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Symbolic legitimacy vs. pragmatic policy
framing in party communication during the
Covid-19 pandemic**

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Abstract

The Covid-19 crisis as an extreme case of politics was a formidable real-world test for the legitimacy of the EU as decision-making arena. The debate about party political politicisation in the EU has so far focussed mostly on the existence of politicisation, its drivers of and the question of politicisation is a good or a bad thing for European integration. On the basis of reflections derived from Talcott Parson's idea that formal authority is valid as long as it corresponds to the underlying social belief systems about governance, the paper distinguishes between politicisation of pragmatic aspects of crisis management and of symbolic aspects of the EU as a decision-making arena. Analysing party communication in social media and through official party channels at the moment of most acute crisis, the paper finds that the EU's 'right to govern' is only critically questioned by the extreme right in the seven West European Eurozone countries under examination. The paper opens up a reflection about how to assess empirically the robustness of the EU as a legitimate decision-making arena beyond normative or functional accounts.

Keywords

Covid-19 crisis, Talcott Parson, EU, European integration, legitimacy, party communication, politicisation, legitimacy, authority

Introduction

As an 'extreme case of politics'¹, the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis was an exceptional real-life laboratory for the social scientist to snap a picture of legitimacy structures underpinning the EU as a political system.

Politicians on all levels of decision-making were compelled to make exceptional decisions over life and death, over halting entire economies, over the freedom of movement - without having their usual playbooks at hand.

Given that parties avoid issue entrepreneurship in times of crisis (Schattschneider, de Vries), an analysis of how parties framed EU action during the crisis, provides a pretty clear picture of party leaders' assumptions about the perception of the legitimacy of the EU in their electorate.

In the framework of the EU's institutions, politicians and high civil servants took a series of 'exceptional' decisions, in particular regarding a large economic recovery plan which allowed for the first time to contract debt collectively (De Witte 2021). But also in other policy fields, in particular health policy the EU has acted despite missing competences and thus beyond existing treaties.

The support for such EU action – and the support for the arena they are taken in - is strongly dependent on how actors frame the EU's action in the public sphere (Kohler-Koch 2000; Schuck and de Vreese 2006; Lacroix and Nicolaïdis 2010)"plainCitation": "(Kohler-Koch 2000; Schuck and de Vreese 2006; Lacroix and Nicolaïdis 2010).

Political parties are important drivers of such a framing on the domestic level, while governments are more important for European wide debates (Grande, Hutter and Kriesi 2015). During the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, domestic parties were particularly important, because other participants in public debate, such as social or civil rights movements, did not have comparable resources to make themselves heard.

This paper distinguishes between *pragmatic and symbolic* framing of EU action arguing that pragmatic framing refers to the EU's ability to deliver policies, while symbolic framing refers to the legitimacy of the EU as a political system and decision-making arena. The European integration process has from the start been justified on both dimensions, the pragmatic dimension being more and more important once the EU had engaged in a market-driven functionalist trajectory (Vauchez). A pragmatic argument could for example be the economic advantage for member states or peace and stability on the European continent. Symbolic arguments construe the EU as political community (Della Porta and Caiani 2007).

The paper argues that in order to understand the limits and potential of regional integration in Europe, only politicisation of the second dimension is meaningful. Politicisation of policies and adequate tools is part of the normal democratic process.

The paper focusses on parties and their communication, not on discursive arenas as done in other research (see e.g. Maatsch 2014; Closa and Maatsch 2014; Maatsch 2010; Wendler 2014, 2016; Lord 2008), starting from the assumption that parties address different audiences and do so strategically. It thus connects two literatures which communicate rarely.

The paper begins by reviewing the debate about politicization of European integration and by discussing why to see the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis as 'extreme case' of politics is particularly useful in order to deepen our understanding of the legitimacy conflicts underlying European integration. On the basis of the literature about strategic party communication we devise three sets of hypotheses about how different groups of parties have politicized (or not) the EU and its policy-making in the first half of 2020. In the next section we describe the research methodology.

¹ Daniele Caramani in a workshop at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute, 2021.

We used a manual frame-analysis of party-level and social media communications of parties in seven member states of the Eurozone to analyse how the EU is framed. In the following we present the results which show that under the conditions of extreme politics only the radical right attempts to politicize the legitimacy of the EU as a political system. The last section concludes.

The debate about politicisation of the EU: a clarification

The politicisation of the EU has been debated in academic discourse since the mid-2000 (for overviews please see de Wilde et al. 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2009b). Politicisation has mainly been analysed as *public conflict* (public forms of political exchange and mobilisations...), while other forms of politicisation, for example within the European or domestic institutions have not been reflected in the debate.

The debate has mainly focussed on the existence of politicisation in the public realm and the drivers of this politicisation. The main question in the literature is whether we can observe a universal trend towards politicisation of the EU multi-level governance. One strand of the literature considers that we are observing a perpetual increase of politicisation since the treaty of Maastricht (De Wilde and Zürn 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2009a) executives of European Union (EU, either because European integration has become a field of strategic interaction among party elites as 'legitimate decision-making has shifted from an insulated elite to mass politics' (Hooghe and Marks 2009a: 13) or as a consequence of the importance of authority transfer to the European Union (De Wilde and Zürn 2012) executives of European Union (EU). An opposite strand of literature does not see signs of a fundamental move towards more politicisation but rather 'a patchwork of politicizing moments' (Hutter and Grande 2014), which even declined in the years 2000. These moments are mainly crisis moments which lead to forms of politicization which are region-specific (Northwest, South, and the East of Europe) (Kriesi 2016).

