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Trading votes: what drives MEP support for trade liberalisation?

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ABSTRACT
Which factors drive support of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) for trade liberalisation? The literature suggests that economic factors, ideology, and politicization shape MEP voting behaviour. Drawing on a new dataset encompassing all trade-related MEP votes (2009-2019), this study offers a quantitative assessment of the determinants of MEP support for trade liberalisation. It finds that ideological factors have the strongest and most persistent effect on MEP support for trade liberalisation. The economic competitiveness of MEPs' home regions, in turn, has only a limited effect. Politicization, lastly, has an unclear effect on its own and mostly influences MEP voting behaviour through interactions with ideological and economic factors. The study offers the first comprehensive assessment of the determinants of MEP voting on trade liberalisation and contributes to political economy research on electoral institutions and trade, the European Parliament's role in trade policy and the effects of politicization on policy-making.

Introduction

Political economy scholars have extensively studied the role of parliaments in trade policy and trade liberalisation (see Ehrlich, 2007; Kono, 2006; Milner & Kubota, 2005; Rickard, 2015; Rogowski, 1987). Little attention, however, has been afforded to trade-related voting patterns in the European Parliament (EP) (Migliorati & Vignoli, 2021; Raunio & Wagner, 2020). This research gap

is remarkable in several regards. First, the European Union (EU) is the world's largest trading block, and its trade policy significantly affects the world economy and global trade regime. Second, the EP has become a co-ratifier and co-legislator for EU trade policy measures since the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. How Members of the European Parliament (MEP) vote on trade measures thus matters and shapes the EU's trade policy (see Larsén, 2020). Last, EU trade policy has been at times highly politicised in the last decade resulting in considerable public scrutiny of the European Institutions including the EP in this policy domain (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020; Young, 2019). The effects of this new phenomenon on MEP voting patterns remain understudied, and little understood.

This study seeks to address this blind spot in the political economy literature. It focuses on two research questions: First, which factors drive MEP support for liberal trade policy measures? And second, to what extent and how does the at times high degree of politicization of EU trade policy in the last years affect MEP support for liberal trade policy measures? Building on existing political economy research, this study develops several hypotheses on how regional economic factors, ideology and politicization may shape MEP support for trade liberalisation. It draws on a new dataset that encompasses all MEP votes in trade-related rollcalls in EP terms 7 and 8 (2009–2019). It contains 183.931 observations and is the first to offer a highly comprehensive overview of MEP voting behaviour on trade policy. The study finds that ideological factors have strong effects on MEP support for liberal trade measures. Europhile, right-wing and economically liberal MEPs are more likely to vote for trade liberalisation, than Eurosceptic, left-wing and protectionist MEPs. Levels of regional unemployment have a negative effect on voting for liberal trade measures. However, this effect is relatively small. Contrary to widely held assumptions economic factors such as GDP per capita or the regional employment share in high tech sectors have no clear effect on MEP support for trade liberalisation. The only other economic factor that appears to have a notable yet counterintuitive positive effect on MEP support for trade liberalisation is regional employment in agriculture. Politicization has a negative effect on MEP support for trade liberalisation for some types of votes. In particular, politicization increases the negative effect of protectionism on voting for liberal resolutions. In sum, this study finds that MEPs are on balance more driven by ideological rather than economic factors at the regional level and that politicization has a weaker and more nuanced effect on support for trade liberalisation than often assumed. Further research is needed to substantiate these findings and underlying theoretical assumptions.

The study makes empirical and theoretical contributions to the literatures on the role of parliaments in trade policy and MEP voting behaviour. It is the first study to comprehensively document and assess MEP voting patterns

and support for trade liberalisation. While there is a growing number of studies that seek to shed a light on MEP voting and support for trade liberalisation through qualitative (Larsén, 2020; Meissner & McKenzie, 2019; Van den Putte *et al.*, 2015) and quantitative means (Migliorati & Vignoli, 2021; Raunio & Wagner, 2020), the empirical bases of these studies are typically narrow and limited to parliamentary discussions on key Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). Second, it is also the first study to statistically scrutinise associations between economic factors and MEP support for trade liberalisation. Whereas economic factors take centre stage in the international political economy (IPE) literature on parliaments in trade (Ehrlich, 2007; Rickard, 2015; Rogowski, 1987), the few statistical examinations of MEP attitudes and voting on trade policy have so far disregarded economic factors (Migliorati & Vignoli, 2021; Raunio & Wagner, 2020). This study thus embeds research on the EP in trade policy into the broader IPE literature on electoral institutions and trade. Third, it is also the first study to statistically examine associations between politicization and MEP voting. While research on politicization in EU trade policy has been mushrooming, it mostly focuses on why and how politicization occurs and varies (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020; Duina, 2019; García, 2020) yet offers few insights on how politicization impacts on policy-making. The remainder of this study is structured as follows. It first discusses existing research on the formation of trade preferences and parliamentary voting and formulates hypotheses on potential determinants of MEP support for trade liberalisation. It then lays out the research design and operationalisation of this study, discusses the findings of our main models and concludes.

Theorising MEP support for trade liberalisation

IPE research suggests that three factors may shape parliamentary voting patterns on trade liberalisation: (1) the economic competitiveness of parliamentarians' electoral districts (see Ehrlich, 2007; Kono, 2006; Milner & Kubota, 2005; Rickard, 2015; Rogowski, 1987); (2) the ideological orientations of policy-makers (Elsig, 2002; Goldstein, 1993; Migliorati & Vignoli, 2021); (3) and lastly the degree of politicization of trade policy (Duina, 2019; Gheyle & Rone, 2022; Moerland & Weinhardt, 2020; Taylor, 2021). The following section discusses this literature to formulate hypotheses on the potential determinants of MEP support for trade liberalisation.

The literature on economic determinants of trade policy stipulates that trade has income effects on societal constituencies, which shape individual trade policy preferences, electoral mobilisation and, lastly, parliamentary voting behaviour (Ehrlich, 2007; Kim & Osgood, 2019; Kono, 2006; Milner & Kubota, 2005; Osgood, 2018; Rickard, 2015; Rogowski, 1987). The causal argument exists in many different varieties – some scholars suggest that income effects occur along class, sectorial or intra-sectorial divides (see Kim &

Osgood, 2019) – yet all models share the basic assumption that firms and workers with a competitive advantage in world markets should see income gains from trade liberalisation, whereas firms and workers with competitive disadvantages should experience income gains from trade protection. Parliamentarians, in consequence, should vote in favour of trade liberalisation or protection in view of maximising income for their electorate. The competitive advantage that underlies these dyamics should derive from producitivity differentials that manifest themselves in regions and countries exporting pro-protionally more or less of a certain good or service to world markets than other regions and countries (Huber *et al.*, 2023). Potential secondary indicators for the relative competitive advantage of regions and countries are inter alia the GDP per capita in purchasing power parities, unemployment rates and sectorial employment structures.

Despite the prominence of economic factors in IPE research, they play a secondary role in the EU trade policy literature. Societal economic interests and income effects are assumed to determine the broad orientations of EU trade policy (Dür, 2008; Eckhardt, 2015; Elsig & Dupont, 2012; Young, 2016) yet institutional, ideological or systemic factors are assumed to shape context-specific EU trade policy decisions. This 'oversight' is particularly pronounced with regard to research on the EP. Van den Putte *et al.* (2015), for instance, observe that ideological factors dominate MEP voting but that economic interests may under certain circumstances override normative considerations. This representation of economic interests as background factors, however, may be rooted in epistemological challenges rather than empirics. First, most studies on the EP in trade policy draw on qualitative methods that defy the formal modelling and statistical testing of the impact of economic factors on MEP voting (see Larsén, 2017; Meissner & McKenzie, 2019; Rosén, 2017). Only two studies statistically assess MEP voting patterns on trade policy yet refrain from assessing the significance of economic factors (Migliorati & Vignoli, 2021; Raunio & Wagner, 2020). Second, the EP holds limited powers – in comparison to for instance the US Congress – in setting tariff schedules. Under European primary law, tariffs are jointly set by the European Commission and Council of the European Union. The EP, in turn, can only influence tariffs on the margins when for instance adopting and amending regulations on reforms of the EU's Generalised System of Preferences or in the run up to giving its consent to FTAs. The EP's limited powers mean that it is challenging to analyse the effect of economic interests on trade liberalisation. Unlike in the US context, scholars cannot scrutinise how MEPs vote on specific tariff lines that affect industries in their home regions but instead need to code the trade effects of non-tariff measures. Hence, little is still known about the influence of economic factors on MEP voting patterns. This study seeks to start closing this gap by testing the below hypothesis.

H_1: MEPs from regions with a relative competitive advantage are more likely to vote for liberal trade measures than MEPs from regions with a relative competitive disadvantage.

