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Mobilizing Europe's citizens to take action on migration and climate change: behavioral evidence from 27 EU member states

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how two politicized issues – migration and climate change – mobilize citizens across European countries. Building on the concept of issue-specific mobilization potentials, we examine citizens' willingness to support petitions related to the two issues using an original behavioral measure embedded in the 2024 European Parliament Election Study. We document variation in political engagement and examine how opposing stances on issues owned by the left or the right mobilize citizens, how citizens' agreement with issue positions affects support, and whether grievances, participation cultures, politicization levels, and the ideology of the national government can explain national-level variation. Our results indicate substantial variation in petition support across countries and issues, with the right-wing petition on migration attracting the most support. However, our country-level measures do not explain this variation well. Overall, our findings highlight the need for more nuanced, issue-specific approaches to understanding cross-national patterns of political participation.

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Introduction

Although voting remains the most common form of political participation, European citizens draw on a diverse repertoire to express their political opinions (Giugni & Grasso, 2022; Rojon et al., 2025). The 2024 European Parliament Elections, for instance, were not just about casting ballots; voting was accompanied by a variety of contentious and noncontentious actions, with citizens actively participating in street protests or engaging directly with their representatives concerning salient issues like climate change, migration, or the war in Ukraine. However, there is considerable and poorly understood variation in such nonelectoral political participation within and across European countries, especially concerning different issue areas. Understanding this variation becomes more important as electoral turnout continues to decline in many countries, trust in political parties and representative institutions erodes (e.g., Petrarca et al., 2022), and alternative forms of participation, such as petition drives, demonstrations, or civil disobedience, and direct engagement with politicians through social media are on the rise (Ortiz et al., 2022; Theocharis et al., 2023; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018).

We contribute to the scholarly debate on the level and drivers of nonelectoral participation by adopting an issue-based approach and providing original evidence from across member states of the European Union (EU), distinguishing our study from most previous cross – national analyses (e.g., Dalton et al., 2010; Kostelka & Rovny, 2019; Vráblíková, 2014). Specifically, we examine petition signing – one of the most common forms of nonelectoral participation – in the context of two highly salient and polarized political issues: migration and climate change. Taking a cross-issue and cross-national comparative perspective, we assess differences between engagement on migration, often politicized by the right, and climate change, typically pushed on the agenda by the left. Using data from an original questionnaire module fielded as part of the 2024 European Parliament Election Study (Popa et al., 2024), in which different petitions are randomly assigned to respondents, we explore how opposing policy proposals on these issues mobilize citizens. Furthermore, we examine the extent to which mobilization is shaped by aggregate support levels or by contextual factors identified in the scholarly literature as drivers of nonelectoral participation.

Our study bridges the literature on political participation (for a recent overview, see Giugni & Grasso, 2022) with research on polarization and cleavage transformation in European societies (e.g., Bornschier, 2010; Bornschier et al., 2024; Dassonneville et al., 2023; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Koedam et al., 2025; Kriesi et al., 2012, 2008). While participation research has documented citizens' diverse action repertoires (Jeroense & Spierings, 2023; Oser, 2022; Rojon et al., 2025), it often neglects the specific issues that drive mobilization

(Borbáth, 2024; Kriesi, 2008). In contrast, studies on polarization and cleavage transformation have focused on how new issue divides reshape European politics but have paid limited attention to mobilization beyond elections and party competition (Borbáth et al., 2023; Hutter, 2014). By addressing these gaps and bridging the literature, this study advances our understanding of issue-specific and country-specific variation in participation in nonelectoral politics across the EU.

We move beyond standard survey measures, which – since the classic study by Barnes and Kaase (1979) on conventional and unconventional political participation – have typically asked about general involvement or intentions regarding specific participation forms without considering particular issues or demands (see, e.g., the question batteries in the European Social Survey). Instead, we reintroduce issue variation and positions by adopting the concept of ‘issue-specific mobilization potential’ from social movement studies, which is defined as ‘an individual’s propensity to engage in certain political activities to defend his or her position regarding a specific issue’ (Kriesi et al., 1993, p. 155; see also Mercea et al., 2024).

Methodologically, our study innovates in two ways. First, we employ random assignment of invitations to support petitions, presenting respondents with one of four policy proposals, each reflecting opposing stances on two major EU-wide issues: migration and climate change. This removes self-selection in exposure to petition support opportunities and enables direct measurement of willingness to support petitions if exogenously presented with the opportunity to do so.¹ Second, we advance previous studies by using a behavioral outcome measure – respondents are asked if they would like to endorse the assigned policy proposal by supporting a petition-like endeavor. This approach captures a behavioral response in two senses. The action is a real political action, in the sense that, as in a standard petition, respondents are told that their support for actions is to be shared with political actors in the European parliament, albeit in anonymized form. It is also the case that supporting the petition requires a small but explicit action to access the petition screen, adding a minimal yet meaningful behavioral component to the survey. While we consider our measure behavioral, it clearly represents a relatively weak form given its integration within a standard survey format. However, we also note that prior research suggests that even purely intentional measures can be reliable proxies for actual participation (Quintelier & Blais, 2016).

The primary aim of this paper is descriptive: to showcase the potential of our innovative measure of issue-specific signing of petitions related to migration and climate change across all EU member states. We anticipate substantial variation across countries and issues. While the study was pre-registered, and we closely follow the specified analyses (see Section 7 in the Supplementary Materials), this article is exploratory, given that, to our

knowledge, there is no comparable study on issue-specific political participation across such a broad set of countries in general and hardly any comparative research on signature collections in particular.

Our results indicate significant variation in petition-support rates by petition issue, political alignment of petitions, and country. On average, 21.7% of respondents supported a petition, aligning with European Social Survey benchmarks. There is striking variation, however, with right-wing petitions receiving the most support and climate petitions in general receiving less support. At the individual level, we observe a statistically robust relation between citizens' issue positions and their likelihood of engagement. This relationship, though statistically strong, is substantively weaker than we might expect, as we see a surprising number of respondents supporting positions that advocate positions that do not align with previously expressed opinions. Differences in issue positions play almost no role in explaining cross-country differences, which are overwhelmingly driven by baseline participation rates in a country. Our examination of drivers of this cross-national variation has, for the most part, not been successful. Theory-motivated analyses of grievances, protest culture, politicization levels, and national government ideology reveal limited support for the idea that these factors explain cross-national variation in engagement; notably, we find a positive association between grievances and climate-related participation, but we do not find the same relation with migration-related participation.

Overall, our analysis advances a more nuanced understanding of political participation both across policy issues and countries. As expected, we observe substantial variation within and between EU member states, as well as across issue areas. At the same time, our findings underscore the need for further research to better identify the individual- and context-level factors that drive these patterns of participation.

