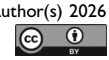
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Euroscepticism in party discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from Portugal and Spain

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic confronted the European Union (EU) with a sanitary and an economic crisis. This study examines how the crisis affected party-level Euroscepticism in Portugal and Spain through an analysis of parliamentary speeches. We propose two competing hypotheses: the pandemic may have fostered unity, tempering Euroscepticism, or alternatively, amplified criticism in response to perceived shortcomings in the EU's crisis management. We argue that the prevailing pattern is conditioned by parties' pre-existing orientations toward the EU. Drawing on an original dataset, we found an initial decline in Euroscepticism, though its magnitude and persistence varied across ideological and national contexts. The Portuguese radical left displayed the most pronounced and enduring Euroscepticism, reinforcing the view that pre-existing party positions were crucial in shaping responses during the pandemic.

Keywords

Euroscepticism, COVID-19 pandemic, party parliamentary discourse, Portugal, Spain

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has been hit by successive crises from 2008 onwards: the international financial crisis and the sovereign debt crisis that began in 2009; the migration and asylum crisis of 2015; Brexit in 2016; the pandemic crisis between 2020 and 2023; and the war in Ukraine since 2022. This period has been described as a Union's poly-crisis (Nicoli and Zeitlin, 2024), which fostered the politicization of EU institutions and policies (Nicoli and Zeitlin, 2024; Schmidt, 2020). In particular, the pandemic crisis put the EU under severe strain, as it was a global crisis that seriously affected Europe and in which European institutions played a decisive role (e.g. Schmidt, 2020).

Focusing on this critical moment, we examine how the coronavirus pandemic affected political parties' stances toward the EU. There is substantial evidence that crises, especially economic ones, influence levels of party Euroscepticism, often increasing opposition to the EU, especially among parties on the ideological fringes (e.g. Braun et al., 2019; Pirro et al., 2018). In contrast, mainstream parties tend to show resilience to such shifts during crises (Pirro et al., 2018). These patterns were evident in Portugal and Spain during the Eurozone crisis (Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro, 2018; Lisi, 2024; Real-Dato and Sojka, 2024). The evidence regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is more limited and ambiguous. Some studies suggest that it affected both the salience and polarization of EU-related issues (Capati et al., 2024), with some pointing to increased Euroscepticism, such as in Eastern Europe (Hloušek and Havlík, 2024), while others argue that it contributed to a pro-European consensus (Schmidt, 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

With the aim of addressing this gap, our main goal is to analyze party-level Euroscepticism during the pandemic by testing two possible scenarios. First, the external threat posed by the pandemic may have fostered an early cross-party consensus on the EU's role, thereby reducing pre-existing levels of Euroscepticism (Merkley et al., 2020). Alternatively, similar to what occurred during the Eurozone crisis, the pandemic may have intensified Euroscepticism due to critical evaluations of the EU's crisis management (Leconte, 2015; Lisi, 2024; Walker and Schaart, 2020). In short, our study seeks to determine whether the pandemic mitigated or exacerbated Euroscepticism in party discourse in Portugal and Spain.

In line with previous research highlighting that pre-existing party stances shaped responses to COVID-19 policy issues (Gruber et al., 2023; Rovny et al., 2022), we argue that the predominance of one or the other of these two contradictory scenarios is conditional on parties' prior positioning toward the EU. That is, typically pro-European parties are most likely to have adopted a strategy aligned with the first scenario, thereby reaffirming their pro-European stances, whereas Eurosceptic parties are expected to have sought to capitalize on the pandemic by intensifying their Eurosceptic discourse. We further claim that party positions likely evolved as the pandemic unfolded.

Our study focuses on party speeches related to EU issues delivered in the Portuguese and Spanish parliaments between October 2019 and April 2021. Following the *most similar systems design* (Przeworski and Teune, 1970), Portugal and Spain provide an adequate comparative framework for studying party Euroscepticism during the pandemic. Both countries share similar historical, political, and economic backgrounds,

and a common trajectory of European integration. They were also among the countries most severely affected by the Eurozone crisis, leading to heightened Euroscepticism at that time (Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro, 2018; Lisi, 2024). These similarities help control for broader contextual factors. At the same time, both party systems are ideologically diverse, encompassing radical left, radical right, and pro-European parties, with far-right Eurosceptic forces gaining ground in recent elections in both countries (Rooduijn et al., 2023), thus enabling meaningful comparisons across party types. Furthermore, differing strategies of radical left parties, together with the distinct political contexts in each country during the pandemic, further justify their comparison, as these factors help explain the variation in party discourse on the EU. For instance, the Spanish radical left joined a coalition government with the Socialist Party in January 2020, whereas in Portugal it remained in opposition. Spain also experienced greater political capitalization of the pandemic (Royo, 2020; Verney et al., 2022).

Using an original dataset, we observe an initial drop in party Eurosceptic rhetoric following the onset of the pandemic, although its scale and persistence varied across ideological camps and between countries. In Portugal, the radical left clearly stood out by displaying the strongest and most enduring Euroscepticism. These results support our core argument that pre-existing party orientations played a central role in shaping parties' reactions to the pandemic crisis.

Pandemic politics and European integration: The case of Iberian parties

Euroscepticism has historically been a phenomenon relegated to the margins of public opinion and of party systems in the Iberian Peninsula (Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro, 2018; Llamazares and Gramacho, 2007). In Portugal, accession to the European Economic Community in 1986 was led by moderate political parties (the center-left Socialist Party—PS, *Partido Socialista* and the center-right Social-Democratic Party—PSD, *Partido Social Democrata*). With the exception of a brief Eurosceptic interregnum of the conservative Democratic and Social Centre Party (CDS-PP, *CDS—Partido Popular*) in the 1990s, Euroscepticism in Portugal has always been associated with the parties of the radical left, notably the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP, *Partido Comunista Português*), which rejected membership of the European project (Lisi and Freire, 2023). The emergence of the left-libertarian Left Bloc (BE, *Bloco de Esquerda*) in 1999 further reinforced this trend of left-wing Euroscepticism in Portugal (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2024).