Moreover, party political preferences are likely to play a role in influencing MEP's voting behaviour with regard to trade policy. There is an extensive literature on the political and institutional determinants of voting behaviour in the European Parliament, highlighting the overall high level of voting cohesion among (centrist) political groups and their importance in structuring contestation in the EP and inter-institutional bargaining (e.g., Bressanelli et al., 2016; Hix et al., 2006). Nevertheless, MEPs at times do face competing demands from national parties and political groups (Lindstädt et al., 2011). In general, research has long established that the left-right dimension is a relevant predictor of voting behaviour in the EP (e.g., Hix et al., 2006; Kreppel & Tsebelis, 1999) and a key determinant of national parties' political group membership (McElroy & Benoit, 2012). Its importance has also been shown specifically with regard to external EU policies (e.g., Raunio & Wagner, 2020). In matters related to international trade, right-wing MEPs are generally more supportive of liberal economic policies than left-wing MEPs that favour stronger state intervention in the economy. This reasoning implies that right-wing MEPs should be more supportive of trade liberalisation than left-wing MEPs. Migliorati and Vignoli's (2021) assessment of FTA-related MEP speeches again corroborates this intuition. Right-wing MEPs generally expressed greater support for these agreements than left-wing MEPs. Moreover, a further political dimension identified as relevant in political contestation in the EP (and in particular regarding roll-call voting) is the pro-anti EU dimension. Even though research shows that it has lost in importance vis-à-vis the left-right dimension over time as the EP became empowered (Hix et al., 2006), it arguably continues to structure contestation within the EP on salient issues (Roger et al., 2017). Europhile MEPs are seen to generally support the European Commission in the development of Union policies, whereas Eurosceptic MEPs are seen to be critical of the European Commission and Union policies. EU trade policy, as developed by the European Commission, has historically been liberal in global comparison as manifested in low tariff levels (World Bank, 2023), high trade to GDP ratios (ibid), and a record number of FTAs in force (WTO, 2023). In view of this historic trend, one should expect Europhile MEPs that seek to play a constructive role to be more likely to vote for trade liberalisation than Eurosceptic MEPs, who often seek to frustrate Union policies. Migliorati and Vignoli (2021) assess MEP speeches on a small number of FTAs and indeed find that Europhile MEPs generally exhibit higher support for these agreements than Europhobe MEPs. In a similar vein, Braml and Felbermayr (2020) show that Europhile EU citizens tend to be more supportive of trade liberalisation and FTAs than Eurosceptic

citizens. Finally, MEP's policy-specific preference with regard to international trade are likely to play an important role in determining their voting behaviour in this area. Arguably, party positions on protectionism vs. free trade have historically been strongly aligned with the overall left-right dimension. However, we hold that it is conceptually and empirically useful to distinguish between these two dimensions, as both the far-left and the far-right as well as some centre-left (e.g., Green) parties now hold relatively protectionist positions. In sum, the literature points to three potential ideational drivers of MEP support for trade liberalisation.[1]

> H$_{2.1}$: Right-wing MEPs are more supportive of liberal trade measures than left-wing MEPs.

> H$_{2.2}$: Europhile MEPs are more supportive of liberal trade measures than Europhobe MEPs.

> H$_{2.3}$: Liberal MEPs are more supportive of liberal trade measures than protectionist MEPs.

The third broad factor seen to shape policy-making and outcomes is variation in the politicization of EU trade policy. This study uses the same definition of politicization as the other contributions to this special issue and explained in greater detail in its introduction (see Dür *et al.*, 2023). Hence, politicization is defined as (1) the growing salience of a policy domain and issues and (2) their growing contestation in the public sphere, which may often manifest itself in a polarisation of public opinion, political discourse and media coverage (see De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020; Wilde *et al.*, 2016). Politicization should thus show in the contestation of policy options and intensity of political discourse among political and societal actors as well as relevant media coverage. It may occur both at the domestic and European level with likely spill-overs and spill-backs between governance levels and different domestic political arenas over time (Bressanelli *et al.*, 2020). In sum, a policy domain or measure is here deemed politicised, if parties, politicians, societal actors and media afford great attention and strongly contest different policy options thus often resulting in a polarisation of public discourse, opinions and media coverage. A domain or measure is deemed non-politicised, in turn, if parties, politicians, societal actors, and media take little interest and barely contest policy options. Due to the at times high degree of politicization of EU trade policy – and notably of the TTIP negotiations – in the last decade, research on politicization has flourished (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020; De Ville & Gheyle, 2023; Duina, 2019; García, 2020; Gheyle & Rone, 2022; Moerland & Weinhardt, 2020; Taylor, 2021; Van den Putte *et al.*, 2015; Young, 2016). It focuses, however, on why and how politicization occurs rather than its effects on policy-making such as changes in MEP voting patterns. Hence, this literature does neither

provide a theoretical nor empirical discussion of the impact of policisation on MEP voting.

To address this research gap, it is helpful to turn to the literature on EU governance. In accordance with the above definition of politicization (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020; Wilde *et al.*, 2016), Laffan (2019) suggests that politicization leads to increased public scrutiny and demands for responsiveness. Whereas the European Commission and Council of the European Union may thus see politicization as a phenomenon that limits their policy autonomy and requires mitgation, MEPs may perceive politicization as an opportuntinuty to consolidate their standing in the European polity. MEPs have been facing for decades criticisms of being out of touch with European citizens despite many efforts to establish better accountability and input legitimation mechanisms and narratives (Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Majone, 1998; Moravcsik, 2002). MEPs may use politicization and seek to demonstrate their responsiveness and willingness to scrutinise policy on behalf of their electorates in order to enhance their accountability and legitimacy in the eyes of European citizens. It follows that politicization may translate into two changes in MEP behaviour: First, politicization should boost MEP interest in trade policy and the trade-offs that society faces in this domain. It is, in other words, likely to kindle MEP interest in this otherwise rather technical policy domain. Second, politicization may harden MEP preferences and limit the space for compromise. High public scrutiny of MEPs in combination with societal contestation is likely to incentivise MEPs to engae in political 'grandstanding' and to refuse concessions, which may cause reputational damages among their electorates. This hardening of MEP positions should result in overall decreased MEP support for liberal trade measures.

$H_{3.1}$: Politicization reduces overall MEP support for liberal trade measures.

We expect, furthmore, significant interaction effects between our independent variables. Politicization should amplify the effects of economic competitiveness and ideology on MEP voting behaviour due to increased MEP interest in the policy, heightened contestation and often polarisation in MEP preferences (De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020; Laffan, 2019; Wilde *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, we theorise that politicization boosts support for liberal trade measures among MEPs from highly competitive regions that are likely to gain from trade liberalisation yet further reduces support among MEPs from less competitive regions. Politicization, in other words, is assumed to intensify policy struggles between regions and their respective firms, workers, and voters who should closely scrutinise the voting behaviour of their MEPs. In a similar vein, politicization is expected to increase the effects of ideological factors on MEP support for trade liberalisation. Politicization should thus increase support for liberal trade measures among Europhile MEPs that seek to play a constructive role in EU policy-making and to

collaborate with the European Commission. It should lower support, however, among Eurosceptic MEPs that seek to signal their opposition to Commission initiatives and Union policies. We further expect politicization to intensify support for liberal trade measures among right-wing MEPs, while eroding support among left-wing MEPs. This assumption echoes the conventional view that right-wing politicians and voters prefer lower degrees of state intervnetion than left-wing politicians and voters. Last, we further assume that politicization amplifies differences in voting between protectionist and liberal MEPs. Whereas liberal MEPs should be even more likely to support liberal trade measures in times of high politicization, protectionist MEPs should be less likely in view of heightened public scrutiny. Politicization, to conclude, should significantly interact and amplify the effects of economic and ideological factors on MEP voting.

> $H_{3.2}$: Politicization amplifies the effects of regional economic competitiveness on MEP support for liberal trade measures.

> $H_{3.3}$: Politicization increases the effects of ideological factors on MEP support for liberal trade measures.

Research design and operationalisation

This study draws on a new dataset that encompasses all MEP votes on trade-related roll-call votes (RCVs) to test the validity of the hypotheses and shed a light on the importance of different factors as voting determinants. The dataset contains 183.931 observations of individual MEP votes that fell under the lead of the EP's International Trade (INTA) Committee. It covers terms 7 (2009–2014) and 8 (2014–2019).[2] The dataset records the names of MEPs, their vote, the title and ID of the resolution/measure subject to voting, the applied voting procedure, and the roll-call outcome. It is important to note that our dataset only contains information on 'main votes' for measures and resolutions as a whole, but not on amendments.[3]

The dependent variable of this study is MEP support for trade liberalisation. To that end, we code a dummy variable indicating the liberal nature of trade agreements, measures, and resolutions under consideration in RCVs. We deem an agreement, measure, or resolution liberal, if it calls for or advances the liberalisation of trade and investment flows through the removal of existing tariff or non-tariff trade barriers. Relevant RCVs may for instance promote the conclusion of WTO talks, FTAs, or sectorial agreements, seek to strengthen the WTO, grant trading preferences to developing or least developed countries, transpose international standards and norms for the sake of trade promotion, or amount to autonomous legislative measures that streamline customs and border checks to limit trade frictions and costs. We deem an agreement, measure, or resolution protectionist, in turn,

if it calls for and/or advances trade and investment restrictions through the creation of new tariff or non-tariff barriers. Relevant RCVs may for instance strengthen trade defence and screening mechanisms, or call for the rejection of FTAs, WTO, and sectorial agreements. Finally, we deem an agreement, measure, or resolution neutral, if its primary purpose is neither to liberalise nor to restrict trade and investment flows. Relevant RCVs address for instance the collection of trade statistics, the operational procedures of EU agencies in the realm of trade, the representation modalities of the EU and Member States in investor-state dispute settlement proceedings, Human Rights or environmental appeals, or financial and development aid programmes. Overall, the dataset contains observations on 245 RCVs of which 118 RCVs qualify as liberal, 114 RCVs as neutral and 13 RCVs as protectionist.[4]

Building on this dummy variable, we operationalise our main dependent variable in three ways. First, we analyse MEP support for all liberal agreements, measures, and resolutions to gain broad insights on the factors fuelling support for trade liberalisation (Model 1). Second, we only focus on MEP support for liberalising trade agreements (Model 2). Of the 245 RCVs in our dataset, 57 RCVs came under the consent procedure and dealt with the ratification of international agreements. Most agreements qualify as liberal, yet some are of administrative nature and neutral in terms of trade effects. They govern for instance the EU's accession to sectorial bodies such as the International Cotton Advisory Board but do not contain commitments that directly interfere with trade and investment flows. We exclude these administrative agreements from Model 2 in that MEP voting in these RCVs does not yield insights on MEP support for trade liberalisation. Third, we assess MEP support for liberal resolutions and 'autonomous trade measures' (Model 3). Liberal 'autonomous trade measures' are EU directives and regulations that remove tariffs and non-tariff barriers by for instance widening access to the EU's Generalised System of Preferences and providing for the mutual recognition of trade-related foreign norms and conformity assessment bodies. Liberal resolutions, in turn, are political statements calling for trade liberalisation.