Theoretical expectations on issue-specific participation

Our study adopts a classical understanding of political participation, defined as 'action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes' (Brady, 1999, p. 737). Building on this definition, this paper focuses on political action available to citizens beyond election day, ranging from institutionalized activities like contacting a politician to non-institutionalized actions such as signing a petition or participating in public demonstrations (e.g., Hooghe & Marien, 2013). These nonelectoral forms have increasingly become normalized in contemporary democracies, i.e., used by a broader segment of the population to advance a more diverse set of claims (e.g., Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001).

We selected petition signing as one of the many forms of nonelectoral participation for several reasons. First, it is a widespread and accessible form of

engagement (Dalton, 2017), allowing individuals across diverse socio-economic backgrounds to participate with minimal effort. Second, petitions are inherently expressive and directly tied to a specific demand, making them particularly suitable for studying issue-based mobilization dynamics. By signing a petition, individuals signal their stance on a concrete policy proposal rather than merely expressing a general political orientation. Finally, while petition signing is a relatively individualized form of participation, it still relies on political supply, as petitions are typically initiated and structured by organizations, advocacy groups, and broader political campaigns. This combination of individual agency and external mobilization efforts makes petitions a valuable tool for analyzing how citizens respond to structured participation opportunities.

Beyond these conceptual reasons, recent research underscores the role of petitions in participation repertoires. While our study focuses on a single participation act, treating petition signing as a noninstitutionalized and expressive mode of engagement, findings suggest that petitions are among the few forms embedded across multiple participation profiles. Jeroense and Spierings (2023) for the Netherlands and Oser (2022) for the US show that, except for vote specialists, who engage solely in elections, and inactive citizens, petition signing is consistently practiced by expressive voters (who combine voting with petitions and online expression), active insiders (who participate in all modes), and expressive outsiders (who engage in nonelectoral channels such as contacting politicians and petitioning). Similarly, Rojon et al. (2025) find that across several countries, only a small percentage of citizens participate apart from voting, boycotting, petitioning, and social media expression, reinforcing the idea that petitions belong to a core set of participation forms that transcend electoral engagement. Given their prevalence across diverse participation profiles, petitions offer an ideal lens to study mobilization beyond voting while avoiding highly specialized or relatively marginal forms of nonelectoral participation.

Classical research on political participation has examined why certain individuals or social groups are more likely to engage politically, highlights factors such as higher socio-economic status (Verba et al., 1995), political alienation (Finifter, 1970), or value orientations (Inglehart, 1977). More recent studies, informed by social movement theories and leveraging advancements in cross-national survey data, have enhanced our understanding of the variation in nonelectoral political participation across countries (see below). These studies have often mirrored the classical explanatory triad from social movement research, introducing concepts like opportunities, grievances, and resources as drivers of political action (Mcadam et al., 1996).

Adopting these concepts in political participation research reflects an effort to complement the field's longstanding emphasis on individual-level explanations, which have yielded important insights into political behavior.

In contrast, social movement research has long treated protest as a collective action embedded in broader political processes, offering a more contextualized and issue-based perspective on political engagement (see Kriesi, 2008). Our approach draws from this latter tradition, aiming to extend existing models by incorporating context and issue-specific dynamics, rather than replacing individual-level accounts. At the same time, we acknowledge that most of the research cited below does not differentiate petition signing from other acts classified under nonelectoral or protest participation but instead tends to analyze them collectively, often by constructing composite indices.

A key insight from the political opportunity structure approach is the connection between activities outside mainstream political institutions and the broader political context. The cross-national perspective on political opportunity structures, pioneered by Kitschelt's (1986) seminal study on anti-nuclear mobilization and further advanced by Kriesi et al. (1995) in their work on new social movements, has led political participation scholars to explore the effects of institutional openness on levels of nonelectoral participation. Polity level features that have been identified in this literature include general measures of democratic development (e.g., Anderson & Mendes, 2006; Dalton et al., 2010) as well as more specific aspects of the political opportunity structure within democracies (e.g., Braun & Hutter, 2016; Fatke & Freitag, 2013; Joshua Kjerulf Dubrow et al., 2008; Spina, 2014; van der Meer et al., 2009; Vráblíková, 2014).

Generally, these studies suggest that overall democratic development has a stronger positive effect on nonelectoral participation than variations in institutional contexts. For instance, Dalton et al. (2010) found a significant positive relationship between the openness of a political system (measured by the rule of law index from the World Bank) and the level of protest (measured by an index including actions such as signing petitions). Conversely, van der Meer et al. (2009) identified only limited evidence for a direct effect of the consensus versus majoritarian democracy distinction on protest levels, noting that contacting politicians tends to be less common in consensus democracies. Similarly, Vráblíková (2014) found that vertical (territorial) and horizontal (veto powers) decentralization positively affect levels of nonelectoral participation.

Research focusing on grievances and resources to explain cross-national variation in nonelectoral participation has emphasized economic factors, understood as motivations to participate and as proxies for the mobilization capacity in society. Comparative studies examining a broad set of countries worldwide generally found a positive impact of economic development on the level of nonelectoral participation. Dalton et al. (2010), for example, reported a strong positive linear relationship between GDP per capita and the level of protest participation. However, focusing on European countries only, van der Meer et al. (2009) and Vráblíková

(2014) identified no substantial associations between economic development and protest behavior.

In the specific context of economic crises, Kern et al. (2015) suggested that while higher levels of economic development might correlate with increased nonelectoral participation, sudden negative economic shifts, such as rising unemployment, lead to a decline in participation. Relatedly, Kurer et al. (2019) demonstrated that during the Great Recession, even structural economic disadvantages did not hinder political involvement in a highly mobilized environment. Put differently, their findings show that the relationship between individual hardship and political action is moderated by the level of political mobilization in country, highlighting the crucial role of mobilizing resources and the political supply available.

Yet, these studies usually neglect the role of specific issues that might motivate citizens to take action. Citizens typically mobilize on specific policy issues that are salient to them. While there is variation depending on the type of political participation, there are always some minimum costs of engagement. Consequently, citizens do not sign a petition or march on the streets for an issue that does not matter to them (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). Despite the issue focus of political protests, prior research on political participation has largely ignored the issue-based nature of political mobilization. As Borbáth (2024) has recently argued, this neglect is mainly because the items implemented in cross-national surveys typically ask about participation in general, neglecting the role of the specific issues or mobilization contexts more generally.

From a theoretical and empirical perspective, recent research on polarization and cleavage transformation in European democracies has emphasized the degree to which particular issues are articulated by political entrepreneurs across various arenas, thereby mobilizing people differently depending on the topic at hand (e.g., Bornschier, 2010; Bornschier et al., 2024; Dassonneville et al., 2023; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2012, 2008). Two policy issues that have become particularly important for political mobilization in recent years are migration and climate change. The rise of the far right has been accelerated by increasing migration flows (Rooduijn et al., 2024), and there have been large-scale demonstrations calling for action against climate change in many countries (De Moor et al., 2020).