Like in Portugal, Spain's integration into the European project, also in 1986, was embraced by the moderate parties (the center-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party—PSOE, *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* and the center-right People's Party—PP, *Partido Popular*). Spanish Euroscepticism has likewise been confined to radical left formations such as the United Left (IU, *Izquierda Unida*) and left-wing pro-independence parties such as the Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG, *Bloque Nacionalista Galego*) and the Basque Country Unite (EH Bildu, *Euskal Herria Bildu*) (Gómez-Reino et al., 2008).

Since the onset of the 2010 economic crisis, the role of EU institutions became increasingly politicized in both Portugal and Spain (and more broadly, across the EU). Although rising Euroscepticism did not significantly shift Iberian parties' overall alignment with the EU (Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro, 2018), some important changes occurred. In Spain, the emergence of Podemos on the radical left and Vox on the radical right disrupted traditional patterns by challenging Eurozone fiscal policies (Real-Dato and Sojka, 2024), although Podemos has softened its Euroscepticism in the post-crisis (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2024). In Portugal, no new political force emerged during the austerity period to capitalize on growing public dissatisfaction with the EU (Lisi, 2024). The far-right populist party Chega (CH) only appeared in 2019 (Rooduijn et al., 2023), contributing to the rise of Euroscepticism on the Portuguese right (Lopes, 2024).

If we look at the mass level, both Portugal and Spain were among the most pro-European countries until the 2011–2015 economic recession, when anti-EU sentiments rose sharply (Lisi, 2024; Teperoglou and Belchior, 2024). However, trust in the EU has since rebounded, returning to pro-EU levels after the crisis (Teperoglou and Gkotinakos, 2022). Overall, both party-level and mass-level Euroscepticism in these countries have historically depended on specific contexts and tended to be short-lived (Lisi, 2024; Parker and Tsarouhas, 2018; Teperoglou and Belchior, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted parties to reconsider their positions toward the EU. The public service cuts implemented after the Eurozone crisis had left both countries ill-equipped to cope with the full impact of the health emergency (Royo, 2020; Silva et al., 2021). However, while the measures adopted by the Portuguese government were broadly supported by citizens and opposition parties, greatly facilitating crisis management (Silva et al., 2021), the opposite occurred in Spain. There, crisis management became more politicized, rendering the response to the pandemic considerably more difficult (Royo, 2020). The Spanish party system was also comparatively more polarized (Verney et al., 2022). Unlike Portugal, where the incumbent party was re-elected in October 2019 and formed a minority government with presidential endorsement, Spain experienced significant political instability, holding two general elections in 2019 (April and November). Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that parties in the two countries displayed varying levels of support for the EU as the pandemic unfolded.

Pandemic politics and party-level shifts in Euroscepticism: Hypotheses

Unlike the financial crisis, the EU's response to the pandemic is seen as a paradigmatic shift toward deeper European solidarity across several domains (Nicoli and Zeitlin, 2024; Quaglia and Verdun, 2023; Schmidt, 2020). A key example of this is the Next Generation EU Fund, which represented a crucial step forward in economic integration (Schmidt, 2020), and in fostering cohesion among member states during this critical juncture (Ferrera et al. 2021). Consequently, even though party discourses over the crisis shifted from harsh antagonism to appeasement (Ferrera et al., 2021), the EU has been perceived

as more resilient to the likely negative consequences of the politicization of this crisis than initially expected (Nicoli and Zeitlin, 2024). Furthermore, the accidental nature of the pandemic made it difficult to politicize and reduced divisive and polarizing political discourses (Bobba and Hubé, 2021). This leads us to expect, in general, that the effect of the pandemic on party Euroscepticism will differ from the pervasive detrimental impact triggered by the economic and financial crisis (Leconte, 2015; Lisi, 2024; Walker and Schaart, 2020).

Our research investigates whether parties' pre-existing positions on the EU help explain their stances after the onset of the pandemic crisis, either by reinforcing or moderating prior levels of Euroscepticism. While not limited to these actors, the analysis pays particular attention to radical parties, given that Euroscepticism is typically concentrated at the ideological extremes (Braun et al., 2019; Taggart, 1998; Van Elsas et al., 2016; Verney, 2011). We compare radical left with radical right parties due to the different underlying roots of their Euroscepticism. Radical right parties' opposition to the EU stems from concerns about the negative impact of European integration on national welfare systems and their resistance to market liberalization. It is also driven by a perceived threat to national sovereignty resulting from the transfer of political authority to supranational institutions, as well as by anti-immigrant sentiments (Pirro et al., 2018; Van Elsas et al., 2016). Regarding radical left Euroscepticism, there are both strategic-instrumental and ideological-programmatic reasons (Keith, 2018). These parties argue that EU economic governance, particularly mechanisms like the Stability and Growth Pact and austerity-driven conditionalities, undermines national sovereignty and constrains progressive social and economic policies (Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro, 2018; March, 2011), thereby advancing a neoliberal agenda (Pirro et al., 2018). In contrast to the Eurozone crisis, when radical parties leveraged their distinct ideological positions to mobilize Euroscepticism, the unforeseen nature of the COVID-19 pandemic limited such opportunities, leading to wide variation in how these parties framed the crisis and formulated policy responses (Gruber et al., 2023; Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2024).

An argument supporting the expectation that the pandemic crisis increased Euroscepticism among radical parties is that, despite the EU's joint efforts to address the crisis, it rekindled long-standing tensions toward Southern Europe that had characterized the Eurozone crisis period (e.g. Ferrera et al. 2021; Walker and Schaart, 2020). Illustrating the enduring political tensions over solidarity and resource redistribution among EU countries, in April 2020, Dutch Minister Wopke Hoekstra's suggested to investigate Spain and Italy for their capacity to respond to the pandemic (Walker and Schaart, 2020), which generated subsequent public condemnation from the Portuguese Prime Minister (EURACTIV, 2020). Eurosceptic parties may have used this institutional tension as an opportunity to intensify their criticism of the EU's performance, reopening the controversy over cross-national solidarity under economic adversities between Northern and Southern member states (Ferrera et al., 2021).

Compared to mainstream parties, challengers—such as the Iberian Eurosceptic parties—are generally more susceptible to Eurosceptic impulses during times of crisis (Pirro et al., 2018). This is because challengers are freer to adopt "riding the wave" strategies that appeal to discontented voters (Wagner and Meyer, 2014). Since these parties often employ

Euroscepticism strategically to distance themselves from the mainstream (Taggart, 1998) and capitalize on crises to intensify their critical stance toward the EU (Pirro et al., 2018), it is reasonable to expect that a similar process may have occurred during the pandemic.

