# Research Conversation

## Pro-con EU Postdoc Project

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## Overview

1. Project Overview
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**Pro-Con EU**

**Project aims:**

▶ analyse the enlarging gaps between Proponents and Opponents of European Integration in terms of

  ▶ party politics
  ▶ citizen politics
  ▶ social media communication

**Main data sources:**

▶ Party manifestos

▶ Survey Data (EES)

▶ Twitter data

## WP4 Data

- ▶ EP 2019 Political campaigning on twitter dataset (Stier et al., 2020)
  - ▶ All tweets by MEP candidates, as well as public replies, mentions, and retweets
  - ▶ 16 million tweets
  - ▶ 28 countries, 31 languages
  - ▶ 500,000 MEP candidate tweets
  - ▶ 23 April - 30 May 2019

- ▶ EP 2014 Political campaigning on twitter for UK candidates

## Manual Coding

- ▶ 17 research assistants hired to code tweets across 10 languages
- ▶ 9,000 tweets per coder
- ▶ tweets split by candidate/public, then by country (for candidates), and language
- ▶ random sample taken for each language
  - ▶ weighted so that 75% candidate tweets, 25% public
- ▶ for languages with more than one coder, 2,000 of the tweets were coded by both for inter-coder reliability checks

**Table:** Tweet language distribution and sampling

| Country | Language | All tweets Candidates | Sampled tweets Candidates |
|---|---|---|---|
| UK | English | 131,332 | 13,500 |
| France | French | 62,403 | 13,500 |
| Spain | Spanish | 52,824 | 13,500 |
| Italy | Italian | 17,826 | 7,000 |
| Poland | Polish | 43,770 | 13,500 |
| Netherlands | Dutch | 13,793 | 7,500 |
| Germany* | German | 13,156 | 13,156 |
| Greece* | Greek | 4,349 | 4,349 |
| Ireland* | English | 14,697 | 14,697 |
| Hungary* | Hungarian | 326 | 326 |

*All candidate tweets were manually coded for these countries

## Language Distribution of 2019 MEP Candidate Tweets by Country

| | UK | Ireland | Spain | France | Germany | Italy | Greece | Poland | Hungary | Portugal | Netherlands | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| English | 131,322 | 14,697 | 3,166 | 980 | 1,804 | 296 | 244 | 985 | 664 | 1,982 | 1,670 | 1,547 |
| Spanish | 211 | 15 | 52,824 | 159 | 30 | 111 | | 58 | | 182 | 67 | 24 |
| Catalan | 87 | 14 | 17,687 | 22 | | | | | | 21 | | |
| French | 420 | 18 | 785 | 62,403 | 87 | 64 | | 36 | 18 | 63 | 61 | 26 |
| German | 352 | | 181 | 94 | 13,156 | 12 | | 57 | 60 | | 132 | 39 |
| Italian | 104 | | 155 | 233 | 19 | 17,826 | | 17 | | | 57 | 11 |
| Greek | | | | | 131 | | 4,349 | | | | | |
| Polish | 309 | | | | 12 | | | 43,770 | | | | |
| Hungarian | | | 10 | | | | | | 326 | | | |
| Portuguese | 67 | | 1,031 | 46 | 13 | 29 | | 21 | | 3,701 | 13 | 17 |
| Dutch | 69 | | 35 | 14 | 32 | | | | | | 13,793 | 17 |
| Swedish | 50 | | 12 | | 12 | | | 10 | | | | 16,074 |
| Other | 4,543 | 446 | 3,260 | 1,313 | 639 | 1,054 | 505 | 2,027 | 70 | 230 | 735 | 992 |

**% of Country's tweets in each language**

0    25    50    75    100
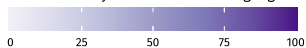
Cells with < 10 tweets unlabelled, empty cells with 0 tweets left as white.

## Coding Process

- ► Coders were asked to label tweets across a range of features, including:
  - ► sentiment
  - ► communication style (broadcasting opinions, vs engaging with other users)
  - ► campaign messaging
  - ► political issues

For tweets that mentioned political issues, these were then grouped into 10 categories:

1. Economy
2. Environment
3. Immigration
4. Brexit
5. EU

6. Support for democratic values
7. Opposition to democratic values
8. Anti-elitism
9. Crime and justice
10. Other (recategorized as transport, health, education, etc)

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## Machine Learning Classifier

- ▶ For countries/languages where all tweets cannot be manually coded, we apply classification methods using the human coded training set
- ▶ Text pre-processing
- ▶ Binary classification models for each individual issue at the tweet level
  - ▶ Extreme Gradient Boosting (xgBoost) models
- ▶ Model performance varies across issues and languages, performing worst where we have limited human coded samples