Still, the two policy issues differ significantly in certain regards. Right-wing populist parties compete for votes with a nativist agenda. They emphasize a strong, exclusionary national identity and portray immigrants and minorities as threats to cultural and economic stability (Mudde, 2004). This rhetoric frequently appeals to fears of cultural erosion and promotes policies aimed at restricting migration. Concerns about migration, fueled by the far right, extend beyond the ballot box and influence nonelectoral politics and grassroots activities (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022; Pirro et al., 2024).

In contrast, the environment initially emerged as a valence issue championed by left – libertarian social movements in the 1980s, contributing to the rise of Green parties across Europe (Spoon, 2011). Recently, concerns about climate change have spurred a new generation of young activists to engage in nonelectoral mobilization, both in the streets and beyond. A study by Borbáth and Hutter (2024) on the cross-national spread of environmental protest in Europe shows that groups like Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Last Generation have led a new wave of protest, encompassing a wide range of civil society groups across countries. Importantly, as in earlier periods of politicization, the political left has largely driven this issue onto the agenda. At the same time, far-right parties have increasingly campaigned against environmental policies, framing them as economically harmful and restrictive for working-class citizens (Dickson & Hobolt, 2024).

There are strong reasons to reconsider whether and how issues matter when studying political participation. Given the intense politicization of both policy issues in recent years, it is unsurprising that migration and climate change rank highly in survey ratings on the importance of policy issues for citizens motivating political behavior (e.g., on the 2019 European Parliament Elections, see Braun & Schäfer, 2022). Yet, studies on polarization and protest participation also indicate substantial cross-national variation, highlighting that the migration issue has been pre-dominantly owned by the right, whereas climate change has primarily been politicized by the left. This aligns with Sorace's (2025) findings, which show that attitudes toward climate change and migration form distinct groups when examining the homogenization of public opinion in the EU.

As a baseline, one would expect participation to be primarily driven by citizens' alignment with the petition at hand, and that average ideological support for a policy proposal within a country explains its aggregate support levels.² While such mechanisms are widely studied in the context of voting behavior, they remain relatively underexplored in research on nonelectoral participation: the vast majority of studies do not consider the issue-specific nature of participation. By directly addressing this gap, our study also allows us to assess the effects of positional alignment between petition content and citizen preferences. At the same time, as emphasized in both the participation and social movement literature, participation is shaped not only by predispositions at the individual level but also by the broader context of mobilization.

Building on this theoretical foundation and scholarship examining cross-national variation in nonelectoral participation, we focus on four specific factors in the following analysis: (1) we examine whether grievances related to migration and climate change affect citizens' petition participation; (2) we consider the extent to which a country's general protest culture –

reflecting overall protest supply and opportunities – influences participation rates; and (3) we assess whether the politicization of the issue in the public at large explains variation. In addition to a citizen's alignment with the petition at hand, we thus expect all three contextual factors – grievances potentially mitigated by the petition, protest culture, and issue politicization – to show a positive association with issue-specific petition-signing rates across the studied EU member states. Finally, (4) we investigate whether the ideological leaning of the national government in terms of left-right orientation affects citizens' willingness to participate. This can be described as one way of looking at political opportunity structures. Here, we consider two competing mechanisms: On the one hand, issue-specific signing rates could increase if there is ideological congruence between the national government and the proposed policy. Citizens might expect that the national government will also push for respective policies on the European level and, hence, assume a higher probability of implementation. On the other hand, if national governments are expected to oppose a petition due to their ideological position, citizens might perceive the EU as a different input channel. In this case, incongruence with the national government could motivate increased participation rates for the respective petitions.

Data and empirical strategy

The study uses public opinion data from all 27 member states of the European Union, which was collected within the framework of the 2024 European Election Study (Popa et al., 2024). The data-gathering process was administered by *Demoscopy* and accompanied by a team at GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences.³ We draw in particular from an original questionnaire module that focuses on political participation.⁴ This analyses for this component were pre-registered (<https://osf.io/s6bvfh>).⁵ The module was approved by research ethics committees at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center and at GESIS.

Population and fieldwork period

The population consists of the voting-age population in each country. Respondents were drawn from existing online-access panels curated by *Demoscopy* and partners. The fieldwork started directly after the 2024 European Parliament Elections took place and ran from 10 June to 30 June.

Respondent selection

Selection from online access panels aimed to fulfill specific population quota fulfillment in regard to the country's distribution of (inter alia) gender, age, region, and level of urbanization.

Sample size

The minimum sample size for each country was 1,000 respondents. For countries with smaller populations, specifically Malta, Cyprus, and Luxembourg, the target number was a minimum of 500 respondents. All in all, the dataset includes information on 25,904 citizens. Due to missing information concerning our variables of interest, the number of cases drops to 24,375 for this study.⁶

Design and measures

In each country, respondents were assigned randomly to one of four groups. Each group received a specific policy proposal as a treatment. We look at the areas of migration and climate change policies, and we include opposing policy proposals for each area (Table 1). Respondents were informed that policies like these are currently being discussed in the EU and asked whether they were inclined to share their opinions on these policies by supporting a petition. This allows us to measure issue-specific nonelectoral political participation.

Our outcome measure captures whether respondents chose to support a petition whose aggregate result would be presented to European politicians.⁷ Specifically respondents were asked if they would like to be anonymously 'added' to the petition. The full wording can be found in the Supplementary Materials (Section 6). Respondents first had to type 'EU2024' in a text field to access the petition screen. We added this as a small hurdle resembling some costs of participation, in addition to the fact that respondents were also informed that this part of the survey was not mandatory and that they would nevertheless receive their full compensation if they finished the survey directly. Putting it differently, dropping out at this stage – without even reading through our module – would not have affected their remuneration. Taken together, this is intended to increase external validity as real-world participation also always comes with certain costs.⁸ After typing in the correct code, respondents could either ask to be added (anonymously) to the petition or close the survey. Hence, our primary outcome measure is binary (1 = added to the petition).

The degree to which respondents agree with the policy proposal at stake is determined from the answers to two items. These issue positions were

Table 1. Overview of treatments.

Issue	Treatment (policy proposal)
Migration (right)	Secure stricter controls at its external borders to strongly limit immigration
Migration (left)	Create safe and humanitarian routes into the EU allowing for more immigration
Climate (left)	Implement stronger measures to fight climate change even if this means rising energy costs for everyone
Climate (right)	Prioritize low energy costs for everyone even if this means that climate change goals cannot be achieved

measured pre-treatment. Indeed, our entire module measuring participation was presented after respondents completed the regular 2024 EES questionnaire while the items concerning issue positions were placed roughly in the middle of the questionnaire. This limits potential priming effects, framing or related issues affecting our outcome measure. The position on migration refers to being fully opposed to (0) or fully in favor of (10) a restrictive policy on migration.⁹ Concerning climate change, we use the respondent's position, ranging between 'limiting climate change should take priority even at the cost of economic growth' (0) and 'economic growth should take priority even at the cost of accelerating climate' change (10). The items allow us to validate the assumption that issue agreement drives participation. [Figure 1](#) shows the distribution of average positions on the two substantive issues across countries. Strikingly, we see no evidence of a positive correlation between positions on these issues across countries. For example, Cyprus shows the most right-wing average position on migration but one of the most left-wing average positions on climate; Slovakia shows exactly the opposite pattern. The overall individual-level correlation between the items is, in fact, negative ($r = -0.03$), though both correlate weakly in the expected direction with self-placement on a left-right scale. This supports the argument that the two issues are not aligned in the political competition space (see Kenny & Langsæther, 2023).