Furthermore, the pandemic crisis appears to have expanded the discursive space for Eurosceptic narratives (e.g. Capati et al., 2024, on Italy). In particular, responses to the pandemic seem to have been shaped by party type, with parties more likely to politicize the crisis when they are populist, ideologically anchored, or challengers (Bobba and Hubé, 2021; Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2024). Based on this, it can be expected that the increase in Euroscepticism during the pandemic was mainly driven by traditional Eurosceptic parties.

H1a: Party-level Euroscepticism increased during the pandemic period among traditionally Eurosceptic parties in both countries.

We also argue that Euroscepticism has risen most notably within the radical left in the wake of the pandemic. Research on the Eurozone crisis has shown that criticism of EU governance intensified during the crisis, particularly among radical left parties in Southern Europe (Hobolt and Wratil, 2015; Lisi, 2024). In countries like Portugal and Spain, radical left Euroscepticism has largely focused on opposition to the EU's economic policy framework (Teperoglou and Belchior, 2024). Overall, the radical left has been the primary driver of party-based Euroscepticism in the region (Gómez-Reino et al., 2008; Lisi and Freire, 2023; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2024).

In the context of the pandemic crisis, Eurosceptic parties are also expected to capitalize on the situation to gain electoral advantage by reinforcing their Eurosceptic rhetoric. A revival of EU-skeptical positions is particularly likely among radical left parties, as Euroscepticism is often central to their electoral appeal (March and Rommerskirchen, 2015). This expectation is further reinforced due to the EU's initial disjointed response to the pandemic, marked by delayed coordination and perceived failures in solidarity, which reignited long-standing North–South tensions (Ferrera et al., 2021). In Portugal and Spain, the recent memory of the Troika's austerity measures predisposes radical left parties to interpret the EU's pandemic response critically, particularly with respect to healthcare investment, fiscal solidarity, and national autonomy.

In contrast, the core issues typically emphasized by radical right parties—such as national sovereignty, immigration control, and cultural identity—were harder to mobilize during the pandemic (Froio, 2024), diminishing the relevance of their usual Eurosceptic narratives, although these parties were still able to adapt to the new context (Froio, 2024; Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2024).

H1b: Party-level Euroscepticism increased during the pandemic period mainly among radical left parties compared to radical right ones in both countries.

Moreover, we argue that several factors render this trend more pronounced in Portugal than in Spain. First, Portuguese party discourse has historically exhibited stronger

currents of left-wing Euroscepticism than Spain, particularly in the aftermath of the Troika intervention (Keith, 2018; Lisi, 2024). Second, as previously noted, Spain's main radical left parties—Podemos and United Left—were part of the governing coalition led by the PSOE during the pandemic (Rodon, 2020), which likely led them to moderate their Eurosceptic positions to preserve coalition stability. Third, Spanish public and elite opinion tend to be more favorable toward EU membership, especially during crises when EU support is perceived as essential. Existing research confirms that Spain's radical left has generally framed its critique of the EU in reformist rather than rejectionist terms (Calvo, 2021). These contextual differences likely shaped the rhetorical strategies and intensity of criticism expressed by radical left parties in both countries.

H1c: Party-level Euroscepticism among radical left parties increased during the pandemic period more in Portugal compared to Spain.

There are also grounds to anticipate a decrease in Euroscepticism. Existing research suggests that the COVID-19 crisis may have contributed to increased support for governing institutions. Periods of heightened uncertainty and fear often prompt citizens to amplify their support to political authorities and institutional structures, something commonly referred to as the *rally-around-the-flag* effect (Schraff, 2020). This phenomenon reinforces the support of in-group symbols, such as political leaders and institutions, as individuals seek stability and reassurance in the face of external threats (Flinders, 2020: 6; Hetherington and Nelson, 2003: 37–38). Moreover, existing studies show that this effect can also extend to political parties. For example, partisan antagonism in Canada diminished following the onset of the pandemic, giving way to a more cross-partisan consensus (Merkley et al., 2020). Consistent with this, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have temporarily reduced the polarization of public discourse along party lines in many countries (Bobba and Hubé, 2021; Nicoli and Zeitlin, 2024: 3019–3021).

Another strand of the literature emphasizes that, beyond a purely emotional rally effect, executives are typically held accountable for their performance during crises (e.g. Flinders, 2020: 7–14). Evidence from the Eurozone crisis indicates that evaluations of European governance played a central role in shaping levels of Euroscepticism (Hobolt and Wratil, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, retrospective assessments of governmental performance were also crucial in explaining variations in citizens' trust in government during the early stages of the crisis (e.g. Altiparmakis et al., 2021, Kritzinger et al., 2021).

Considering that the EU was widely perceived as a key actor in responding to the COVID-19 crisis, and that assessments of its actions were generally positive (Quaglia and Verdun, 2023; Schmidt, 2020; Wang et al. 2023), it is expected that party-level Euroscepticism declined following the pandemic's onset, particularly in the immediate aftermath due to a rally effect (Merkley et al., 2020). Moreover, pro-EU parties likely responded by fostering greater consensus, further reducing their already low levels of Euroscepticism to negligible degrees. This pro-consensus stance is also likely due to their prior pro-European commitments, which may have provided fertile ground for a *rally-around-the-EU* in response to the external threat.

The role of parties within the party system may also be relevant, as it has been shown to shape responses to the pandemic (Gruber et al., 2023; Rovny et al., 2022). In particular, governing and opposition parties aspiring to office tend to politicize the crisis less (Bobba and Hubé, 2021; Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2024). Given that pro-European parties in both Portugal and Spain are also mainstream actors, typically alternating in government, this reinforces the expectation that levels of Euroscepticism among them declined to minimal levels following the outbreak of the crisis.

H2a: Party-level Euroscepticism generally declined with the outbreak of the pandemic in both countries.
H2b: Party-level Euroscepticism decreased to minimum levels with the outbreak of the pandemic among the typically pro-European parties in both countries.

