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Understanding public support for EU polity building in hard times: the role of territorial, functional, and crisis politics

Zbigniew Truchlewski  ^{a,b,c}, Marcello Natili  ^d and Ioana-Elena Oana  ^e

^aDepartment of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands;

^bRobert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Fiesole, Italy;

^cEuropean Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK;

^dDepartment of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milano, Milano, Italy; ^eDepartment of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute, Fiesole, Italy

ABSTRACT

Between 2005 and 2025, repeated European crises spurred various forms of EU polity building in a process we call 'binding' (i.e., the development of capacity by the centre to provide public goods). This paper investigates whether EU citizens support this development. Leveraging the polity building literature, we theorise three key dynamics structuring preferences for binding: territorial, functional, and crisis politics. Exploiting original data on public preferences across six crisis-related policy domains (social, fiscal, migration, health, defence, and climate) in 15 countries, we find broad support for EU polity building in all domains. Territorial cleavages are generally weaker than expected, with fiscal policy being a partial exception. Functional cleavages retain their relevance and largely reflect ideological and socio-economic divides. Surprisingly, and contrary to Hirschman's famous argument, crisis politics – marked by dissatisfaction and high salience – heighten the demand for EU polity building, especially in redistributive domains like social, climate, and health policy. These findings suggest that crises can reshape Europeans' preferences and mitigate territorial and functional conflicts, offering opportunities for polity building in challenging times.

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CONTACT Zbigniew Truchlewski  z.g.truchlewski@uva.nl  Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, Netherlands
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Introduction: do Europeans support European polity building in hard times?

After two decades of crises between 2005 and 2025, Europeans are waking up to the fact that the European Union (EU) ‘is doing more – lots more’; in fact, ‘the EU has changed profoundly during the past seven years. The forces, however, have been centripetal rather than centrifugal’ (Stephens, 2023). Brussels now participates in policy domains that were once the preserve of national capitals: health, budgets, defence, borders, to name but a few. Interestingly, this process of European polity building (i.e., the development of capacity by the centre to provide public goods), what we call ‘binding’ in our polity framework (Ferrera *et al.*, 2023), is happening after a decade of populist backlashes. This, along with the long-standing criticism of the EU’s democratic deficit and its ‘crisisification’ (Rhinard, 2019), makes it all the more crucial to assess whether public opinion supports such polity building at the EU level. Do Europeans support this ‘competence accretion’ (Bartolini, 2005, p. 132) across policy domains?

While many contributions have mapped out the demand-side conflict constellations underpinning binding in specific crises and the particular policy domains they affected (Burgoon *et al.*, 2022 for social policy; Nicoli, 2019 for economic policy; Kriesi *et al.* 2024 for migration policy; Bremer *et al.*, 2023; Kyriazi *et al.*, 2023; Truchlewski *et al.* 2025a for health and COVID-19; Moise *et al.*, 2025; Truchlewski, *et al.*, 2023), we know far less about such demand-side preferences for EU binding comparatively, across policy areas (for an exception, see de Vries *et al.*, 2015). Nonetheless, evidence suggests that Europeans are increasingly divided not only along an integration-demarcation axis but also regarding the specific forms of integration they support (Gerhards *et al.*, 2019; Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Schäfer *et al.*, 2022). Relevantly, in our perspective, polity building or binding is a process that broadly identifies the increasing involvement of EU institutions in key functions of government, without necessarily implying a full centralisation of control and the creation of new ‘core’ institutions of government as in Bartolini (2005). In this process, the authoritative centre of the EU becomes more important through the coordination or the pooling of some powers and capacities of the member states into central and supranational institutions. Not unlike the concept of ‘extensive unification’ (Ferrera *et al.*, 2024) or ‘coordinative Europeanization’ (Ladi & Wolff, 2021), binding does not require sacrificing the power of the member states, which is rather ‘strengthened by their inclusion in the steering of new common policies at the center’ (Truchlewski *et al.*, 2023).

We leverage the polity approach (Caramani, 2015; Ferrera *et al.*, 2023) to explore what drives public demand for EU binding in key policy domains. This approach underscores the need to examine how territorial and (post-)functional cleavages interact with satisfaction regarding crisis policy responses, providing a coherent framework that integrates various

explanations for EU polity building demands during crises (Schimmelfennig, 2024). In line with this, we aim to understand whether demands for EU polity building are driven by long(er)-standing and hard(er)-changing territorial divisions or cleavages or by output legitimacy (i.e., satisfaction and threat/salience with policy responses to crises). This speaks, on the one hand, to the extent to which territoriality is dissipated within the EU across policy domains and whether it is replaced by cleavages cutting across these territories (Caramani, 2015; 2024), and on the other hand to the ways in which territorial and (post-)functional constraints could be re-enhanced, overcome, or bypassed altogether through crisis performance or output legitimacy.

Our contribution is thus threefold. First, we introduce the polity framework for understanding how these three dynamics (territorial, functional, and crisis-related) structure preferences for polity building (Bartolini, 2005; Caramani, 2015; Ferrera *et al.*, 2023; Hirschman, 1970). Second, we map public demands for EU polity building in six policy domains according to these three dynamics, using an original public opinion survey conducted in 15 countries in 2021. Third, we inspect whether demands for European polity building stem from pre-existing territorial divides among member states, primarily reflect (post-)functional cleavages – either pre-existing or emerging – or rather result from an evaluation of how EU institutions handled a crisis.

In a nutshell, our results highlight the growing importance of a functional cleavage structured along ideological and socio-economic lines, while finding little evidence of deep territorial divisions in demand-side preferences for EU polity building. This is particularly relevant as the shift from territorial to functional cleavages can generally be seen as a sign of increasing loyalty to the EU polity (Caramani, 2015, 2024). However, strong (post-)functional cleavages may also reflect polarised constituencies, potentially leading to gridlocks (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, 2018).

In this regard, our empirics also show that crisis politics can help to ‘unlock’ such functional gridlocks. The threat of crises generates increased demand for polity building across most policy domains, while (dis)satisfaction with crisis management at both national and European levels tends to boost support for these processes. Surprisingly, and contrary to Hirschman’s famous argument, crisis politics – marked by dissatisfaction and high salience – heighten demand for EU polity building, especially in redistributive domains like social, climate, and health policy. These findings suggest that crises can reshape Europeans’ preferences and mitigate territorial and functional conflicts, offering opportunities for polity building in challenging times (see also Truchlewski, *et al.* 2025b).

Taken together, our findings suggest that the highly politicised crises starting in 2008 have contributed to increased support for European polity building – at least in some domains – and that the reforms undertaken benefit from a degree of legitimacy. Crucially, the EU’s response to crises plays a significant role in shaping public preferences for further integration.

This paper proceeds as follows. The first section develops our polity-centred theoretical framework. The second section examines empirical evidence on public support for polity building in the EU. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the findings and discusses their broader implications.

Three dynamics structuring preferences for EU polity building in hard times

Our analytical starting point is viewing the European Union as a compound polity of nation states in the making (Ferrera *et al.*, 2023). This implies that when studying the drivers of demand-side support for polity building, three defining features of the EU as a political system should be considered. First, being compound means that the EU has a diverse membership. Member states retain their (sometimes divergent) interests; therefore, territorial politics need to be taken into serious consideration. The existence of territorial cleavages is particularly important given the EU's 'weak centre' and dispersed authority structure (Alexander-Shaw *et al.*, 2023). In this context, such divisions can encumber policymaking and polity building at the European level as they can give rise to divergent national coalitions that would make agreeing to common solutions harder.