This three-pronged analytical approach reflects several considerations. For one, the procedures for the adoption of trade agreements (Model 2) and autonomous measures and resolutions (Model 3) differ, which warrants disaggregation. Whereas MEPs can amend autonomous measures and draft resolutions in line with their preferences, they are *de jure* limited to giving or withholding their consent for international agreements. These procedural differences might affect voting patterns and thus bias findings. What is more, disaggregating the data in RCVs on trade agreements, autonomous measures and resolutions promises to throw into sharper relief the drivers of MEP support for trade liberalisation. Whereas the effects of liberal resolutions on trade may be non-existent and the purpose of autonomous trade

measures difficult to apprehend, most trade agreements effectively advance trade liberalisation. Hence, analysing MEP support for trade agreements (Model 2) should yield particularly clear insights on the factors that promote trade liberalisation.

Last, it would be desirable to run regressions with MEP support for protectionist measures as dependent variable to complement above analysis. The factors and causalities fuelling MEP support for protectionism should, after all, mirror in many regards the factors and causalities underlying MEP support for trade liberalisation. Due to the small number of RCVs in our dataset that deal with autonomous measures and resolutions of manifestly protectionist nature, we refrain from running separate models with this specification.

To operationalise the independent variables – namely economic interests, ideology, and politicization – we use data from various sources and proceed in several steps. Regarding economic factors, we assume that conditions at the national level are inappropriate to model effects on MEP voting on trade matters. Particularly within large heterogenous member states, economic conditions and hence the potential impacts of trade liberalisation (or the lack thereof) may differ considerably between regions. In the literature on international trade, the regional level has thus been identified as suitable arena to analyse the impact of trade agreements on domestic economic conditions, and, in a further step, political reactions to the latter (see Autor *et al.*, 2016; Margalit, 2011; Osgood, 2018). In the EU context, the 242 NUTS-2 regions[5] have been shown to be meaningful territorial units to analyse citizens reactions, for example with regard to an increase in support for populist parties (Dippel *et al.*, 2015; Hays *et al.*, 2019) or xenophobic beliefs (Colantone & Stanig, 2019, 2018). The NUTS-2 level also presents itself as suitable unit to analyse the impact of economic variables for the context of this study. However, establishing a potential relationship of responsiveness between an MEP and a NUTS-2 regions is not straightforward. MEPs are elected using a form of proportional representation, and most Member States use national electoral lists for the EP elections. What is more, the few Member States[6] that use regional lists have electoral districts that are not congruent with NUTS-2 regions. In general, the electoral connection in the European Parliament is thought to be very weak, even though some scholars find evidence for limited incentives for territorial representation (Chiru, 2022; Farrell & Scully, 2010; Lo, 2013).

New research has identified types of relationships between representatives and voters that help to theorise the relationship between MEPs and individual regions for the purposes of this paper. Wolkenstein and Wratil (2021) identify 'surrogation' as a useful but particulary understudied conception of representation to think about the relationship between members of parliament and their constituents in the absence of a direct electoral

connection (p. 869). Surrogation refers to a relationship of 'claiming and choosing constituents and representatives' (Wolkenstein & Wratil, 2021, p. 862) in which representatives feel responsible to their surrogate constituents [...]' in particular districts or areas (Mansbridge, 2003, p. 523 in Wolkenstein & Wratil, 2021, p. 869). In some cases, MEPs explicitly make surrogation claims with a particular area or region (see Appendix 4 for an example). They might choose to do so to increase their own public profile, to gather electoral support, to represent regional organisational structures in their parties, or to counter the perception that the EP and the EU in general are too removed from the citizens. However, even where this is not the case, we believe that identifying a NUTS-2 region as an MEP's 'centre of political activity' is a useful proxy for such a surrogation relationship. This centre of political activity is not necessarily identical with the birthplace but refers to the place where MEPs worked and lived in the years immediately prior and during their time as MEP and thus build political-professional networks.

To identify the relevant NUTS-2 regions, information from personal or party websites is used to determine the geographical centre of life of MEPs. For instance, an MEP born and raised in Hamburg, who studied in Heidelberg and then lived, worked, and held local political offices for many years in Munich before entering the EP would be coded as an MEP from Upper Bavaria (DE21) rather than Hamburg (DE60) in that we assume that the MEP's political networks are focused on Munich. This focus on the centre of political activity of MEPs builds on the assumption that even in Member States with national electoral lists MEPs need a regional political base for (re-)selection and are responsive to its socio-economic realities. A French MEP living in Lyon, for instance, should be more susceptible to the economic realities of the Rhone Valley than Brittany or Guadeloupe even though they are elected to the EP on a national electoral list.

In a second step, the regional affiliations of MEPs are matched with NUTS-2 Eurostat data on (1) regional GDP per capita in purchasing power parities as a percentage of the EU average, (2) regional unemployment rates, employment in (3) high-tech sectors and (4) agriculture (Braml & Felbermayr, 2020; Dahlberg et al., 2020). It is assumed that these are appropriate proxies for the relative competitive advantage of regions and indirectly convey information on the likely income effects of trade liberalisation. Highly extra-EU trade dependent regions indeed tend to have higher regional GDPs, lower unemployment rates and employment in agriculture yet higher employment in high-tech than average. This recourse to proxy variables is necessary as Eurostat and the member states do not collect subnational trade data, which are only available for a relatively small number of countries from alternative data sources.

In a similar vein, the operationalisation of ideology proceeds in two steps. In a first step, MEPs are assigned to a national party. In case of changes in

party membership over time, MEPs are assigned multiple parties for different time periods. Data on party membership is drawn from MEP and party websites. In a second step, data from the Euromanifesto Project is added (Schmitt *et al.*, 2016). The Manifesto Project codes the ideological positions of parties across Europe for a number of policy issues based on their election manifestos. Three variables are of interest here: (1) the stance of parties on European Integration; (2) their position on the general left/right axis; and (3) their attitude towards free trade and protectionism.[7] Assuming that the positions of national parties and beliefs of individual MEPs are associated through cohesive voting (Bressanelli *et al.*, 2016; Hix *et al.*, 2006), the analysis scrutinises to what extent the ideological stances of parties corelate with MEP support for trade liberalisation.[8] As a further robustness check, we run the same analysis using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (see Appendix 9).

Last, the operationalisation of politicization of trade policy is particularly challenging. No timeseries with EU-wide survey data on trade-related public opinion exists. Existing studies have sought to address this problem through dummy variables or qualitative assessments of the degree of politicization of specific trade policy projects or EU trade policy as a whole (see De Bièvre & Poletti, 2020). This approach defies, however, a fine-grained measurement of politicization of EU trade policy over time and across member states. To address this problem, this study relies on a new index that seeks to measure the politicization of EU trade policy through variation in media coverage (Hamilton, 2022). Media coverage is frequently used as an indicator in politicization studies in that the intensity of media coverage is thought to be associated with both the (1) salience and (2) contestation of relevant policy issues and domains (see Wilde *et al.*, 2016). The underlying assumption is that the size of the mediated space is limited, which implies that an increase or decrease in media coverage of trade policy limits or enables reporting on alternative policies of interest to society thus conveying information on its relative salience and contestation. Another advantage of relying on media coverage is that it provides '(…) a systematic politicization indicator that is comparable over time and institutions' (Rauh & Zürn, 2020, p. 594). Newspaper coverage brings salient issue into the mediated public sphere where societal debate and contestation is taking place and where important decision by governments and supranational actors are communicated (p. 595). Hamilton's indicator is based on the Lexis Uni media database that compiles full text articles of 15.000 publications worldwide including national and regional newspapers, magazines, news agencies, online news platforms and alike. To build the index, Hamilton searched this database for mentions of five high-profile EU trade agreements (TTIP, CETA, ACTA, EU-Ukraine, and Mercosur) as well as generic trade policy terms such as 'trade agreement' in all official EU languages in articles published between January 2009 and December 2021 in publications from EU Member States.