Given the likely but transient *rally-around-the-flag* effect (e.g. Hetherington and Nelson, 2003), along with the tendency of citizens to reward or punish executives based on their performance in managing external shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Belchior and Teixeira, 2023), our final expectation is that the decline in claims against the EU will be most pronounced in the initial phase of the pandemic, but that as the crisis unfolds prior levels of Euroscepticism are likely to be gradually restored.

H3: Party-level Euroscepticism generally resumed at the later stages of the pandemic crisis in both countries.

Data and methods

Our analysis relies on an original dataset built within the framework of the project *Study on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Portugal (2020-2022)*.[1] Parliamentary debates serve as a key resource for analyzing parties' positions on the EU and party-based Euroscepticism (e.g. Baloge, 2021) and this study employs content analysis of parliamentary speeches by MPs in Portugal and Spain[2] (see the Online Appendix for the classification of the parties). Parliamentary speeches primarily serve as signals to voters about parties' positions rather than forums for deliberation and debate (Proksch and Slapin, 2014). Consequently, they provide a valid and reliable source for testing our hypotheses. Furthermore, by approaching Euroscepticism as a discourse, we aim at encompassing the different assortment of claims (disapproval, but also support) regarding the EU and its underlying policies (Leconte, 2015).

The period of analysis in both countries begins after the last elections before the pandemic emerged, right after the executives took office (the Portuguese executive took office on the 7th of October 2019, and the Spanish on the 11th of November 2019) and ends one year after the pandemic outbreak, in April 2021. We have selected this time frame to capture the full picture of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on parties' Eurosceptic stances, allowing us to compare the moment before and after the crisis emerged.

For analytical purposes, the period was divided into six phases of three months each, except for the pre-pandemic phase, which spans from October 2019 in Portugal and

November 2019 in Spain until the pandemic's onset. Using six phases instead of monthly data helps address short-term fluctuations in party claims, offering a broader perspective less impacted by outliers and variations in the typically small number of claims. This option also facilitates the interpretation of results: by avoiding the segmentation of the analysis by month, the assessment of the effect of each moment of the pandemic becomes more straightforward.

The empirical strategy for the content analysis is based on the following steps. First, we collected all paragraphs from MPs' speeches in the respective legislative chambers that directly addressed or referenced the EU and its institutions, using the parliament's website database as the primary source. Following Baloge's methodology, we employed keywords to identify debates on EU issues (2021: 4), analyzing the entirety of the speeches made during the period of analysis rather than a sample.[3] After identifying parliamentary speeches that mentioned the EU, all paragraphs containing one or more keywords were coded. Each paragraph was classified based on its underlying assessment of the EU as an institution, as well as of European positions and policies.

This identification and collection process resulted in a database of 2803 paragraphs directly related to the EU from both countries.[4] The coding procedure's results were tested for intercoder reliability across all dimensions of interest. A 10% random sample of paragraphs from the Portuguese and Spanish cases was assigned to all coders. The results demonstrated acceptable reliability levels, providing a robust foundation for our operationalization of Euroscepticism.[5]

Regarding our dependent variable, we adopt the traditional dichotomous approach to party positioning, classifying parties as either Eurosceptic or pro-EU. While a more nuanced typology could better capture the complexity of Euroscepticism (Pirro et al., 2018), it would impose limitations on our statistical analysis, particularly given the very small sample sizes in some categories. Accordingly, the dependent variable is coded as 1 when a party claim is Eurosceptic and 0 when it is pro-European.

We also conduct a complementary analysis that takes into account the diverse manifestations of Euroscepticism. Our analysis presented in the Online appendix distinguishes three types of Euroscepticism. The goal is to provide subsidiary data on the two commonly considered types of Euroscepticism: *hard* (implying principled rejection of the EU project) and *soft* (a more limited or issue-specific form of opposition) (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2008). Additionally, we draw on Bijsmans' fourfold typology on party positions toward the EU: (a) *hard Euroscepticism* (principled opposition and support of EU withdrawal); (b) *soft Euroscepticism* (support for integration but opposition to current supranational arrangements and specific EU policies); (c) *Euroalternativism* (support for EU integration, but advocating an alternative model, often encapsulated in the slogan: "Another Europe is possible"); and finally, (d) *support for the EU* (endorsement of EU integration, its institutions, and policies).[6]

The independent variables include three party dummies (for radical left, radical right, and pro-EU, each using all other parties in the system as the reference category); dummies for the pandemic phases (with the pre-pandemic period—October/November 2019 to the end of February 2020—as the reference category); a dummy for the topic of the claim

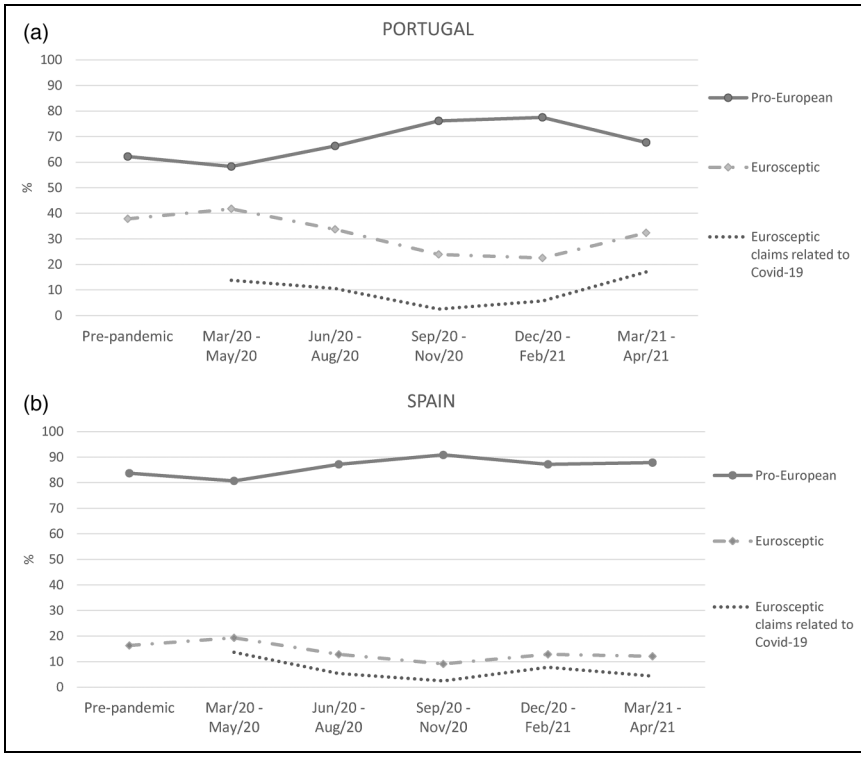


Figure 1. Mean overall party stances in relation to the EU in Portugal and Spain, between October 2019 and April 2021.
Source: Study on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Portugal (2020–2022).