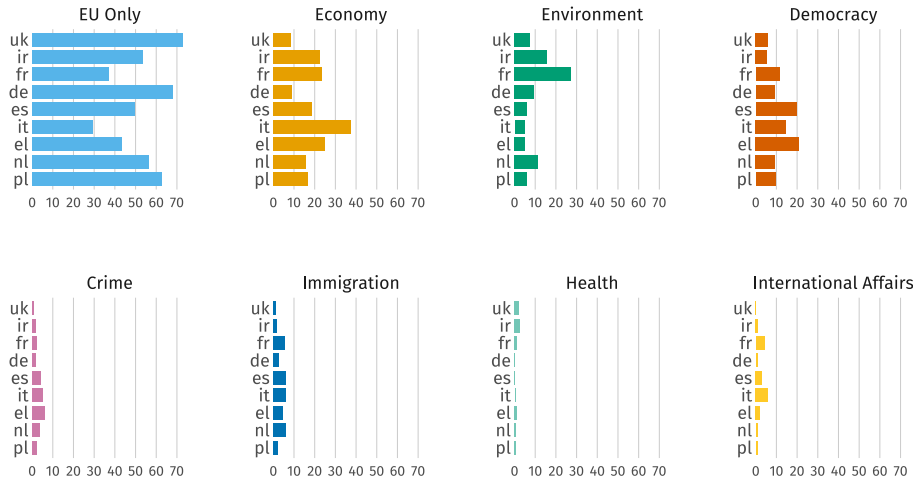## Political Issues Discussed by 2019 EP Candidates on Twitter

Tweets by 2019 MEP candidates that mention at least one political issue
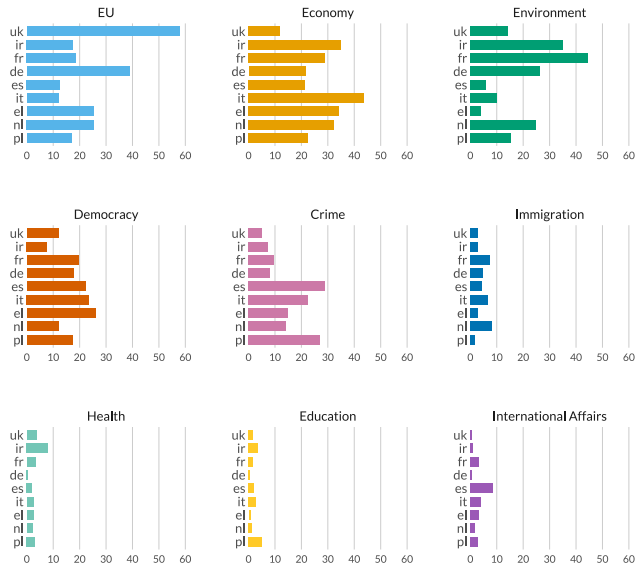
% of country tweets that mention each issue

## Political Issues Mentioned Alongside the EU by 2019 EP Candidates on Twitter

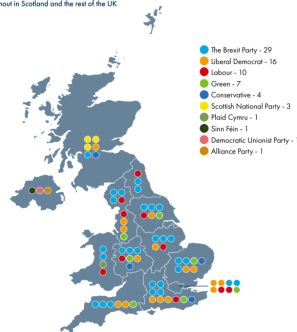Tweets by 2019 MEP candidates that mention the EU

% of country EU tweets that mention each issue

## UK 2019 EP Election

► **UK participation**

  ► Delays to Brexit resulted in having to hold EP elections at short notice

  ► UK MEPs would only hold their seats for a few months, before being redistributed to other member states

  ► Rare example of an election where office-related benefits are curbed

► **What do you campaign on when the rewards for winning are limited?**



**2019 European Parliament Elections**
Election results and voter turnout in Scotland and the rest of the UK

- The Brexit Party - 29
- Liberal Democrat - 16
- Labour - 10
- Green - 7
- Conservative - 4
- Scottish National Party - 3
- Plaid Cymru - 1
- Sinn Féin - 1
- Democratic Unionist Party - 1
- Alliance Party - 1

## Party campaigning strategy

- ▶ Parties can talk about issues they own (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2021), or issues popular with the public (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016; Barberá et al., 2019)
- ▶ Issue responsiveness tends to be lower in second order elections (Binzer Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016)

**UK**

- ▶ Strategic factors that promote coherent campaign communication much weaker here
  - ▶ Office seeking incentives curbed
  - ▶ Vote seeking incentives muted by lack of time/resources attached to the campaign by parties
- ▶ Beyond Brexit issue, more freedom to pursue preferred policy platform

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## The dilemmas of UK candidates

► Parties have little incentive to build coherent issues appeals beyond the topic of Brexit, less co-coordinated campaigns, and more freedom for individual candidates
► Office-seeking motivations reduced for top candidates
    ► Eligible candidates are now in a similar position to lower candidates, their career is dependent on the goodwill of the party

