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# The enduring impact of democracy on political behaviour: voting on European integration in the European Parliament

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how early-life exposure to democracy shapes the voting behaviour of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Drawing on the ‘impressionable years’ hypothesis, we analyse 30 years of roll-call votes (EP1–6) and find that MEPs who experienced more democratic regimes between ages 18 and 25 are significantly more likely to vote in favour of EU integration. These results are robust across specifications and supported by MEP survey data. Our findings highlight the lasting influence of early institutional environments on elite decision-making and offer important insights for understanding the long-term impact of democratic backsliding and EU enlargement.

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**KEYWORDS** Exposure to democracy; impressionable years; EU integration; European Parliament; NOMINATE

## Introduction

How does early-life exposure to democracy shape the political behaviour of politicians? This question is central to understanding the long-term consequences of democratic backsliding and institutional quality. We address this question in the case of the European Parliament (EP), an ideal setting

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given cross-national variation among parliamentarians, analysing voting in favour and against European integration in the first six directly elected legislatures.

We argue that early exposure to democratic (or non-democratic) environments leaves an enduring imprint on political elites, shaping underlying values and predispositions that, in turn, influence their policy preferences and, critically, their voting behaviour.

Our theoretical framework, illustrated at length in the following section, builds on the literature on political socialisation, which consistently finds that formative years are central to the formation of traits and values with enduring consequences for political attitudes later in life.

Crucially, the quality of institutions experienced during youth affects support for democracy in adulthood (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2024). We then build on the literature conceptualising European integration as an emerging cleavage in citizens' and elites' political attitudes, which manifests in political behaviour.

Consistent with the literature, we expect that experiencing less democratic regimes in adolescence and early adulthood may shape the values and traits of individuals toward attitudes less supportive of democratic pluralism, international openness, and the delegation of authority to supranational institutions. As a result, exposure to higher (lower) quality of democratic institutions in youth should yield more (less) support for EU integration later in life.

Support for European integration has become increasingly salient as a central cleavage in EU and national politics (e.g., Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; Jackson & Jolly, 2021; Marks *et al.*, 2021). Within the EP, voting is generally analysed through partisanship and nationality, and their intersection within transnational European Political Groups (EPGs), as voting cohesion is high (Hix & Noury, 2007; Hix *et al.*, 2009). However, there is evidence that individual characteristics of legislators can matter for voting on issues related to the GAL-TAN dimension, (e.g., Ramstetter & Habersack, 2020) to which European integration belongs. As a result, we can expect individual characteristics of MEPs, including the quality of institutions they experience in youth, to matter for voting on support for EU integration.

As detailed within our theoretical framework, we conceptualise support for European integration as linked to cosmopolitan and communitarian values (e.g., De Wilde *et al.*, 2019), which arguably fall among those formed in youth and remain largely stable thereafter (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989) continuing to shape political behaviour even in later stages of the life course (Sears & Funk, 1999).

Crucially, the transnational nature of the EP allows us to leverage substantial cross-national variation in the institutional quality MEPs were exposed to during youth. We build our analysis on roll-call votes in the EP from the first

six directly elected legislatures (1979–2009) in Western Europe. We operationalise support for EU integration following the literature (e.g., Hix *et al.*, 2006) through NOMINATE scores which scale ideological position along a left-right dimension and a second dimension capturing EU integration. Exposure to democracy is measured using V-DEM data (Coppedge *et al.*, 2021), based on the institutional regime that MEPs experienced between the ages of 18 to 25.

The analysis reveals that exposure to (non)democratic institutions at young age (18–25) significantly increases the probability of MEPs to vote (against) in favour of European integration. The estimated effects range between about 6–16 per cent of the mean,<sup>1</sup> depending on the legislature, indicating a meaningful impact of early-life experiences on elite voting behaviour.

We further corroborate these findings through alternative measures of pro-EU orientations using alternative measures, including MEPs' self-reported positions on EU integration from the MEP Survey (Hix *et al.*, 2016). Using European Social Survey (ESS) data (European Social Survey – European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC), 2024), we show early socialisation operates in a consistent direction among citizens and elites.

Our study contributes to two strands of literature. First, it advances research on political socialisation by showing that early-life exposure to democracy shapes political attitudes toward European integration and that these imprints persist into adulthood (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2024; Batinti *et al.*, 2022; Maggio *et al.*, 2024) and translate into elite voting behaviour, (e.g., Carreri & Teso, 2021) even under party and institutional constraints. Second, it contributes to debates on declining support for EU integration and long-term institutional legacies, in line with findings on the role of past crises in fuelling populism and Euroscepticism (Daniele *et al.*, 2023; Fazio, 2024; Gavresi & Litina, 2023).

The article continues with the theoretical framework. Next, we detail the empirical strategy and the dataset in Section 'Data and empirical strategy'. Results are displayed and discussed in Section 'Results'. In the conclusion, we highlight the relevance of our results, link them to the existing literature and explore possible extensions of the study.

## Exposure to democracy and elite political behaviour

This section develops the theoretical framework underpinning our analysis of how early-life exposure to democracy shapes elite political behaviour, specifically voting on European integration. We argue that early exposure to democratic (or non-democratic) environments leaves an enduring imprint on political elites, shaping political values and attitudes that subsequently translate into voting behaviour. Our framework draws on the impressionable years

theory, which posits that experiences during youth (ages 18–25) are crucial for the formation of political values and beliefs. We build on two strains of literature on exposure to democracy and support for democracy on one side and cultural cleavages on the other. We derive a conceptualisation of support for EU integration as support for transnational democracy, allowing us to link early-formed democratic attitudes to later elite voting behaviour, which grounds our expectations for its relationship to the quality of institutions experienced in youth.

### ***The impressionable years and political socialisation***

The impressionable years theory suggests that adolescence and early adulthood are critical periods for political socialisation. During these years, individuals develop fundamental political orientations that tend to persist into adulthood and continue to structure political behaviour over the life course (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989; Sears & Funk, 1999). This theory has been applied to various political attitudes and behaviours, demonstrating the long-lasting impact of early-life experiences.

Consistent with this theory, exposure to democratic institutions during youth shapes individuals' understanding of and support for democratic principles. Growing up in a democratic environment fosters a deeper appreciation for democratic values, while exposure to non-democratic regimes may lead to a more skeptical view of democracy (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, exposure to a well-performing democracy in early adulthood increases persistently democratic support (Krishnarajan *et al.*, 2023). This suggests that the quality of institutions during youth has a significant impact on how democracy is understood and valued. In line with the previous literature we define quality of democracy broadly, drawing on the comprehensive framework of V-Dem (Coppedge *et al.*, 2021) which extends beyond the mere presence of an autocratic or democratic regime, scoring its performance along its liberal, electoral, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian aspects, allowing to distinguish whether and how either shapes political attitudes that later inform behaviour in adulthood.

These early experiences form the foundation of individuals' political orientations, shaping political attitudes that persist over time and structure later political behaviour (Sears & Funk, 1999). The long-lasting effects of exposure to democracy on both attitudes and voting behaviour are well-documented in the socialisation literature, with a growing body of work showing that these attitudinal imprints can also translate into voting behaviour under certain conditions. Heyne (2019) argues that individual expectations of democracy are influenced by regime-specific socialisation, with democratic preferences shaped by the democratic history, authoritarian legacies, and the prevalent democratic model experienced.

Within this strain of literature, past research has shown this time frame to be crucial for several values relevant to the GAL-TAN cleavage. For instance, Borghi *et al.* (2025) show that exposure to terrorism during this time frame decreases social trust. Experiencing macroeconomic shocks in youth increases the propensity to vote for populist parties and decreases trust toward national and EU institutions (Daniele *et al.*, 2023; Gavresi & Litina, 2023). We expect impressionable years are similarly crucial for the formation of values relevant to the GAL-TAN cleavage (e.g., Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006, 2008). In its conception as support for transnational democracy hinged on communitarian globalist attitudes, support for European integration falls within this realm. As a result, voting on European integration constitutes a meaningful behavioural expression of these underlying values within the GAL-TAN cleavage.