The index summarises the findings in the form of article counts per month, per agreement and per Member State, which are then weighted by the number of covered publications by Member State population. We sum these adjusted counts for all agreements per month and Member State and use this aggregate as a proxy for the general politicization of EU trade policy over time and across Member States. To ease interpretability of the effects and make them more substantially meaningful, we divide the original index by ten, so that a one-unit change on this variable corresponds to ten additional newspaper articles per month. Finally, given the very skewed distribution of this measure of politicization with many months with no or very few newspaper articles on EU trade policy in most countries (see Figures SI1a and SI1b in Appendix 2), we perform a root transformation of the variable and use its square root in our analysis.

Our working assumption that Hamilton's index captures variation in the general politicization of EU trade policy reflects the observation that politicised trade agreements exert 'spill-over' effects that increase the salience and contestation of the policy domain as a whole. Indeed, politicization of EU trade policy always started out with heightened public interest and contestation of specific trade negotiations but then spread out and permeated discussions on trade policy measures more generally. The politicization of the TTIP negotiations illustrates this 'spill-over' effect. The politicization of the TTIP negotiations at first entailed the politicization of the CETA negotiations and consequently increased public interest and contestation of the EU's approaches to inter alia investment protection, regulatory cooperation, sanitary and phytosanitary standards, and procedural transparency in EU trade policy-making (De Ville & Gheyle, 2023; Hurrelmann & Wendler, 2023). The TTIP negotiations, in other words, fuelled a politicization that went beyond transatlantic cooperation and affected the entire policy domain. Hence, we assume that variation in the media coverage of key trade agreements can serve as a proxy to measure not only the politicization of relevant trade agreements but of EU trade policy more generally.

Analysis

An initial look at the development of EP voting in EU trade policy reveals interesting patterns. Plotting the total number of trade-related votes in terms 7 and 8 shows relatively constant number of votes between the two terms overall. However, while the number of non-liberal votes was higher in term 7, the reverse is the case in term 8 (Figure 1). Particularly notable is a rise in non-legislative liberal votes in term 8 (Figure 2). Votes under the ordinary legislative procedure (OLP) regarding autonomous trade measures, decreased in term 8. This decrease in all likelihood reflects the fact that the EU had to adopt implementation legislation to manage competence transfers
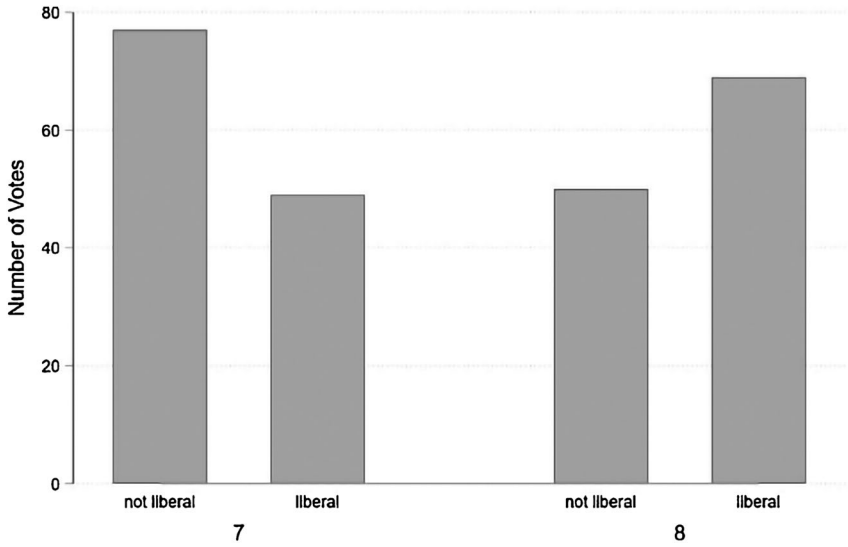
Figure 1. Vote frequency per term.

Figure 2. Vote frequency per term and procedure.
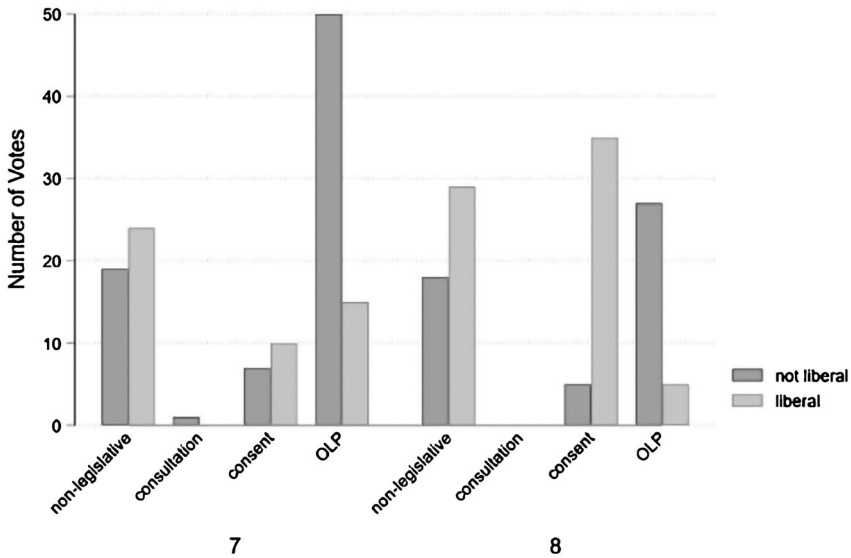
under the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. This legislation concerned for instance the grandfathering of member states' bilateral investment treaties and the EU's representation modalities in investor-to-state arbitration proceedings. Disaggregating voting patterns further shows that the share of RCVs dealing with liberal and non-liberal measures and resolutions remained fairly stable
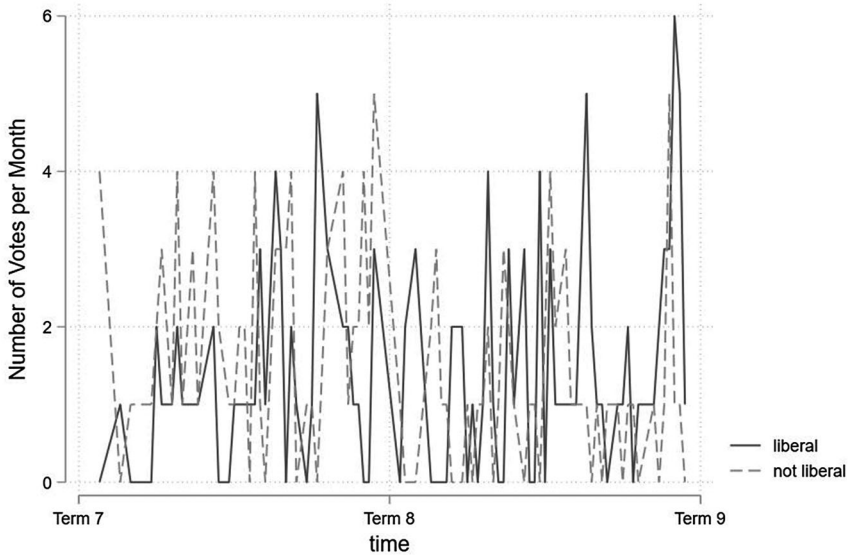
Figure 3. Number of votes over time.

throughout terms 7 and 8 (Figure 3). In terms of policy substance, a marked increase in trade-related RCVs dealing with FTAs and neighbourhood and EEA relations occurred in term 8 in comparison to term 7. These patterns reflect the EU's keen pursuit of FTAs in the last decade, the growing salience of political and economic ties with neighbours such as Ukraine, Tunisia, or Georgia as well as preparations for a then looming Brexit. The number of trade-related RCVs dealing with developmental considerations, Economic Partnership Agreements with African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states and WTO affairs remained fairly stable in comparison (Figure 4).

Turning to overall support for liberal trade measures and resolutions, it becomes clear that support is high for MEPs from most parliamentary groups in the EP. MEPs from the biggest groups in the EP – the European People's Party (EPP), Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and Alliance of Liberal Democrats for Europe (ALDE) – are highly supportive of liberal trade measures (Figure 5). Support for liberal trade measures by MEPs from different member state exhibits similar patterns of high support (Figure 6). The most 'sceptical' MEPs are from the Netherlands, Greece, and France. At first sight, this finding may surprise in that conventional wisdom has notably the Netherlands as an economically liberal-leaning and trade-friendly Member State. This 'cliché' makes little sense, however, in that it detracts from the variation in trade competitiveness across sectors and regions within countries, which limits the value of statements about national aggregate preferences. Upon closer examination, moreover, it becomes clear that the comparatively lower
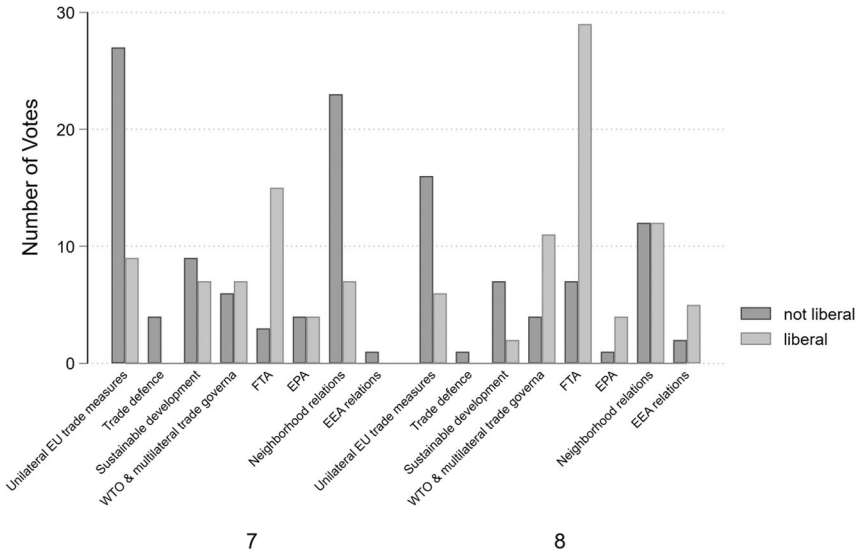
Figure 4. Voting frequency per issue area.