The second question in the literature is whether growing politicisation is 'good' or 'bad'. While for Hooghe and Marks politicisation is a phenomenon driven by Eurosceptic parties the phenomenon is necessarily 'bad' with reference to European elites' aspirations for jurisdictional expansion (not with reference to objective functional goals) because it constrains the scope of this integration, for de Wilde and Zürn politicisation is the necessary corollary for the increasing authority of the EU as a decision-making centre.

Both strands oddly beg the central question. Politicisation as such is neither good nor bad. Politicisation and depoliticization processes are the usual ingredient for the political struggle over the common good in Western European mass democracies.

Only the politicisation of the polity and its decision-making rules would have a 'negative' impact on European integration because it could potentially undermine the legitimacy of the EU as a political decision-making arena. Legitimacy is one of the pre-requisites of political systems. We are here in the middle of a classical problem of comparative politics. In a classical definition legitimacy of a polity can be defined as the 'voluntary acceptance of political decision that are legitimate, that is, in conformity with the values and beliefs of society' (Smith 1970). Legitimacy means that 'a rule, institution, or leader has the right to govern' (Hurst 2022).

In terms of its 'right to govern' the EU is a younger and more multi-faceted problem-solving arena and institutionalised rule system than are the member states of which it is composed. The legitimacy of its polity has been debated (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2007) and contested (Wiesner 2019) over the years. Since the mid-1990ies the EU's legitimacy has often been evaluated on the grounds of standards pertaining to *democratic* legitimacy, either derived from the empirical comparison of democracies (Beetham and Lord 1998; Moravcsik 2002; Majone 1998, 2014) or from normative standards (Nicolaidis 2013; Bellamy 2010).

The Covid-19 pandemic as an emergency and 'extreme case of politics' was an extraordinary real-world experiment to observe the state of the 'social relationships' on which the authority for rule-making in the multi-levelled EU is based in the sense Talcott Parsons understands the relationship between the formal authority and the social structures underlying it (Weber et al. 1947: 75). It was a moment of emergency and wide-ranging decisions without pre-existing playbook, templates and procedures neither for national governments nor for EU decision-makers. In moments of extreme pressure on political decision-makers, one can expect to see those social structures emerge which are 'solid' - the planks we stick to in the case of a ship wreckage. Crises are no moments to mess around, no moment for party politics, but for executives and those decision-making arenas we are reassured by.

The literature puts a strong emphasis on the potential for the negotiation of jurisdictional change in moments of crisis, but it has so far neglected that the social structures and informal institutions underlying the EU polity run on other timelines. For Parsons changes are not equal to changes in the legitimacy structures underpinning the rule-system (Smith 1970: 23). In this sense the Covid-19 crisis was an excellent 'lackmus test' not to learn about change, but about the legitimacy structures underpinning the European rule system and how political decision-makers perceived them.

How can we conceptualise the difference between the politicization of policy issues and the politicization of the polity itself? The answer is that arguments relating to European integration either be framed *symbolically* or *pragmatically*.

Symbolic frames assess the appropriateness of a political action, in our case EU policy decisions during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, with reference to shared norms and values. Such shared norms could be appropriateness to the shared values of a community to which the speaker belongs (Wendler 2014: 551). Symbolic frames are particularly concerned with the question of direction of the polity of the European Union (Wendler 2014: 552), either into the direction of intergovernmental cooperation or of a political community sharing elements of identity and destiny on which solidarity and redistributive policies could be built.

Pragmatic frames on the other hand are based on a consequentialist mode of action and justify political decisions on the basis of 'externally defined interests and resources' (Wendler 2014: 551).² Pertaining to the political system of the European Union, pragmatic frames relate to the capacity of the EU to be an effective problem-solving arena.

Crises and the discursive space for party politics: Parties as strategic actors of symbolic and pragmatic framing of the EU

Acute crises such as the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic reduce the discursive space for party politics to what party leaders assume to be the safe bet towards their electorate. While crises can be triggers for change, the acute phases of crises reduce the given 'competitive space' (Hutter and Kriesi 2019b) for parties. Political actors will not structure new divides but fall back on the safe options. (Hutter and Kriesi 2019a: 4). In acute crises political parties will not open up new conflicts but expand the scope of existing ones (Schattschneider 1975). Issue entrepreneurship is very unlikely in times of acute crises as it already a risky strategy for parties in times of normal party competition, in particular in multiparty systems (Hobolt and De Vries 2015). It risks to alienate more voters than to align and it risks to reduce coalition options. On the basis of these assumptions, we should parties expect to run low risk strategies and to politicise actively only such issues of which they are sure of their voters' stance. We should thus find during the crisis less cleavages between the usual 'drivers' of the politicisation of EU policies and institutions.

² In her work on enlargement Sjursen distinguishes a third time of frame based on ethical considerations. Justificatory arguments of this type follow also a logic of appropriateness but the latter is not directed towards shared values but towards principles of fairness and justice which can be accepted by political groups with conflicting values and interests (Sjursen 2002: 491).

The EU is a political system with a particular structure and political infrastructure (Bartolini 2005). Beyond the party-political cleavages on domestic level, there are in particular two types of politicisation which need to be taken into account because they represent both the particular multi-level structure of the EU and the new types of party cleavages which have evolved as a consequence of the European integration process and the transfer of competences to the European level.

Government and mainstream opposition

In the current political system of the European Union governments are in the driving seat on EU policies and constitutional decisions and are thus actors on multiple levels. It is rare that a government has not had to agree to a given policy in the Council of Ministers or the European Council. On domestic level governments thus need to defend EU policy while the opposition will tend to have a more critical stance (Raunio 2009). The literature shows that we often find government opposition dynamics when it comes to the politicisation of the governments' EU policies. The dynamics of European decision-making often frustrate the domestic oppositions opportunities for meaningful issue-opposition (Mair 2013). Government parties use a more positive and opposition parties a more negative framing.