### ***Support for European integration and exposure to democracy***

Building on the established understanding of the impressionable years in shaping citizen attitudes, we now extend this logic to elite political behaviour, asking whether these early-formed attitudes should also translate into voting on European integration.

Both at the elite and citizen level, research highlights the central role of partisan and geographical determinants of support for EU integration, especially marked in the post-Great Recession polycrisis, making EU integration increasingly contested and politicised (e.g., Baccaro *et al.*, 2021; Whitefield & Rohrschneider, 2019). The EP from 1979–2009 offers a unique lens to examine these questions before the high politicisation of EU integration issues. Studying this period therefore allows us to examine whether individual predispositions rooted in early socialisation matter for elite voting behaviour when EU integration is salient but we can expect less stringent party discipline. This complements the existing literature where, at the elite level, individual characteristics of MEPs are largely ignored as voting cohesion is fairly high within EPGs and especially in national delegations within them.

The growing importance of cultural cleavages in shaping political attitudes, for both citizens and elites, provides a crucial context for our study. Cultural cleavages encompass dimensions such as attitudes toward the environment, migration, gender equality, and LGBTQI+ rights. Accordingly, divides fall along the GAL-TAN spectrum. On the GAL side, we find globalist, green, and inclusive attitudes (e.g., on gender, LGBTQI+, migration); on the TAN side, traditional and nationalist ones (e.g., Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Hooghe *et al.*, 2002; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006, 2008). These attitudes are inherently linked with conceptions and attitudes toward society and the (inclusive) dimension of democracy and can structure how both citizens and elites evaluate political projects that extend democratic authority beyond the nation state, such as European integration.

We conceptualise support for EU integration as reflecting a broader commitment to cosmopolitan, globalist values and inclusive transnational democracy (Besley & Persson, 2019; Tabellini, 2008). These kinds of values and attitudes are among the ones formed during the so-called impressionable years. Political socialisation and the institutional context during youth yield a long-term impact on attitudes such as trust, tolerance, and support for democracy (Berggren *et al.*, 2026; Berggren & Nilsson, 2015). Along this reasoning, similar considerations should extend to support for EU integration, which represents an extension of democratic cooperation and authority beyond the nation state rather than a substitute for national democracy. In this sense, support for EU integration relates primarily to conceptions of democracy as legitimate authority and constraint, rather than to evaluations of democratic performance or output at the national level (e.g., Verovšek, 2025). Exposure to less democratic regimes is therefore expected to weaken support for political systems that institutionalise pluralism, shared rule, and constraints on national sovereignty, which are core features of European integration in the period we study.

At the same time, existing research highlights alternative mechanisms linking exposure to non-democratic or low-quality democratic institutions to support for the EU. In particular, negative national experiences may generate anti-regime backlash and foster support for European integration as a compensatory safeguard that constrains domestic authorities or provides external guarantees for democracy (e.g., Dinas & Northmore-Ball, 2020; van der Brug *et al.*, 2021). From this perspective, support for EU institutions reflects instrumental or defensive preferences, which may be activated in contexts of democratic crisis, accession, or heightened political salience.

Importantly, these mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. However, they differ in their implications for the persistence and behavioural expression of support for European integration. Compensatory logics may generate situational increases in pro-EU attitudes – for instance in the context of referenda (Gehring, 2021). Yet, a growing body of evidence shows that positive evaluations of national democracy and democratic institutions are systematically associated with higher support for the EU. Satisfaction with national democracy is associated with support for the EU (Muñoz *et al.*, 2011; Zmerli, 2010). Similarly, political trust, which is shaped by interactions with the political system, can be extrapolated from the national to the EU level (Glanville & Paxton, 2007; Harteveld *et al.*, 2013). In addition, relevantly for our analysis van der Brug *et al.* (2021) show that support for the EU is closely tied to support for liberal-constitutional democracy. This suggests that early exposure to higher-quality democratic institutions shapes political attitudes that generalise beyond the nation state and translate into durable orientations toward supranational authority, in parallel to how democratic institutions breed their own support at the national level (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2024).

### ***Exposure to democracy and pro-EU voting in the EP***

The question remains whether expectations derived from citizen-level research also manifest in elite voting behaviour, that is, whether attitudes shaped during youth translate into voting decisions under institutional and partisan constraints. Two main objections emerge. The first relates to the extent to which we can expect youth experiences to affect attitudes and especially voting of legislators. Elite political behaviour and voting in the EP are shaped by party affiliation, national context, and legislative socialisation. However, we argue that early-life experiences can leave an enduring imprint on political elites, by shaping political orientations that continue to inform voting behaviour, even when voting is subject to strong institutional and partisan constraints. Firstly, within the memory literature (Verovšek, 2024), early-life experiences are argued to shape elite orientations towards supranational authority. Albeit in a different substantive context, Carreri and Teso (2021) provide analogous evidence that formative experiences can persistently shape elite voting behaviour, showing that exposure to recessions during early adulthood affects roll-call voting in the US Congress.

A second counter-argument is that elite voting on EU integration may primarily mirror aggregate patterns in which past autocratic experiences foster support for the EU as a safeguard for democracy at home. This compensatory logic may appear particularly plausible for political elites, who are directly involved in institutional design and may be especially attentive to the role of supranational constraints in protecting democratic standards. For this logic to dominate consistently at the elite level, however, individual traits and values acquired early in life would need to be fully overridden by later socialisation within parties and political institutions, leaving no trace in individual voting behaviour. Evidence of individual characteristics of MEPs playing a role in their voting behaviour suggests otherwise (e.g., Ramstetter & Habersack, 2020), indicating that individual-level predispositions are not fully neutralised by elite socialisation. Nevertheless, while we expect voting on EU integration to be linked to the legacy of MEPs' experiences with political institutions we acknowledge the need to validate the underlying attitudinal mechanism against patterns observed among citizens and to assess whether and how partisan affiliation moderates these effects.

Drawing on the theoretical framework and empirical evidence presented, we hypothesise that MEPs who were exposed to more (less) democratic regimes during their youth are more (less) likely to cast pro-EU votes, reflecting the persistence of early-formed political attitudes in elite voting behaviour. This hypothesis tests whether the long shadow of past regime experiences influences elite behaviour in a supranational context. By focussing on voting behaviour, we provide a 'hard test' of the far-reaching impact of democratic exposure, as it captures the behavioural manifestation of MEPs'

underlying orientations toward supranational authority and has tangible consequences for policy outcomes.

A final consideration relates to when we should expect socialisation to matter for voting behaviour. Specifically, experiences with democracy yield cosmopolitan view that favour transnational integration. When EU integration is not a relevant dimension of a vote, we should not expect individual predispositions related to democratic socialisation to structure voting behaviour systematically. Conversely, when EU integration constitutes a meaningful cleavage, individual orientations toward supranational authority are more likely to be activated and expressed in legislative behaviour. At the same time, when contestation becomes very high and EU integration aligns strongly with partisan competition, party discipline is expected to constrain the expression of individual-level predispositions. This implies a non-monotonic relationship: socialisation effects should be most visible when EU integration is salient but not exceedingly constrained by partisan concerns.

## **Data and empirical strategy**

In this section, we describe the data and present our empirical strategy, which builds on the impressionable years hypothesis to examine how early-life exposure to democracy shapes elite voting behaviour in the European Parliament.