Figure 5. Support in liberal votes per group.
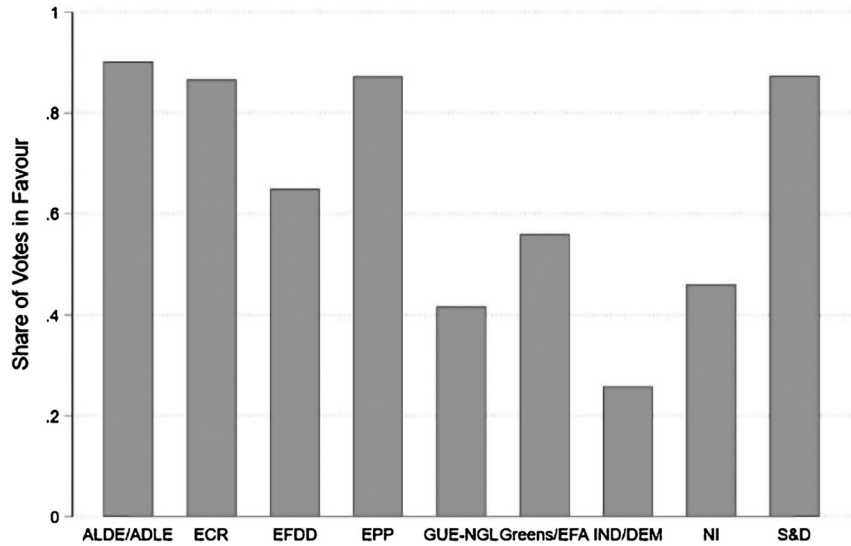
level of support for liberal trade measures and resolutions may reflect the strong presence of MEPs from Eurosceptic parties from these member states. Eurosceptic MEPs – from the far-right and far-left – often (but not always) exhibit protectionist attitudes and seek to frustrate Union policies resulting in opposition to Commission-led liberal initiatives such as FTAs.
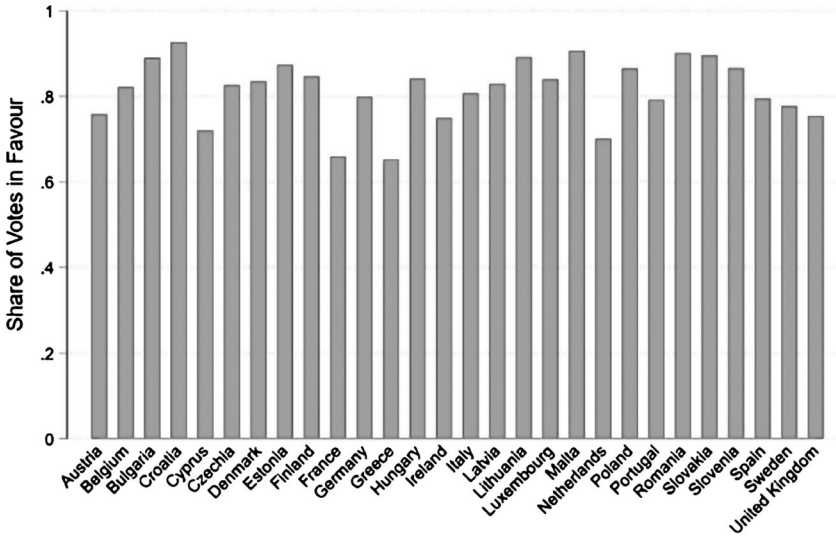
Figure 6. Support for liberal votes per country.

The descriptive data provides interesting initial insights on a number of theoretical discussions in the EU trade policy literature.[9] Overall, these aggregate level observations set the scene and already point to the likely importance of notably ideological factors for MEP support for trade liberalisation.

Table 1. Main models.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	All	Trade Agreements	Regulations, Directives, Resolutions
Empl. in Agriculture	0.141***	0.573***	0.079***
	(0.03)	(0.15)	(0.03)
Empl. in High Tech	0.054	0.167**	0.020
	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.03)
GDP	−0.048	−0.110	−0.020
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.03)
Unemployment	−0.083**	−0.235***	−0.044
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.03)
Left-Right	0.206***	0.520***	0.117***
	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.03)
Anti/Pro EU	0.532***	0.723***	0.480***
	(0.04)	(0.09)	(0.03)
Protectionism	−0.287***	−0.512***	−0.190***
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.03)
Politicization	−0.114***	0.030	−0.205***
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.02)
Constant	0.786***	1.988***	0.741***
	(0.05)	(0.14)	(0.04)
Observations	49776	19411	30365
Number of RCVs	103	38	65

Note: Logistic regression models. Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors are clustered at the level of individual MEPs. All models include year fixed effects (omitted).

In the following, we deepen this analysis to better understand the factors shaping MEP voting behaviour. Table 1 shows the results of three logistic regression models. To capture potential time trends, we include year fixed effects. Model 1 is based on the entire sample of liberal trade agreements, autonomous measures, and resolutions. Model 2 is limited to votes on liberal trade agreements held under the consent procedure used for treaty ratifications. Model 3, lastly, focuses exclusively on votes on liberal autonomous trade measures and resolutions coming notably under the ordinary legislative procedure. To ease comparability of effect sizes, all variables have been standardized so that they have a mean of 0.

Recall that we hypothesized that MEPs from regions with a competitive advantage are more likely to vote for liberalising votes. We do not find a significant relationship between regional GDP per capita and MEP voting. However, we find that in Model 2, an increase in high-tech employment is associated with an increase in the likelihood of voting in favour of liberal trade agreements. This finding is in line with the expectations of the extant literature. The coefficient for unemployment is significant in Models 1 and 2, but the size of the effect is substantially small. To get a better understanding of the substantive effect sizes, we plot predicted probabilities in Figure 7. We predict the probability for a vote in favour at the minimum and maximum values of the variables represented in our dataset (with the exception of empirically implausible or misleading cases, as explained below) and hold all other variables at their mean. Taking the example of unemployment in Model 2 (liberal trade agreements), the likelihood of an MEP from the NUTS-2 region with the lowest level of unemployment (Prague in 2018 with 1.3%) voting in favour of an agreement is around 14 percentage points higher than for an MEP from the region with the highest level of unemployment in our dataset (Andalucía in 2013 with 36.2%). With regard to H1, another finding is worth noting. We find a positive effect for higher levels on employment in the agricultural sector on voting in favour of liberalising measures for all three models. Arguably, this finding can be considered counterintuitive. We thus only find limited support for hypothesis 1.

Support for Hypotheses 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 is more unequivocal. In all three models, the left-right position and EU attitude of MEP's national parties have a significant effect at the 0.01 level. In all cases, the effect is also in the expected direction: MEPs from right-wing parties and Europhile MEPs are more likely to vote in favour of liberal measures than left-wing and Eurosceptic MEPs. Across our models, MEPs from the most pro-EU party in our dataset are around nine times as likely to vote in favour of a liberalising measure compared to the most Eurosceptic party. We also find a larger effect for protectionism (Hypothesis 2.3). Taking Model 2 as an example, MEPs from the most protectionist party in our prediction (Rassemblement
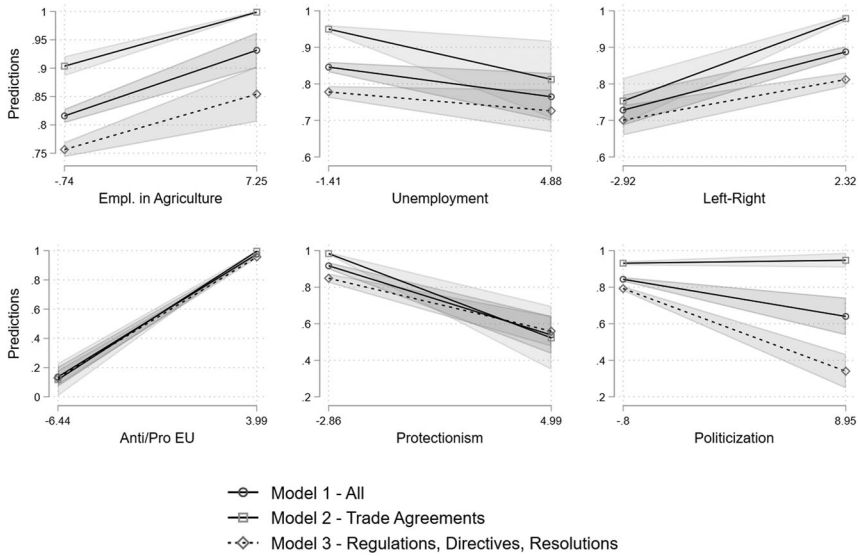
Figure 7. Predicted probabilities.