(indicating whether it is related to the pandemic); and a country dummy (Spain *vs.* Portugal).

Results

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of party discourse on the European Union, contrasting the pre-pandemic period (October 2019) with the post-outbreak phase (March 2020–April 2021). The figure presents data for both Portugal and Spain, showing the proportion of party claims related to the EU that are either pro-European or Eurosceptic, also including Eurosceptic claims that are linked to COVID-19-related issues.[7] This analysis allows us to assess whether the COVID-19 crisis was accompanied by a shift in party rhetoric toward greater support for, or opposition to, the European Union, thereby offering an initial indication of how the pandemic may have influenced political discourse on European integration.

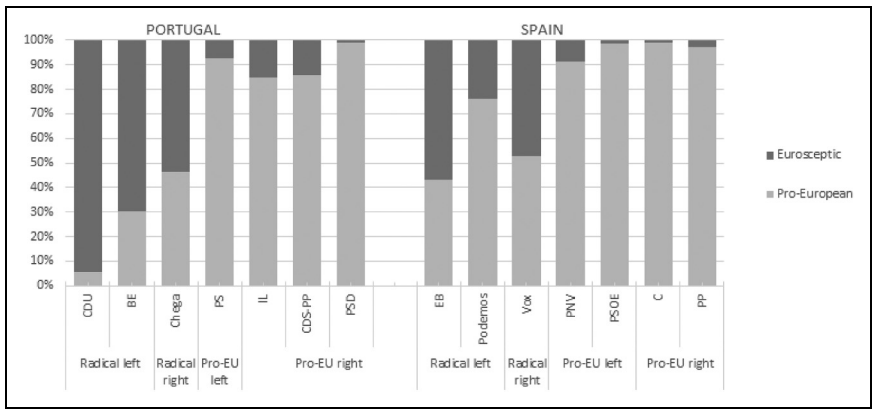


Figure 2. Political parties' positioning in relation to the EU in party discourses in Portugal and Spain (Oct/2019–Apr/2021).
Note: See Online appendix for details about the parties in this figure.
Source: Study on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Portugal (2020–2022).

Although pro-European stances in party discourse are consistently lower in Portugal compared to Spain, particularly in the pre-pandemic period, both countries show a similar trend of increased support for the EU in the post-pandemic period. This pattern is consistent with expectations of a general decline in party-level Euroscepticism after the wake of the crisis. However, while the trend remains relatively stable in Spain over the observed period, Portugal shows greater fluctuation, with a steeper rise in pro-European positions after the onset of the pandemic and a clear decline following December 2020.[8]

Furthermore, the figure indicates that party Eurosceptic discourse in both countries is largely driven by the instrumentalization of the pandemic as a platform to criticize the EU, as suggested by previous literature (Bobba and Hubé, 2021; Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2024). While Portugal exhibits higher levels of Eurosceptic rhetoric than Spain, the trajectories in both countries closely mirror the proportion of COVID-19-related party claims with Eurosceptic content. As expected, Eurosceptic pandemic-related claims decline in both countries after the outbreak, until September–November, before beginning to recover. In Spain, this recovery is modest, whereas in Portugal it is more pronounced, reaching a level in March–April 2021 comparable to that observed at the onset of the pandemic. This suggests that, relative to Spain, Portuguese party discourse on pandemic-related topics contributed more strongly to Eurosceptic party rhetoric, particularly to its later resurgence.[9]

To assess the relative prominence of Eurosceptic claims over the period under analysis, Figure 2 presents the distribution of Eurosceptic and pro-European claims across radical left, radical right, and pro-European parties. To minimize potential bias from small sample sizes, only parties with 30 or more total claims are included in the analysis.

Despite party-level differences within and across the two cases, certain patterns of convergence are evident. Pro-European positions dominate among the mainstream parties

in both Portugal and Spain, regardless of ideological orientation, including the PS and the PSD in Portugal, and the PSOE the PP in Spain (respectively, the center-left parties and center-right parties in each country). More broadly, it is not only mainstream status but also a traditional pro-European stance that consistently aligns with a supportive discourse toward the EU. Radical right parties, like the CH in Portugal and the Vox in Spain, display similar distributions of claims toward the EU, with their rhetoric roughly split between pro-European and Eurosceptic positions.

On the one hand, when radical right parties voice criticisms of the EU, these are predominantly directed at perceived excessive bureaucracy and threats to national sovereignty, topics that account for 26% of their Eurosceptic claims. This framing of the EU has already been identified as common among radical right parties during the pandemic (Bobba and Hubé, 2021; for a review of specific topics, see Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2024: 992). Although critiques of the EU's role in promoting immigration are present, they appear less prominently in the discourse. On the other hand, radical right parties also expressed support for certain aspects of the EU, particularly in relation to its economic policies: 18% of their pro-EU claims were linked to this dimension. This notably contrast with the radical left, for whom economic governance is typically a central point of contention. It also highlights the difficulty these parties faced during the pandemic in mobilizing the issues that structure their rhetoric (Froio, 2024).

Among radical left parties, pro-European positions tend to be a minority. However, this pattern is not uniform across parties. The CDU in Portugal consistently emphasizes Euroscepticism in its discourse, positioning itself as the most Eurosceptic radical left party across both countries. The BE adopts a more balanced stance, although approximately two-thirds of its claims are Eurosceptical. In Spain, the Eh Bildu leans more pro-European overall but retains a notable Eurosceptic presence. Podemos, by contrast, emerges as the most pro-European radical left party in both countries, with only 24% of its claims reflecting Eurosceptic positions. This more moderate stance had already been identified during the Great Recession (Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro, 2018).[10]

The radical left in both Portugal and Spain primarily directs its criticism at the EU's economic and financial governance (39% of Eurosceptic paragraphs of the radical left), such as the negative impacts of austerity measures, the Fiscal Compact's constraints on public services, and debates surrounding the EU's Recovery Plan. This prevalence of socio-economic Euroscepticism within the Iberian radical left is well established (Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro, 2018). Additionally, EU policies on migration and asylum are frequently criticized by radical left parties as excessively restrictive. In Portugal, the CDU was particularly critical of the EU's common defense policy and the Permanent Structured Cooperation.