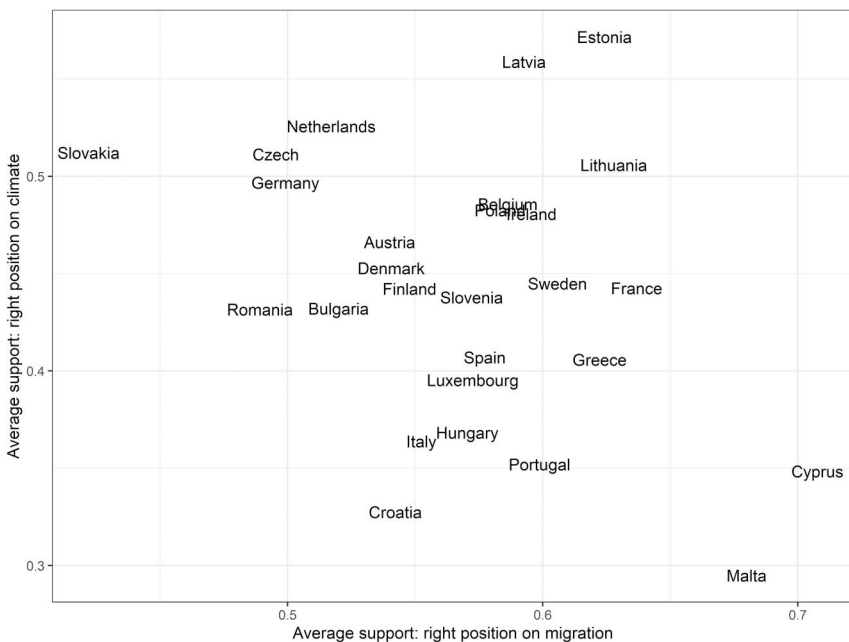


Figure 1. Distribution of positions in migration and climate, country averages.

At the country level, measuring contextual effects, (1) we look at grievances represented by the most recent figures on a country's migrant (United Nations, 2020) and refugee population (Eurostat, 2024) measured relative to the population size as well as the 2021 Vulnerability Index by the Notre Dame Global Adaption Initiative (Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 2024). The latter indicates countries' exposure, sensitivity, and capacity to adapt to the negative effects of climate change. (2) Our analysis includes standardized protest participant data from an updated version of the protest event data from the Observatory for Political Conflict and Democracy (PolDem) covering the years 2000–2021 (Kriesi et al., 2020). We use this measure of protest incidence as our measure of nonelectoral protest culture.¹⁰ Moreover, (3) we are interested in the politicization of the two issues in each country, and we run analyses with three different measures. We look at polarization by calculating the standard deviation of the two issue position measures described above (see also Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Hobolt & Hoerner, 2020). By relying on the same items, we define public salience as the mean of the absolute difference from the scale midpoint – assuming that more extreme positions are associated with a larger importance for an individual as they indicate a stronger wish for change motivating participation (e.g., Kioussis & McDevitt, 2008).¹¹ After normalizing these two measures, we multiply the values to get an index of politicization, following related approaches analyzing party competition (e.g., Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Finally, (4) we investigate whether the national government's left-right position relates to country-specific participation rates. Our measure builds on information from the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon et al., 2024), updated as new governments have been formed since the last year covered in the data set (2022). We subtract the proportion of cabinet positions held by left-wing parties from the respective proportion held by right-wing parties, thereby indirectly considering the proportion of positions held by centrist parties. The scale runs from –1 (left) to 1 (right). Summary statistics for all variables at the country level are provided in Supplementary Material (Section 1).¹²

Estimation

In addition to descriptive evidence, we focus on three analytical steps, all of which have been pre-registered (<https://osf.io/s6bvfh>). The primary analysis focuses on our expectations that there is substantial variation between issues as well as countries. The secondary analysis focuses on separating variation due to preferences and general propensity to participate. The tertiary analysis focuses on national context,

The primary analysis estimates the following simple hierarchical model:

$$Y_{ij} = a_j + e_{ij}, a_j \sim N(\mu_a, \sigma_a)$$

where Y_{ij} is the decision to be added to a petition by individual i in country j , for any of the petitions.

Here, a_j captures the overall engagement level in country j , μ_a captures the expected level for a country, and σ_a captures cross-country heterogeneity. This analysis is deliberately simple, seeking to estimate only the overall variability in engagement across countries.

The secondary analysis examines variation across the four petitions and seeks to decompose differences between countries into differences that are due to differences in attitudes (X) and differences that are due to variation in propensity to act given attitudes. For intuition, if we find greater support for a petition in country A than in country B, this could be because more citizens in country A support the petition; but it could also arise even if attitudes are the same in the two countries but there is a greater propensity to take political action in country A. Our decomposition exercise seeks to assess how much a country's deviation from the average can be attributed to these two components.

To distinguish between these logics, for each petition, we use hierarchical models to estimate:

$$Y_{ij} = a_j + b_j X_i + e_{ij}, \quad a_j \sim N(\mu_a, \sigma_a), \quad b_j \sim N(\mu_b, \sigma_b)$$

where X_i is coded to reflect support for the position of the petition in question.

National-level variation in country j that can be attributed to attitudes in country j is then given by:

$$\delta^x := b_j(\bar{X}_j - \bar{X})$$

where \bar{X}_j is the average attitude on an issue in country j and \bar{X} is the overall average. $(\bar{X}_j - \bar{X})$ is then j 's deviation in attitudes, which may be positive or negative.

Variation due to mobilization in country j is then given by:

$$\delta^b := (a_j - \mu_a) + (b_j - \mu_b)\bar{X}$$

This captures the expected difference in participation we would see across countries even if they all had the same attitudes, on average, on the issue in question.

Note that this is a decomposition in that:

$$\begin{aligned} \bar{Y}_j - \bar{Y} &= (a_j + b_j \bar{X}_j) - (\mu_a + \mu_b \bar{X}) = (a_j - \mu_a + (b_j - \mu_b)\bar{X}) + b_j(\bar{X}_j - \bar{X}) \\ &= \delta^x + \delta^b \end{aligned}$$

However, there is no imposition that δ^b and δ^x have the same sign. Hence, these values cannot be converted into the share of the deviation that is

due to behaviors or preferences. The decomposition is then compared across the four petition versions.

