

# The responsive public: How EU decisions shape public opinion on salient policies

**Christoph Mikulaschek**  
Harvard

IPES 2021

# Why public opinion on EU matters

## **European Union has greater financial resources than any other IO**

- EU budget 18 times larger than budget of all UN bodies
- New EU Covid-19 recovery fund worth almost USD 1 trillion

# Why public opinion on EU matters

## **European Union has greater financial resources than any other IO**

- EU budget 18 times larger than budget of all UN bodies
- New EU Covid-19 recovery fund worth almost USD 1 trillion

## **European Union is highly politicized in European countries**

- 35 national referenda on EU in past two decades (e.g., Brexit)

# EU is responsive to public opinion ... and vice versa?

- **EU decision-makers signal responsiveness to public opinion**  
(Bazzan and Migliorati, 2020; Hobolt and Wratil, 2020; Schneider, 2019; Wratil, 2018; Hagemann, Hobolt, and Wratil, 2017; Copelovitch, Frieden and Walter, 2016; Bolstad, 2015; Bailer, Mattila, and Schneider, 2015; Toshkov, 2011)

# EU is responsive to public opinion ... and vice versa?

- EU decision-makers signal responsiveness to public opinion (Bazzan and Migliorati, 2020; Hobolt and Wratil, 2020; Schneider, 2019; Wratil, 2018; Hagemann, Hobolt, and Wratil, 2017; Copelovitch, Frieden and Walter, 2016; Bolstad, 2015; Bailer, Mattila, and Schneider, 2015; Toshkov, 2011)
- Do EU decisions also shape public opinion on policy issues?

# EU is responsive to public opinion ... and vice versa?

- EU decision-makers signal responsiveness to public opinion (Bazzan and Migliorati, 2020; Hobolt and Wratil, 2020; Schneider, 2019; Wratil, 2018; Hagemann, Hobolt, and Wratil, 2017; Copelovitch, Frieden and Walter, 2016; Bolstad, 2015; Bailer, Mattila, and Schneider, 2015; Toshkov, 2011)
- Do EU decisions also shape public opinion on policy issues?
- EU does not just react to public's policy views; it also shapes them

# What determines public attitudes on EU issues?

## **Material cost-benefit balance:**

- Educated, affluent citizens benefit from integrated, open markets (Hobolt, 2014; Gabel, 1998)

# What determines public attitudes on EU issues?

## **Material cost-benefit balance:**

- Educated, affluent citizens benefit from integrated, open markets (Hobolt, 2014; Gabel, 1998)

## **Cultural identity and political values:**

- Exclusive national identity, hostility to immigration (Kuhn and Stoeckel, 2014; Hooghe and Marks, 2005)
- Cosmpolitanism, cultural openness (Daniele and Geys, 2015; Bechtel, Hainmueller and Margalit, 2014)



# What determines public attitudes on EU issues?

## Material cost-benefit balance:

- Educated, affluent citizens benefit from integrated, open markets (Hobolt, 2014; Gabel, 1998)

## Cultural identity and political values:

- Exclusive national identity, hostility to immigration (Kuhn and Stoeckel, 2014; Hooghe and Marks, 2005)
- Cosmpolitanism, cultural openness (Daniele and Geys, 2015; Bechtel, Hainmueller and Margalit, 2014)

## Elite cues:

- Cues from preferred political party, news source (de Vries and Edwards, 2009; Gabel and Scheve, 2007)
- Do Europeans also take cues on EU issues from other elites?

# Publics take cues from IOs, foreign leaders, others

- U.S. public forms political attitudes based on cues from various elites such as military leaders, celebrities (Golby, Feaver and Dropp, 2018; DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007)

# Publics take cues from IOs, foreign leaders, others

- U.S. public forms political attitudes based on cues from various elites such as military leaders, celebrities (Golby, Feaver and Dropp, 2018; DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007)
- IOs, foreign government elites shape public attitudes in China, Japan, UK, U.S. (Greenhill, 2020; Fang and Sun, 2019; Tago and Ikeda, 2013; Maliniak and Tierney, 2014; Chapman, 2011)

# Publics take cues from IOs, foreign leaders, others

- U.S. public forms political attitudes based on cues from various elites such as military leaders, celebrities (Golby, Feaver and Dropp, 2018; DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007)
- IOs, foreign government elites shape public attitudes in China, Japan, UK, U.S. (Greenhill, 2020; Fang and Sun, 2019; Tago and Ikeda, 2013; Maliniak and Tierney, 2014; Chapman, 2011)
- Do EU publics' views on policies also respond to cues from IOs?

