media coverage, political parties, or the performance of national political systems (Ibid.). However, they are reflective of broader political attitudes. Here we focus on two key variables that have been shown to drive public opinion formation on the EU: political ideology and trust. On the one hand, mainstream political parties in the (centre) right and (centre) left are very favourable to EU integration (Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009), while party-based Euroscepticism has tended to concentrate at the fringes of the political systems (Ray 2007). Therefore, we can generally expect that being located on the far left or far right of the ideological spectrum increases one's chances to be prefer attributes linked to the thin polity class. The second variable is trust, which we examine in relation to both the domestic government and the EU, even though the two are closely related (Harteveld, van der Meer, and de Vries 2013). Low levels of trust in the national political system translate into low trust in EU integration (Hobolt and de Vries 2016) and are a pathway to exiting the EU (Ejrnæs and Jensen 2022). Accordingly, we expect that trusting respondents (both those with high levels of trust in their government and in the EU) will be more likely assigned to the thick polity class.

H3a: Individual – Mainstream-Horseshoe Politics: Support for far left and right politics will be associated with *thin* polity preferences (Exit L2, Porousness L2 / Rules L2, Unity L2).

H3b: Individual – Trust: Low levels of trust will be associated with *thin* polity preferences (Exit L2, Porousness L2 / Rules L2, Unity L2).

Beyond the threefold literature on latent, grounded attitudes towards the EU, we also hypothesise that exposure to the EU's multiple major crisis events post-2008 might impact attitudes towards the polity. First, and most straightforwardly, those who are dissatisfied with EU crisis responses might have a more sceptical outlooks toward boundary condolisation and binding authority, associating them with a *thinner* polity preference (H3c below). This is the classic Hirschmanian prediction, that disillusionment will lead to a retention of exit options and no further transfers of powers to the EU's institutions. However, counter Hirschman, it is also possible that the picture will be more complicated and that states reporting low levels of crisis satisfaction might perceive this as owing to a lack of binding authority at the EU level. For example, through the Euro crisis, 'northern saints' criticized the EU's lack of powers to fiscally bind other 'southern sinners' in the Eurozone (Matthijs and McNamara 2015). In this scenario, it is possible that dissatisfied respondents will prefer tighter binding *and* open bounding (H3d). Finally, taking this further, it is possible that those dissatisfied with the EU's crises will attribute this to the 'half-baked' nature of the set up (Jones, Kelemen, and Meunier 2016; 2021), and will see this as a call to consolidate a *thicker* polity (H3e).

H3c: Individual – Crisis Attitudes – Baseline Hirschman: Low levels of crisis response satisfaction will be associated with *thin* polity preferences (Exit L2, Porousness L2 / Rules L2, Unity L2).

H3d: Individual – Crisis Attitudes – Counter Hirschman: Low levels of crisis response satisfaction will be associated with *club* polity preferences (Exit L2, Porousness L2 / Rules L1, Unity L1).

H3e: Individual – Crisis Attitudes – Loyalty Hirschman: Low levels of crisis response satisfaction will be associated with *thick* polity preferences (Exit L1, Porousness L1 / Rules L1, Unity L1).

The placement of these hypotheses is summarised in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Ideal Type Polities and European Polity Formation Hypotheses (Individual Level)

Club	**Thick**
H1 – Utilitarian H3d – Counter	H2 – Identitarian H3e - Loyalty
Thin	**Arena**
H3a/H3b/H3c – Political/Crisis Attitudes	-

The *Arena* polity preference, which comprises strong boundaries (limited exit options) and weak binds of authority, is a conceptually possible combination of views. However, in practice, based on our review of the existing EU public opinion literature, we do not envisage this combination of views being visible in the responses.