Our tertiary analysis explores country-level factors that help explain variation in a_j for individuals supportive of the position. That is, conditioning on respondents whose preferences are above the mid-value (appropriately signed for each petition), we estimate:

$$Y_{ij} = a_j + e_{ij}, a_j \sim N(X\beta, \sigma_a)$$

A pre-registered set of country covariates X is examined, with each covariate entering the model on its own.

In the Supplementary Materials we describe a small number of deviations from our pre-analysis plan (see Section 7) and provide additional analyses (Section 5) for alternative measures.

Results

Before moving to our pre-registered analyses, we present some descriptive patterns in the data. Overall, 21.7% of the citizens supported the petition. This is comparable to typical figures from the European Social Survey (European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure, 2024), which regularly asks whether an individual has signed a petition in the last 12 months. If we look at the four petitions separately, there is substantial variation, with the two left-wing petitions showing the lowest (18.9%), the right-wing climate petition moderate support, and the right-wing migration petition showing the greatest support (26.7%).

Figure 2 shows the share of respondents supporting each petition by country, underscoring significant variation across both countries and issues.

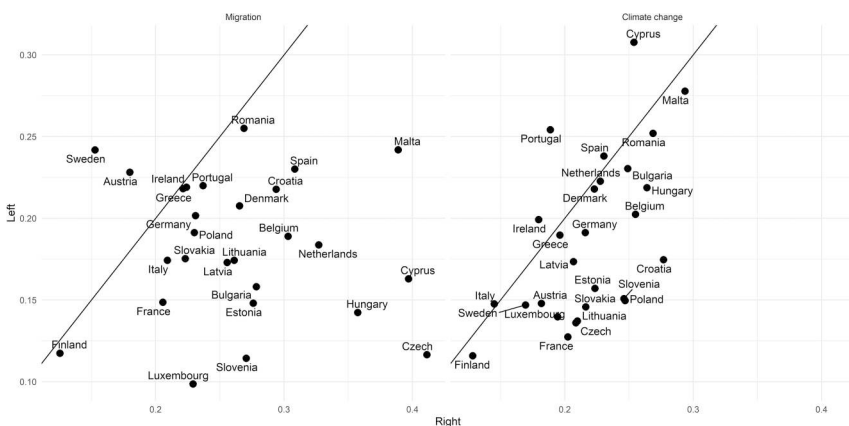


Figure 2. Share of respondents supporting petitions with left-wing policy proposals on the y-axis and right-wing proposals on the x-axis.

Overall, support for right-wing positions on migration is highest. Indeed, except for Sweden and Austria, the proportion backing the right-wing petition surpasses that of the left-wing petition in each country. When opportunities for political mobilization arise, citizens appear more inclined to take action aimed at limiting further migration to Europe.

Climate change, however, exhibits a somewhat different pattern: high support for one petition often correlates with high support for the opposing petition. Although the right-wing petition for climate change still tends to attract slightly more support, the distribution of countries is noticeably closer to the 45-degree line. This positive slope suggests greater polarization within countries – even as the salience of the issue varies considerably across countries. While the difference between the two issues is not as large as one might expect, the results as a whole still point to the distinct driving forces of politicization – namely, the political right for migration and the political left for climate change.

Looking at Spearman's rank correlations further supports these interpretations: there is a weak but negative correlation between the proportion of citizens supporting right- and left-wing petitions when it comes to migration ($r = -0.08$). The respective correlation for the climate change issue is positive and higher ($r = 0.45$). Interestingly, we find the highest correlations for the two right-wing petitions ($r = 0.72$) and a substantial positive correlation for the two left-wing petitions ($r = 0.45$). This country-level correlation is striking given citizens' issue position on migration and climate change are basically uncorrelated.

Figure 3 shows how support depends on citizens' attitudes on an issue. As expected, we find a positive trend for all four petition versions. Citizens who are more in line with the content of the petition show greater support. There are three additional interesting findings: (1) The shapes of the functions differ, with the relationship between citizens' attitudes and support for the petition close to linear only for the left-wing petition on migration. For the remaining three, we see a rather flat pattern (even downward sloping) up to the mid-point of the attitudinal items' scale, followed by a steep increase. In other words, for three out of four treatments, it does not matter whether you are strongly or only moderately opposed to the policy proposal named in the petition when it comes to participation. It matters a lot, however, if a citizen is moderately or strongly in favor. (2) The differences in proportion between being strongly opposed and strongly in favor are not very large. There is variation across conditions, with the right-wing migration and the left-wing climate change treatment showing larger differences – for the latter, the figure nearly doubles. Still, the actual effect of positional agreement seems relatively small overall. (3) Even more striking, Figure 3 indicates that the probability of supporting the petition is substantially high even if there is no positional agreement. For the two right-wing petitions, figures are around 25% for respondents with opposite views on the issue and about

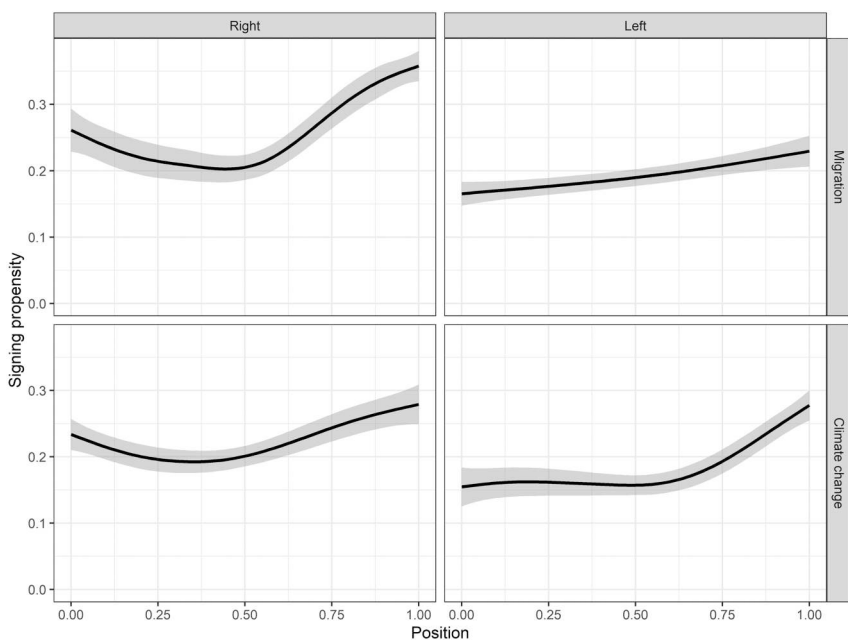


Figure 3. Petition support as a function of citizens' position on each issue.

15% for the left-wing petitions. This broad pattern is also true across countries, though it varies somewhat, as we have seen, by petition type.

These last two findings are puzzling. Clearly, one would expect much weaker support among nominal opponents to a petition. In the Supplementary Materials (Section 4), we compare survey completion times for signers and non-signers to check whether signers are 'speeders' – we see no evidence for this, however. Alternative explanations could be noise in the preference measures, noise in the petition measure, or the possibility that some share of respondents simply want to use the petition to raise the salience of an issue. We currently cannot distinguish between these last three explanations. We, therefore, focus more on the differences across petitions than on their levels in the discussion.