### ***Support for EU integration***

Our dependent variable, measuring support for EU integration, is constructed from roll-call votes (RCVs) in the EP for the first six legislatures (EP1–EP6). While the use of RCVs raises concerns of potential biases, previous research shows the biases are limited and do not affect patterns of MEPs voting behaviour, suggesting they can be reliably exploited in the context of our analysis (Hix *et al.*, 2018; Kaniok & Mocek, 2017).

### ***Main sample***

We focus on Western European countries due to methodological and theoretical considerations. Methodologically, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are only observed (partially) in EP6, with insufficient post-accession voting data for meaningful comparison in line with our identification strategy. While CEE countries are highly relevant to the broader discussion on democratic backsliding, democratic transitions and EU integration, their distinct experiences under communist regimes, which socialised citizens towards different understandings of democracy, warrant separate, dedicated analysis. One argument lays on communist socialisation conceiving democracy as a social basis linked to performance rather than a liberal one

grounded on procedural fairness and inclusivity (Heyne, 2019). In parallel, Verovšek (2025) highlights how in the West post-war trajectories link democracy to limited sovereignty, respect for the rule of law and protection of minorities while in CEE countries, post-communist trajectories link democracy to popular sovereignty and national self rule. These socialisation and democratisation experiences may carry different implications for those communitarian globalist attitudes on which we ground our conceptualisation of support for EU integration (e.g., Kitschelt, 1999; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017). Within the context of the pressured timeline and reforms conditionality of the 'Big Bang' Enlargement EU institutions and the EU polity are, often framed primarily as an external constraint (e.g., Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). As a result, while also in this instance compensatory logics cannot be excluded, in CEE countries post-communist socialisation implies external constraints as potentially perceived as a suspect restriction to national authorities (Verovšek, 2025).

Along similar lines of reasoning we restrict our analysis to EP6 in the main model. This timeframe precedes the high politicisation of EU integration issues that occurred after 2009. EU integration has become increasingly politicised (Jackson & Jolly, 2021) as competences expanded to issues perceived as part of core state powers and within highly related policy domains (Blumenau & Lauderdale, 2018; Otjes & van der Veer, 2016). These developments have several theoretical and empirical implications. Politicizations entails that the EU has become increasingly perceived as a governing polity – salient and polarising in national and EP voting with the polycrisis onset after the Great Recession. In parallel the EU has moved away from a purely regulatory power to encompass distributive conflicts and making constraints to domestic policy especially visible in crisis governance such as the Troika. As such, support to EU integration in later periods can increasingly reflect performance evaluations and contemporaneous political cues (Baccaro *et al.*, 2021; Whitefield & Rohrschneider, 2019). This is especially relevant for the analysis of elite voting behaviour as politicisation entails a turn from the initial constitutional nature of EU integration closer to our conceptualisation as legitimate authority and constraint, toward a policy and crisis linked performance evaluation subject to sharper party political constraints.

Such shifts has been reflected into a change in fundamental alteration in dimensionality of political conflict within the EP already in EP7 (Cheysson & Fraccaroli, 2025; Hix *et al.*, 2023). EU integration becomes the primary rather than the residual explanatory factor in EP voting and as such we can expect it to be more heavily mediated by parties. As a result, the selected period of allows us to consistently capture support for EU integration using the second dimension of NOMINATE scores, a widely established approach in the literature as further elaborated below. Given our focus on disentangling

individual preferences of MEPs and the ‘hard test’ of voting behaviour, we restrict our baseline model to Western European countries and EP6, allowing us to leverage NOMINATE scores through which we can consistently identify individual positions on EU integration as revealed through voting behaviour. However, we explore the dynamics in later legislatures and CEE countries using alternative data sources which confirm empirically the exclusion of post-crisis and non-western observations.

### Dependent variable

The 40-year timeframe encompasses significant evolution in EU integration, including the expansion of the EP’s role and the scope of EU competences. Assessing the ex-ante relevance of EU integration in a given vote type would require robust theoretical expectation of procedures and subject matters where we expect this cleavage to be more salient. Over the timeframe of the analysis the role of the EP within the EU political system expanded over time, from an almost solely consultative body to a powerful co-legislator. In parallel, procedures have changed and competences have expanded across policy areas. To address this issue we generate empirically for each vote a measure of pro-EU support and c. We base our measure on ideological structure identified through NOMINATE, which has been broadly applied for scaling votes within the EP (Cavallaro *et al.*, 2018; Hix & Noury, 2009; Hix *et al.*, 2006, 2009; Lo, 2018; Martin, 2021; Ramstetter & Habersack, 2020). We consider the second dimension of NOMINATE, which represents support for EU integration, as calculated by Hix *et al.* (2006) for EP1–5 and we extend it to EP6. In the timeframe we consider, the second dimension is residual compared to the predominant left-right cleavage. However, in the context of our analysis only votes for which the EU integration cleavage is salient are relevant and not being the predominant dimension of partisan conflict allows for individual preferences to be less likely to be fully constrained by the national delegation or EPG line.

**Table 1.** Correlation between MEPs NOMINATE and party attitudes.

|                    | (1)         | (2)        | (3)              | (4)        |
|--------------------|-------------|------------|------------------|------------|
|                    | Party level |            | Individual level |            |
|                    | NOMINATE 1  | NOMINATE 2 | NOMINATE 1       | NOMINATE 2 |
| Anti-pro EU scale  | 0.1678      | 0.5495     | −0.0921          | 0.3164     |
| Obs.               | 144         | 144        | 3306             | 3306       |
| Left-right scale   | 0.7833      | −0.0546    | 0.7867           | −0.1995    |
| Obs.               | 148         | 148        | 3347             | 3347       |
| State-market scale | 0.7640      | 0.0946     | 0.7539           | −0.0945    |
| Obs.               | 148         | 148        | 3347             | 3347       |

Note: ‘Party level’ columns: individual NOMINATE are averaged at national party level. ‘Individual level’ columns: party scores are assigned at MEPs based on their national party.

In the literature there is a good consensus on the correlation between the second dimension of *NOMINATE* and the positive attitude toward EU integration. We further corroborate the validity of using the second dimension of *NOMINATE* as a proxy for EU integration in several ways. Table 1 shows the correlation between the two dimensions of *NOMINATE* and positions on several issues from ParlGov dataset (Döring *et al.*, 2022) at party level. We cannot expect voting behaviour to be fully congruent with (domestic) party level positions on EU integration. Nevertheless, the second dimension of *NOMINATE* is positively correlated to the pro-EU attitudes of national parties and basically uncorrelated to the left-right scale and to the attitude toward the market, while the opposite is true regarding the first dimension of *NOMINATE*. This provides some validation on *NOMD2* capturing support for EU integration, which holds at both at party level (columns 1 and 2) and at individual level (columns 3 and 4).<sup>2</sup> In line with the above-mentioned expectations from the literature, such correlation only holds until EP6, further confirming we cannot rely on *NOMINATE* for identifying pro and anti-EU stances afterwards. We check for other factors extant literature identifies as potentially also captured by *NOMD2* within robustness checks, namely accounting for the potential role for (transnational) government-opposition dynamics (Hix *et al.*, 2006).

We do not use MEPs *NOMINATE* scores directly as they are not robust to comparisons across legislature (Lo, 2018). Instead, we generate a measure of pro-/anti-EU relevance leveraging *NOMD2* scores to (i) detect if voting in favour or against is a pro- or anti-EU stance and (ii) whether EU integration is a relevant cleavage. In detail, for each legislature, we compute the average score of *NOMD2* among all the MEPs voting yes or no, separately, and we compute the difference, which is vote-specific. If the vote is somehow related to the second dimension of *NOMINATE* (i.e., EU integration), we expect the difference to be large (in absolute value), meaning that MEPs' votes are clustered according to their attitude toward EU integration. Conversely, when the difference in the second dimension of *NOMINATE* is small, votes and *NOMINATE* scores are uncorrelated and the voting behaviour of MEPs is not systematically structured by attitudes toward EU integration. The sign of the difference allows us to determine whether yes or no are pro- or anti-EU.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the absolute difference between MEPs voting yes and no on a specific vote, reveals the level of polarisation in EU instances. For example, consider a vote where the average score on the second dimension of *NOMINATE* of MEPs voting yes is 0.6 and the average of MEPs voting no is -0.3. The difference, in absolute values, between those voting yes and no is 0.9. This informs us that: (1) the vote has relevance for EU instances, as the MEPs are clustered depending on EU attitudes; (2) the level of polarisation is 0.9, which is the absolute difference between those voting yes and those voting no in the second dimension of *NOMINATE*.