Note: **Predicted Probabilities for Models 1-3 (95% confidence intervals). Empirical examples used (non-standardized values for illustrative purposes):** Employment in Agriculture: Low: FR10 Île de France (France) 0.1 High: RO41 Sud-Vest Oltenia (Romania) 52.5; Unemployment: Low: CZ01 (Prague) 2018 1.3 High: ES61 (Andalucía) 2013 36.2; Left/Right: Low: AOM/Communist Party (France) −39.58 High: Golden Dawn (Greece) 56.19 (NB: given that GD is an extreme outlier and had only very few MEPs, we estimate the effect at maximum for a more empirically meaningful and typical case, namely New Democracy in Greece, a mainstream party with significant representation in the EP which has high levels on the Manifesto Project 'rile' variable, i.e., is far to the right with a score of 26.90); Anti/Pro-EU: Low: Congress of the New Right (Poland) −64 High: National Party (Malta) 45.46; Protectionism: Low: UKIP (UK) 2009 −6.95 (NB: as UKIP's low values might be the product of a criticism of a perceived protectionist EU rather than of support for free trade, we predict values for a liberal mainstream party, the Danish Venstre, with a value of −2.58) High: Front National (France) 2009 4.12. Politicization: The lowest level corresponds to a value of 0 in our Politicization variable which is observed in all member states at different times in our dataset. The highest value corresponds to a value of 8.82 observed for Spain in January 2016. All other variables are held at their mean.

National/Front National) are half as likely to vote for a measure then MEPs from a very liberal party (the Danish Venstre).

We now turn to Hypothesis 3.1 on politicization. Interestingly, we find different effects for the three subsets of votes. For the model focusing on liberal trade agreements (Model 2), we do not find a significant effect of politicization. However, for Models 1 (all liberal votes) and 3 (liberal regulations, directive, and resolutions), we find a significant negative effect. In the latter case, our predicted probabilities show that when trade policy is not politicized, the likelihood of voting in favour of a resolution is around 40 percentage points higher than at the highest value of politicization observed in Spain in January 2016. Overall, given the low number of votes against a proposal in the EP, we believe that the effect of politicization and ideological variables in particular is at least non-negligible.

Turning to the theorised interaction effects (H3.2 and H3.3) between politicization, economic and ideological variables, we run relevant regressions for all economic and ideological variables that had a largely persistent statistically significant effect in our main models: regional unemployment rates, employment in agriculture, pro/anti-EU, left/right, and protectionist/liberal attitudes. Our findings only partially confirm H3.2. They suggest that there is a significant interaction between unemployment and politicization for Models 1 and 3 in Table 2 (i.e., all liberal votes and liberal regulations, directives and resolutions) as well as a significant interaction between employment in agriculture and politicization for Model 3 (Regulations, Directives, Resolutions). The interaction coefficients for politicization and pro/anti-EU attitude is significant in all three models, the interaction for politicization and protectionism in Models 1 and 2, and the interaction for politicization and left/right attitudes in Model 3 and only at the 0.01 level (H3.3). However, we are cautious to interpret these interactions substantially based on regression coefficients alone.

Table 2. Model with interaction effects.

	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	All	Trade Agreements	Regulations, Directives, Resolutions
Empl. in High Tech	0.052	0.176**	0.010
	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.04)
GDP	−0.052	−0.117*	−0.022
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.03)
Politicization	−0.097***	0.083	−0.243***
	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.03)
Empl. in Agriculture	0.125***	0.568***	0.033
	(0.04)	(0.14)	(0.03)
Politicization # Empl. in Agriculture	−0.017	0.050	−0.075***
	(0.04)	(0.12)	(0.03)
Unemployment	−0.089**	−0.254***	−0.041
	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.03)
Politicization # Unemployment	0.068***	0.038	0.092***
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Left-Right	0.199***	0.522***	0.116***
	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.03)
Politicization # Left-Right	0.032	−0.026	0.030*
	(0.02)	(0.06)	(0.02)
Anti/Pro EU	0.495***	0.672***	0.466***
	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.03)
Politicization # Anti/Pro EU	−0.111***	−0.188**	−0.079***
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.03)
Protectionism	−0.298***	−0.462***	−0.206***
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.03)
Politicization # Protectionism	−0.124***	−0.261***	−0.019
	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.02)
Constant	0.803***	2.032***	0.712***
	(0.05)	(0.14)	(0.04)
Observations	49776	19411	30365
Number of RCVs	103	38	65

Note: Logistic regression models. Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors are clustered at the level of individual MEPs. All models include year fixed effects (omitted).

Given the concerns about potential non-linearity of effects, lack of common support and an overreliance on interpolation for sparse regions in the dataset, we rely on Hainmueller *et al.*'s (2019) suggestions for modelling multiplicative interaction terms. In light of the distribution of and sparseness of our politicization variable (even in its transformed form), we believe that some of the concerns around standard practices for modelling interaction effects listed by Hainmueller and co-authors are applicable in our case. The suggestion by Hainmueller *et al.* (2019) is to use a 'binning estimator'. The procedure 'break[s] a continuous moderator into several bins represented by dummy variables and interact these dummy variables with the treatment indicator' [...] (p. 170). The moderator, in our case politicization, is thus divided into three 'bins' corresponding to the three terciles of the variable (ibid.). The median of each of these three bins is then chosen as an evaluation point, at which the conditional marginal effect of our independent variables on the outcome is estimated (p. 171). An advantage of the approach is that '[…] the conditional marginal effects can vary freely across the three bins and therefore can take on any nonlinear or nonmonotonic pattern that might describe the heterogeneity in the effect of D [the treatment, our independent variables] on Y [the outcome, MEPs' vote choice] across low, medium, or high levels of X [the moderator, here politicization]' (p. 171). Moreover, as the bins are chosen based on the distribution of the moderator (here politicization), the estimation takes place at more typical values and is not affected by outliers and interpolation (ibid). We thus proceed according to their suggestion and divide our (continuous) moderator variable (politicization) in three bins based on terciles estimating the marginal effect at the median of our politicization variable in each bin, using the *interflex* package in R (Xu *et al.*, 2017). In Figure 8–12, the solid lines with confidence intervals represent the estimated linear effects, while the three point estimates show the conditional marginal effects estimated at the medians of the three bins, i.e., the three terciles of the distribution of our moderator, politicization. A histogram indicating the distribution itself is shown at the bottom of the figures above the *x*-axis. Given that we have only very few observations for very high values of politicization, we censor the *x*-axis at −1 and 4. A cursory glance at the figures already shows that the distribution of our moderator is indeed highly skewed towards lower values and that the estimates from the binning estimator differ quite markedly from the linear prediction in some cases, confirming our choice to use the inteflex procedure.[10]

Figures 8–12 thus show the effect of independent variables on the likelihood of voting in favour of a resolution and different levels of politicization for Model 4 (all liberal votes). The interflex graphs for Models 5 and 6 can be found in Figure SI2 in Appendix 6. The conditional marginal effects from our binning estimators are overlayed with the linear predictions (with 95% confidence intervals respectively). Again, it is important to highlight the
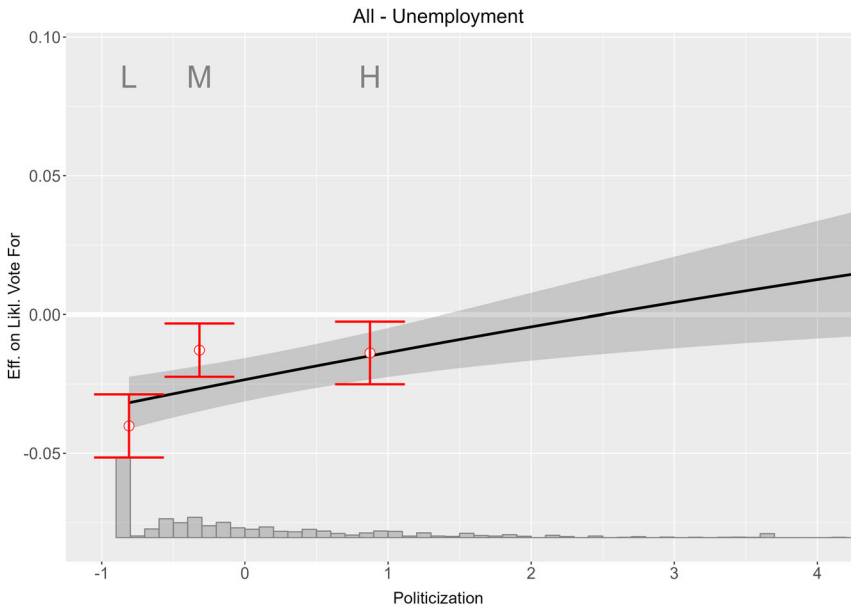
Figure 8. Conditional Marginal Effects of Unemployment at different levels of politicization.