However, and second, 'functional' conflicts that cut across territoriality retain a crucial relevance in polity formation. Caramani (2015, 2024) even argues that the progressive replacement of territorial cleavages with functional divides may contribute to integrating different groups in forming polity independently from national/territorial bonds. In other words, as citizens on the same sides of the cross-territorial cleavage can ally, this can offer a social base and solidarity bonds for their integration (see also Oana & Truchlewski, 2024).

Third – and finally – the EU has developed properties that are 'historically new' and 'make it crisis-prone' (Ferrera *et al.*, 2023, p. 707), as the continuous outbreak of crises since 2008 outlines. A situation of (perceived) existential threat for the polity affects citizens' support for polity building (Ferrera *et al.*, 2023), and so does their evaluation of how supranational institutions respond to such situations (Truchlewski *et al.* 2025b). Territorial divisions, functional cleavages, and crises, we argue, contribute to structuring citizens' demands for EU polity building and mutually influence each other, in a way that existing literature fails to fully recognise. In the following, we delve into each of these dimensions, introducing specific hypotheses regarding how they structure citizens' demand for EU polity building.

Territorial cleavages

In the Rokkanian perspective adopted in this article, territorial cleavages refer to divisions and political alignments across and within member states¹

regarding patterns of EU centre consolidation (Caramani, 2015). A prominent line of research suggests that preferences for integration and risk-sharing at the EU level are shaped by country-specific characteristics, such as 'vulnerability profiles' (Walter *et al.*, 2020) or the 'political geography' of the EU polity (Beramendi, 2012; Beramendi & Stegmueller, 2020). Conflicts over social regulation, for example, often arise between high-wage countries with robust welfare systems and low-wage countries with less comprehensive protections, manifesting as tensions between 'old' and 'new' or Western and Central/Eastern member states. This illustrates how national economic, institutional, and social contexts shape preferences for deeper EU integration and influence alignment in intergovernmental negotiations, reflecting varying capacities and willingness to support specific forms of EU involvement. Recent studies highlighted the emergence of more-or-less stable transnational coalitions among member states, driven by their socio-economic and political contexts, in EU-related affairs (Buti & Fabbrini, 2023; Porte & Jensen, 2021; Fabbrini, 2022; Truchlewski & Schelkle, 2024; Truchlewski *et al.* 2025a).

Beyond these socio-economic divides, the literature also suggests that territorial divisions arise from the distinct ways in which countries experience and respond to crises, leading to varying coalitional patterns in their preferences for EU integration. In other words, crises introduce an additional layer of variation in preferences for polity building across different member states, reflecting policy-domain-specific dynamics. From this perspective, these transnational coalitions are fluid, shifting over time and across policy domains (Truchlewski & Schelkle, 2024).

For example, during the euro area crisis, much scholarly attention focused on the divide between proponents and opponents of fiscal stability and cross-national transfers, commonly framed as the 'creditors-versus-debtors' or 'Northern saints versus Southern sinners' or the Frugals (e.g., the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark) vs. the Solidaristic (Portugal, Italy, Spain) coalitions dynamic (Matthijs & McNamara, 2015). As a result, Hobolt and de Vries (2016, p. 419) suggest that support for polity building in the fiscal and social domain is higher in southern and eastern peripheral states. Similarly, the refugee crisis revealed territorial divides between frontline states that bore the brunt of migration flows (e.g., Greece, Italy), transit states (e.g., Hungary, Austria), and destination states (e.g., Germany, Sweden, France) (Kriesi *et al.* 2024). The COVID-19 crisis further exposed divisions between the 'Frugal Four' member states (Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden), the Solidarity Coalition (e.g., the Corona 9: Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Slovenia, and Ireland), and the Visegrád Four (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) (Truchlewski *et al.* 2025a; Kriesi *et al.* 2024).

Empirical findings confirm that these coalitions not only shape governments' positions in negotiations but also influence public attitudes within member states, which often align with the stances their governments adopt in EU-level

negotiations (Oana & Truchlewski, 2024; Kriesi *et al.* 2024; Truchlewski *et al.* 2025a; Kriesi, Moise, and Oana 2024). Building on this perspective, we hypothesise that public preferences for EU polity building are strongly conditioned by the crises that have shaped their countries' experiences in specific policy domains, systematically aligning with the transnational coalitions their country was part of during crisis management negotiations in those domains:

- H1: Respondents' polity building preferences systematically cluster in line with the transnational coalitions their country is a part of, and these transnational coalitions vary with policy domains as was shown during multiple recent crises:
 - H1a: In the migration domain, respondents in frontline states during the refugee crisis of 2015–16 (Greece, Italy, Spain) and open destination states (Germany, Sweden) are likely to support greater EU involvement.
 - H1b: In the fiscal and social domain, respondents in the 'periphery' during the euro area crisis (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and CEE states) are likely to support more EU involvement.
 - H1c: In the health and social policy domain, respondents from member states that faced the most acute strains on their economies and healthcare systems during the COVID-19 crisis (Poland, Italy, Spain, Romania, Latvia) are likely to support more EU involvement (Truchlewski *et al.* 2025a: Chapter 6).²

In contrast, for defence and climate policy, we refrain from formulating strong hypotheses. Given that our survey was conducted before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and given the long-standing, erosive nature of the climate crisis, we assume these domains would not exhibit the same clear territorial divides or established coalitional patterns as those seen in social, fiscal, migration, or health policy domains, which were heavily politicised during previous crisis negotiations.

Functional cleavages

We have already emphasised that a relevant strand of the polity building literature argues that long-term social transformations are reshaping the structure of divides across the EU from territorial ones to functional-based ones that cut across geography (Caramani, 2015). Such cross-cutting divides can be seen either in the left–right ideological dimension (highlighting pre-existing functional cleavages) or in an emerging post-functional cleavage – the new transnational divide opposing cosmopolitans who benefit from the globalisation process against communitarians who tend to lose (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). Whether preexisting or emerging, we analyze these cross-cutting divides under the same umbrella as (post-)functional cleavages and as different from the territorial divides.

On the one hand, in line with the new transnational cleavage explanation, whether an individual has a stronger national or European identity affects their views on EU integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). A stronger national identity is generally associated with being against migrants and multiculturalism, while a European identity is linked to more positive attitudes toward these phenomena (Ejrnæs & Jensen, 2019; Otjes & Katsanidou, 2017). Accordingly, we hypothesise that individuals with a stronger EU identity would want more EU involvement across all policy domains. On the other hand, this new cleavage is also said to oppose social and economic groups depending on how they benefit from the process of European market integration (Gabel, 1998; Hooghe & Marks, 2005). More educated individuals with higher incomes are expected to benefit disproportionately from these processes, while lower-income and less-educated groups often perceive globalisation and European integration as threats to their economic security and, more broadly, to their social status and recognition in society.

- H2a: Respondents with stronger EU identities are likely to want more EU involvement across all policy domains.
- H2b: Respondents that are more highly educated and have higher incomes are likely to want more EU involvement across all policy domains.