3.4 National Level

Beyond individual level differences within member states, we also expect to identify varying constellations of polity preferences *between* member states. Another major implication of the 'polity perspective' (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023), and where it arguably departs to some degree from individually centred literature on intra-country cleavages, is the distribution of different conceptions of membership across the member states of the EU. Unlike mature federal states with vertically-integrated party systems and (comparatively) homogenous populations, in the EU the territorial dimension of political conflict tends to override other divisions (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023). This has certainly been the case with crises prior to Brexit: both the Euro area and refugee crises brought the EU's geographical divides into relief, with scholars noting divisions between north and south, east and west, core and periphery (Matthijs 2020; Truchlewski and Schelkle 2024; Ferrara, Schelkle, and Truchlewski 2023). We see the kernels of such a divide and the potential of further exits being forced by non-departing states in recent disputes over human rights and the rule of law. A June 2021 Hungarian law prohibiting the portrayal of homosexuality in educational materials and television programmes for under-18s was a notable flashpoint. European leaders including Luxembourg's Xavier Bettel and the Netherlands' Mark Rutte responded by suggesting that

Hungary should either adhere to a universal recognition of minority rights per Article 2 or leave the EU (BBC News 2021).

If the debate over different visions of the EU polity resonates with publics, one likely pattern would be that classes favouring a thinner conception of membership, i.e., a plurality of values and a weaker enforcement of rules will be more dominant, in states which have recently challenged the mainstream vision of the EU as a union of liberal democracies. Respondents could be more in favor of an exit facilitated by the EU, albeit on their own terms when the country itself has decided the time is right, but reject expulsion. Moreover, we expect a broader division along core and periphery in line with studies which show that EU regime support is higher in the founding member states compared to the South and East (Hobolt and de Vries 2016, p. 419). Older member states have had more time and power to shape the European project, anchoring it in the institutional arrangements of the core, whilst their citizens have been more socialized in the European project. Moreover, countries on the EU's periphery have been fragilized by crises more so than the core. This is summarised in H4a below.

> **H4a – Countries - Core-Periphery**: Economically less developed southern and eastern (Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Italy, Portugal) member states will be associated with *thinner* (Exit L2, Porousness L2 / Rules L2, Unity L2) polity preferences than wealthier northern and western member states (Germany, Finland, Netherlands, Ireland).

However, the inverse finding is also possible, whereby older, wealthier and more mature northern and western ('core') member states are associated with *thinner* polity preferences, owing to a perceived notion that the EU has overreached and/or is benefitting other member states more than theirs. Indeed, some evidence suggests that so-called peripheral member states are exhibiting more pro-European attitudes (Voluntiru et al 2024). This is not solely related to economic performance, but we use this as a broad marker of core-periphery status. Therefore we invert H4a in H4b.

> **H4b – Countries - Core-Periphery Inverted**: Economically less developed southern and eastern (Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Italy, Portugal) member states will be associated with *thicker* polity preferences (Exit L1, Porousness L1 / Rules L1, Unity L1) than wealthier northern and western member states (Germany, Finland, Netherlands, Ireland).

Finally, similar to the individual-level expectations related to crisis response satisfaction, we envisage a more conditional type of *club* polity preference among wealthier states, whereby tighter binding rules are applied to the benefit of the EU's longer-standing beneficiary members and to constrain (perceived) volatility in the periphery, while retaining openness of membership boundaries to allow for potential exits (Hobolt and De Vries 2016).

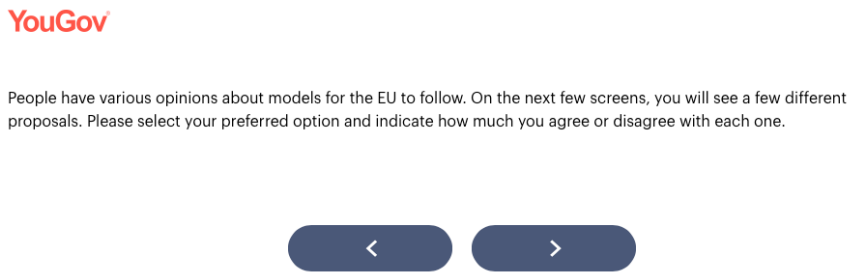
> **H4c – Countries - Core-Periphery Conditionality**: Economically more developed wealthier northern and western member states (Germany, Finland, Netherlands, Ireland) will be associated with *club* polity preferences (Exit L2, Porousness L2 / Rules L1, Unity L1).