### *Selection of salient votes*

We construct our dependent variable starting from a dummy taking value 1 when MEPs vote takes a pro-EU stance and 0 for those votes that can be classified as going against EU integration.<sup>4</sup> The next step is the selection of salient votes, those with a larger cleavage on the second dimension of NOMINATE. We test our results at different thresholds of polarisation: we repeat the analysis only selecting votes where the absolute value of the difference between scores of yes and no votes as outlined above exceed each threshold level. As the polarisation threshold increases, the sample size of contested vote decreases. Taking the case of the first legislature, considering only those votes with (absolute) differences above 0.2 yields 653 out of the 886 votes as contested. Considering a 0.5 polarisation threshold conversely leads to 294 contested votes. Keeping as a reference the 0.5 threshold, contested votes increase to 474 in EP2 reaching 2189 votes in EP4, respectively amounting to 22 and 64 per cent of the votes. We expect to find significant differences only when polarisation is sufficiently high.

Finally, we take the average of the voting behaviour for each MEP within each legislature on the election of votes across each threshold of polarisation.<sup>5</sup> This procedure allows us to routinely detect and select only those votes with a meaningful cleavage over the pro/anti-EU integration dimension and detect which voting behaviour is pro/anti-EU, independent of the type of vote and on the nature of the procedure. Our approach allows us to avoid any predetermined selection of when and where contestation over EU integration may be expected. Conversely, we consider empirically whether contestation has taken place.

### *Additional dependent variables*

Although NOMD2 provides the best measure of individual voting behaviour and the literature has highlighted that it captures support for EU integration, it may potentially include some further dimensions that could marginally reduce its accuracy. To test the precision of NOMD2 in capturing the pro-EU attitude, we replicate our analysis using self-declared attitudes of MEPs through the MEP survey dataset (Hix *et al.*, 2016). More in detail, we replace the NOMD2 associated to each MEP with the answer MEPs provided to the question on their own position on whether EU integration should be pushed further or has gone to far.<sup>6</sup> Of course, also this indicator may be biased: on the one side MEPs could misreport their true attitudes due to some 'social desirability bias', or other reasons, while NOMD2 is based on 'true preferences' revealed by actual voting behaviour. In addition, MEP Survey data is only available for a small sample of MEPs and for a more limited period than NOMD2. However, the consistency of the results strengthens our conclusions and confirms the accuracy of NOMD2 in measuring pro-EU

attitudes, at least in sample and our reference period (EP1–6). In addition, this data allow us to verify how results hold beyond this context, confirming persistence but weakening of the effect in later legislatures, coherently with both lower variation in the exposure to democracy of MEPs and the politicisation on voting on EU integration that would leave less scope for individual preferences to shape legislators voting. Furthermore, this data also confirm that our analysis cannot be directly extended to CEE countries supporting that conceptions of national and transnational democracy and EU integrations may be different in these countries.

In addition, we also make use of Euromanifesto data (Schmitt *et al.*, 2016) to measure support of parties for EU integration. This data follows the established Manifesto project methodology (Lehmann *et al.*, 2024) to measure party positions, extending expert data by grounding positioning on the content of the Manifestos. However, it has several limitations for our analysis as it is static during the legislature and groups (potentially diverse) national parties under one single value when they are part of a coalition issuing a joint manifesto. We use Manifesto data as an alternative to NOMD2 in measuring directionality and polarisation at the vote level. That is, we associate to each positive and negative vote the 'EU Integration' variable score of the party and repeat the rest of the process as for our main dependent variable. Even if weaker than voting and survey data, also this indicator confirms the consistency of the results and corroborates the validity of the main measure.

Finally, we address the concern of whether elites long-term implications of quality of institutions shape attitudes and preferences of citizens and political elites differently. We address this in two way. On one side, we test that the relationship hold at the citizen level on the basis of ESS data,<sup>7</sup> which is confirmed. On the other, we test for the moderating role of partisanship, which does indicate that the effect is predominantly driven by MEPs on the right side of the political spectrum, as further discussed in the results.

### **Exposure to democracy**

Following Acemoglu *et al.* (2024), we measure exposure to democracy using the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database (Coppedge *et al.*, 2021). The V-Dem dataset is the most comprehensive source measuring the level of democracy across all countries of the world. The latest version of the V-Dem dataset covers more than 200 countries from 1789 to 2020. The V-Dem dataset provides five different measures of democracy: liberal democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, electoral democracy and egalitarian democracy. Each item is assessed by an expert and ranges from 0 (low level of democracy) to 1 (high level of democracy). In our baseline model, we take the average of these five indicators as a broad measure of democracy in each country every year. We also repeat the analysis across

each subcomponent allowing us to examine whether and how different aspects of democracy affect MEPs' voting behaviour. In order to measure the average exposure to democracy during the impressionable years of each MEP, we compute the average democracy score when the MEP is aged 18 to 25 in the country in which they are elected. While this threshold is in line with previous work on the impact of exposure of democracy as discussed in our theoretical framework, the exact timeframe of impressionable years is somewhat contested. To address this we test empirically alternative specifications of impressionable years in earlier childhood and adolescence as well as later in life as a placebo test for effects on elite voting behaviour. Our approach allows us to exploit heterogeneity both across countries and over time, since only MEPs elected in the same country and born in the same year have the same exposure to democracy.

We acknowledge the limitation of not having data on MEPs' residence during their formative years. However, we collected data both on the country of election and on the country of birth, so that we are able to make different assumptions about the institutions MEPs were exposed to when 18 to 25. We are also able to identify those MEPs who were born and elected in the same country, thus with a higher probability of being exposed to the institutions of that country.<sup>8</sup>

We retrieve other information on MEPs from the public archives on the website of the European Parliament (Michon & Wiest, 2021). In detail, information on date of birth, gender, national party, and EPG are used as control variables in the regression analysis, accounting for traditional drivers of voting behaviour in the EP.

Table A.1 shows the descriptive statistics of the main variables, Table A.2 shows the levels of exposure to democracy in each legislature, while Table A.3 displays the sample composition and the fixed effects variables used in the regressions. As the descriptive statistics show, the mean level of exposure to democracy increases by around 15 percentage points, going from 0.44 in the first legislature to 0.60 in the sixth legislature. Also, more than 75 per cent of the MEPs in our sample were born before 1950. Differences are also substantial across countries both in their initial democracy score among MEPs and their evolution across legislatures. As shown in Figure A.1, especially in initial legislatures, a number of countries display some MEPs socialised under lower quality institutions. This is no longer the case in later legislatures where MEPs exposed to less democratic institutions are concentrated in a small number of Member States.

### ***Empirical strategy***

We test the hypothesis that exposure to democracy increases pro-EU voting among MEPs. Uncovering a causal relationship between exposure to democracy and voting in support of EU integration is surely a challenge since there

are many confounding factors that can explain such a relationship. To overcome the usual difficulties when with identifying the long-term effects of early-life experiences on political behaviour, we build on the impressionable years hypothesis (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989).