A similar approach to that positing a cosmopolitan-communitarian cleavage that shapes attitudes towards the European Union relates these attitudes to partisanship. A lot of previous empirical research looks at the relationship between these two as an inverted U-shape (Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; de Vries and Edwards 2009), so that those individuals that have placed themselves towards the centre of the left-right scale are more supportive of the EU than those that place themselves towards the extremes. However, Hix and Høyland (2023) criticise this approach for being too static while acknowledging that the EU and its policy outputs have changed over time. Generally, both the first approach and the empirical findings of Hix and Høyland suggest that the far right would be associated with less support for the EU, but they disagree on the levels of support amongst those placing themselves on the left. Taking this commonality as a starting point as well as the simple heuristic that generally the right would prefer less regulation and more national sovereignty, we expect those citizens placing themselves towards the far right of the ideological scale to be less in favour of more EU involvement. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the possibility of a relationship that varies across policy domains/bundles that would disconfirm this hypothesis.

- H2c: Respondents that place themselves towards the far right of the ideological scale are likely to want less EU involvement across all policy domains.

Crisis politics: threat, satisfaction, and policy domains

While territorial and (post-)functional explanations are powerful in explaining overall trends in the demands for EU polity building in general, they do not offer specific expectations on how individual crises may affect such preferences. Territorial identities, EU identity, and ideology are the result of deep-seated psychological predispositions, which makes them quite stable (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008). Crises, endangering the very existence of a polity, may also influence citizens' support for polity building in the short term (Moise *et al.*, 2023). The perceived threat that a crisis poses can also reflect shorter-term trends related to events that become of public interest due to their relative and perceived uncertainty, risk, novelty, and the need to be immediately resolved. More importantly, threat has been associated in the literature with 'rally-around-the-flag' effects (Truchlewski *et al.*, 2023). If the threat of crisis drives demand for EU polity building, then crises – especially those perceived as highly threatening – can be seen as windows of opportunity.

- H3a: The more respondents think that a crisis is threatening for the EU, the more likely they are to want more EU involvement in that particular policy domain.

Likewise, the performance of the EU in past crises shapes citizens' support for EU polity building. On the one hand, this reflects an output legitimacy logic of EU polity building. Hence, we look at satisfaction with crisis management at both the EU and national levels as measures of output legitimacy and a potential driver for EU polity building. Thus, satisfaction with the result of a crisis (output legitimacy) should be at the root of wanting a more active EU. Second, and by contrast, the more respondents are dissatisfied with how the EU has managed a crisis, the less they should be inclined to support polity building in each policy domain. Similarly, the EU would be 'punished' for its failures. In a Hirschmanian logic, dissatisfaction would lead to exit or partial exit (Hirschman, 1970). The inefficiency of the EU would cause respondents to oppose further polity building.

- H3b: The less respondents are satisfied with the crisis management at the EU level, the less likely they are to want more EU involvement in that particular policy domain.

On the other hand, one may also argue that a deeper trust in the EU could already have been built, for example, because of socialisation or a longer process of EU identity formation and loyalty building. This deeper trust could be strengthened by a rational calculus, as ordinary people may also

assume that the EU maintains a potential functional advantage in responding to many of the current crises compared to the national level, as experts frequently do (Boin *et al.*, 2013). If citizens feel that the EU has failed to respond satisfactorily to a crisis not because of its inherent ineffectiveness but due to its lack of authority or policy capacity, a badly handled crisis may lead to the recognition of a need for more EU involvement.

- H3c: The less respondents are satisfied with the crisis management at the EU level, the more likely they are to want more EU involvement in that particular policy domain.

Citizens' assessment and attitudes towards the EU are the result not only of how the EU itself performs, but also of a comparison between national and EU performance. This insight draws on the 'benchmark' theory, which argues that support for the EU does not form in isolation (de Vries 2018). Thus, if member states are perceived as underperforming in a particular policy domain, the demand for EU involvement in that policy domain may increase. Consequently, dissatisfaction with the performance of the national government in a specific domain increases the likelihood of favouring a greater role for the EU in that domain.

- H3d: The less respondents are satisfied with the crisis management at the national level, the more likely they are to want more EU involvement in that particular policy domain.

Finally, we explore variation by policy domains (Goldberg, van Elsas, and de Vreese 2021; Schäfer *et al.*, 2022). De Vries and Hoffmann (2015) investigate people's multidimensional EU attitudes and show that EU citizens would like an EU that guarantees peace and security, whereas they tend to be rather sceptical towards an EU engaging with the reduction of inequalities and migration, and even less supportive of an EU combating climate change or securing energy safety (De Vries and Hoffmann 2015: 39).

These findings are interesting in light of a recent debate within the polity building approach to European integration on what the potential drivers are for public demands for polity building. Building on classical 'bellicist' theories (Tilly, 1990), some scholars have suggested that concern for security may prompt citizens in different member states to close ranks and build capacities on the European level (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022; Truchlewski *et al.*, 2023). Others, on the other hand, emphasise how the quest for social security has been a consistent driver of EU polity building (Ferrera & Schelkle, 2023), so that EU polity building may rather emerge from citizens' demands for the EU to protect them against emerging social and climate-related risks (Natili & Visconti, 2023). The latter approach follows the notion that within liberal

democratic regimes typical of the twenty-first century, citizens tend to demand from their political leaders mostly protection against risks related to their everyday experience, such as economic hardship, social dislocation, and environmental degradation, rather than more 'distant' public goods related to an EU common defence and diplomacy.

As these findings point to divergent expectations, we add two alternative hypotheses:

- H3e: Respondents are likely to want more EU involvement in policy domains related to their peace and physical security rather than in the protection against social risks, climate change, or migration.
- H3f: Respondents are likely to want more EU involvement in policy domains related to social and environmental security rather than in the protection against military threats.

Empirics

Data and methods

Our survey was conducted within the framework of the ERC Project SOLID – a research project piloted by a consortium of universities: the University of Milan, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the European University Institute – in 16 EU countries between 24 May and 19 October 2021, with nationally representative samples. Before preprocessing the data, our sample had 34,246 observations, which includes countries that we do not focus on (e.g., the United Kingdom) and various modules including different questions to ours. After eliminating missing responses and those with a low response time (less than 10 minutes), we were left with around 19,555 observations. Our 15 countries were chosen to reflect the territorial heterogeneity of the European Union and its territorial conflicts (see above) whilst also balancing between North, South, East, and West. We sampled the following countries (final country sample after cleaning in parenthesis): Austria (1893), Finland (1879), France (1909), Germany (1767), Greece (2302), Hungary (2074), Ireland (1920), Italy (1806), Latvia (2033), the Netherlands (1802), Poland (2280), Portugal (2175), Romania (1927), Spain (2012), and Sweden (1808).

We note that the timing of our survey was specific and beyond our control: we started working on it in late 2019, but it was conducted one year after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and nine months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its impact on Europe through migration, energy, and inflationary crises. Consequently, if conducted today, our survey could yield different results. For these reasons, our consortium plans to rerun our survey in 2025.