4. Empirics: Conjoint Experiment

4.1 Data and Design

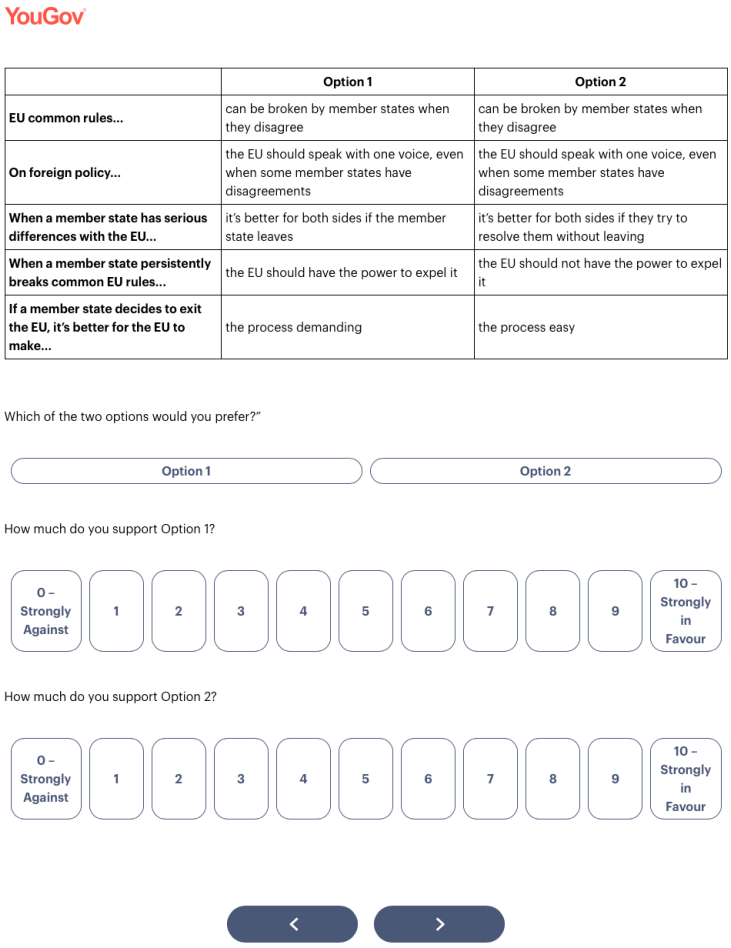
Our paper draws on data from a conjoint experiment embedded in a larger survey conducted with representative samples of 2,000 respondents in nine European Union member states about contemporary EU politics: our total sample will therefore be around 18,000 respondents. These states are Germany, Hungary, Romania, Italy, Portugal, Finland, Netherlands, Ireland, Czech Republic. A conjoint is an experimental design that breaks down 'product' attributes, or in our case 'polity' attributes, and then co-varies combinations of these attributes, while asking respondents to rank (relative to one another) and force-score (in absolute terms) different polity options presented with row-wise attributes in a table to respondents. The conjoint approach has become more widespread in political science in recent decades (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Druckman 2024 Chapter 4). We follow leading publications in both wider political and European studies (Bremer et al. 2023; Dill, Howlett, and Müller-Crepon 2024; Oana, Pellegata, and Wang 2021) to ask about preferences for binding and bounding, and aim to perform subgroup analysis based on the usual predictors of EU integration preferences (Hobolt and de Vries 2016) and crisis evaluations (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020; Cuesta, Egami, and Imai 2022). Our proposed conjoint contains two elements: a forced-choice element between two options with varying attributes, and an overall rating for each proposed level (0-10). This question process will be repeated twice for each respondent, with variations in polity models. Figures 3 (introductory prelude) and 4 (question screen, presenting alternative EU polity models) below show how the experiment will be viewed by respondents on the survey interface.[7]

Figure 3: Conjoint Interface (Intro Screen)



[7] Translated versions will be presented in the national languages of each state.