This descriptive analysis indicates that the relative levels of support for the EU across the two-party systems—both overall and by party type—largely persisted throughout the pandemic period, as reflected in parliamentary speeches. These findings are consistent with prior research showing that left-wing Euroscepticism in Portugal is not only more pronounced than that of the Portuguese radical right but also stronger than among its Spanish counterparts (Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro, 2018). They also align with post-pandemic trends identified by expert assessments of party support for the EU (based

on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, reported in the Online appendix). What these data allow us to conclude is that the pandemic crisis alone was insufficient to reshape existing patterns of Euroscepticism in the Portuguese and Spanish party systems, in line with evidence from Central Europe (Hloušek and Havlík, 2024).

Up to this point, our analysis has provided only a preliminary assessment of our hypotheses, shedding limited light on how political parties' positions toward the EU evolved in both countries as the pandemic unfolded. We now test our hypotheses using a logistic regression approach, given the binary nature of our dependent variable. The supplementary material presents the results of a three-model regression analysis. The first model includes the effects of party type, pandemic phase, country, and claim topic. The second model adds the interaction terms for radical parties by country and pandemic phase, while the third model incorporates the interaction terms for pro-European parties by country and pandemic phase. The dependent variable contrasts Eurosceptic party claims with pro-European claims (0 = party pro-EU claim; 1 = party Eurosceptic claim).

Results support H1a and H1b, as during the period under analysis radical left parties contributed substantially to accentuating the Eurosceptic discourse, followed by radical right parties. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that party-based Euroscepticism in Southern Europe has traditionally been driven by the radical left (Verney, 2011: 8–10), and more broadly with the tendency for Euroscepticism to be anchored at the ideological extremes (Van Elsas et al., 2016; Verney, 2011). As expected, traditionally pro-European parties are significantly associated with a rejection of Eurosceptic discourse, exhibiting lower odds of voicing Eurosceptic claims compared to other parties.

Also as expected, the emergence of the pandemic is associated with a decline in levels of Euroscepticism. With the exception of the March–May 2020 period—immediately following the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe—subsequent phases show a consistent decrease in the chances of parties articulating Eurosceptic claims, with a modest resurgence observed only in March–April 2021 (consistent with H3). Although these results do not fully align with the expectations of a *rally-around-the-flag* effect (e.g. Schraff, 2020), since the decline in Euroscepticism does not occur immediately after the crisis began, they nevertheless suggest that support for the EU is gradually increased with the emergence of the pandemic, converging with H2a. This delay may be explained by the fact that the EU is not typically perceived by parties as an in-group symbol capable of directly addressing external threats (e.g. Flinders, 2020: 6; Hetherington and Nelson, 2003: 37–38), especially when compared to more proximate national institutions. Nonetheless, the findings are consistent with a broadly positive assessment of the EU's pandemic response (Wang et al., 2023), reinforcing our argument.

Furthermore, in line with our expectations, the chances of a party making an unfavorable mention of the EU is more than twice as high in Portugal compared to Spain. Additionally, skeptical party discourse toward Europe during the period under analysis does not appear to be significantly driven by the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic, as indicated by the non-significant coefficient. These findings suggest that, while Eurosceptic expressions have remained prevalent, particularly among radical parties, the pandemic itself did not serve as a major catalyst for increased Eurosceptic rhetoric (as found by Hloušek and Havlík, 2024).

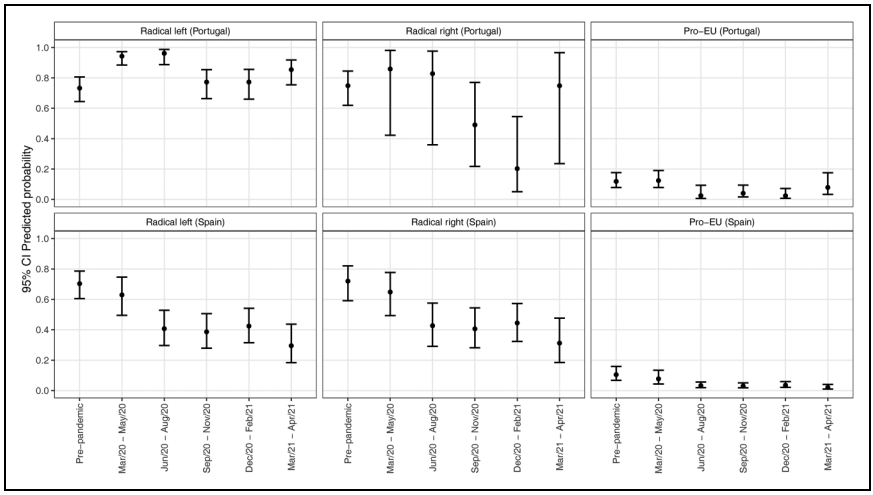


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of parties making a Eurosceptic claim.
Source: The estimates are from Model 3 in the Online appendix.

To facilitate the interpretation of the interaction terms, we rely on the predicted probabilities of a party expressing a Eurosceptic claim, as shown in Figure 3. These probabilities are calculated using the fully specified regression model, as previously described. The figure shows that party-level Euroscepticism among Portuguese radical left parties increased following the onset of the pandemic (note that the interaction coefficients are not significant for the radical right). These parties exhibit a higher probability of making Eurosceptic claims in the early stages of the crisis compared to the pre-pandemic period, followed by a decline as the pandemic progresses, and a resurgence approximately one year after its onset. In contrast, radical left parties in Spain show a steadily decreasing tendency in the probability of making Eurosceptic claims throughout the first year of the pandemic.

Although model 1 provided evidence supporting H1a—that party-level Euroscepticism increased globally during the pandemic among traditionally Eurosceptic parties—Figure 3 shows that this pattern holds only for the Portuguese radical left, as Euroscepticism intensified solely among these parties in Portugal. The non-significant results for the radical right suggest that, when comparing Portugal to Spain, the emergence and development of the pandemic did not produce distinct statistical effects on these parties' Eurosceptic discourse.