Our survey has questions on preferences for polity building at the European and national levels in six policy domains: public health, social welfare (poverty

and unemployment), immigration and asylum, fiscal policy and public debt, environment, climate and energy issues, and international defence and diplomacy. Specifically, we ask: 'Indicate whether in the following areas you would want the European Union to take a more active role, a less active role, or keep about the same role as today.' We recode these positions as –1 for a less active role, 0 for keep about the same as today, and +1 for a more active role of the EU. Given these three categories of our dependent variable, in the following we run multinomial logit models to see how independent variables related to our hypothesis predict the probability of being in one of the three categories. For each model, we use country fixed effects to control for country heterogeneity and additional controls usually used in the quantitative works cited (discussed below) to deal with omitted variable bias.

Results

Territorial cleavages

Figure 1 presents a brief overview of preferences for polity building with country averages, which help us shed light on our first hypothesis, namely whether there is a territorial cleavage in the EU in terms of polity building preferences.

Country variation within policy fields suggest that in general, the countries that are more in favour of EU involvement in these policy fields are Southern and Eastern European countries (mostly Portugal, Greece, Romania, Latvia, Poland, France, and Ireland) while the countries least in favour of EU polity building are the Netherlands and Sweden (mostly in the fiscal policy domain). With regard to our territorial hypotheses, H1a for migration policy is confirmed: frontline states like Greece, Italy, and Spain are indeed most in favour of EU polity building since they bear the burden of arrivals. Respondents in destination states like Germany and Sweden were also, at the time of our survey, in favour of devolving more powers in the migration policy to Europe. Our next hypothesis is confirmed: it stated that in social and fiscal policies, countries hard hit by the euro area crisis and poor countries (Southern and Central Eastern Europe) would be in favour of Europe taking a more active role. Finally, our third territorial hypothesis on health and social policies is also corroborated: respondents from member states most highly exposed to COVID-19 (Poland, Italy, Spain, Romania, Latvia) want the EU to be more involved in these policy domains.

That said, it is also fair to say that territorial differences are rather weak in all policies given the small variation in Figure 1, with the partial exception of the fiscal domain. Moreover, territorial coalitions are not stable through crises: only respondents in the Solidarity Coalition, together with Romania, are always at the top of each policy domain, demanding more EU polity building. The other known coalitions are not so monolithic on the demand side:

Preferences for EU Binding

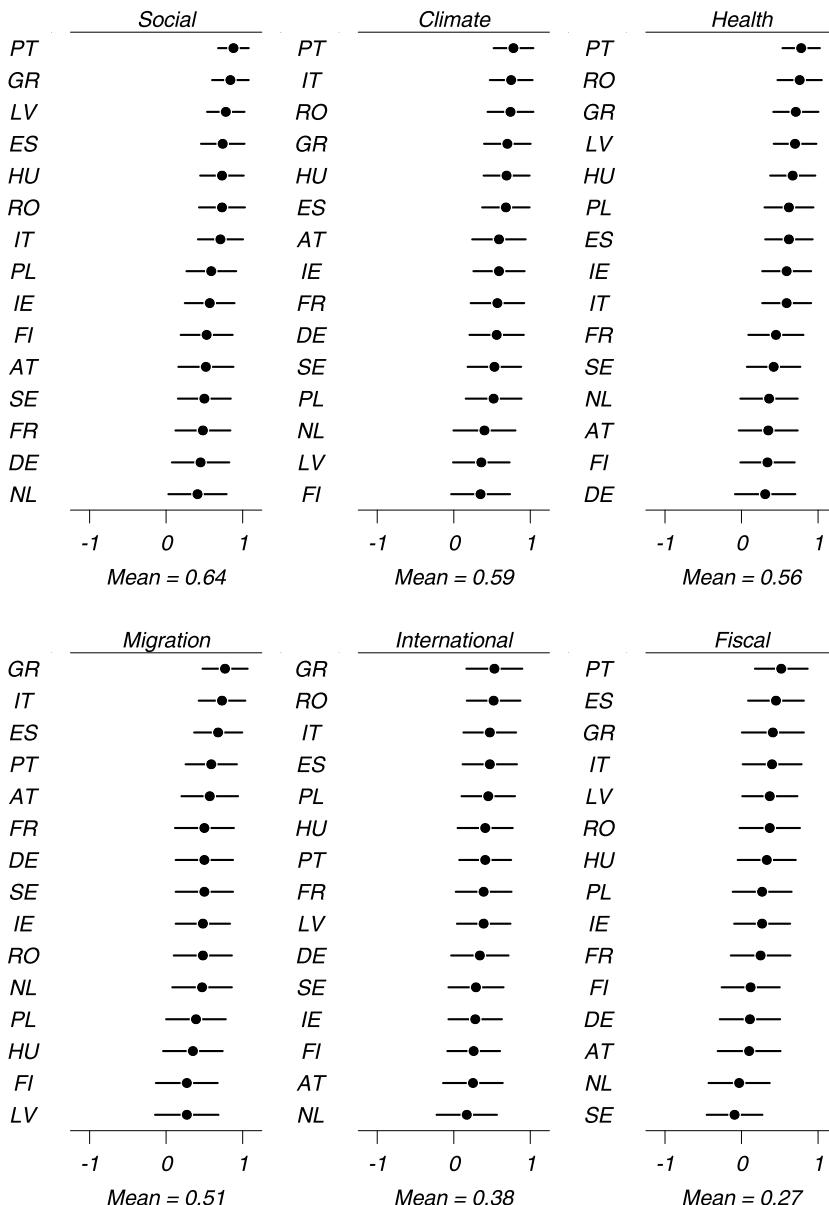


Figure 1. Hypothesis 1 – Average Country Preferences on EU Polity building in Six Policy Domains.

Austria from the Frugals wants more EU health and international policies. The only policy domain where the Frugals seem strongly aligned is fiscal policy, where respondents are the most sceptical among Europeans, but still with

most respondents asking for more EU involvement. This suggests that the governments of these countries have a weak post-functional constraint on the demand side and can change their preferences during EU negotiations on the supply side. There seems, therefore, to be an asymmetry when we compare supply – and demand-side coalitions: while on the supply side, the most coherent coalitions against polity building in the EU are those that are against it (e.g., the Frugals), on the demand side there is a solid majority in favour of polity building in the EU, including in these countries.³

Overall, there is variation among and within policies, but we do not see a strong territorial cleavage emerging. Nevertheless, territorial politics are more relevant in some policy domains than in others, and in particular in international and fiscal policy. The more we move towards policies with a social function (social, climate, health), the less important the territorial cleavage and the more the functional logic prevails.

Inconsistent positions also suggest that the ‘structural’ relevance of territorial politics is limited: it is possible that some countries like Sweden and the Netherlands are reluctant to give more fiscal powers to the EU polity, but at the same time ask it to take a more active role in certain policy domains. Austrians, for instance, are lukewarm toward the fiscal dimension of the European polity, but they also expect it to step in concerning climate, social, and migration issues. Likewise, the Dutch and the Swedes are not particularly keen on seeing more polity building in fiscal policy but expect the EU polity to take a more active role in climate and energy issues.

Functional cleavages

We now turn to the (post-)functional hypotheses (H2) focused on pre-existing or emerging divides related to identity, socio-economic status, and ideology (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 2018; Ganderson *et al.*, 2023; Ejrnæs & Jensen, 2019) using variables measuring identity, education (low, middle, or high), income, and ideology.⁴

Figure 2 shows predictions from multinomial logit models, this time focusing only on the category ‘a more active EU’. The four columns represent our post-functional variables (H2a – c: identity, education, subjective income perception, and ideology), while each row displays results across six policy domains (from top to bottom: social, climate, health, migration, international, and fiscal). The graph illustrates the marginal effects of preferences for more EU binding (vs less) in these domains.⁵ Controls include EU integration preferences, trust in government and the EU, and residence type (rural, town, city).