# Argument

**Europeans who trust Council of EU incorporate its cues into their own opinion on salient policy issues**

# Argument

## Europeans who trust Council of EU incorporate its cues into their own opinion on salient policy issues

- Members of public form opinion about foreign affairs based on cues from trusted, knowledgeable elites (Zaller, 1992; Ray, 2003)
- Council of EU is “single most powerful decision-making body in the EU” (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016)
- Broad agenda enables Council to send cues on many issues
- News media emphasize authoritative policymakers’ views (Baum and Groeling, 2010), transmit IO cues on salient issues to public (Murray, 2014)
- 75% in Austria, Germany know of Council of EU, 63% place at least moderate trust in it (Mikulaschek, 2021)

# Hypotheses

- 1 Endorsement of policy by Council of EU conveys cue to European public → rallies public's support of policy

# Hypotheses

- 1 Endorsement of policy by Council of EU conveys cue to European public → rallies public's support of policy
- 2 Cue from Council of EU only affects attitudes of those citizens who view Council as trustworthy elite



# Hypotheses

- 1 Endorsement of policy by Council of EU conveys cue to European public → rallies public's support of policy
- 2 Cue from Council of EU only affects attitudes of those citizens who view Council as trustworthy elite
- 3 Council's unanimous policy approval signals foreign elite unity, endorsement despite dissent cues foreign elite divisions → Council rallies support of policy more strongly if it is united

# Research design

- 2 survey experiments manipulate respondents' perceptions of EU's position on two salient policies

# Research design

- 2 survey experiments manipulate respondents' perceptions of EU's position on two salient policies
- Large samples of Austrian, German citizens
- Nationally representative in terms of age, gender, province
- N = 2,500 in each country
- Surveys administered online in Aug.-Sep. 2020

# Research design

- 2 survey experiments manipulate respondents' perceptions of EU's position on two salient policies
- Large samples of Austrian, German citizens
- Nationally representative in terms of age, gender, province
- N = 2,500 in each country
- Surveys administered online in Aug.-Sep. 2020
- Estimation procedure: OLS with province f.e., robust s.e.
- Covariates: gender, education, income, political attitudes, interest in politics and foreign affairs, geographic region

# Instrumentation for first experiment

The Coronavirus inflicted severe damage to the economy.

Unemployment increased strongly, especially in Southern Europe.

An economic crisis in Southern Europe would also hurt [Austria/Germany].

Germany and France want the European Union to take out loans in the amount of 500 billion Euro and to give the money to those member states that were hit the hardest by the crisis.

In a unanimous vote, the Council of the European Union accepted this proposal.

The Council of the European Union accepted this proposal, but four small members of the European Union voted against it, because they opposed giving grants to countries in crisis.

The Council of the European Union did not accept the proposal, because four small members cast a veto, because they are opposed to grants to countries in crisis.

The Council of the European Union did not accept this proposal, because most members of the European Union opposed giving grants to countries in crisis.

Would you favor or oppose the European Union taking out loans in the amount of 500 billion Euro and giving the money to those member states that were hit the hardest by the crisis? Strongly favor / Moderately favor / Neither favor nor oppose / Moderately oppose / Strongly oppose

# Instrumentation for second experiment

Over the course of the past few months, more than 70,000 persons crossed the Mediterranean and applied for asylum in Greece, Italy, and Spain.

Many of these refugees want to move to [Austria/Germany].

Greece, Italy, and Spain want the other members of the European Union to help with the influx of refugees.

Germany proposed to relocate 40,000 of these refugees to other members of the European Union; [800/11,000] of them would be relocated to [Austria/Germany].

In a unanimous vote, the Council of the European Union accepted this proposal.

The Council of the European Union accepted this proposal, but five small members of the European Union voted against it, because they do not want to relocate these refugees.

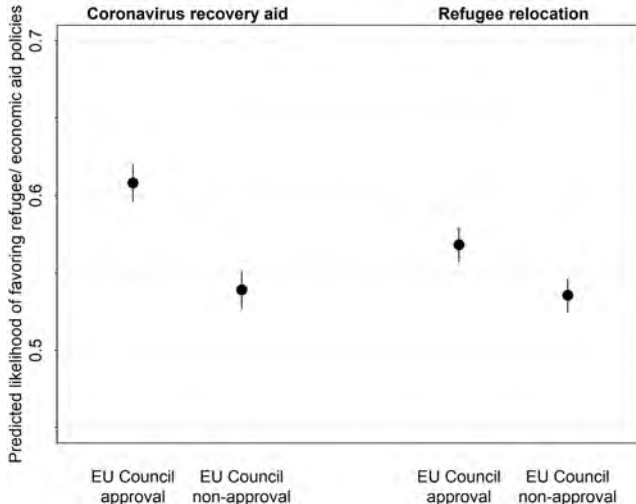
The Council of the European Union did not accept the proposal, because France and Poland were opposed to relocating these refugees.