These findings also confirm H1b for Portugal but not for Spain. Portuguese radical left parties display a higher probability of making Eurosceptic claims during the pandemic than their radical right counterparts, the latter showing no statistically significant effects. This suggests that the resurgence of long-standing tensions during the pandemic (Ferrera et al., 2021; Walker and Schaart, 2020) may have shaped the discourse of the Portuguese radical left.

The results also show that Euroscepticism among radical left parties during the pandemic increased more in Portugal compared to Spain (validating H1c). More broadly, and regardless of party type, levels of Euroscepticism tend to be consistently higher in Portugal throughout the period under analysis. A likely explanation lies in the institutional context and party positioning within each country. In Spain, the main radical left parties—Podemos and Izquierda Unida—were integral members of the PSOE-led governing coalition, occupying key positions in Sánchez's cabinet (Rodon, 2020). This likely exerted a moderating influence on the overall levels of party Euroscepticism in the country. In contrast, in Portugal, while radical left parties maintained a close parliamentary relationship with the PS until 2019, they significantly distanced themselves from such arrangements, thereafter, freeing themselves from potential moderating influences (Jalali et al., 2020).

The predicted probabilities further validate previous findings supporting H2a. With the exception of the Portuguese radical left, the likelihood of parties expressing Eurosceptic claims generally declines following the pandemic's onset, remaining below pre-pandemic levels. In particular, for traditionally pro-European parties, as posited by H2b, Euroscepticism drops to minimal levels following the outbreak of the pandemic. This is compatible with the idea of a cross-party pandemic consensus (Merkley et al., 2020) among pro-European parties. Although these parties' probability of having a Eurosceptic stance is very low throughout the period of analysis, Eurosceptic mentions in these parties' discourse decline to residual levels after the emergence of the pandemic, especially in Spain.

Finally, the data in Figure 3 also allows us to partially support H3: Euroscepticism seems to resume at the later stages of the pandemic among some Portuguese parties. This is particularly evident for the Portuguese radical left (but not for the radical right, whose coefficients are non-significant) and to a lesser extent among pro-EU parties, which show a very slight indication of strengthened Eurosceptic positions. These results are broadly consistent with a *rally-around-the-flag* effect and its ephemeral character (e.g. Hetherington and Nelson, 2003), as well as with the tendency to hold the executive accountable in the aftermath of the pandemic (Belchior and Teixeira, 2023), particularly in the case of the Portuguese radical left.

Robustness test

To assess the robustness of our findings and further validate the hypothesis tests, we also employ an alternative operationalization of Euroscepticism. Unlike our main approach, where we first coded the type of EU position (pro-European, soft Euroscepticism, Euroalternativism, or hard Euroscepticism) and subsequently constructed the dependent variable, this alternative strategy directly codes parties' evaluations of the EU as positive, negative, or neutral. Neutral statements refer to statements that do not allow a party's position to be clearly classified as either pro-EU or Eurosceptic. For the purposes of the analysis, negative evaluations are coded as 1, while positive evaluations and neutral statements are coded as 0.

The results, presented in the Online appendix, closely align with the results reported above and detailed in the Online appendix. First, radical parties contribute to increasing

Euroscepticism in the post-pandemic period, with Portuguese radical left parties being the most likely to adopt negative stances toward the EU in their speeches following the outbreak of the pandemic (radical right parties remain mostly non-significant in this analysis). Second, traditionally pro-European parties consistently express support for the EU throughout the period under analysis, with Eurosceptic discourse remaining almost non-existent. Third, although not all coefficients are statistically significant across phases, and some phases could not be included in the analysis for radical right and pro-EU parties, the overall evidence suggests that the pandemic generally reduced negative evaluations of the EU (later in the case of the Portuguese radical left, and with a resurgence at the end of the first year of the pandemic) and kept them at minimal levels among pro-EU parties.

Concluding remarks

As with the Eurozone crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic tested the response capacity of both national and European political institutions (Altiparmakis et al., 2021; Nicoli and Zeitlin, 2024). The EU's pivotal role in addressing the crisis is evident both in its promotion of the economic recovery package aimed at mitigating the social and economic impacts of the pandemic and in its coordination of a joint vaccine procurement strategy for mass vaccination across Europe. This created conditions for Eurosceptic parties to take advantage of perceived delays, inefficiencies, or inequities in the Union's crisis response, thereby reinforcing their Eurosceptic narratives and portraying the EU as inadequately equipped to handle the complex challenges posed by the pandemic.

Our study of parties' Euroscepticism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal and Spain underscores the pervasive interplay between external crises and party positions on European integration (e.g. Pirro et al., 2018). By systematically analyzing parliamentary speeches across six phases of the pandemic, this research uncovers both convergences and divergences in Eurosceptic rhetoric between these two Iberian countries. Although it is not possible to isolate the effect of the pandemic, given that this is a phenomenon influenced by multiple factors beyond the control of our research design, our results contribute to a broader understanding of how crises shape party-level stances toward the EU and the conditions under which Euroscepticism either intensifies or abates.

Our findings show that the COVID-19 pandemic had a nuanced impact on party-level Euroscepticism in Portugal and Spain (as observed in Central European states: Hloušek and Havlík, 2024), with three key trends emerging. First, there was a general tendency for Euroscepticism to decline immediately following the outbreak, with traditionally pro-European parties exhibiting only residual levels of Eurosceptic claims during the pandemic. This likely reflects a positive perception of the EU's role in crisis management (Schmidt, 2020; Wang et al. 2023). However, this decline was neither universal nor lasting, as some parties resumed their critical stance in later phases of the pandemic (as was the case for the Portuguese radical left, which emerge as the Iberian parties that most capitalized on the pandemic for their Eurosceptic rhetoric). Second, ideological differences shaped party responses: radical left parties intensified their Euroscepticism during the initial phases, mainly due to criticisms of economic and financial policies, while radical right

parties maintained a lower and steady Eurosceptic rhetoric, rooted in concerns over sovereignty and excessive bureaucracy. Third, notable cross-national differences emerged, with Portuguese radical left parties exhibiting higher levels of Euroscepticism than their Spanish counterparts. This disparity appears linked to the opposition status of Portugal's radical left parties versus their coalition role in Spain, underscoring the significance of domestic political contexts in shaping party responses to crises.