Given mainstream government and opposition parties proximity relating to the general goal of European integration, however, the latter can be expected to abstain from politicizing the EU as a political community. Under the extreme conditions of the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis, leaders of mainstream opposition parties can be expected to calculate that they risk losing voters if they put into question the legitimacy of the EU as a decision-making arena.

*H1a: Given the usual government and opposition dynamics in the EU, we expect that mainstream opposition parties will use **more negative pragmatic framing** than government parties.*

*H1b: Given the ideological proximity of government and mainstream opposition parties on European integration, we expect that mainstream opposition parties **do not use a significantly more negative symbolic framing** than government parties.*

Radical parties – mainstream parties

Radical parties have gained a lot of academic attention in recent years for different types of opposition of the European integration process (Aspinwall 2002; De Vries and Edwards 2009; Marks and Wilson 2000; Hooghe *et al.* 2002). Parties under this label build their programmatic positions on 'contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration' (Taggart 1998: 366). Later definitions distinguish more clearly between the opposition between a principled rejection of European integration and a rejection of the current functioning of the EU (Taggart 2000; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018). Studies mostly refer to a distinction between parties which 'are pessimistic about the EU's current and/or future reflection of these ideas' (Euroskeptics) and parties which 'subscribe neither to the ideas underlying the process of European integration nor to the EU' (Kopecký and Mudde 2002: 302).

Before Brexit, radical parties from both extremes of the political spectrum have had programmatic positions speculating about exiting the European Union – leading to a growing scholarly interest in the potential of further European disintegration (Jones 2018; Webber 2019; Schimmelfennig 2018). Given that for radical parties from both sides of the political spectrum, the opposition to European integration corresponds to an already existing political conflict, we should expect parties to widen the scope of this conflict under the conditions of the Covid-19 crisis. We should expect a more critical, i.e. more negative, framing of both the policies decided upon on the European level and the EU's problem-solving capacity but also the potential of the EU to be a political or solidary community by radical parties than is the case from mainstream parties.

*H2a: Given that radical parties usually position themselves critically towards parts of the EU's policy output, it can be expected that radical parties use **considerably more negative pragmatic framing** and less positive framing of the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic than mainstream parties.*

*H2b: Given that radical parties position themselves often critically towards the project of European regional integration, it can be expected that **radical parties use considerably more negative symbolic framing** during the Covid-19 pandemic than mainstream parties.*

Radical left vs. radical right

While radical-left and radical right parties distinguish themselves from mainstream parties in the anti-establishment rhetoric (Vries and Hobolt 2020) and thus their rejection of mainstream policies, the programmatic stance on European integration of a political party is also highly dependent on the type of policy concerned and the political legacies of radical parties. Given the strong importance of economic issues during the Covid-19 pandemic, we can expect in particular economic policy positions to apply here. Left parties tend to advocate economic solidarity and financial transfers in the European Union (Closa and Maatsch 2014: 832; Boix 2000).

While parties both from the radical left and the radical right can be expected to broaden the scope of their criticism about European integration (symbolic framing), they can be expected to frame the political decisions during the Covid-19 crisis significantly differently.

*H3a: Given the different stance on financial and economic policy-issues in the EMU, we can expect **significant differences in pragmatic framing** by parties from the radical left and parties from the radical right.*

*H3b: Given their generally hostile position on European integration, we expect **no significant difference in symbolic framing** between the radical left than from the radical right.*

The following section presents the research project, the methodology used and the data.

Data and Methods

Data, timeframe and case selection

The analysis of this research project is based on a manual content analysis of text data. The data set consists of three different types of data: social media output (Facebook and Twitter), other forms of direct political communication (press releases, interviews, and speeches), and news media content. The period of data collection covers the months between February and the end of July (6 months), i.e. the first wave of the pandemic. The countries included are seven Eurozone countries: the "big four" (Italy, Spain, France and Germany) and three smaller states (Netherlands, Austria and Ireland). This allows us to map the domestic public discourse in the core of Eurozone countries during the first wave of the pandemic in which macroeconomic coordination in the EMU and economic policies played a major part in the debates. As we are interested in party framing, this selection allows us furthermore to concentrate on member states with comparable cleavages of party competition.

For each of countries, country experts identified the relevant actors and parties. Included in the data collection were the head of government (e.g. Prime Minister), Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Health, Minister of Finances, and all parties represented in the National Parliaments. Overall, more than 60 parties from the seven Eurozone countries were included in the analysis. The categorization of parties into different party families was conducted along work by Rooduijn et al. (2019).

To collect party communication from social media, we scraped messages from relevant accounts on Facebook and Twitter, the two most important social media networks for political discussions. Other forms of direct political communication, such as press releases, statements, and speeches were collected by the country experts from the official party websites. Furthermore, we included one serious newspaper per country, thereby excluding tabloid newspapers. Country experts identified the daily newspaper with the highest circulation number in their respective countries and content was collected via the FACTIVA database.

Subsequently, we used specific keyword strings in order to receive only documents that address the COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union. Furthermore, we excluded documents that did not address the European Union or Europe in general. After this pre-sampling step, the data set consists of more than 5,000 documents. Table 1 below summarizes the number of documents per category and country.