Our first analysis confirms that there is substantial variation between countries when it comes to supporting the petitions. We present our analytical findings with the help of figures. Results tables and additional information can, however, be found in the Supplementary Material (especially in Section 2). [Figure 4](#) presents our Bayesian estimates taking account of sampling uncertainty (black dots) in comparison to raw means (red dots) for each country. The hierarchical model is nearly split when it comes to over- or underestimating the proportion of citizens supporting a petition. Considering that samples in Cyprus, Luxembourg, and Malta are smaller, only Finland has a slightly larger difference between estimated and raw values.

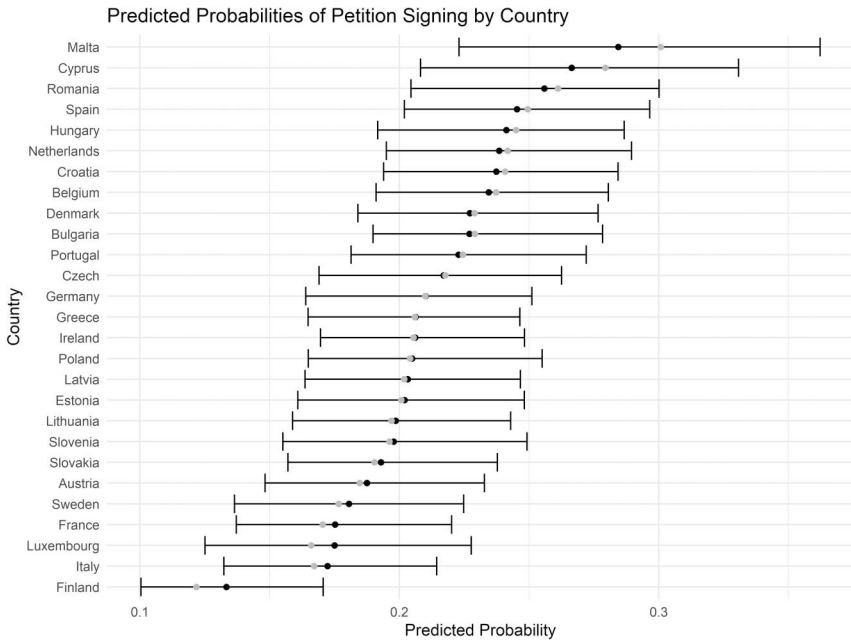


Figure 4. Predicted probabilities (black dots) and signing rates (gray dots) by country.

By averaging all four petitions, we find that estimated participation rates range from about 12% (Finland) to about 28% (Malta). In the Supplementary Materials (Section 3), we confirm these patterns with frequentist analysis showing that country-fixed effects account for 18% of the variation in national level petition supporting (adjusted R^2), petition-content fixed effects account for 27% of the variation, while country- and petition-fixed effects combined can account for a full 55% of the country-level variation. In contrast, we note that our variables do not explain much of the considerable in-country variation in supporting rates (adjusted $R^2 = 0.01$).

Looking at predicted probabilities and signing rates, we see no obvious patterns in the ordering of countries in Figure 4. For example, comparing countries below and above the median country (Greece), Eastern and Western countries can be found in both groups. The same holds for more or less democratic countries or countries with typically higher levels of non-electoral participation.

Our second analysis seeks to understand the extent to which variation across European states reflects differences in positions on these issues or differences in participation given positions. We first confirm in Figure 5 that the patterns observed in Figure 3 are supported by the statistical models. The results highlight the importance of position for supporting probabilities. However, they confirm again that supporting rates are relatively high even for those who previously reported not agreeing with the substance of the petitions. We see that

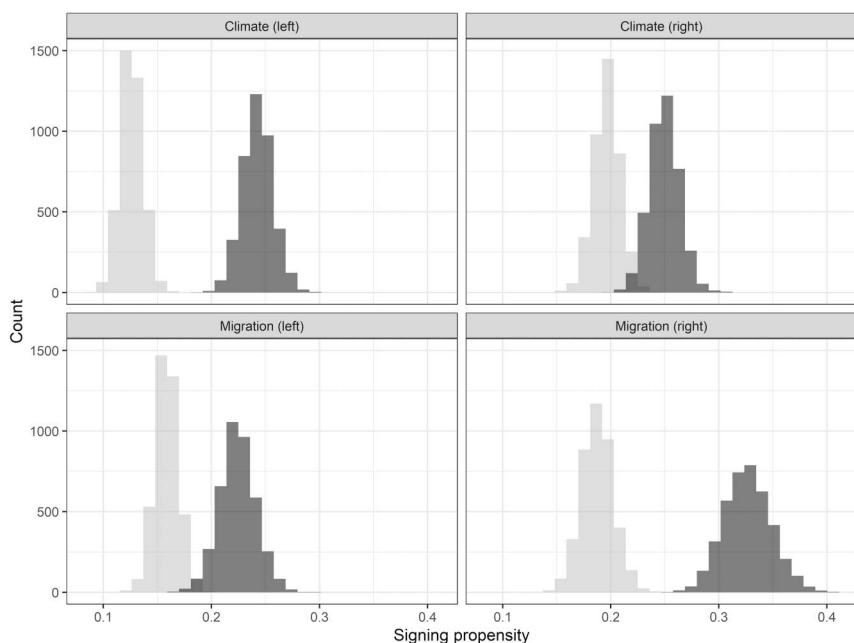


Figure 5. Model predictions on support probabilities for individuals supporting (dark gray) and opposing (light gray) petition items.

the highest rates of support arise for those agreeing with the left climate petition and with the right migration petition. In contrast, participation by supporters of the left migration petition and the right climate petition is rather muted. These patterns are consistent with the idea that the migration topic is ‘owned’ by the right, the climate issue is owned by the left, and respective political camps are more likely mobilized by the issues they own.

To assess the extent to which these differences in participation are due to differences in positions on the two issues or differences in behaviors given positions, we implement a decomposition in which we first calculate the deviation in support rates for each country for each petition type. We then assess how different outcomes would be, under the model, if the country had issue positions corresponding to the European average. This difference corresponds to the attitude-induced deviation component. We then assess to which degree outcomes would differ, under the model, if the country had base participation rates corresponding to the European average. This difference corresponds to the behavior-induced deviation component. Note that these components do not necessarily have the same sign: that is, a higher-than-average tendency to participate can be either amplified or offset by differences in issue positions.