► Static career ambitions no longer an options
    ► Name recognition and the ability to stand out are essential (i.e. individual profile) important for progressive career ambitions

**Do candidates follow the party line or do they try to differentiate themselves from the party?**

Figure: Candidate Tweets Mentioning Party's Top 3 Issues by Country

Proportion of candidate issue tweets that
mention any of their party's top 3 issues
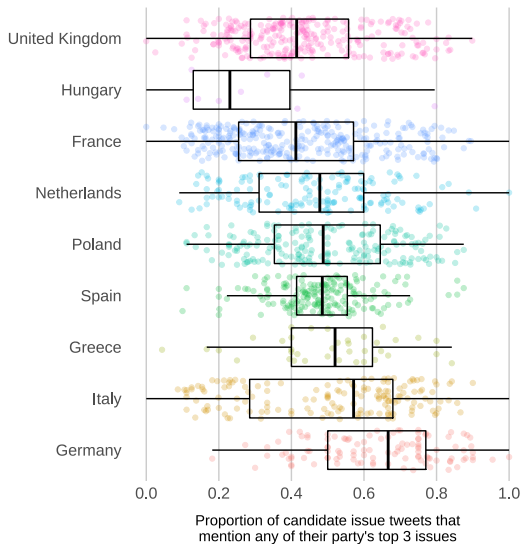
## Overview

- ▶ How issues around EU integration shape party competition

**Research Questions**

Across online campaign communication:

- ▶ Which parties are the main drivers behind the salience of the EU issue?
- ▶ How do parties link (embed) the EU to other political issues?

- ▶ Focus on social media allows to study the direct communication of parties with voters

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## EU Salience - The role of challenger parties

▶ Challenger vs. dominant parties

▶ EU issues-Polity (nature of the EU) vs. Policy (role in policy making)

▶ Salience of these these issues has increased over time (De Vries, 2018; Braun and Grande, 2021; Bakker et al., 2018)

▶ EU salience previously driven by challenger parties (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Hobolt and de Vries, 2015; Ehin and Talving, 2021)

▶ Consistent evidence of a shift in this pattern since 2014
  ▶ Dominant parties increasingly likely to engage with EU issue (Eugster et al., 2021; Braun and Grande, 2021; Fazekas et al., 2020)
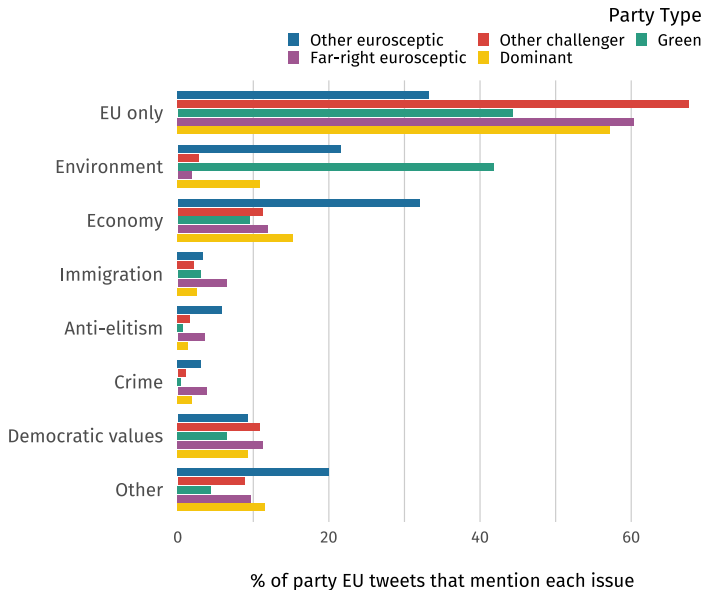
**EU Issue Embedding - Polity or Policy?**

- ▶ Gradual shift from challenger parties outward hostility to EU, towards calls for reform (Braun et al., 2016; Brack, 2020; Treib, 2021)
  - ▶ Shift in strategy to link the EU to core issue ownership

- ▶ Dominant parties-no longer risky and costly to talk about the EU
  - ▶ But post-Brexit, shift towards emphasising positives of the EU project (Hobolt et al., 2022)

  H1 Challenger parties are more likely to **embed EU policy issues** than dominant parties.

**The Issues Parties Mention when Discussing the EU**
Tweets by 2019 MEP candidates that mention the EU

Party Type
- Other eurosceptic
- Far-right eurosceptic
- Other challenger
- Dominant
- Green

% of party EU tweets that mention each issue

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## Results

**2019 EP Campaign Findings**

- ▶ Substantial cross-national variation across all three items
- ▶ Dominant parties tend to be the main promoter of the EU issue
- ▶ Certain challenger parties more likely to embed EU policy issues
  - ▶ Greens, far-left & moderate eurosceptics
- ▶ Far-right eurosceptic parties seem to link the EU to a narrower set of issues than dominant parties,

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