Table 1. Text documents

Country	Party: press release etc.	Party: social media	Newspaper articles	Total
Austria	88	177	243	508
France	276	179	257	712
Germany	439	340	894	1637
Ireland	169	79	255	503
Italy	220	223	317	760
Netherlands	127	137	209	473
Spain	141	291	422	854

Frame-analysis and coding procedure

To analyse how EU action is evaluated in domestic public spheres, we have used a mix of qualitative and quantitative frame-analysis (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Snow et al., 1986). We understand framing in line with Entman (1993): to frame “is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p.52).

The codebook was developed inductively going through a sample of the corpus of media and party communication. The manual coding was conducted by an international team of coders that were centrally trained and supervised at the European University Institute. The unit of analysis was the individual document. The codebook consists of items for the 1) issue, 2) frames, 3) sentiment, and 4) a variable that measures addresses to the European Public Sphere.

Issues

With the issue code, we aim to identify the particular topics that each item refers to: What is the actor talking about? Each item can be coded with three issues. Issues are grouped into topics being discussed in an European context, topics in a Domestic issue, and Miscellaneous issues. The complete list of issues can be found in the codebook in appendix [A]. Domestic and miscellaneous documents were subsequently excluded from the analysis since the aim of this study is to examine documents that address the European Union.

Framing

In this step, we move beyond what is being talked about, to how. We focus particularly on the framing of the European Union and Europe in general. Framing is defined as the emphasis of certain characteristics about an issue (Entman, 1993). Framing is a reduction of the complexity of the empirical world to more simpler statements which facilitate communicative exchange on a day-to-day basis (Goffman). To code the frame, we ask ourselves: Which frame of reference is the speaker using about the European Union? Which narratives about the EU are being created?

For the operationalization of the issue-specific frames, we used a mixed approach that includes inductive and deductive coding. First, a manual pre-analysis of random samples of documents explored the framing of the EU in each of the included countries inductively. This exercise revealed a number of issue-specific frames that were subsequently included in the codebook. Subsequently, the country experts used the list of frames deductively to code the documents from their respective countries. However, country experts were also encouraged to keep an open mind to country-specific frames that appear regularly in their own country documents but were not part of the codebook. In the initial analysis we have identified eight frames (see appendix [B]), out of which four are relevant for the current analysis.

Pragmatic framing

1. POLICY-FAILURE: The EU has fails to provide necessary policies during the crisis (*negative framing*)
2. POLICY-TOOL-PROBLEM-SOLVING ARENA: The EU is a useful tool to overcome the crisis (*positive framing*)

Symbolic framing

1. NATION-STATE: The Covid-19 crisis proves that Europe should go back to nation-states (*negative framing*)
2. DESTINY: The EU is a community of destiny (*positive framing*)

The frames were organized in pairs of positive and negative symbolic and pragmatic frames. *Pragmatic* frames are frames relating to instrumental arguments. A frame of central importance for positive pragmatic framing of the EU in party communication was the 'TOOL-frame' ('The EU is a necessary tool to overcome the crisis'). This frame describes the EU as a transnational problem-solving arena which is essential to solve the policy-issues stemming from the Covid-19 crisis. Communication was coded under this frame when the contribution emphasized that the EU is a necessary decision-making level to tackle the challenges from the transnational crisis event. A frame of central importance for negative pragmatic framing in the communications we analyzed was that the EU has failed to provide efficient solutions for the transnational policy dilemmas during the Covid-19 crisis, we called this frame 'FAILURE'-frame ('The EU has failed in the crisis'). Arguments pointing towards the ideas that the EU was useless during the crisis or that it did not do enough and too late were coded under this framing.

Symbolic frames are frames relating to the appropriateness of a political action with reference to the shared values of a community. In the party communication during the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis an important positive framing in the category was what we have called the DESTINY frame ('The EU is a community of destiny which can only fight the crisis together'). All party communication emphasizing that political action and solidarity in the EU was needed because Europe belonged all to one community sharing the same destiny was coded under this frame. A frame of central importance for negative symbolic was pointed to the fact that the Covid-19 crisis showed that governance in Europe had to take place on the level of the nation-state as only legitimate problem-solving arena (NATION STATE). Communication which portrayed the EU as potentially dangerous for legitimate political communities was coded under this frame ('back to the nation state').

Inter-coder reliability

In terms of intercoder reliability, we followed previous research with complex coding schemes (see for example (Kriesi *et al.* 2019)we attempt to develop a conceptual framework that improves upon the concepts originally introduced by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001. Following this approach, a team of international coders (a total of 7) were instructed to follow the codebook. For detailed instructions, we organized regular meetings during the training period and closely supervised progress during the coding period to resolve difficult coding decisions. We paid close attention that coding decisions were applied in a harmonized manner to make the final dataset as comparable across countries as possible.

Results

We move now to discussing frames. All graphs are based on country-level fixed effects regression models, that control for country-specific trends. We look at the frames chosen by specific types of political parties and ask if we can find particular dynamics.

Mainstream government vs. mainstream opposition

There is only few polarisation of the framing between mainstream government and opposition parties, neither of the EU's capacity as a problem-solving arena, nor of the EU as a community sharing the same political destiny. This shows that EU level decisions were only marginally used to play the game between the government and the opposition.

Pragmatic framing

Positive pragmatic framing here would be for example 'The EU is acting quick and provides help: All regions in need will be provided with medical equipment and protective masks that they need'(see appendix). Negative arguments would be '*This EU is proving to be completely overwhelmed by the crisis!*'(reference).

We find weak, even if significant, differences of framing when it comes to arguments which emphasize that the EU has failed in the crisis, the mainstream opposition being more negative towards the handling of the crisis, while the government parties are less critical (see figure 1). There is, however, no significant difference in arguments relating to the EU as a political problem-solving arena capable to tackle the policy dilemmas ensuing from the Covid-19 pandemic. Government and opposition parties use this frame to a similar extent.