strong non-linearities which some plots indicate, implying that focusing on the regression coefficients in Table 2 alone for interpretation would be mis-leading. Starting with the interaction of unemployment and politicization (H3.2), we find evidence for heterogenous effects. In all three models, an increase in unemployment has a clear negative effect at low levels of politi-cization. For medium and high levels of politicization, the confidence inter-vals overlap with zero for Model 5 (trade agreements) and 6 (regulations, directives and resolutions), as Figure SI2 shows (if mirginally so in the latter case). Only for the model with all votes (Model 4, Figure 8) we find a substan-tially small yet significant negative effect for unemployment at high or medium levels of politicization. A clear effect for unemployment can thus only be found at lower levels of politicization. We now turn to the interaction of politicization with the other economic variable, which was clearly significant in the main models, employment in agriculture. The esti-mates from the binning estimator tend not to be significantly different from each other (Figure 9). If anything, we thus find limited evidence against Hypothesis 3.2. Turning to our ideological variables, we find that the effect of pro-EU attitudes is positive at all levels of politicization, but see no statistically significant differences between the effect of pro EU-atti-tudes at low, medium, and high levels of politicization in Models 4 (Figure 10) and Model 5 (Figure SI2). The panel for Model 6 shows a slightly
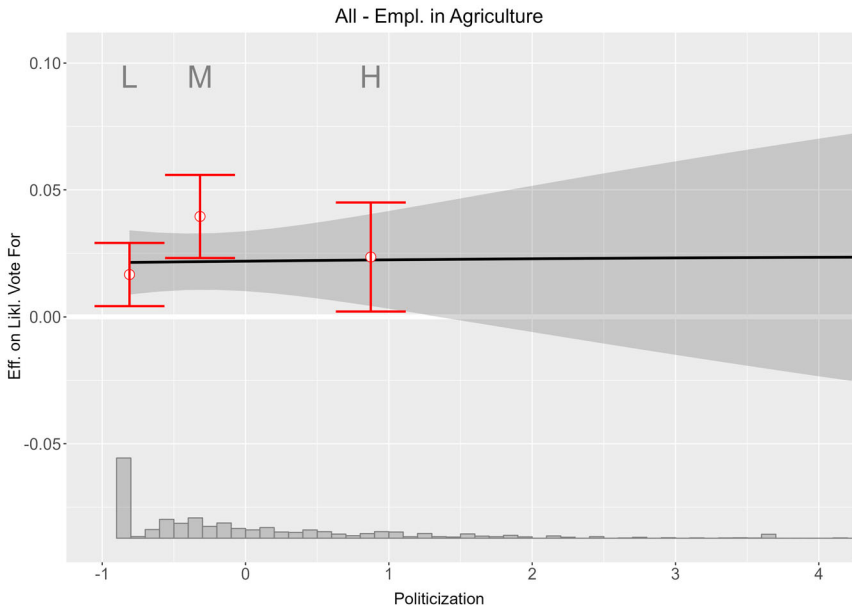
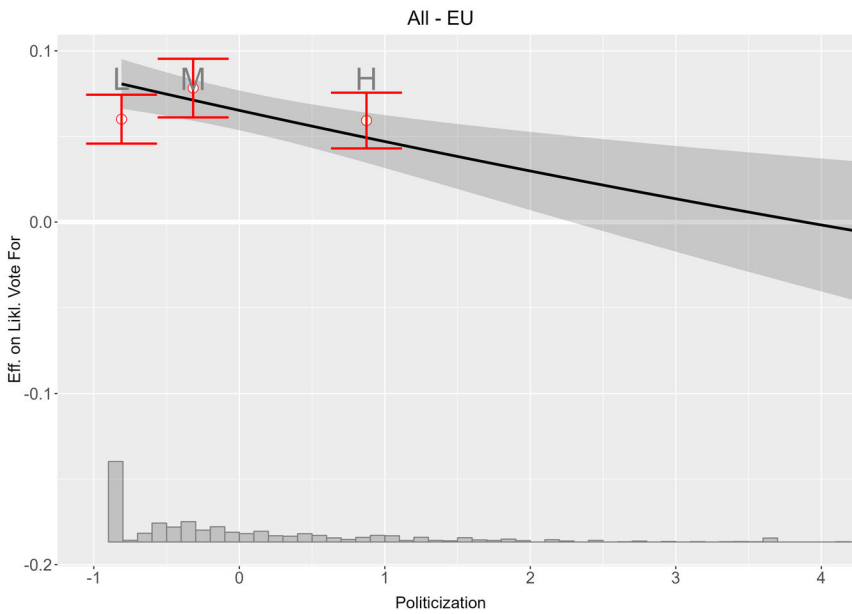**Figure 9.** Conditional Marginal Effects of employment in agriculture at different levels of politicization.

Figure 10. Conditional Marginal Effects of EU Attitude at different levels of politicization.
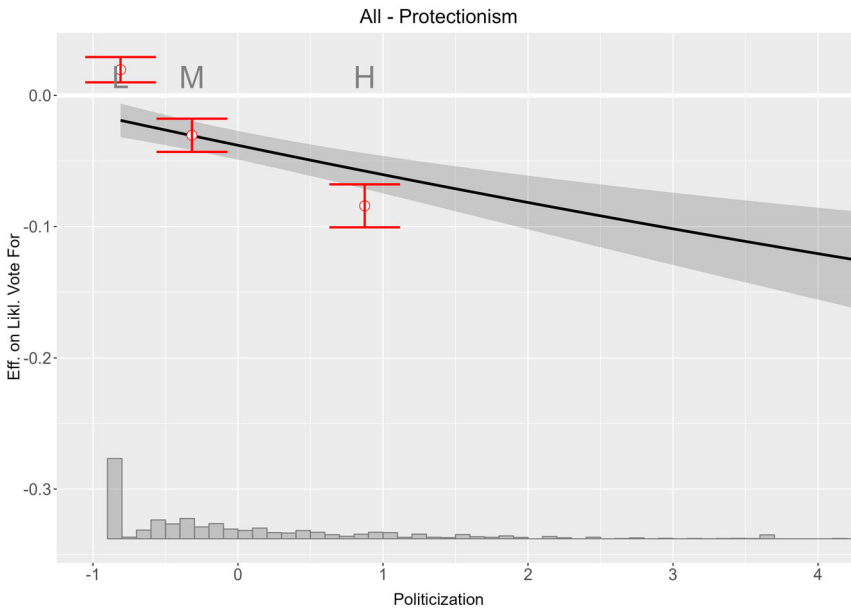
Figure 11. Conditional Marginal Effects of protectionism at different levels of politicization.

stronger positive effect for pro-EU attitudes at medium and high values of politicization (Figure SI2). Again, the difference between the interflex binning estimators and the linear prediction is striking. By contrast, for the interaction between protectionism and politicization, we find that protectionism has an increasingly negative effect at medium and high levels of politcisation for the model with all liberal votes (Figure 11). The negative effect of protectionism is clearly significant and substantial for medium and high levels of politicization in all models. At low levels of politicization, in contrast, we find a substantially minuscule positive effect, which is barely significant at the 95% level. Notably, we do not find such an effect at low levels of politicization for the model only including Trade Agreements (Figure SI2) and for all three types of votes when including fixed effects in a linear model (see the robustness check in Appendix 7, Figure SI9). Finally, turning to the interaction of an MEP's national parties left-right position and politicization, we find some evidence that there is only a significant interaction for this variable and politicization in Models 4 (Figure 12) and 6, and in Model 6 there is only a significant positive effect for an MEP's national parties left-right position at medium and high levels of politicization (Figure SI2). Moreover, while the confidence intervals for medium and high levels of protectionism for Models 4 and 6 also overlap, we can see a tendency for the effect of being an MEP from a more right-wing parties to be stronger at
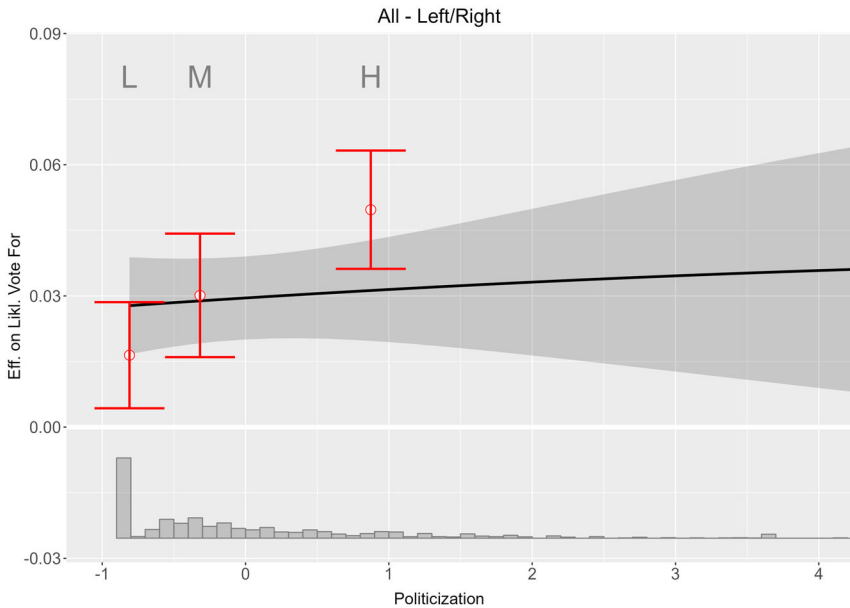
Figure 12. Conditional Marginal Effects of a MEPs national party's left-right position at different levels of politicization.

higher levels of politicization. On balance, we thus find reasonable support for our Hypothesis 3.2.