The Council of the European Union did not accept this proposal, because the majority of European countries were opposed to relocate these refugees.

Would you favor or oppose relocating 40,000 refugees to other members of the European Union and relocating [800/11,000] of them to [Austria/Germany]? Strongly favor / Moderately favor / Neither favor nor oppose / Moderately oppose / Strongly opp.

# Result: Council of EU cues affect public attitudes

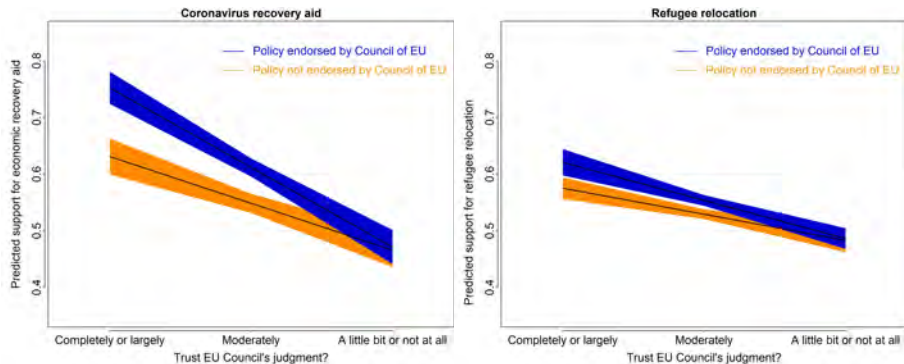
DVs: Respondent's approval of econ. recovery aid, refugee relocation



Predictions, 95% CIs derived from OLS models of full sample, s.e. clustered by region

# Result: Cue response varies by trust in Council of EU

Variation in effect of cue from Council of EU by level of trust in Council's policy judgments

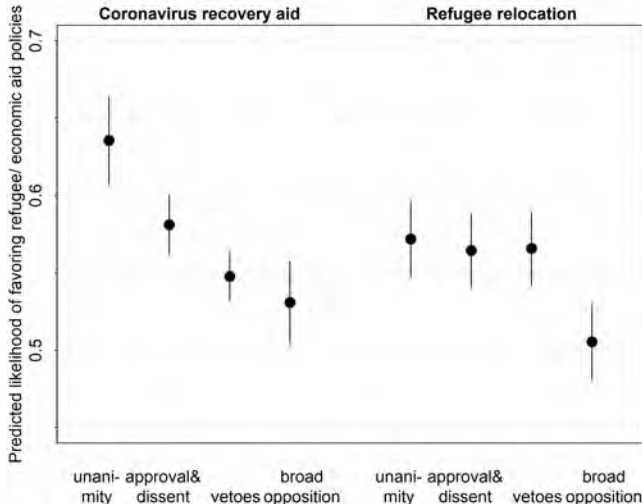


Predictions (with 95% CIs) derived from OLS models with linear interaction between EU cue and respondent's pre-treatment trust in EU Council's judgment



# Result: EU Council unity, divisions affect public opinion

DVs: Respondent's approval of econ. recovery aid, refugee relocation



Predictions, 95% CIs derived from OLS models of full sample, s.e. clustered by region

# Alternative explanations

## **Respondents do not merely use Council of EU stance as proxy for domestic elite opinion**

- Independently randomized cue about domestic parties' views does not reduce effect of signal from Council of EU

## **Cue from Council of EU affects respondents' attitudes regardless of who proposes policy**

- Independently randomized cue about identity of proposer does not alter effect of signal from Council of EU

# Next steps

## **Field more nationally representative surveys**

- Replicate findings in other countries
- Test whether some countries' dissent matters more than others'

# Next steps

## **Field more nationally representative surveys**

- Replicate findings in other countries
- Test whether some countries' dissent matters more than others'

## **News media content analysis**

- Examine prominence of cues of Council of EU in media coverage of Coronavirus economic recovery aid, refugee relocation

# Conclusion

Council of EU not only responds to public opinion but also shapes it

# Conclusion

Council of EU not only responds to public opinion but also shapes it

Council decisions affect policy attitudes of those who trust it

# Conclusion

Council of EU not only responds to public opinion but also shapes it

Council decisions affect policy attitudes of those who trust it

United Council may have particularly large effect on public opinion

# Conclusion

Council of EU not only responds to public opinion but also shapes it

Council decisions affect policy attitudes of those who trust it

United Council may have particularly large effect on public opinion

Results may explain why states incur costs to gain EU unanimity



# Conclusion

Council of EU not only responds to public opinion but also shapes it

Council decisions affect policy attitudes of those who trust it

United Council may have particularly large effect on public opinion

Results may explain why states incur costs to gain EU unanimity

Unanimity is the default decision-making practice in Council of EU