Symbolic framing

There was indeed no significant difference between government and opposition parties as far as concerning the symbolic framing of the EU as a political community in the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis. Both mainstream government and opposition parties used to a similar degree frames pertaining to this type of argument. This shows that under the condition of extreme urgency of decision-making, mainstream political parties have refrained from politicizing the question if the EU is a sort of community of destiny. What is more, negative symbolic framing is almost absent, both from government and opposition party communication (see figure 2). This type of framing asks for the disintegration of competences on the national level ('The EU is increasingly becoming a threat. It is developing more and more into a gigantic octopus and an omnipotent bureaucratic superstate, marking the exact opposite of what the Union was once founded for' (see appendix).

First differences emerge between radical left and radical right on symbolic framing: Radical parties vs. mainstream

During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic radical parties framed the EU's problem-solving capacity significantly more negative than the mainstream parties. In contrast to our expectations, however, the extreme-left frames the EU positively as a political community to the same extent that mainstream parties do this.

Pragmatic framing

On the basis of the literature, we had assumed that parties on the fringes of the political spectrum tend to have anti-EU programmatic positions which they try to expand in scope under the conditions of an extreme case of politics. We therefore assumed that they would have considerably more negative framing of pragmatic arguments pertaining to the EU as a problem-solving arena than mainstream parties.

We find indeed a significant polarisation of pragmatic framing between mainstream and radical parties. Radical parties portray the EU in particular much more often as failing during the crisis. They relate also less often to the EU as indispensable problem-solving arena which member states need to tackle the transnational policy dilemmas emerged in the Covid-19 pandemic. Mainstream government and opposition parties on the other hand show higher levels of positive framing of the EU as a tool to overcome the crisis and portray the EU far less often as failing during the crisis (see figure 1).

Symbolic framing

We assumed that given that radical parties often hold anti-EU political positions, they would use significantly more negative symbolic framing and less positive symbolic framing than mainstream parties. This hypothesis only holds for the radical right. The radical left portrays the EU as a community of destiny which requires solidarity to an extent which is not statistically different from government and opposition mainstream parties. Only the radical right uses the crisis to claim that the Covid-19 pandemic is a chance to transfer competences back to the nation state as legitimate political community (see figure 2).

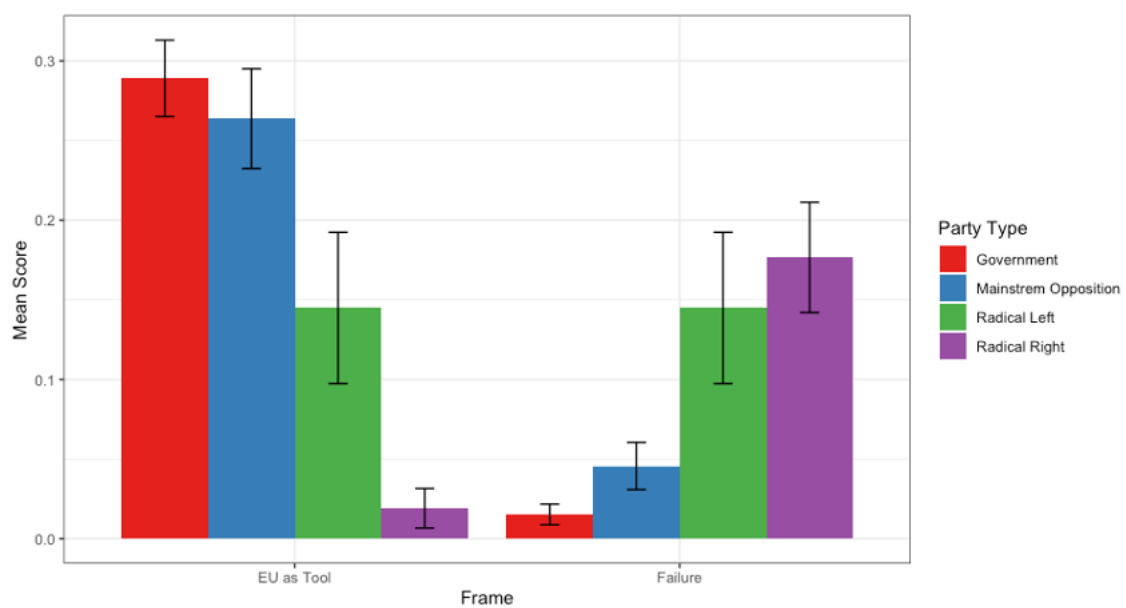
No differences on pragmatic framing but significant differences on symbolic framing: Radical right vs. radical left

In contrast to our expectations, both radical left and radical right parties extended the scope of conflict as far as concerning EU policies and the EU's problem-solving capacity throughout the crisis, portraying EU level decisions as a failure. There are, however, significant differences between both groups when it comes to framing the EU as a political community: There is a highly significant difference between right and left radical parties.

Pragmatic framing

There is no significant difference between radical right and radical left parties when it comes to framing the EU policies as a failure in the Covid-19 crisis.