The results are shown in [Figure 6](#), which plots the country-level deviation in petition support rates against the deviation in average positions (darker

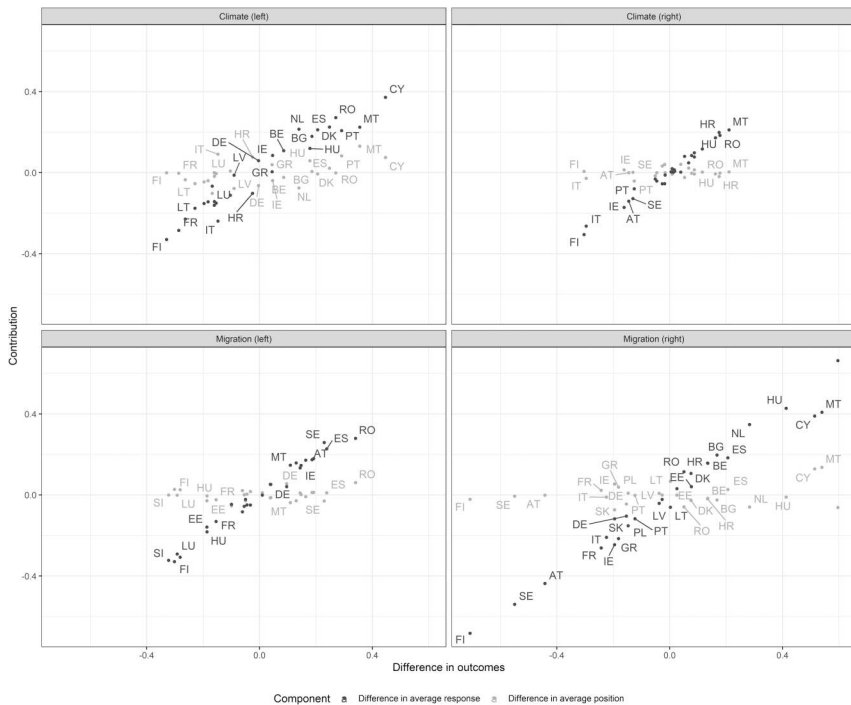


Figure 6. Decomposition of variation: parts of the variation in support rates attributable to differences in positions (lighter gray) or differences in action given positions (darker gray).

markers) and the differences in expected action given positions. In general, we find that the differences across EU countries are overwhelmingly driven by base differences in participation rates given positions and not by differences in positions on issues. Specifically note that the lighter markers – capturing deviations due to differences in position – are all similar and close to zero; the darker oness – capturing deviations in propensity to act given position – varies substantially, correlating with the country level deviation in petition signing. This is especially true for the non ‘owned’ issues: the results for migration left and climate right are almost entirely driven by baseline propensities. Country-level variation is not very much driven by differences in average positions on migration and climate change, but countries tend to have higher or lower participation levels for the different petitions. The validity of this analysis depends on the validity of our measures of positions on the two issues.

Our third analysis seeks to account for country- and issue-level variation that cannot be attributed to attitudinal differences. [Figure 7](#) shows our results. For the different hierarchical regression models, country-level variables are only included one at a time. Overall, we see that country-level

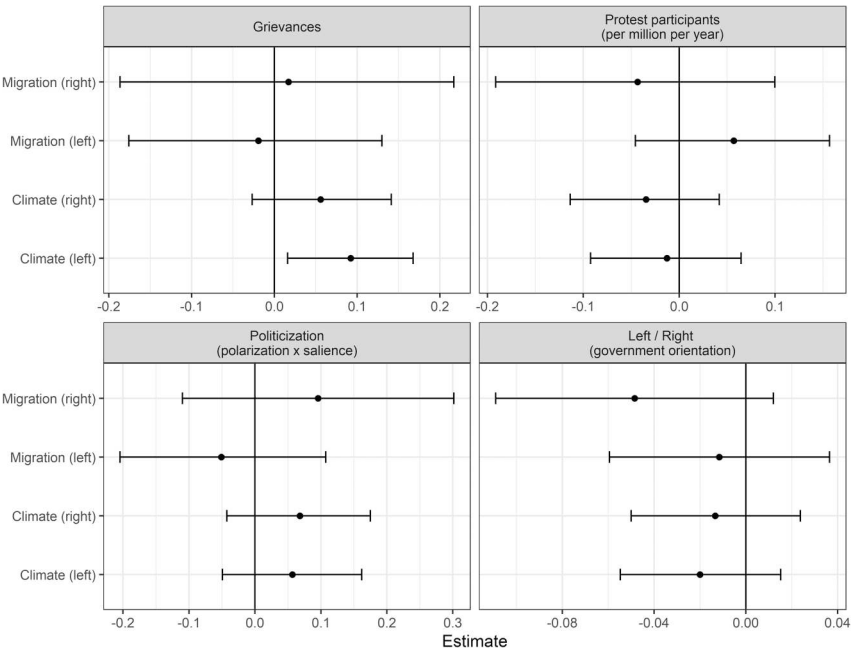


Figure 7. Country-level correlates of engagement.

covariates do little to explain country-level variation in support rates. Based on theoretical considerations, we expected positive and substantial effects of all macro variables regardless of the substantial content of the petition. However, the models not only often result in negative coefficients, but also in rather small coefficients with large uncertainty. The most striking results relate to the grievance motivations for supporting the right petition on migration and the left petition on climate – both of which we saw appear most strongly dependent on issue positions. Risk of exposure to negative effects of climate change does appear to predict support for climate actions. In contrast, exposure to large numbers of migrants and refugees does not explain engagement on the right-wing migration petition. The little evidence we do find does not point to any simple explanation of variation. Unfortunately, while there is country- and issue-level variation, the theoretically deduced and pre-registered measures are unable to shed light on what causes these differences.

Conclusion

Nonelectoral political participation appears to be on the rise, yet several aspects of nonelectoral participation, particularly in the EU context, remain poorly understood. First and foremost, we have a weak understanding of issue-specific mobilization and participation, limiting our ability to grasp

how political competition and mobilization unfold in a multi-issue environment.

We employed an original strategy to investigate these issue-specific patterns of participation by using a new behavioral outcome measure implemented within the framework of a large cross-national study, namely the 2024 European Election Study. More precisely, we invited citizens to support a petition while we randomly varied the content of the petitions to reflect left- and right-wing positions on two highly politicized issues, migration and climate change.

We found high rates of participation, and, in line with our expectations, there is substantial variation across issues, issue positions, and countries. Moreover, as expected, the probability of supporting a petition increases if citizens align with the issue position of the presented policy proposal. However, the relationship between stated position and petition support is weak, and, strikingly, even citizens who do not agree with a position show a probability of about 15–20% of signing, depending on the petition they encounter.

Our results also suggest that mobilization patterns across countries are primarily driven by baseline propensities to participate given position in the EU member states rather than by differences in policy positions themselves – a result consistent with the relatively weak estimated effects of position within countries. This is, we note, more in line with a participation culture hypothesis rather than a cross-national issue polarization hypothesis.

Finally, following previous studies on nonelectoral participation inspired by social movement scholarship, we investigated the effect of macro-level characteristics to explain the cross – national variation. Specifically, we assessed the association between participation and proxy variables for grievances, protest culture, issue politicization, and national governments' ideological orientation to explain the issue- and country-level variation. This may be the second surprising finding of our study, as we do not find that these characteristics relate strongly to patterns of participation. We observe a clear positive association between grievances and climate-related participation, but not with migration-related participation – suggesting the relevance of issue-specific dynamics also among macro-level predictors.