According to the impressionable years hypothesis, people form their political attitudes while aged between 18 and 25. To the extent that the state of the political institutions is exogenous to the individual MEPs when they are between 18 and 25 years old, the impressionable years hypothesis allows us to test whether or not politicians exposed to higher democratic contexts are then more willing to vote in favour of EU integration.

In brief, we estimate the model

$$VoteEU_{igctp} = \alpha + \beta Exp_{igctp} + \lambda Fem_{igctp} + \gamma_c + \delta_p + \theta_g + \eta_t + \varepsilon_{igctp} \quad (1)$$

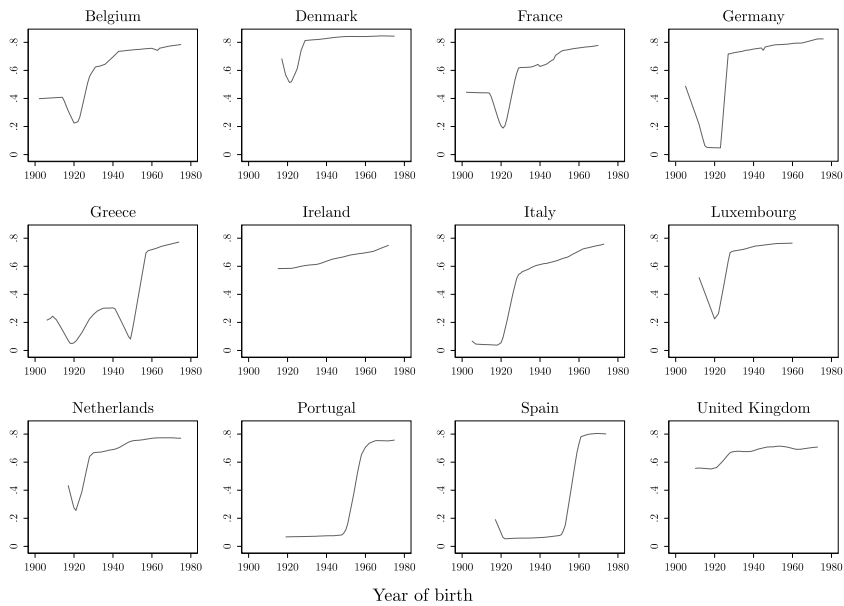
where  $VoteEU_{igctp}$  is the probability of voting for pro-European voting of MEP  $i$  elected in country  $c$  in legislature  $p$ , belonging to parliamentary group  $g$ , and born in year  $t$ , and  $\gamma$ ,  $\delta$ ,  $\theta$  and  $\eta$  are the respective fixed-effects.  $Exp$  is the democracy index described above and  $\varepsilon_{igctp}$  is the idiosyncratic error term. Since some MEPs are elected in more than one legislature and their behaviour is clearly not independent across legislatures, we cluster the standard error at MEPs' level.<sup>9</sup> Fixed effects allow us to control for time-invariant characteristics related to country, legislature, parliamentary group and year of birth that may influence the behaviour of individual MEPs. As a control, we also include a binary variable,  $Fem$  indicating the gender of the MEPs.

For our strategy to be valid, we need a certain degree of variation of exposure to democracy both within and between countries, so the sample of countries and EP used to estimate the relation above becomes crucial. As a benchmark, we employ the most consistent sample over time, that is, the group of EU-12 countries where elections took place since EP1 in 1979.<sup>10</sup> Figure 1 shows the exposure to democracy by year of birth and country. As a robustness check, we also include Austria, Finland and Sweden, which joined the EU with the fourth Parliament. Beyond the theoretical consideration regarding CEE countries already discussed, we do not to include the ten countries that joined the EU on May 1st, 2004 as they are observed only in EP6 and their contribution would be absorbed by the fixed effects.

We examine heterogeneous effects across party groups. To further explore the mechanism, we examine how different dimensions of democracy affect MEPs' voting behaviour.

## Results

Table 2 shows the main results focussing on votes with a medium level of polarisation (set at 0.70, as defined in Section 'Data and empirical strategy') over legislatures. Our findings consistently demonstrate that MEPs exposed



**Figure 1.** Exposure to democracy.  
 Notes: The figure shows the mean exposure to democracy by EU-12 country and year of birth.

to higher levels of democracy during their youth (18–25) are significantly more likely to cast pro-EU votes, controlling for gender, birth year, country of election, legislature, and EPG. This underscores the enduring impact of early-life democratic exposure on elite political behaviour, specifically their voting patterns.

Notably, the magnitude and significance of this effect diminish in more recent legislatures. This trend is consistent with the increasing average and decreasing variance of exposure to democracy among younger cohorts, as

**Table 2.** Main results.

|                              | (1)<br>EP1<br>b/se  | (2)<br>EP1-2<br>b/se | (3)<br>EP1-3<br>b/se | (4)<br>EP1-4<br>b/se | (5)<br>EP1-5<br>b/se | (6)<br>EP1-6<br>b/se |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Democracy index at age 18–25 | 0.219***<br>(0.079) | 0.156**<br>(0.063)   | 0.157***<br>(0.054)  | 0.125***<br>(0.043)  | 0.087**<br>(0.037)   | 0.061**<br>(0.030)   |
| Female dummy                 | 0.034<br>(0.032)    | 0.002<br>(0.018)     | 0.002<br>(0.013)     | 0.003<br>(0.009)     | 0.005<br>(0.008)     | 0.011*<br>(0.007)    |
| Country FE                   | Yes                 | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  |
| Parliament FE                | No                  | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  |
| Birth year FE                | Yes                 | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  |
| Parliament Group FE          | Yes                 | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  | Yes                  |
| R <sup>2</sup>               | 0.82                | 0.61                 | 0.68                 | 0.72                 | 0.72                 | 0.72                 |
| N                            | 488                 | 1068                 | 1636                 | 2224                 | 2819                 | 3406                 |

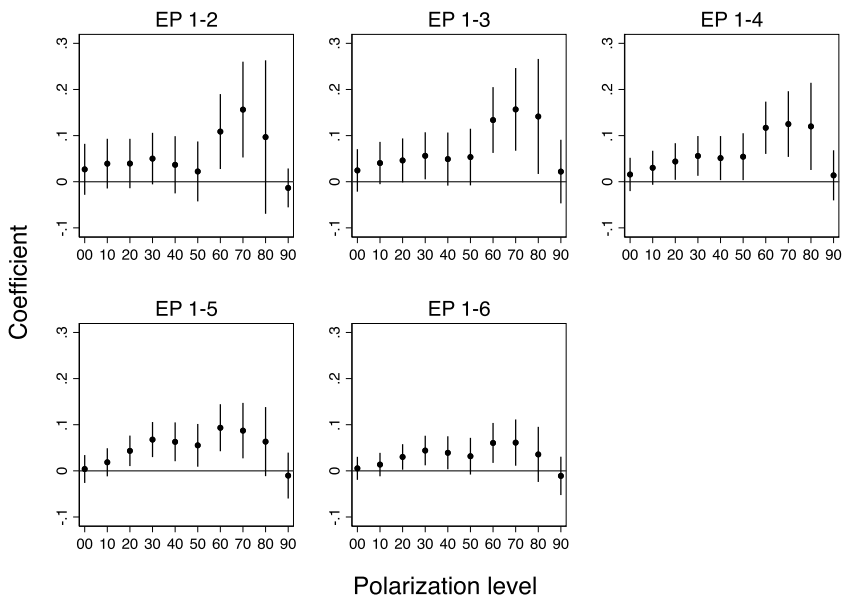
Note: Standard errors clustered at MEP in parentheses. Polarisation: 0.70.  
 \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

depicted in Figures A.1 and A.2. Essentially, MEPs elected in later legislatures within the EU-12 sample have predominantly experienced high levels of democracy, reducing the observable impact of political socialisation.