Figure 2. Pragmatic frames



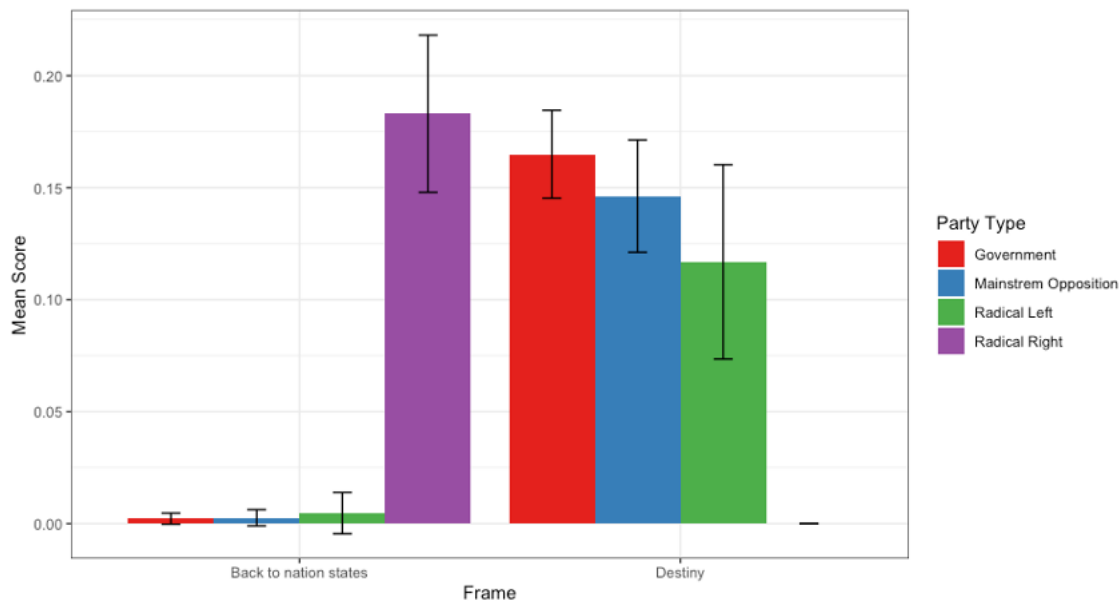
There are, however, as expected significant differences in the way the EU is framed as a problem-solving arena during the first wave of the crisis between the radical left and the radical right. As we have seen above, the radical left uses to significantly lower extent this framing than do mainstream opposition parties. But they use it to a significant and much greater extent than the radical right where this framing is almost absent (see figure 1).³

Symbolic framing

The differences between radical right and radical left are extreme, once we have a look at positive and negative symbolic frames. We had expected differences here given the different programmatic stance of the radical right and the radical left on transnational solidarity. On both framings there is a strong difference between the framing of the radical right and the radical left. We do not find any indications for a shared nationalist ideology between the two fringes (Halikiopoulou et al. 2012). This may be partially caused by the dominance of economic issues during the Covid-pandemic, but rather seems to point to a significant difference as far as concerning the perception of acceptance of the EU as a political community.

³ This relates to a finding which we have made elsewhere in our project. The radical left and opposition parties frame the crisis often as a chance for a better Europe in the future.

Figure 3. Symbolic frames



The radical left uses a framing supporting the idea that the European Union is a political community sharing a common destiny to more or less the same extent as the mainstream government and opposition parties. There are no statistically significant differences.

The radical right does not use this framing at all, which is coherent with its nationalist ideology, under which legitimate decision-making takes place in the ambit of the nation state as only legitimate political community. The same patterns apply to frames pertaining to the fact that Covid-19 crisis proved that the member states of the European Union need to go back to classical intergovernmental cooperation.

The radical right is the odd one out. It presents high levels of this framing, while it is almost absent in the radical left (and the mainstream). In the party communications we analyse we do not find indications for a nationalist radical left.

Conclusion

Does the EU have the 'right to govern' under the conditions of extreme politics, i.e. is it legitimate to govern? Who drives 'bad' politicization with reference to the EU's legitimacy as a political community and problem-solving arena?

We had started out from distinguishing politicisation of the EU on a pragmatic dimension (rationality of tools and capacity to govern) and politicization on a symbolic dimension (coherence of political community). We had argued on the basis of the literature that under the conditions of extreme politics parties would not adventure themselves towards issue entrepreneurship, but would widen the scope of existing conflicts.

Party communication during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic followed a number of expectations. Opposition parties have only weakly attempted to politicize the EU neither on pragmatic nor on symbolic level. Pragmatic framing relating to the EU's performance and capacity during the crisis, shows a significant difference between mainstream and radical parties. Radical parties frame the EU's policies during the crisis and its problem-solving capacity as a failure.

In terms of symbolic framing, however, the radical left does not show any significant differences from mainstream parties in terms of framing the EU as a political community. This underlines the fact that the radical left has been described in the literature as opposed to the current European Union, but not to European integration more generally (Kopecký and Mudde 2002; Closa and Maatsch 2014).

Striking is, the extent to which radical right and radical left distinguish each other on the 'right to govern' of the EU in principle during the Covid-19 pandemic. Under the conditions of the pandemic the radical right is clearly the only party group which denies the EU a right to govern and opposed its legitimacy to do so heads on. The symbolical battle about the EU as a political community with a shared destiny opposes the radical right to all other parties.

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Appendix

[A] ISSUES

With the issue code, we aim to identify the particular issues that each item refers to. Each item should be coded with one issue. Issues are grouped into topics being discussed in an European context, domestic context, and Miscellaneous issues.