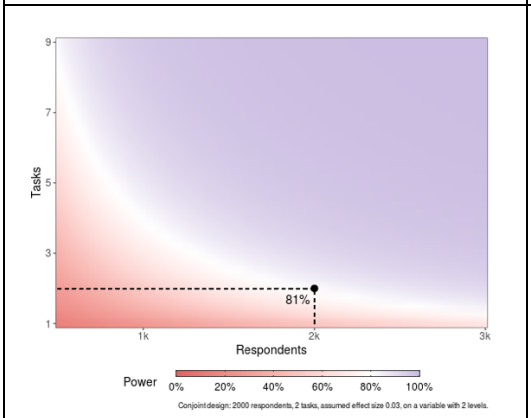
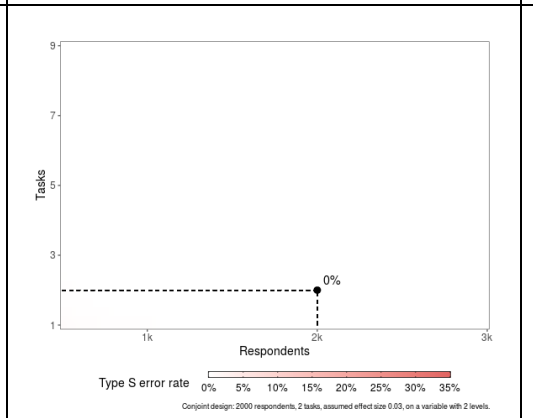
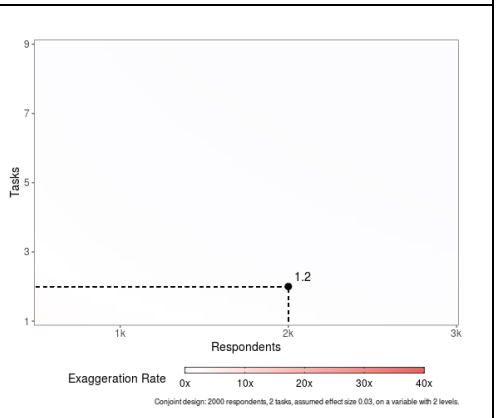
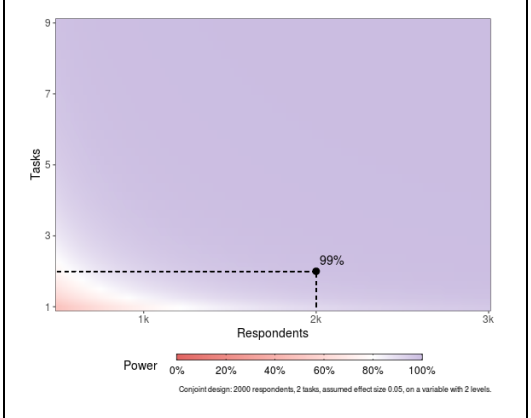
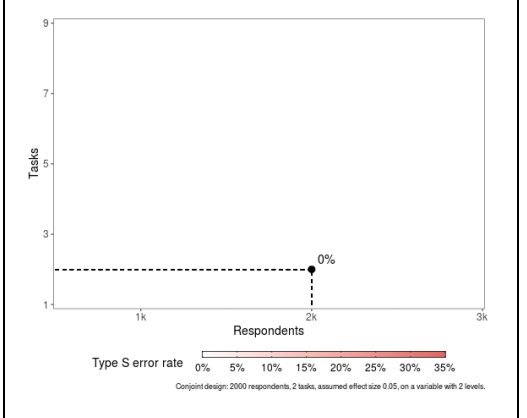
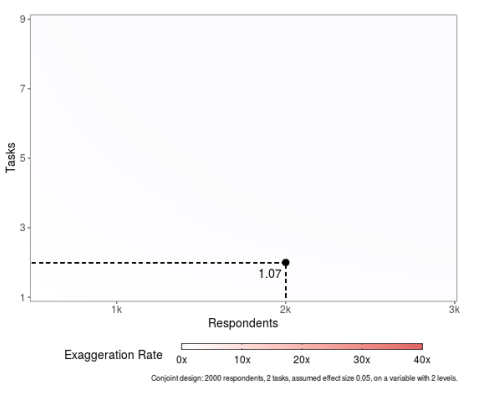
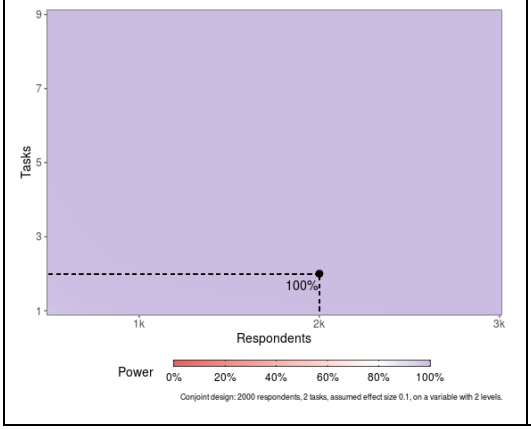
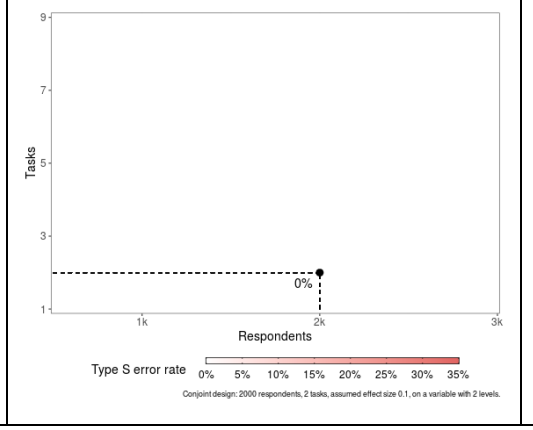
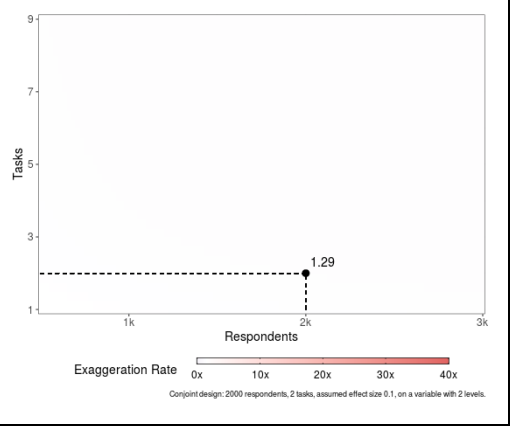
Figure 4: Conjoint Interface (Question Screen)