Robustness check

To evaluate to robustness of these findings, we run further models with alternative specifications and operationalisations. First, recall that in contrast to the models displayed in Table 2, the models in our interflex graphs (Figures 8–12) do not include year fixed effects as the interflex package currently does not support these for logistic regression models. Thus, we run robustness checks with linear regression models and year fixed effects using the interflex package. These can be found in Appendix 7 We also show the interflex estimation using linear models without fixed effects for comparison. For most independent variables of interest, the results are similar. However, for the interaction of unemployment and politicization, we find that for medium levels of politicization, a one unit increase in unemployment seems to have a substantially very small significant positive effect in Model 6, which is just marginally different from zero (Appendix 7, Figure SI3). At low levels of politicization, the effect of unemployment remains negative. However, in the linear models without fixed effects (Figure SI4) our results are very similar to the logit models without fixed effects (Figure SI2). Moreover, for employment in agriculture we find a more pronounced difference

for the point estimates between medium and high levels of politicization for linear models with and without fixed effects when analysing Trade Agreements only (Figure SI5 and SI6). For a national party's left/right position, at low levels of politicization the confience interval slightly overlapps with zero for the model including all votes inthe model with fixed effects (Figure SI11) and there is a more pronounced difference between the effect at low/medium and high values of politicization for Trade Agremenets in the linear models, yet the confidence intervals still overlapp (Figure SI11 and SI12). However, overall , we are confident in the general findings of our main models.

Second, recall that in our main models, we exclude abstentions. To verify whether the inclusion of abstentions would change our results, we predict the likelihood of voting in favour (as opposed to voting against and abstaining, Models 7-9) and voting in favour or abstaining (as opposed to voting against, Models 10-12). The tables show that the coefficients remain substantially broadly similar regardless of whether abstentions are included as votes in favour or not, further confirming the robustness of our results (Appendix 8, Tables SI2 and SI3).The size and significance levels of some coefficients change somewhat, while their signs remain largely consistent. We thus refrain from separately plotting the interaction effect for these modules using the interflex command. Third, as a further robustness check, we run a multinomial logistic regression model with three outcome categories (votes, against abstentions, and votes in favour). With votes in favour being the baseline categories, the signs of the coefficients for the model predicting votes against unsurprisingly overall reverse compared to our main models. The signs of the coefficients for abstentions as the outcome largely correspond to those for votes against a liberal proposal (with some expecptions, e.g., unemployment and GDP), suggesting that if anything, abstentions can be procedurally treated as votes against a proposal (Table SI4). Moreover, the interactions of politicization with the variables of interest are not significant when predicting abstentions as an outcome, with the exception of the left/right position in Models 23 and 24 and EU attitudes in Model 24 (Table SI5).

As a final robustness check, we also run our models with data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) for our left/right and anti/pro-EU variables (Jolly et al., 2022). We use the 'lrgen' and 'eu_position' variables in this operationalisation. As a variable on protectionism is only available for 2019 in the CHES dataset, we continue to use Euromanifesto data for this variable in our models. As the results show (Appendix 9), most findings for our key variables of interest remain substantively similar, even though the coefficients for high tech employment and GDP reach a higher level of significance in some models (Table SI6). In the interaction models (Table SI7), the significance levels of the coefficients for high tech employment and GDP also change

compared to our main models and politicization reaches a higher level of significance in Model 29. Employment in agriculture reaches a higher level of significance in Model 30 and the coefficients of its interaction with politicization vary. The significance level of the coefficient for unemployment also changes slightly, and the interaction of politicization and unemployment is now also significance in Model 29 (even though these coefficients have to be interpreted with caution, as describe above). The interaction of parties' left/right positions and politicization is not significant in these models, and the significance level of the coefficient for the interaction of EU attitudes and politicization slightly varies in Model 29. As Figure SI 17 shows, the positive effect of right-wing attitudes is more pronounced at lower levels compared to high levels of politicization for Trade Agreements when using CHES data, thus differening from the findings for our main operationalization We do not find significant interactions for all votes and regulations, directives, and resolutions. These differencesmight be in part due to the fact that CHES measures party positions with regard to parties' positions at the domestic level, whereas our Euromanifesto measure relates to the parties' EU related policies. Moreover, the correlation between CHES and Manfiesto data is comparatively somewhat lower for the (general) left-right position, potentially due to differences in the approaches (see for example Ferreira da Silva *et al.*, 2023, p. 163).

Discussion and conclusion

Which factors determine MEP support for trade liberalisation? Do regional economic factors, ideology, or variation in trade policy politicization best account for voting patterns in the EP? Despite the EP's considerable influence on EU trade policy and the EU's central role in the global trade regime, these questions have not been explored in detail yet. This study found that ideological factors – namely MEPs' pro/anti-EU, left/right, and liberal/protectionist attitudes – have the strongest effects on MEP support for trade liberalisation. This finding echoes the literature on European party politics and the EP, which reports that MEPs frequently vote along the classic left/right and pro/anti-EU cleavages (see Hix *et al.*, 2006). Regional economic conditions in MEP home regions – such as GDP per capita, or the share of employment in high tech sectors – have no clear effect. However, regional unemployment has a negative and employment in agriculture shows a persistent positive association with MEP support for trade liberalisation. These findings are remarkable in two regards. First, most IPE research stipulates that economic factors shape trade preferences, political mobilisation and thus parliamentary voting behaviour in democracies (see Ehrlich, 2007; Kim & Osgood, 2019; Osgood, 2018). Yet, MEPs seem comparatively little responsive to the economic conditions in their home regions. Second, the positive

association between agricultural employment and MEP support for trade liberalisation is counterintuitive. One would assume rural agrarian regions to be overall less competitive and thus more protectionist than urbanised regions with high employment in manufacturing and service sectors. The observation that MEPs from regions with high agricultural employment are more likely to support trade liberalisation may reflect that (1) agriculture is in reality among the EU's top export sectors and thus likely to benefit from trade liberalisation contrary to the widely held idea of European farmers as staunchly protectionist interest group (European Commission, 2021); and/or that (2) rural agrarian regions tend to be more conservative, which in turn would point back to ideological factors as underlying cause (Kenny & Luca, 2021). Importantly, whether an electoral connection exists between MEPs and the economic conditions in their 'home' region remains questionable. Lastly, politicization has only a limited effect on MEP support for trade liberalisation but affects MEP voting behaviour to varying degrees through interaction effects with ideological and economic factors. Overall, this study warrants further research to scrutinise certain empirical findings and underlying theoretical assumptions and conceptualisations to increase confidence and clarify causalities.

What are the broader ramifications of these findings for our understanding of EU trade policy? First, the study confirms qualitative research on EU trade policy that depicts the EP as a political institution driven by ideological and normative considerations rather than economic interests (Larsén, 2017; Meissner & McKenzie, 2019; Van den Putte et al., 2015). The EP, as a new domestic veto player, is thus most likely to shape the EU's negotiating behaviour, to constrain the European Commission, and to enhance the EU's bargaining power vis-à-vis third countries with regard to non-trade issues – such as the democracy and Human Rights promotion, regional integration, labour rights, environmental and climate protection – due to its credible veto threats. It is less likely though to shift the EU's stance on the liberal/protectionist axis or to structurally alter its negotiating behaviour and bargaining power with regard to core trade issues such market access. As MEPs seem to pay comparatively little attention to economic factors, they are unlikely to credibly 'tie' the Commission's hands in market access negotiations with third countries. Second, the findings are relevant for our general understanding of the impact of electoral institutions on trade policy-making and outcomes. The US-centric IPE literature suggests that electoral institutions play a key role in aggregating societal economic interests by shaping collective action problems for competing societal factions (Kono, 2006; Milner & Kubota, 2005; Rickard, 2010; Rogowski, 1987). This vision of electoral institutions assumes strong personal ties between members of parliament and their electoral districts and are arguably rooted in the role of US Congress in trade policy. At least with regard to regional economic factors, this responsiveness seems to be absent or weak in the case of the EP. As the EP decisively shapes EU trade

policy and the EU is a key actor in the global trade regime, the EP cannot be discarded as a mere outlier but requires us to reconsider our vision of parliaments and electoral institutions in trade policy. Instead of focusing on the capture of members of parliament through regional economic interests, it is important to afford greater attention to ideological factors and variation in electoral accountability relations to model the influence of parliaments on trade policy outcomes.

Notes

1. Empirically, the correlation between protectionism and parties' left-right position based on Euromanifesto data is negative (i.e. left-wing parties are more protectionist) but relatively small with a coefficient of −0.09.
2. The raw data were retrieved from VoteWatch.com
3. We omit abstentions from the analysis as it is unclear for which reasons MEPs abstain from a vote, see for example Meijers and Van der Veer (2019) for a similar approach.
4. A detailed coding scheme can be found in appendix 5. Further, due to missing values, our regression models use a smaller subset of 103 liberal RCVs.
5. The NUTS classification (nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) is used to divide the territory of the EU Member States for statistical purposes. NUTS-2 corresponds to the 'basic regions for the application of regional policies' and is the largest subnational statistical territorial unit (European Commission, 2022). For maps of NUTS regions, please see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/nuts-maps.
6. Belgium, Ireland, Italy, and Poland.
7. Further details on the formulas used and the individual codes can be found Appendix 3.
8. We rely on data from the 2009 and 2014 wave of the Euromanifesto study, employing linear interpolation between the 2009 and 2014 values and using 2014 values for the period until 2019.
9. Further descriptive statistics can be found in table SI1 in Appendix 1.
10. As the inteflex command currently does not support fixed effects estimations for logistic regression models, we tun these models without them. As a robustness check, we run linear regressions with fixed effects using the interflex procedure in Appendix 7.

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Disclosure statement

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