1. Topics discussed in an European context:

- Pandemic (general pandemic/crisis situation)
- Pandemic (general response)
- Pandemic (Public health advice, like wearing masks, social distancing, etc.)
- Pandemic (information, facts, statistics)
- Pandemic (disinformation, e.g. bots/trolls, 5G networks etc.)
- Pandemic (hospitals, IC Capacity, care homes, medical equipment)
- Pandemic (lockdown, domestic closure measures, e.g. schools, bars, etc.)
- Pandemic (medicines, treatments, vaccines, research)
- Pandemic (tests, testing, temperature scans)
- Pandemic (tracking apps)
- Travel/Evacuation of travelers
- Economic Response on EU Level (Eurobonds, Coronabonds, Investment Funds, Recovery Fund, European Stability Mechanism, EU-Budget etc.)
- Schengen, Borders, Migration (also including asylum/refugees)
- Cooperation within the EU (Cooperation between different EU Member States)
- Crisis handling in other EU member states (for example taking German Corona regulations as an example)
- EU Competencies
- European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
- EU Institutions
- European “Values” & Democracy
- International Cooperation between the EU and other regions in the world (e.g. African states, China, Turkey, etc.)
- International Organisations (e.g. WHO)
- Brexit or Brexit negotiations
- Agriculture
- Army/Defence
- Business/Industry (Regarding support for individual businesses and their finances, including

self-employed, entrepreneurs, small businesses, large corporations)

- Crime (Regarding law and order, criminality, corruption)
- Cultural liberalism (Regarding goals of the new social movements, peace, solidarity with the Third World, gender equality, human rights, cultural diversity, racism [including the Black Lives Matter movement], the right to abortion and euthanasia, patriotism, national solidarity, the defence of tradition, national sovereignty and traditional moral values)
- Culture (Regarding museums, theatres, cinemas, etc.)
- Economy (Regarding support packages, economic downturn; excluding Eurobonds)
- Education
- Environment, animals (Regarding climate change, environmental protection, nuclear energy; as well as animal rights and protection)
- Infrastructure (e.g. improvements to infrastructure like roads, train lines, airports, cycle paths)
- Institutional Reform (regarding institutional reforms such as constitutional changes, the extension of direct democratic rights, modifications in the structure of the political system, federalism and decentralization, calls for the efficiency of government and public administration, New Public Management)
- Religion
- Welfare (regarding unemployment support, labour market benefits, and other welfare benefits)
- Inequality (e.g. Corona crisis impacts different societal groups unevenly)

2. Domestic Issues

- Domestic Corona crisis situation or response
- National Politics (Government / Party politics / ...)
- National executive agencies (e.g. institutes for Infectious disease protection) - National Economy
- Civil Society
- Citizens

3. Miscellaneous Issues

- Miscellaneous (e.g. non-political issues; announcements regarding upcoming speeches, interviews, parliamentary debates or decisions).

[B] FRAMING CODES

1. **EU exploits crisis:** Is the document emphasizing aspects that hint towards the idea that the EU exploits the COVID crisis in order to increase its control and power / to pursue its own agenda? Does the tweet mention any form of “power grab” of the EU, implicitly or explicitly?

EXAMPLE: *“It is precisely in this dramatic situation that the “Reconstruction Fund” is actually introducing euro bonds through the back door. We will be the only EU- critical party in the parliament to consistently oppose this development and continue to insist on our national sovereignty! The EU is getting too powerful!”*

EXAMPLE: *“While the corona crisis in Europe is getting out of hand, the EU is claiming more and more control. This is just the latest power grab in Brussels. We must stop this absurd and unaffordable policy!.”*

2. **The EU has failed in the crisis:** Is the document emphasizing aspects that hint towards the idea that the EU is failing during the crisis / is useless during the crisis? Or did not do enough and acted too late?

EXAMPLE: *“However, this gigantic money destruction machine EU, which is “guided” by her, is currently failing completely. Anyone with the power and will to see can see clearly these days: this EU is proving to be completely overwhelmed by the crisis! In the crisis, the nation states act as they see fit. The EU, on the other hand, does NOT do anything and once again proves to be a gigantic money-destroying machine without sense or reason.”*

3. **EU provides help to the wrong people:** Is the document emphasizing aspects that hint towards the idea that the EU is supporting regions/countries (in or outside Europe) that do not deserve help (question of deservingness), while neglecting people that actually do deserve help? Is the EU helping the wrong region/country?

EXAMPLE: *“The average Italian has total assets after deducting his debts of about 84,500 Euros, the middle Spaniard one of about 87,700 Euros and the middle Frenchman even calls assets worth about 93,700 Euros his own. For comparison the fortune of the middle German: 32.500 Euro, which is just a laughable 34% (!) of the fortune of the middle Frenchman. But we Germans of all people should now be financially responsible to a considerable extent for the fact that other EU countries should receive money as a GIFT - allegedly because of the corona problems there. A scandal!”*

EXAMPLE: *“Last year, the European Central Bank bought up 1300 billion (!) euro of debt to help Southern Europe. As a result, our pensions are evaporating. So @djeppink #ECB calls president Lagarde the “queen of debt”. She reacts as if stung by a wasp!”*

EXAMPLE: *“Southern European countries demand joint billion-dollar debts with Northern Europe. These so-called ‘corona bonds’ are totally unfair. The Dutch are among the longest working Europeans. Rutte and Hoekstra must stand firm and continue to oppose coronabonds.”*

4. **BACK TO NATION STATES:** Is the speaker demanding that national governments should take care of their own county or citizens first? Is the document emphasizing aspects that hint towards the idea that it would be better to abolish the EU or to return competencies to the national governments? Is the document portraying the EU as potentially dangerous for the well-being/wealth of the nation state?

EXAMPLE: *“The EU is increasingly becoming a threat. It is developing more and more into a gigantic octopus and an omnipotent bureaucratic superstate, marking the exact opposite of what the Union was once founded for. Under these circumstances, the question of remaining in the EU is becoming increasingly urgent. Under these circumstances, a DEXIT is no longer*

a taboo, but rather the ultima ratio, which is the last option to be imposed and which I already spoke of in last year's election campaign."