As previously discussed, the effect we test depends crucially on the level of polarisation or contestation of the votes. Figure 2 shows the coefficients and standard errors for several sets of regressions: each panel represents a different set of legislatures, and each point represents a different threshold of polarisation. The results indicate that the magnitude and significance of the coefficients increase with higher contestation levels. However, at very high thresholds, the effects become insignificant, potentially due to smaller sample sizes and heightened MEP discipline in highly salient votes.

Another trend emerging from Figure 2 is that the effect declines by adding more recent legislatures. As said above, such a trend is consistent with the decline in the heterogeneity of exposure to democracy, since younger cohorts have experienced more consolidated democracies (see Table A.2).

The magnitude of the effect is not negligible: a one standard deviation increase in the democracy indicator (that is about .24 p.p. in the V-dem) leads to a 1.4 to 5.3 p.p. increase in the probability of casting pro-EU votes, representing about 6–16 per cent of the average. Importantly, this effect is additional to all other (traditional) determinants of voting behaviour that are potentially correlated to exposure to democracy and included in the



**Figure 2.** Different polarisation thresholds.

The figure plots the coefficients of interest and the related confidence intervals (at 10 per cent, on the vertical axis) from different regressions, in which the dependent variable is computed using different polarisation levels (horizontal axis). Each panel refers to a different set of legislatures.

regression, such as EPG affiliation. Of course, these effects refer to the polarisation level of 0.7, which is our benchmark. As discussed extensively above, as polarisation decreases, MEPs' voting choices tend to converge, and exposure to democracy therefore becomes less relevant.

There are two issues that deserve to be discussed before the set of sensitivity analyses and robustness checks: the first refers to the accuracy of the second dimension of *NOMINATE* in capturing the pro-/anti-EU orientation underlying voting behaviour; the second deals with the alignment between elites and citizens.

### Testing the precision of *NOMD2*

As discussed in Section 'Support for EU integration', *NOMD2* is the best available indicator of pro/anti-EU orientation underlying voting behaviour, but needs some further analysis to be fully convincing. To this end, we test whether results hold using an alternative measure for orientations toward EU integration, constructing our analysis on the basis of differences in Euro-manifesto rather than *NOMINATE* scores at the vote level. This measure is not ideal on several accounts. Firstly, it only capture national delegation positions at best if not broader coalitions when they share a common manifesto. Secondly, it only considers positions before the start of the legislature. Results, shown in Table A.4 hold but are significant only when extending the analysis to include EP4 and above.

In addition, an accurate check consists in the use of the elite survey data described in Section 'Support for EU integration'. Table 3 shows results in line with our hypotheses: first, in col. (1), we replicate the results on the same sample as in our baseline specification: the effect of exposure to democracy at age 18–25 is strongly positive and significant, as expected – consistently with behavioural results. The magnitude of the effect declines as far as we extend the sample to more recent legislatures and other EU countries.

**Table 3.** Support for EU integration (survey MEP data).

|                              | EU-12, before 2009<br>(1) | EU-12<br>(2)         | Western countries<br>(3) | All countries<br>(4) |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
|                              | b/se                      | b/se                 | b/se                     | b/se                 |
| Democracy index at age 18–25 | 0.431**<br>(0.164)        | 0.290***<br>(0.073)  | 0.230***<br>(0.073)      | 0.164**<br>(0.054)   |
| Gender                       | –0.020<br>(0.033)         | –0.023<br>(0.028)    | –0.025<br>(0.026)        | –0.017<br>(0.030)    |
| Become MEP – year            | –0.010***<br>(0.003)      | –0.008***<br>(0.002) | –0.008***<br>(0.002)     | –0.007**<br>(0.002)  |
| Year × Country FE            | Yes                       | Yes                  | Yes                      | Yes                  |
| Cohort FE                    | Yes                       | Yes                  | Yes                      | Yes                  |
| R <sup>2</sup>               | 0.41                      | 0.46                 | 0.46                     | 0.41                 |
| N                            | 223                       | 362                  | 419                      | 548                  |

Note: Standard errors clustered at EP group level in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

Weaker effects in later legislature are consistent with two dynamics changing over time: lower variation in exposure to democratic institutions of MEPs and changes in cleavages rendering the EU integration more politicised.<sup>11</sup> In addition, results do not hold in CEE countries, confirming that conceptualisations of (transnational) democracy and EU integration may follow different paths and mechanisms.

### ***Elites and citizens***

As further validation, we use ESS data to examine citizen-level attitudes towards EU integration. The model specification reported in Table 4 adapts the baseline specification of the paper to a different dataset: the ESS survey. The ESS is based on face-to-face interviews and administered every two years from 2002 and it measures European citizens' beliefs, behaviours, and political attitudes. We use the 10 available waves of the ESS (2004–2023), which contain a question measuring support for European integration. Specifically, we measure European integration through a question asking: 'Now thinking about the European Union, some say European unification should go further. Others say it has already gone too far. Using this card, what number on the scale best describes your position?' Possible answers range from 0 (Unification has already gone too far) to 10 (Unification should go further).

The main characteristics of the specification are the same as our baseline model and in line with previous studies testing the effect of impressionable years hypothesis (Roth & Wohlfart, 2018). Specifically, we test whether exposure to democracy at impressionable years affects the support for EU integration. We focus only on respondents declaring to be born in the country where they currently live, controlling for the main individual socio-demographic and economic characteristics (education, marital status, income, unemployment experiences, parental background) and country, cohort and age fixed effects.<sup>12</sup> Results are remarkably in line with expectations and the main model: in EU-12 countries, the effect is positive and significant in the impressionable years and non significant before and after, while in other countries the effect is never significant. These results represent not only a further test of the validity of our hypothesis, but also a very relevant improvement *per se*: exposure to democracy has a long-lasting impact attitudes both for citizens and political elites and for the latter voting behaviour as well.

### ***Sensitivity analysis and robustness checks***

We conduct extensive sensitivity analysis and robustness checks to validate our findings. We structure these additional analyses across three main

**Table 4.** Support for EU integration (ESS data).

|                              | EU-12 countries |         |          |         | CEE countries |         |         |                  |
|------------------------------|-----------------|---------|----------|---------|---------------|---------|---------|------------------|
|                              | (1)             | (2)     | (3)      | (4)     | (5)           | (6)     | (7)     | (8)              |
|                              | b/se            | b/se    | b/se     | b/se    | b/se          | b/se    | b/se    | b/se             |
| Democracy index at age 6–13  | 0.191           |         |          |         |               | 0.348   |         |                  |
| Democracy index at age 14–18 |                 | (0.121) | 0.498**  |         | (0.314)       | 0.186   | (0.166) |                  |
| Democracy index at age 18–25 |                 | (0.168) | 0.570*** |         |               |         | (0.160) | 0.237            |
| Democracy index at age 26–33 |                 |         |          | (0.147) | 0.394         |         |         | 0.302<br>(0.186) |
| Individual Controls          | Yes             | Yes     | Yes      | Yes     | Yes           | Yes     | Yes     | Yes              |
| Country × ESS round FE       | Yes             | Yes     | Yes      | Yes     | Yes           | Yes     | Yes     | Yes              |
| Country × Age FE             | No              | Yes     | Yes      | Yes     | Yes           | Yes     | Yes     | Yes              |
| Cohort FE                    | Yes             | Yes     | Yes      | Yes     | Yes           | Yes     | Yes     | Yes              |
| R <sup>2</sup>               | 0.10            | 0.10    | 0.10     | 0.10    | 0.11          | 0.11    | 0.11    | 0.11             |
| N                            | 109,835         | 109,469 | 108,449  | 103,439 | 106,468       | 106,426 | 105,664 | 100,108          |

Note: Standard errors clustered at country level in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

dimensions. Firstly, we consider alternative specifications of the dependent variables in our baseline model (NOMD2). Secondly, we test different assumptions in relation to our independent variable. These both consider that we do not know for certain the country of residence of MEPs during their youth as well as that impressionable years thresholds are disputed in the context of other types of socialisation. We verify that the relation does not hold for institution quality in irrelevant timeframes. In addition, we consider whether results hold across all sub-dimensions of V-DEM. Finally, we consider alternative model specifications regarding sample, fixed effects and standard error clustering. More crucially, we explore heterogeneous effects over the crucial dimensionality of voting in the EP, partisanship.