4.2 Power Analysis

We perform a power analysis for our conjoint to evaluate whether our sample and questionnaire design have enough power to get the hypothesized effect with enough certainty. Our aim is to have at least 80% of a priori probability that we find evidence supporting our evidence if our hypothesis is true. We use a Shiny App dedicated to power analysis (Lukac and Stefanelli 2020; Stefanelli and Lukac 2020) using the framework of (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). While for the whole sample (around 18,000 respondents), power is not a problem, for country specific samples (around 2,000 respondents) there can be an issue. Table 2 summarizes our power analysis for a range of small effect sizes using Cohen's definition (Cohen 2013) and for type S and M errors (Gelman and Carlin 2014; Gelman and Tuerlinckx 2000).

Table 3. Power Analyses for Conjoint Analysis (Varying Effect Sizes)

Power	*Type S Error Rate*	*Type M Error Rate*[8]
		
		
		

4.3 Control Variables

Finally, our survey proposes to include a wide battery of control variables related to respondent attributes and attitudes for potential use in the final analysis. These are listed below.

[8] I.e., exaggeration rate.

Table 4. Survey Control Variables

Variable Type	Variable	Script
Socio-Demographics	Age	[Auto-coded, panel data] Year of birth
	Education	[Auto-coded] Local measures recoded into low/medium/high (ISCED)
	Locale	**SD1. [D1] Would you say you live in a…?** 1 Rural area or village 2 Small or middle size town 3 Large town or city
	Household Income (Comfort)	**SD5. [SD9] Which of the descriptions below comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?** 1 Living comfortably on present income 2 Coping on present income 3 Finding it difficult on present income 4 Finding it very difficult on present income
	Household Income (5 Year Review)	**SD6. Thinking of your household's financial situation, compared to 5 years ago, do you think that your situation...?** 1 Is a lot better 2 Is a little better 3 Has stayed the same 4 Is a little worse 5 Is a lot worse
	Political Trust	**POL2. [POL2] Generally speaking, how much do you personally trust each of the following institutions? Select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means "don't trust at all" and 10 means "trust completely".** [RANDOMIZE ITEMS] The media [COUNTRY]'s government The European Union