First, identity (H2a): individuals who identify as European, either exclusively or alongside a national identity, show stronger preferences for EU polity formation. Compared to the ‘less EU’ category (Appendix, Figure A6), where all identities have a 10–20% likelihood of preferring less involvement

from the EU, **Figure 2** shows probabilities for 'more EU' ranging from 50% to 80%, reflecting the policy pattern described earlier. While differences between 'EU identity types' are minimal, the key takeaway is a strong overall preference for more EU.

Second, we turn to education and income (H2b): in general, it is accepted in the EU literature that more educated people tend to benefit more from the European polity as they can move between countries to make the most of diverse systems of skills formation and education, and also adjudicate between national labour markets (Ferrera, 2005; Schelkle, 2017). Therefore,

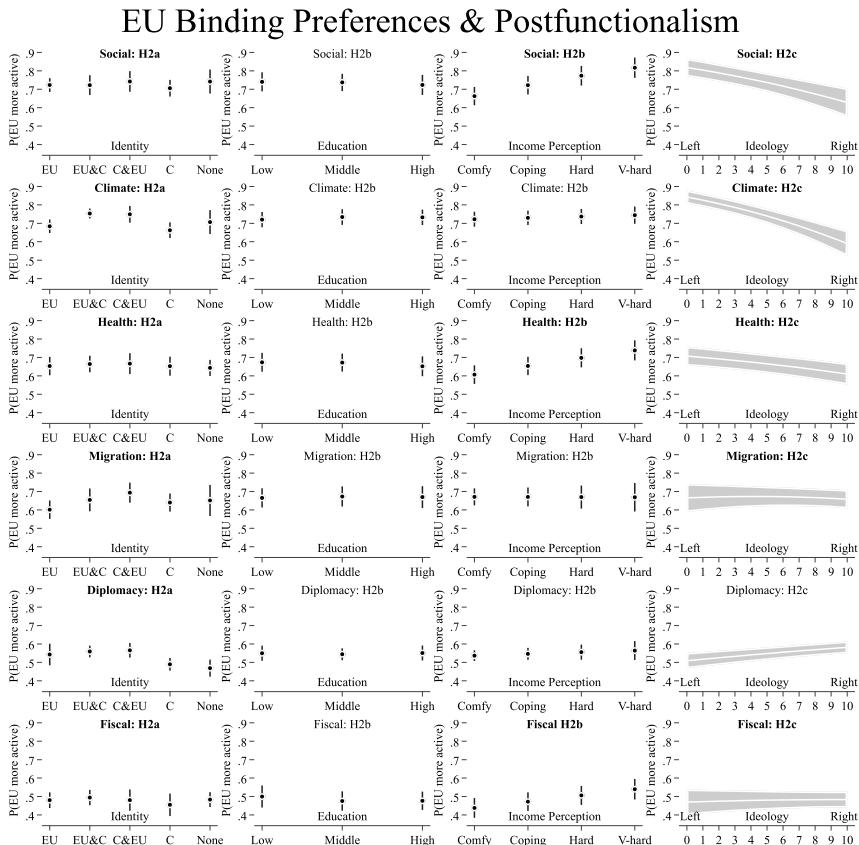


Figure 2. Hypothesis 2 – Predictions from Multinomial Logit Models on the Functional Cleavages and EU Polity Building Preferences (for more active EU).

Note: Multinomial logit models for hypotheses H2a – c. This graph displays marginal effects for preferences for more EU binding in six policy domains (the rows: from top to bottom following the ranking of preferences found above, social, climate, health, migration, international, and fiscal) for the main predictors and hypotheses (in the columns: from left to right, H2a identity (EU, EU and National, National and EU, National, and none)), H2b education (low, middle, and high) and subjective perception of income (comfortable, coping, finding it hard, finding it very hard to make ends meet), and H2c ideology. Statistically significant hypotheses are in bold.

it should be expected that more educated and richer people want more EU involvement. However, the second column in [Figure 2](#) suggests there is no substantive effect of education on preferences for polity building. We observe a statistically significant effect of income for preference of EU centre formation (third column of [Figure 2](#)), but in a different direction: the poorer a respondent considers themselves, the more they will be willing to see the EU take an active role in policies that have a higher redistributive logic. In fact, in social policy, public health, and fiscal policy, the probability of supporting the EU polity building jumps 20 percentage points if we move from the category 'I live comfortably on present income' to the category 'I find it very difficult on present income'. Moving from the former to the latter income category also increases support for EU fiscal policies by 10%.

Third, in regard to political ideology (H2c), apart from fiscal policy, there is always a higher than 50% probability that leftist respondents will want more EU involvement. The effect of ideology is strongest for social policy, public health, climate, and diplomacy. Left-wing respondents want more EU involvement in public health, social, and climate policies, while right-wing respondents want more EU involvement in diplomacy and defence.

Together, these findings suggest that, for redistributive policies, the functional conflicts that matter the most are structured along classic socio-economic divides and the left-right ideological conflict. However, these conflict lines are not extremely polarised: in general, most respondents seem more or less in agreement that the EU needs a stronger centre. For other policies like fiscal and diplomacy, there seems to be an EU cleavage: our regression models suggest that sceptics of EU integration are much less likely to agree that the EU needs to have a more active role in fiscal policy, while respondents in favour of EU integration want more EU fiscal policy and public debt action. Likewise, respondents in favour of European integration do not want the EU to remain foreign to foreign affairs. The post-functional transnational line of conflict over EU polity building regarding preferences for European integration lies mostly in core state powers (budgets and diplomacy) but not in policies that are more directly associated with citizens' socio-economic conditions (public health, social, climate, and energy). We thus see preferences for polity building being uniformly positive for crisis-fighting policies, but much more divided on policies that touch upon issues of sovereignty.

[Figure A6](#) in the Appendix shows the same predictions as [Figure 2](#) (for the category 'more EU' of the dependent variable) using the same multinomial logit model but for another category of our dependent variable: respondents wanting less EU. Likewise, [Figure A7](#) shows the same predictions but for respondents preferring the status quo. With respect to preferences for a less involved EU, first we see that the probability of holding these preferences rarely goes above 30%: there is not so much appetite for a reduced EU, and

even those who prefer an EU with a weaker centre are mostly to the right and prefer less integration. As for preferences for the status quo, the probability of falling into this category rarely rises above 40%, and this concerns mostly respondents on the right (for social policy and climate and energy) and on the left (for migration and defence and diplomacy). As regards integration preferences, the results are not surprising: people who want less integration also want more status quo.