### ***Support for EU integration***

***Scale of the dependent variable.*** In first instance, we use a weighted dependent variable that accounts for the ‘intensity’ of pro-/anti-EU stances, rather than a simple dummy. In the benchmark model, we rely on a dummy variable taking value 1 if the vote is pro-EU and 0 if the vote is anti-EU. On the one side, this measure is very simple and intuitive; on the other, it does not take into account the ‘intensity’ of support for integration. As our classification considers the difference in NOMINATE we can place each vote along a spectrum by weighting every vote by the same indicator we employ to identify polarised votes. Table A.7 shows that the results remain consistent, with larger coefficient magnitudes, suggesting a stronger effect when considering the extent of pro-/anti-EU cleavages. This mirrors increasing magnitudes at higher thresholds in our baseline model.

***Validation of the dependent variable.*** Another threat to our identification strategy comes from concerns on whether the second dimension of NOMINATE captures pro-/anti-EU cleavages. Previous research raises some questions in this regard as NOMD2 has been shown to correlate with government-opposition conflicts (Hix *et al.*, 2006). We address this by including a measure of (transnational) government-opposition conflict as captured measuring partisanship through national party fixed effects instead of EPGs. Table A.8 confirms results are similar to our main findings.

We address concerns over NOMD2 as a measure of support for EU integration by ensuring that our results are not driven by spurious correlations between exposure to democracy and other political preferences possibly correlated with pro-EU stances. To this aim, we run a placebo test by building our dependent variable on the first dimension of the NOMINATE. In other words, we select MEPs’ votes depending on the cleavage of the first dimension of the NOMINATE. The first dimension of the NOMINATE captures the classic left-right cleavage. If our main results are driven by spurious correlations between exposure to democracy and political preferences in general, we should find

some significant associations also when we use the first dimension of the *NOMINATE* to build our dependent variable. Table A.9 shows that there are no significant correlations between exposure to democracy and our dependent variable based on the first dimension of the *NOMINATE*, suggesting that our main results do uncover a causal relationship between exposure to democracy and attitude towards EU integration.

### *Exposure to democracy*

***Impressionable years hypothesis.*** As for our independent variable, as a first step we test that the pertinence of the impressionable years hypothesis. One may think that the impressionable years theory is not a relevant mechanism in this case and that other variables correlated to the year of birth are driving the results. We test the effect of exposure to democracy on attitudes toward EU integration using different age spans. Table A.10 shows that exposure to democracy outside the 18–25 age range does not significantly affect MEPs' voting behaviour, while exposure during youth does. Weaker effects are present for exposure to democracy earlier in life. While this supports the somewhat varied timeframe of impressionable years, results are consistent with the psychological literature suggesting that political attitudes are formed during adolescence and young adulthood. Table A.13 shows similar results when using the MEP survey data.

***Residential histories.*** We also address the concern that our results might be driven by the assumption that MEPs were exposed to the level of democracy in their country of election. One possible limitation of the study is that we do not know the country where MEPs lived during their impressionable years. In our models, we assume for simplicity's sake that MEPs were exposed to the level of democracy of the country where they are elected. An alternative assumption is that MEPs were exposed to the institutions of the country where they were born.<sup>13</sup> Panel a of Table A.11 reports the benchmark model under this alternative assumption. We can observe that the results are mostly unchanged, supporting the stability of our findings. A more conservative strategy relies on the fact that individuals who were born and elected in two different countries are more mobile making any assumptions on the relevance institutions more prone to errors. Table A.11 (panel b) shows the preferred specification estimated only on the subsample of MEPs that were born and elected in the same country. Also in this case, there are no substantial differences in the results; the main conclusions of the analysis are confirmed.

Since we cannot fully reconstruct MEPs' residential histories, we implement an additional set of robustness checks designed to mitigate concerns about potential misclassification and correlated cohort-level confounders. First, following Carreri and Teso (2021), we include cohort-specific trends obtained by interacting birth year with legislature fixed effects,

which flexibly absorb broad generational changes that may correlate with political behaviour. Second, drawing on the MEP Survey, we further allow these cohort trends to vary by location of election, by including interactions between location of election and cohort trends. Because this specification absorbs country-specific cohort trajectories, it captures any systematic sorting of migrant MEPs across constituencies and, at the same time, absorbs slow-moving country-specific socio-economic and political transformations (such as post-war growth paths and convergence dynamics) that could otherwise confound the relationship between early institutional exposure and later voting behaviour. Results of these estimations are presented in Tables A.12 and A.13, and are consistent with our main findings. While these strategies cannot eliminate measurement error entirely, they substantially reduce the scope for bias in our estimates.

**WWII Exposure.** Moreover, to ensure that our findings are not driven by exposure to WWII or externally imposed authoritarian regimes, we re-estimate our baseline models excluding the years 1939–1945 from the V-Dem data. The results, displayed in Table A.14, remain highly similar to our main estimates, indicating that WWII exposure does not account for the patterns we document. Following the same rationale, and to ensure that our findings are not driven by specific historical or national experiences, we re-estimate our main specifications excluding, in turn, all MEPs from Germany, Italy, and Spain. The results shown in Table A.15 remain highly similar to our main estimates, suggesting that no single large country drives the overall pattern.

**V-Dem Components.** Furthermore, we investigate whether the conclusions of our analysis are driven by some specific component of the V-Dem indicator. Table A.16 reports the results of a model in which the V-Dem has been replaced by each of its five main components. In general, the positive and significant effect of V-Dem on pro-EU attitude is confirmed for all the components, although it appears stronger for participatory democracy and electoral democracy.

### **Model specifications**

**Sample definitions.** Another potential concern regards the limited sample of EU12 countries, selected in the benchmark model to provide the most consistency over time. Our approach requires (i) a reliable identification of EU cleavages and (ii) sufficient variation in exposure to democracy across countries and legislatures. Given the changing context of cleavages regarding EU integration in more recent legislatures and the changed dimensionality of political conflict within the EP – as captured by NOMINATE – extending the analysis beyond EP6 is problematic, as discussed extensively in our theoretical framework. Similarly, in addition to theoretical considerations, we cannot extend

the analysis to CEE countries and more generally the 2004 enlargement as these Member States are only observed in EP6. However, we can test whether results are sensitive to the extension to the EU-15 by including the three countries joining the EU in 1995 (EP4); Austria, Finland, and Sweden. The last three columns of Table A.17 show that results are substantially unchanged after the inclusion of these three countries. In addition, we nevertheless test whether results hold after EP6. Table A.18 shows it is not the case as expected by the change in dimensionality in later legislatures (Hix *et al.*, 2023).

**Fixed effects and standard error clustering.** In addition, we consider that the inclusion of fixed effects and the choice of clustering standard errors may influence the results. Table A.19 shows that unclustered standard errors do not change the significance of our results, and so does Table A.20 where standard errors are clustered at country  $\times$  cohort level. Table A.21 reports how the results change after the subsequent inclusion of fixed effects. While EPG affiliation explains a significant portion of pro-EU voting, exposure to democracy remains a significant predictor. All of the results and checks described above are invariant to the inclusion of the gender of the MEPs.