EXAMPLE: *"Erdogan opened the Turkish border wide to blackmail Europe. Millions of "refugees" are pushing in this direction. We must act NOW and control our borders again!"*

- 5. MORE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION:** Is the document emphasizing aspects that hint towards the idea that the more EU integration is needed? Should the EU receive more competencies and power?

EXAMPLE: *"Our guideline for the Council Presidency is clear: European integration is to be strengthened by the Corona crisis. We want to give Europe more competences, especially in the field of health. We must move closer together."*

- 6. THE CRISIS IS A CHANCE FOR A BETTER EUROPE IN THE FUTURE:** Is the document emphasizing aspects that emphasize the idea that the crisis could be or has to be a chance to create a better Europe in the future? Is the document emphasizing the need for change in the future? Is the document arguing that we cannot return to the pre-crisis EU?

EXAMPLE: *"I think it is important that we see this crisis as an opportunity for a courageous process of renewal and not simply say 'reconstruction' in a crude way. We have to invest in future areas now."*

EXAMPLE: *"The #Corona pandemic offers a chance for a new start for #Europe," says @katjakipping. "On the positive side, the EU Commission's economic stimulus package is to be financed with loans. This would be the first time that European crisis aid would be provided."*

- 7. The EU is necessary as a political tool to overcome the crisis:** Is the document describing the EU as a tool with which we can overcome this crisis? Is the document emphasizing measures that the EU is taking, in order to help citizens/countries/governments in the EU? Is the document portraying the EU as necessary for nation states to survive/thrive/prosper? Or is the EU helping/assisting in dealing with the crisis situation? (**Interest guided framing**)

EXAMPLE: *"The EU is acting quick and provides help: All regions in need will be provided with medical equipment and protective masks that they need."*

EXAMPLE: *"A successful response to the coronavirus health crisis must go hand in hand with a strong recovery plan for our economies. We've made available significant funds to support health systems, companies & protect Europeans' jobs. But more is*

- 8. The EU is a community of destiny which can only fight the crisis together:** Is the document emphasizing a demand for more solidarity or cooperation within the EU? Is the EU described as a community that will benefit us all if we stick together? Or does it refer to common European values and the European community? (**normative/moral framing**)

EXAMPLE: *"#COVID19 hits us all. This makes European solidarity all the more important. But the crisis shows that many people do not think European, but in nation-states. This was already the case during the financial crisis. We need more solidarity and cooperation in Europe."*

EXAMPLE: *"In her current video podcast, Chancellor Merkel emphasizes the importance of European cohesion in the fight against the Corona pandemic: The crisis shows that we can only manage to thrive if we stick together. We must show more solidarity with each other."*

[C] SENTIMENT

With the sentiment coding we want to find out whether the text document contains strong and emotionally charged language. This language can be both negative or positive. Negative language for instance, could contain words associated with anger, fear, or hatred. It could also include derogatory terms or insults. Positive language could be appeals to joy, hope or pride. In general, there are five possible options, as outlined below. **Please always pay attention to the intention of the author. Also, please only code sentiment towards the EU.**

1. Very Negative

Clear criticism for failure or wrongdoing. The sentiment is clearly highly negative. Contains strong, harsh, or derogatory language. Appeals to negative emotions.

Example: *“Ursula von der Leyen goes crazy: [...] In plain language: even more German tax money to Brussels, so that the EU can redistribute it as it sees fit. Von der Leyen makes this demand in view of the complete failure of the EU "led" by her in the Corona crisis - more megalomania was rare. Anyone with the power and will to see can see clearly these days: this EU is proving to be completely overwhelmed by the crisis!”*

2. Negative

Contains criticism, attribution of responsibility. The sentiment is moderately or subtly negative. Includes negatively charged language, yet, no insults, hatred, or derogatory language

EXAMPLE: *“The #EU is to take up loans in the amount of 500 billion euros to provide 'non-repayable financial aid' to particularly affected #Corona EU states. This is an obvious breach of the EU treaties by #Merkel and #Macron!”*

3. Neutral

Moderate/weak praise, perhaps also with moderate/weak criticism

EXAMPLE: *“We agree with the EU commission, surpluses and repayments can be offset retroactively after the COVID-crisis. But now it is important to help quickly and without bureaucracy!”*

4. Positive

Praise for efforts or actions that have been taken. The sentiment is moderately or subtly positive. Might include some positive terms.

EXAMPLE: *“The world's largest free travel zone for over 400 million people is also one of the safest. The #Schengen area was a milestone in the integration of our continent, showing the world what we could do when we unite and embrace freedom and #security.”*

5. Very Positive

Praise for achievement, the successes of actions taken. The sentiment is clearly highly positive. Includes appeals to positive emotions such as joy, hope, or pride.

EXAMPLE: *“ We are strong, we are hopeful, we stand in solidarity & remaining united we will win the fight against #COVID19 together! #IAmEuropean #WeStandTogether”*

[D] EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

Lastly, we want to measure whether national actors seek to influence public opinion in other member states during the crisis, and if so, how they framed the EU/Europe while doing so.

Did the document directly address the people of another country (or region) in Europe? Was the document written in another language than the native language? Or is the document an interview with a foreign journalist/newspaper?

EXAMPLE: *“Sempre più liberi noi Le nostre stelle una bandiera sola Sempre più forti noi Dammi una mano e vedrai si vola L'Europa non è lontana C'è una canzone italiana per voi Insieme, unite, #uniteeurope”*, Tweet in Italian by the Austrian pro-european party “Neos”

EXAMPLE: *“The Corona crisis has shown that selfishness, neo-liberal talk and national “go it alone” strategies have cost lives. The only way out of this crisis are European cooperation and a strong sense of #solidarity.”* Tweet in English by the German Finance Minister

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