Crisis politics: threat, satisfaction, and policy domains

We move on to our next set of hypotheses (H3). Hypothesis H3a stipulates that polity building preferences are driven by crisis salience and threat. The more one thinks that a crisis is important for the EU, the more one may support polity building in this policy domain. We use the following question in our [ANONYMIZED] survey: 'Thinking about the past decade before the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union has faced several challenges. Which of the following challenges do you think represented the most serious threat to the survival of the European Union?' We assume that crises that threaten the survival of the EU can lead to a preference for more EU building in order to deal with a given crisis (Ferrara *et al.*, 2023). Our respondent could choose between financial and economic issues in some European countries, 2010–2012; refugee flows to Europe, 2015–2016; the UK leaving the European Union (Brexit), 2016–2020; and finally, poverty and unemployment in the decade 2010–2019. We hypothesised that several dynamics could drive preferences for centre building in the EU, from the bellicist logic to the social security logic. Our threat questions can help disentangle these different dynamics, as Figure 3 shows through predictions from multinomial logit models. *A priori*, deeming one crisis as a threat should lead to preferences for more polity building in each policy domain: if respondents think the financial and economic crisis was the most threatening, they should also think that polity building should happen in this domain but not necessarily in others.

The first pattern emerging from Figure 3 is that threat matters for polity building in all policy fields, but with differences across them. Threat is most important for polity building in the social and health policy domain, as well as in migration and climate/energy policy. Crisis threat matters less for fiscal polity building and the external relations of the EU. The second emerging pattern in Figure 5 is that in general, people who deem any crisis threatening will be supportive of polity building in other policy fields as well. This means that people do not necessarily support polity building within a specific policy area just because there is a crisis. Rather, when they perceive a crisis in one policy field, they also tend to support polity building in other areas. The third pattern is that sometimes there are small variations between threat and preferences for polity building: preferences for polity building in both public

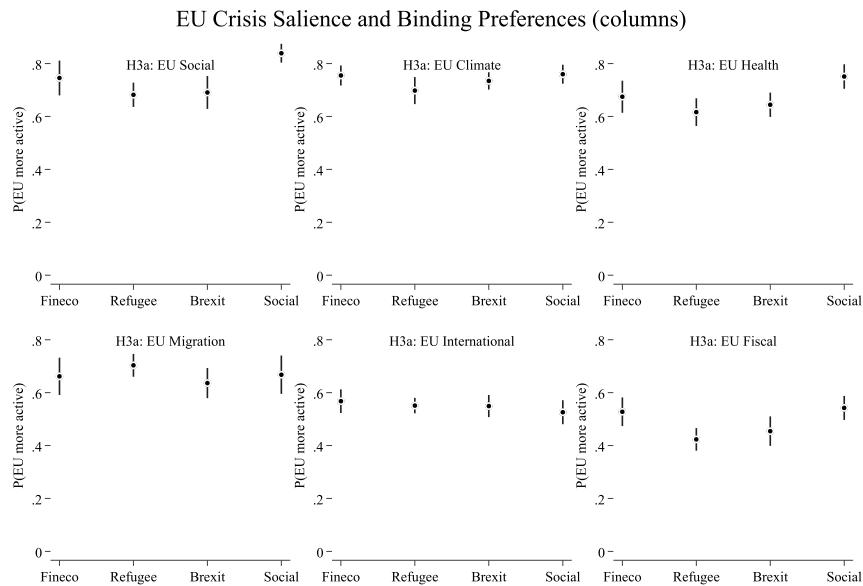


Figure 3. Hypothesis 3a – Predictions from Multinomial Logit Models of Crisis Salience and Polity Building Preferences.

health and social policy are driven by the threat of a social crisis. Polity building for migration policy is driven by both the threat of a refugee crisis *and* the threat of other crises. Polity building in the fiscal realm is weakly supported but it is the threat of a financial and social crisis that pushes for more polity building in fiscal matters. Polity building in climate and energy as well as diplomacy and defence is driven regardless of the crisis being perceived as threatening.

To summarise, it seems that support for polity building increases among respondents in most policy fields whenever they perceive a crisis looming.

We move onto hypotheses H3b, c, and d, namely that satisfaction with crisis management at both the EU and national levels drives demand for polity building at the European level.⁶ We set out a series of conjectures here. First, we hypothesised that the more respondents are dissatisfied with how the EU has managed a crisis, the less they should be inclined to support polity building in each policy domain (H3b). This is the worst-case scenario for the EU polity, which would be ‘punished’ for its failures (Jones, 2009) in a Hirschmanian logic where dissatisfaction leads to exit or partial exit (see Truchlewski, Kyriazi, and Ganderson 2025b for a more detailed discussion). In other words, the inefficiency of the EU leads more respondents to oppose it or simply to support a weaker EU that disintegrates or differentiates more through partial exits. However, previous research has pointed towards negative evidence on this (Ganderson *et al.*, 2023), suggesting it is

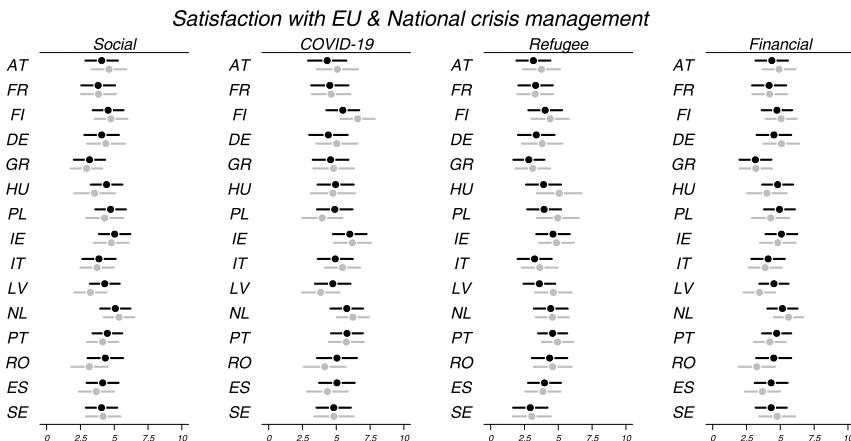


Figure 4. EU and National Average Crisis Satisfaction in Four Policy Domains. (EU in black and national in grey).

not crisis politics that drive the backlash against the EU but deeper variables related to our (post-)functional hypothesis (see above). Following this premise, we may also suggest that dissatisfaction with European crisis management would lead to a demand for EU polity building (H3c): respondents would manifest a deeper trust of the EU by asking the polity to recalibrate so that it can address challenges thrown its way by the wheels of history (Boin *et al.*, 2013; Middelaar, 2019).

Let us consider first descriptive evidence to get an overview of the preferences. Figure 4 exhibits respondents' satisfaction with EU and national crisis management averaged by country (0 stands for completely dissatisfied and 10 for completely satisfied). Regarding satisfaction with different crises, we observe that at both the national and European level, most crises are rated below 5 on average, apart from COVID-19, which is right at the level 5 mark (Figures A2 – A5 in the Appendix give more details). At the EU level, the worst-rated crisis is the refugee crisis, followed by the social crisis. On the national level, the worst-rated crisis is the social crisis. On both polity levels, t-tests between the worst – and best-rated crises are significant. Finally, comparing respondent satisfaction between national and European levels shows that in general, respondents evaluate both levels in similar ways, bar a few exceptions. For the financial and social crises, Latvia and Romania evaluate the EU higher than the national level. For the refugee crisis, Hungary, Poland, and Latvia rate their countries' crisis management higher than that of the EU. For COVID-19, most countries rate the EU's crisis management slightly higher than that at the national level (especially Romania, Poland, and Latvia), apart from Finland and, to a lesser extent, Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands.