**Left-right cleavage and legislative behaviour.** We test for heterogeneous effects, focussing on the central cleavage of voting in the EP in this timeframe: partisanship. Specifically, we assess whether results hold both for left and right wing MEPs. Table A.22 shows our results are mainly driven by right-wing MEPs.<sup>14</sup> These patterns point to important differences in voting behaviour across ideological families within the EP. Importantly, these differences refer to ideological positions of parties and EPGs, rather than to differences in electoral systems or incentives to personalised legislative behaviour. We observe in the EP legislators that have been selected by their respective parties and may face sanctioning by their ranks and voters. We may thus expect that, while individual characteristics play a role, especially in their voting there may be only a certain range of acceptable positions congruent to a degree with those of the party and EPG that legislators represent. Consistently with differences in ideological cohesion across EPGs (Hix & Noury, 2009), these acceptable ranges differ between centre-left and right-wing parties. Centre-left parties hold more homogeneous positions on the GAL side, suggesting visibly taking anti-EU positions may be less tenable for their MEPs – especially in later legislatures. Conversely, a wider range of positions on EU integration may be acceptable on the right, coherently with the larger heterogeneity across national delegations even within the EPP. This suggests that parties can moderate the effect of early political socialisation, either through selection or Europeanisation within pro-EU party groups.

We also try to better account for individual-level determinants of voting behaviour. To this aim, we complement our analysis with measures from the

MEP Survey capturing seniority and voting guidance from national parties, European party groups, and other political actors (Lindstädt *et al.*, 2012). Controlling for these dimensions does not affect our main results, which remain stable in magnitude and significance – as results in Table A.23 show.

## Conclusion

Democracies have been found to increase living standards among the general population (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2005, 2019). The long-lasting impact of political socialisation has also been largely considered at the citizen level, including recently to show the effect of exposure to democratic institutions on individuals' attitudes (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2024). In this paper, we show that these effects extend to elites and their voting behaviour: MEPs exposed to more democratic institutions as young adults are more likely to support European integration. We combine data on the roll-call votes in the European Parliament with data on the level of democracy by country-year. To examine the long-term relationship between exposure to democracy and support for European integration, we rely on the impressionable years hypothesis (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989). According to this hypothesis, individuals form their political attitudes while aged between 18 and 25. To the extent that the quality of institutions is exogenous to the individual MEP, the impressionable years hypothesis is an appropriate strategy to shed light on the relationship between exposure to democracy and support for European integration. Our results confirm that MEPs exposed to more (less) democratic institutions are more (less) likely to vote in favour of EU integration. Our baseline model indicates these effect is non-trivial in EP1–6 in the EU12, ranging between 6–16 per cent. We further validate these findings by showing that elite voting behaviour is consistent with patterns in MEP attitudes measured through survey data and with citizen-level attitudes, supporting the attitudinal mechanism underlying our argument. At the same time, the behavioural manifestation of these attitudes is contingent on the broader political context, and becomes increasingly constrained as EU integration turns into a highly politicised and party-structured dimension of conflict.

Our study makes several important contributions to the literature on political socialisation and elite political behaviour. Firstly, our results indicate that political socialisation in youth matters also in the least-likely case of elites as later socialisation, for instance into political parties, does not erase earlier experiences with democratic institutions. The 'scar' of growing up in autocracies or in contexts of democratic backsliding not only shapes politicians' underlying political orientations but also manifests in their voting behaviour on issues within the GAL-TAN domain, such as support for EU integration, particularly in contexts where institutional and partisan constraints leave scope for individual predispositions to shape legislative behaviour.

Our findings suggest that alike economic crises (Carreri & Teso, 2021) experiences relating to the quality of institutions have profound implications that can extend to policy making and policy outcomes, contributing to current debates on the sustainability of democracies. These carry several implications for current policy debates such as the reignited traction of enlargement and the continued threat of eroding democratic quality in some Member States. In the context of accession of new Member States the legacy of past autocratic experiences continue to matter even if current institutional quality conditions have been met. Similarly, democratic backsliding within EU member states may limit young people cosmopolitan predispositions and pro-EU orientations posing a challenge for the future of European integration.

The analysis also highlights that – under certain circumstances – individual characteristics of MEP can matter for their voting behaviour, in line with evidence from gendered environmental voting (Ramstetter & Habersack, 2020). Future research should consider – especially in relation to other GAL-TAN cleavages whether individual preferences and socialisation may matter for voting behaviour given the institutional and partisan context.

Findings are of particular significance as the centrality of pro-/anti-EU cleavage has grown over time (Otjes & van der Veer, 2016) and has become predominant in recent legislatures (Cheysson & Fraccaroli, 2025; Hix *et al.*, 2023). Our analysis has shown that we cannot detect an impact on voting behaviour of MEPs past EP6. These patterns are coherent with greater partisan constraints in an era of high politicisation (Hix *et al.*, 2023). Yet our analysis has also shown through MEP Survey and ESS data that – in Western Europe – early socialisation continues to shape underlying orientations toward supranational authority, even when the scope for these orientations to translate into voting behaviour is increasingly mediated by party discipline and strategic considerations.

However, heterogeneous effects across the political spectrum, concentrated on the right, may suggest that for those politicians at the core of growing opposition to EU integration, individual experiences with institutions early in life further exacerbate anti-EU preferences and voting, highlighting the conditions under which early socialisation remains politically consequential even in highly structured partisan contestation. Future research should explore these dynamics to better understand the conditions under which the ‘scar’ of autocratic exposure in youth is more likely to manifest at the policy level – both in relation to the type of democratic socialisation and to subsequent socialisation into institutions and political parties.

## Notes

1. This average effect refers to the subset of votes for which MEPs’ preferences and backgrounds are more likely to influence their voting behaviour, and should therefore be interpreted as an upper bound. Section ‘Support for EU

integration' examines vote polarisation, the associated behaviour of MEPs, and the relevance of our analysis.

2. Similarly, second dimension of *NOMINATE* is also positively correlated (0.28) to 'positive mentions' of EU and negatively correlated ( $-0.21$ ) to 'negative mentions' of EU in the Manifesto project data.
3. More in details, if the average of *NOMINATE* scores of MEPs voting yes is positive, then yes are pro-EU and no are anti-EU, while the opposite is true if the average of *NOMINATE* scores of MEPs voting yes is negative.
4. Alternatively, we construct the dependent variable weighting pro-/anti-EU stances for each vote by the level of polarisation of the vote.
5. Importantly, the unit of observation in the regressions is the MEP-legislature. The polarisation threshold only determines which roll-call votes enter the construction of the dependent variable. After this selection step, we collapse voting behaviour at the MEP  $\times$  legislature level by averaging pro-EU stances across the selected votes. As a result, changing the polarisation threshold mainly affects the set of votes used to construct the dependent variable, rather than the number of observations in the regression sample.
6. The exact wording is: 'Some say European integration should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. Where would you place each of the following on the question of European integration?'
7. In particular, we exploit the question 'European Union: European unification go further or gone too far'.
8. German MEPs were classified as being from East or West Germany based on their hand-coded place of birth. While this is not always a perfect proxy for socialisation, given the substantial internal migration following WWII, this procedure provides a reliable indicator of early-life institutional exposure, which is the dimension most relevant for our analysis.
9. Results are unchanged if we also cluster at country  $\times$  cohort level to capture possible correlation among MEPs – results are shown in Table A.20.
10. Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom
11. We confirm this second aspect in the robustness checks by repeating our analysis to EP7 and EP8, which corroborates that in more recent legislatures *NOMD2* is not a good indicator for pro-anti/EU cleavage.
12. Summary statistics are displayed in Table A.6.
13. Slightly less than 10 per cent of MEPs in EP1–6 were born in a country different from the one where they are elected, and the differences between the two models stem from these observations.
14. Left- and right-wing MEPs are classified based on the first *NOMINATE* dimension. Specifically, MEPs are considered as left-wing if their *NOMINATE* score is below 1, and as right-wing otherwise.

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