This study advances the literature on Euroscepticism by incorporating insights from the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of a poly-crisis (Nicoli and Zeitlin 2024; Schmidt, 2020), thereby deepening our understanding of how external shocks shape party positions on EU integration. It reinforces the context-dependency of Euroscepticism, demonstrating how crises can both mitigate and exacerbate party-level skepticism toward the EU, depending on the crisis phase and parties' ideological orientations.

We believe our findings carry significant implications for policymakers and EU institutions. The temporary decline in Euroscepticism following the pandemic's outbreak suggests that effective EU responses to crises may foster institutional support. Conversely, the resurgence of Eurosceptic rhetoric in later stages highlights the importance of sustained engagement and responsiveness to member states' specific needs. In countries like Portugal and Spain, where Euroscepticism remains highly context-sensitive (Parker and Tsarouhas, 2018), proactive communication strategies and equitable resource allocation are crucial to maintaining political support for the EU. Nevertheless, these results should be interpreted in light of the fact that our observations are limited to the first year of the pandemic, rather than the entire period during which it persisted (the pandemic officially ended in May 2023). This leaves open the question of how it may have affected support for the EU in subsequent years.

While the present study offers an original contribution to the literature on party discourse regarding the European Union during the COVID-19 crisis, its scope is necessarily limited. By focusing on Portugal and Spain over a relatively short timeframe our analysis captures only the initial stages of the pandemic's political implications. Future research would benefit from extending the temporal scope-particularly to assess the long-term effects of the NextGenerationEU recovery program-and from including a broader range of national contexts. Such comparative and longitudinal analyses would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of whether the patterns identified here reflect transient reactions to crisis conditions or more enduring transformations in the politics of European integration.

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Data availability statement

The dataset and corresponding codebook are available at: Belchior et al. (2025).

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See the final report here: https://ffms.pt/sites/default/files/2022-08/um-novo-normal-impactos-e-licoes-de-dois-anos-de-pandemia-em-portugal.pdf.
2. The dataset and corresponding codebook are available at: Belchior et al. (2025).
3. The keywords were as follows: for Portugal – Europa; União Europeia; UE, Política Europeia; Parlamento Europeu; Comissão Europeia; Concelho Europeu; Concelho da Europa, Banco Central Europeu; BCE; and for Spain: Europa; Unión Europea; UE, política europea; Parlamento Europeo; Comisión Europea; Consejo Europeo; Consejo de Europa, Banco Central Europeo; BCE.
4. A total of 1689 paragraphs correspond to the Portuguese case, and 1116 to the Spanish case.
5. The Krippendorf's alpha for the evaluations of the EU and parties' position towards the EU is as follows: type of EU position (Portugal): 0,71; type of EU position (Spain): 0,69; evaluation of the EU (Portugal): 0,81; evaluation of the EU (Spain): 0,70.
6. To capture different forms of Euroscepticism, we first coded party claims using Bijsmans' typology and then dichotomized them as either pro-EU or Eurosceptic. Paragraphs were coded as pro-European when MPs expressed support for the EU's status quo. *Euroalternativist* paragraphs rejected the current EU framework but supported an alternative vision of the Union. *Soft Eurosceptic* paragraphs opposed the EU's status quo or its role in specific policy areas without rejecting the broader European integration project. *Hard Eurosceptic* paragraphs, in contrast, expressed outright rejection of the EU and the entire integration process. For the main analysis, all three Eurosceptic types (*soft*, *Euroalternativist*, and *hard*) were combined into a single 'Eurosceptic' category.
7. Party claims about the EU that directly referred to the pandemic were classified as pandemic-related. Overall, claims related to Europe that address Covid-19 account for 20% of all party claims in Portugal, and 42% in the case of Spanish party discourse.
8. We also present the data on a monthly basis in the Online appendix, using two different operationalizations. In the first, we show the monthly average of Eurosceptic versus pro-European claims, while in the second we display the monthly average of positive *versus* negative claims. The distributions are largely consistent with each other and with those in Figure 1. Both

countries exhibit a decrease in Euroscepticism / an increase in favorable positions toward the EU following the pandemic's outbreak, with Spain consistently showing a higher proportion of pro-European / positive claims compared to Portugal.

9. We also use Bijsmans' typology to estimate the relative weight of different party positions towards the EU. The Online appendix presents this analysis. As expected, *hard Euroscepticism*, and even *Euroalternativism*, are marginal or entirely absent from party speeches at certain points in time and within some parties. In other words, *soft Euroscepticism* emerges as the dominant form, with other expressions being largely residual. We also examine the presence of Eurosceptic references in party manifestos, which yield very similar results (see the Online appendix). These findings justify using a simple two-category approach to Euroscepticism in our main analysis.
10. In the Online appendix we also analyze party positions toward the EU, respectively in party discourses and in the manifestos of the same parties during the last elections before the crisis, held in October 2019, based on Bijsmans' four-category typology. This data confirms the dominance of pro-European positions among mainstream parties in both countries, as among parties traditionally identifying as Europeanist. It also reveals the prevalence of *soft Euroscepticism* among the radical left and right in both countries, with Podemos standing out as a pro-European exception.

    A notable difference between party manifestos and speeches is the greater presence of *Euroalternativism* among radical parties - and, to a lesser extent, in other parties - in manifestos, as well as a stronger expression of *hard Euroscepticism*, which is observed exclusively in CH, Vox, and CDU, consistent with their speeches.

    Overall, although Bijsmans introduced the category of *Euroalternativism* to avoid *soft* Euroscepticism becoming a catch-all category, our results (see the supplementary material) indicate that the "Another Europe is possible" slogan remains marginal in the rhetoric of Portuguese and Spanish parties. Most Eurosceptic references fall under *soft Euroscepticism*, which reflects opposition not to European integration itself but to the prevailing supranational approach and EU involvement in specific policy areas. Therefore, we find no evidence of increasing diversity in soft Eurosceptic positions in Portugal or Spain (Verney, 2011), at least not in terms of advocating for an alternative European architecture.

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