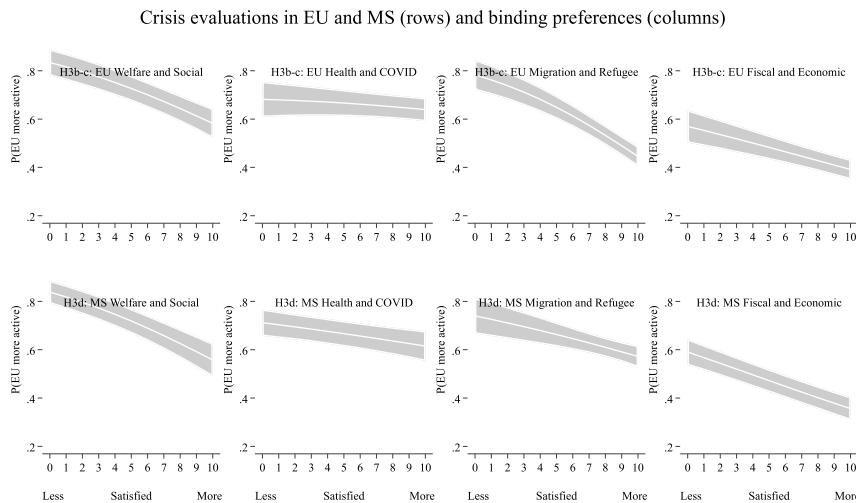


Figure 5. Hypothesis 3b, c, d – Predictions from Multinomial Logit Models on Crisis Evaluations and Polity Building Preferences.

Note: The variable on the x-axis is satisfaction with EU and national crisis management of different crises (EU satisfaction in the top row, and national crisis satisfaction in the bottom row). Specifically, we asked respondents: 'Generally speaking, how satisfied are you with the way the European Union has handled each of the following challenges? Select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'completely dissatisfied' and 10 means 'completely satisfied'.'

Our regression analysis of the impact of crisis satisfaction on the demand for polity building suggests stronger support for H3c than for H3b – an unexpected result, given the generally critical assessment of the EU's crisis management in the past decade. Figure 5 shows results from two multinomial logit models: the first (top row) regresses polity building preferences on EU crisis satisfaction, alongside controls (age, education, residence, identity, ideology, integration preferences, and trust in the EU and national government); the second (bottom row) uses member state crisis satisfaction. Each row is divided into four columns, showing how satisfaction with different crises – welfare (social integration), COVID (health integration), refugee (migration integration), and economic/financial (fiscal integration) – affects preferences for EU polity formation.

If H3b held, then lower satisfaction would lead to a lower probability of more EU; we do not see such an empirical pattern (see also Figures A8 and A9 in the Appendix). If anything, we observe the opposite, in line with alternative hypothesis H3c: the more respondents are dissatisfied with crisis management at the European level, the more they support polity building. This mostly applies to the social and refugee crises, both of which were rated worst. The same finding applies slightly less to the financial crisis and for the COVID crisis – although it should be noted that the COVID crisis is where polity building happened most compared to other crises, so

perhaps, bearing in mind that our survey was conducted in summer and autumn 2021, respondents know that the EU has done enough already.

Does H3d hold at the national level nonetheless? It could be that respondents would be either dissatisfied with how the national level managed the crises and would wonder why the EU would do better, or that respondents think that since the national level managed the crises well, the EU polity building does not make sense. This is not what we observe empirically; if anything, the empirical patterns for satisfaction with national crisis management are the same as with European crisis management: satisfaction with national crisis management does not lead to a high probability of wanting less EU polity building. However, dissatisfaction with national crisis management does lead to a higher probability of wanting more EU polity building. This is strong evidence for H3d: mistakes at the national and European levels are translated into more demand for EU polity building, and successful evaluation of crisis management at the national and EU level does not lead to a demand for less EU. In the worst case, satisfaction with crisis management leads to a higher probability of wanting the EU to stay the same as it was in 2021 after the institutional transformations and innovations of 2020.

Finally, we consider hypotheses H3e and H3f focusing on how EU polity building preferences vary by policy domains. On the one hand, some argue that Europeans prefer to see polity building in core state powers aimed at peace and security (De Vries and Hoffmann 2015) but are less willing to support polity building in policy domains that could be subsumed under the logic of social security and redistribution. This is not far away from arguments highlighting how the security logic is the main factor for polity building (Kelemen & McNamara, 2022; Tilly, 1990). On the other hand, there are those who argue that polity building is driven by the social security and prosperity dynamics (Abramson, 2017; Ferrera & Schelkle, 2023); the EU can also be a function of demands for redistribution and the social security logic that protects citizens from various risks, like the recently emerging climate-related risks (Natili & Visconti, 2023).

Figure 6 displays preferences for polity building in our data set, across our six policy fields. Our dependent variable is coded as –1 if respondents want a less active role for the EU, 0 if they would prefer the EU to maintain the status quo, and 1 if respondents want the European Polity to play a more active role. Figure 1 reveals clear patterns. Overall, there is broad support for greater EU involvement across all six policy fields, with the mode of the histograms consistently at 1, indicating a preference for 'more EU'. However, support varies by policy area: it is highest for social policy (73.1%) and climate and energy (70.5%), and lowest for fiscal policy and public debt (47.6%). These findings align with the social security logic (Moise *et al.*, 2023): support for EU polity building is strongest in areas addressing social risks, climate issues, and healthcare. This may reflect the survey's timing, as it was conducted after

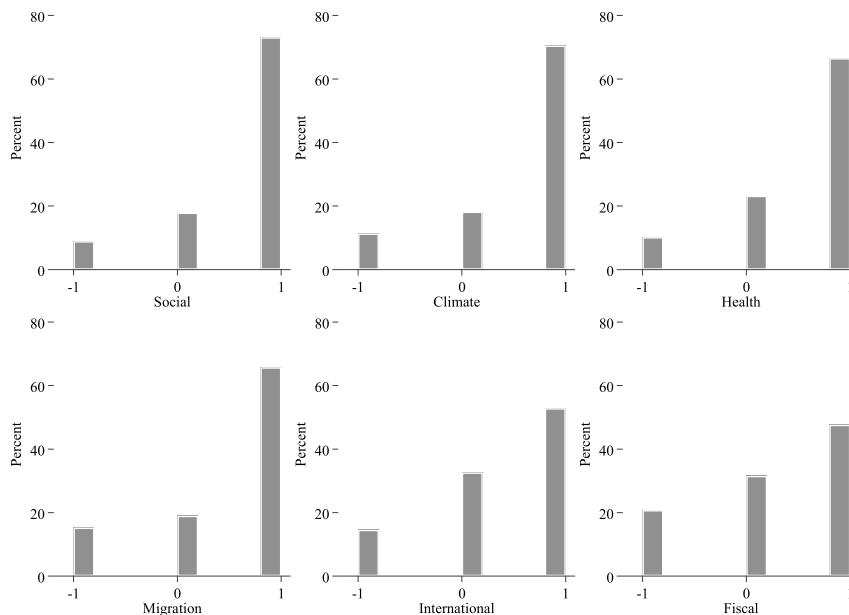


Figure 6. Hypotheses 3e and 3f – Average Preferences on EU Polity Building in Six Policy Domains.

the COVID-19 pandemic, which underscored the importance of healthcare and highlighted the social disruptions caused by lockdowns. Much less supported are the policy fields of ‘core state powers’, which are all tainted by a pure security logic: migration (65.7%), diplomacy and defence (52.8%), and fiscal powers (47.6%).