Variable Type	Variable	Script
	Left-Right	**[POL3] In political matters, people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". How would you place your views on this scale? Select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means "left" and 10 means "right".**
	Personal National Identity	**POL 7. [POL8] Do you see yourself as…?** (ONE ANSWER ONLY) 1 European only 2 European and [NATIONALITY] 3 [NATIONALITY] and European 4 [NATIONALITY] only 5 None of the above
	EU Integration	**[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".**
	Populism/Elitism/Anti-Politics Index	**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means "completely disagree" and 10 means "completely agree".** • Politicians need to follow the will of the people. • I take pride in being an ordinary citizen. • It's important for a political leader to be like the people he or she represents • Political leaders should make decisions according to their best judgment, not the will of the people. • The leaders of my country should be more educated and skilled than ordinary citizens. • Political parties do more harm than good to society.
	National Economy (5 Year Review)	**POL13 [POL17]. Thinking about the economy, compared to 5 years ago, do you think that the general economic situation in (COUNTRY) …?** 1 Is a lot better

Variable Type	Variable	Script
		2 Is a little better 3 Has stayed the same 4 Is a little worse 5 Is a lot worse
	EU Membership Benefits Country	POL14 [POL11]. Overall, would you say that (COUNTRY) has on balance benefitted or not from being a member of the European Union? 1 Benefitted 2 Not Benefitted
	Common EU Defence-Social Security Spending	**Europe is now faced with external threats that may require greater spending on defence. Would you be in favour of [COUNTRY] contributing to a common EU defence fund, at the expense of spending on social security benefits?** 0-10 (Common EU Defence-Social Security)
	Common EU Climate Fund-Social Security Spending	**Europe is now faced with climate change. Would you be in favour of [COUNTRY] contributing to a common EU sustainability fund investing in renewable energy and environmental protection, at the expense of spending on social security benefits?** 0-10 (Common EU Climate Fund-Social Security)
	Trust in Other States	**POL17. Generally speaking, how much do you personally trust each of the following countries? Select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Do not trust at all" and 10 means "Trust completely".** 1 The United States 2 Other EU member states 3 The Russian Federation 4 China
	Knowledge Checks	**Which country voted in favour of leaving the European Union in 2016?** UK, Spain, Hungary, Greece

Variable Type	Variable	Script
		Which of the following countries IS NOT a member of the European Union? Norway, Sweden, Lithuania, Latvia **Who is the current president of the European Commission?** Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen, Olaf Scholz **Who is the current president of the European Central Bank?** Christine Lagarde, Kristalina Georgieva, Jens Stoltenberg, Herman Van Rompuy
Crisis Comparisons	Crisis Response Satisfaction	**C7[C7] Generally speaking, how satisfied are you with the way the (NATIONALITY) government / [European Union] has handled each of the following challenges? Select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means "completely dissatisfied" and 10 means "completely satisfied".** [RANDOMIZE items - ONE ANSWERS PER LINE] 1. Financial and economic issues in some European countries, 2010-2012 2. Refugee flows to Europe, 2015-2016 3. Poverty and unemployment, 2010-ongoing 4. The Covid-19 pandemic, 2020-2023 5. The war in Ukraine, 2022-ongoing 6. Member States undermining democratic values, 2012-ongoing
Polity/EU Attitudes	Right/Wrong Direction in the EU/[country]	**SOL 20.Would you say that things are currently moving in the right direction in …? Please, select one answer.** **_1 In the European Union** **_2 In [YOUR COUNTRY]** 1. Yes, things are moving in the right direction. 2. No, things are moving in the wrong direction
	Democratic Functioning in the EU/[country]	**SOL 21. Generally speaking, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works....?** **_1 In the European Union** **_2 In [YOUR COUNTRY]** 0-10 (Dissatisfied-Satisfied)
	EU Membership	**SOL22. How do you feel being an EU member impacts [COUNTRY] in the following areas?**

Variable Type	Variable	Script
		1. Prosperity 2. Democracy 3. Safety 4. Influence on the world stage 5. Coping with crises 6. Adopting policies good for [COUNTRY] 0-10 (Very Negatively-Very Positively)
	EU Referendum Vote Intention	**SOL23 [SP2_4] If there was a referendum on [NATIONALITY] membership of the European Union, how would you vote? [repeated from W1]** 1. I would vote to remain a member of the European Union 2. I would vote to leave the European Union 3. I would not vote 98. Prefer not to say

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