It is also important to note that respondents display a slight inconsistency in terms of preferences, wanting more EU involvement in domains that demand more spending, but also being reluctant to see the EU gain a greater role in the fiscal policy domain – that is, unless respondents see the EU involvement as coordination rather than centralisation (we come back to this point in the conclusion).

Conclusion

The building of a European polity has been met with scepticism over time due to its uncertain legitimisation (Scharpf, 1999). In the words of one prominent analyst, polity building and competence reshuffling are mostly the result of technocratic power plays lacking any imprimatur from the citizens they are supposed to serve: ‘[T]he alliance between these actors is based on cooperation towards reaching shared goals, but also on institutional competition and mutual controls that take the form of persistent fused powers, unclear competence distributions, and weak legitimacy sources’ (Bartolini, 2005, p. 176). The recurring crises of

recent years have further reinforced this perception, with critics contending that the EU has leveraged these crises to advance polity building regardless of whether this was backed by broader popular support (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2018; Kreuder-Sonnen & White, 2021).

This paper turned these critiques into the following research questions: to what extent do Europeans support this EU polity building process in times of crisis? Where do the main fault lines over this process lie? Our findings suggest that there may be more public demand for the EU than is often assumed (Ganderson *et al.*, 2023; Truchlewski *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, we find that EU citizens tend to support polity building dynamics, particularly in the social domain, which is notable given the never-ending debates about the future of Europe and the growing calls among experts for an expanded European budget (Costa & Schwarzer, 2023).

In more detail, we have three sets of main results (see [Table 1](#)). First, contrary to the results on territorial cleavages in the EU during the long crisis decade and the narratives of a North-South divide (Matthijs & McNamara, 2015), we find that territorial conflicts on the demand side are pretty weak in our six policy domains, with the relatively mild exception of fiscal policy. This is important as territorial identities can be a powerful brake on polity building and lay the groundwork for future secessions or partial exits (Caramani, 2015; Gander-*son et al.*, 2025). Moreover, it suggests that the post-functional constraint in several policy domains is weaker than previously assumed, including in countries where the backlash against EU formation is more pronounced.

Second, and relatedly, our results show that conflict lines over polity building increasingly follow the logic of the 'Europeanization of politics' (Caramani, 2015); that is, we observe that they move from a territorial to a functional basis, which, according to the polity approach writ large, could facilitate further competence accretion in the long term (Bartolini, 2005; Caramani, 2015). The relevant functional conflicts vary across policy domains: in areas that reflect a social security logic – specifically health, social policy, and climate change mitigation – the classic socio-economic and ideological divides are particularly pronounced. Left-wing and lower-income constituencies tend to demand more EU centre building – an interesting finding considering classic arguments about individuals in lower socio-economic status being the least likely to support EU integration (Gabel, 1998). In the international and fiscal domains, on the other hand, the transnational, post-functional cleavage plays a more significant role in structuring policy preferences.

Fiscal policy, in particular, is the least favoured area for polity building. This *may* create inconsistencies on the demand side of politics, as the increasing involvement of the EU in more policy domains necessitates the EU raising its own resources. A possible way out for EU policymakers could be increasing involvement in these policy domains in a coordinative manner, i.e., enhancing national capacities rather than substituting for them, for instance through

Table 1. Summary of the Findings: Conflict Lines Over Polity Building and Dynamics of Polity Building.

Polity Building Dynamics/Policies	Dynamic 1: Territorial	Dynamic 2: Functional	Dynamic 3: Crisis Dissatisfaction
Social	None	Strong	Strong
Climate	None	Strong	Strong
Health	None	Strong	Strong
Migration	None	Weak	Strong
International	None	Strong	Strong
Fiscal	Weak	Strong	Strong
Conclusion	Countries change positions across policy domains.	Rooted in income and ideology.	Crisis management dissatisfaction leads to more demand for EU polity building.

'reinsurance', an idea pioneered by Schelkle (Schelkle, 2005, 2022), rather than a pure centralisation and federalisation with transfer of budgetary powers.

These (post-)functional conflicts can also constrain national governments and thus reintroduce territorial brakes through the backdoor, considering the two-level game nature of the European polity and the relevance of intergovernmental politics. Our third set of findings helps to illuminate how crisis politics can unlock functional gridlocks: we argue, and demonstrate empirically, that crisis politics strengthen polity building through threat and satisfaction effects. Contrary to the Hirschman model of 'exit, voice, and loyalty' (Hirschman, 1970), dissatisfaction with crisis management at both the national and European levels generates more, not less, demand for polity building (in line with Truchlewski, *et al.* 2025b). Likewise, the threat of crises leads to demand for polity building not only within a policy domain but in most policy domains.

Finally, preferences for polity building seem to follow a social security logic (Ferrera & Schelkle, 2023; Freudlsperger and Schimmelfenning 2022; Moise *et al.*, 2023), not a pure security logic (*pace* Kelemen & McNamara, 2022; de Vries and Hoffmann 2015): on average, respondents want more EU in policy domains linked to protection against emerging social risks (social policy, health, climate) but much less in core state powers like fiscal policy and defence (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2014). This finding could be influenced by the fact that our survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Further research of both a theoretical and empirical nature is surely needed to shed more light on this issue (Moise *et al.*, 2025; Oana *et al.*, 2025).

Notes

1. A new and highly promising line of research highlights how regional inequalities and the existence of 'left-behind' places are linked to support for Eurosceptic parties (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2020; Dijkstra *et al.*, 2024). However, given that the current EU institutional structure accords a pivotal role to national governments, this paper focuses on the national level.

2. See also: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>.
3. Figure A1 in the Appendix presents a simple cluster analysis that confirms the slight territorial differences. We find two groups of countries: on the one hand, respondents in countries that are rather lukewarm towards more involvement by the EU (the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Austria, and Finland), and on the other, a mixed group where respondents want more involvement from the EU: Hungary, Romania, Portugal, Greece, Italy, Spain, Latvia, Poland, France, and Ireland.
4. Income in our survey is proxied by the question 'Which of the descriptions below comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?', with possible answers being: living comfortably on present income ('comfy' in our graphs); coping on present income ('coping' in our graphs); finding it difficult on present income ('hard' in our graphs); finding it very difficult on present income ('v-hard' in our graphs).
5. Regression tables can be found in the online appendix.
6. We measure satisfaction with crisis management by using the following items in our survey on the EU and national levels: 'Generally speaking, how satisfied are you with the way the European Union/National Government has handled each of the following challenges?' We use our survey questions on four crises: financial and economic issues of 2010–12; refugee flows in the years 2015–2016; poverty and unemployment in the decade 2010–2019; and the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Data availability statement

Replication materials are available at: <https://github.com/zgtruchlewski/UnderstandsSupport>

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Zbigniew Truchlewski is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam, Research Fellow at Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, and Visiting Fellow at the European Institute, London School of Economics.

Marcello Natili is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Milano.

Ioana-Elena Oana is Assistant Professor at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the European University Institute.

ORCID

Zbigniew Truchlewski  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3594-4290>

Marcello Natili  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1271-8370>

Ioana-Elena Oana  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1507-8217>

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