We highlight five limitations to this study, all of which, we believe, open avenues for future research. First, while petition support is a common form of nonelectoral political participation, it represents only one of many possible modes, each potentially exhibiting unique patterns. Expanding this research to other forms of participation – within the bounds of ethical considerations, external validity, and feasibility – could significantly deepen our understanding of nonelectoral participation. Thus, future research could systematically compare petition signing with other forms of nonelectoral participation, such as street demonstrations, contacting politicians, or online activism.

While petitions are widely used across participation profiles, their mobilization dynamics, perceived effectiveness, and expressive functions may differ from those of more confrontational or collective forms of engagement. A comparative experimental approach – randomly assigning different participation opportunities across issues – could help identify the conditions under which individuals are more likely to engage in petitions versus other forms of action.

Second, the study does not account for specific political mobilizations or policy proposals within each country, which could help explain differences across issues and countries. National issue agendas may vary significantly from expectations based on objective indicators alone. This might also mean that collecting the data directly in the aftermath of the elections to the European Parliament might have affected the results. We consider the fact that citizens cannot self-select into petition types as a strength of our study, as it lets us understand how citizens would respond. However, in real-world settings, petition exposure is often not random. Individuals may encounter petitions through like-minded networks – whether via social media, email lists, or activist groups – which filter both the topics and framings they see. As such, the lack of self-selection in our design may limit the external validity of our findings. Further work could focus on the causal effect of petition type, specifically on individuals that would self-select or not for exposure to different petition types (see, for instance, work on patient preference trials, e.g., Knox et al. (2019)). This might even help explain why individuals are willing to sign a petition despite holding opposing political views.

Third, with the exception of citizens' issue alignment, the study does not take into account the impact of micro-level determinants of political participation. Yet, individual-level explanations remain foundational to political participation research and have repeatedly shown strong explanatory power. Given that the contextual factors examined in this paper offer only limited leverage in explaining cross-national variation, renewed attention to individual-level characteristics – such as political interest, efficacy, and mobilization networks- and potential compositional effects, emerges as a particularly fruitful avenue for future research. Future studies should more fully integrate these dimensions to explain issue-specific participation patterns and their interaction with contextual factors.

Fourth, we are unable to solve the puzzle of why so many respondents with opposing issue preferences still agree to sign a petition. The most obvious reason is that there are weaknesses in the measures of attitudes, of the petition behavior, or both. In this case, this would be a threat to our secondary analysis. But it could also be that the observed behavior really is out of line with positions. While we think that the module was easy to understand and the counter-intuitive participation rates are not lower for higher educated or

politically more interested citizens, complexity might still be an issue. Another explanation could be that some citizens are willing to engage in behavior out of line with their positions because they simply want the topic as such to be on the agenda, regardless of how it is framed. As it stands, we can only acknowledge that while issue alignment has the expected effect across Europe, the effect is smaller than expected, and the willingness to sign a petition regardless of issue alignment is surprisingly high.

Finally, although we have documented substantial variation in participation and mobilization across Europe, fully explaining these differences has proven challenging. Likewise, while we do test certain differences between migration and climate change, we do not systematically address the complete range of cross-issue variation. Accounting for this variation remains a key challenge to understanding issue-specific nonelectoral participation in the EU. Meeting this challenge will require integrative analyses that bridge political context with behavioral-level insights, ideally capturing both national patterns of issue-based political competition and the individual mechanisms driving participation.

Notes

1. Of course, others might argue that this decreases external validity as, for example, many petitions are shared by personal networks which themselves are the result of self-selection. However, not only are there situations in which citizens are confronted with petitions in a rather random way. We also think it makes more sense to focus first on treatment effects in a neutral environment. Still, this is a potential limitation of our approach, and we discuss this in the conclusion.
2. With the exception of citizens' ideological alignment, this paper does not further investigate – conceptually or empirically – the role of micro-level explanations for political engagement. We fully acknowledge the central importance of individual-level factors, including political attitudes and resources, in shaping the political behavior of citizens. However, given the exploratory scope of this study, we focus here on differences across issues and countries. A follow-up paper will be dedicated specifically to individual-level determinants. For further details, please refer to the pre-registration document (<https://osf.io/s6bvh>).
3. For more information on the study and its methodology, see the documentation material of the 2024 European Election Study (Popa et al., 2024).
4. While the core dataset of the 2024 European Election Study has already been published and can be downloaded from GESIS, our module is not yet included. An updated dataset including the module will be published in 2025. Replication material for this study is available following this link: <https://osf.io/frjx5/>.
5. Note that not all pre-registered analyses are part of this paper but will be part of additional studies (see also Section 6.3 in the Supplementary Materials).
6. Note that country-level protest data from the Observatory for Political Conflict and Democracy (PolDem) (Kriesi et al., 2020) is unavailable for Croatia. Hence, the respective estimation model includes only 26 countries and 23,434 respondents.

7. Results will indeed be presented to politicians as part of an event taking place in Berlin.
8. Of course, it is very difficult to actually determine how high the costs are for the respondents. This makes it very difficult to compare it to real-world political participation – even though it would also be difficult to measure the costs of signing a petition or a similar mode of participation there. To provide some additional information concerning costs, we can look at a pretest we did in Germany a couple of months before the EES data was collected. The pretest was part of an online survey with more than 10,000 respondents applying quota-sampling of the adult population in Germany. The module version used pretest was positively reviewed by an ethics board, but we changed it due to feasibility issues. Hence, we cannot compare results. However, we randomly assigned different ways of being able to take part in the petition. One group of respondents had to only note down a four-digit code and click on a hyperlinked button where they had to type in the code to participate – similar to how we implemented the experiment in the EES. The other group had to also note down the link and type it in by hand to access the petition. Over all petitions, the participation rate drops by close to 25 per cent (from 34.8 per cent to 10.5 per cent) if a respondent was faced with the more costly option. As the link had only 30 digits, we take this as evidence that the necessity to type in even short text is costly.
9. The original scale runs the other way around, but we transformed the scale. For this study, more right-wing or authoritarian positions are represented by higher values.
10. We also run additional models using information on the number of protest events and a measure combining the number of events and the number of protesters. There are no substantial differences in our main results.
11. There are other options to determine issue saliency, e.g. aggregating survey replies to the most important problem question (e.g., Dennison, 2019; Wlezien, 2005). However, this data is not yet available.
12. As a deviation from the pre-analysis plan but based on a helpful suggestion by one of the reviewers, we also looked at the potential effect of political opportunity structures beyond government ideological. More precisely and following the approach by van der Meer et al. (2009), we tested the effect of consensus vs majoritarian democracy as postulated by Lijphart (1999). Again, we use data from the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon et al., 2024) to create one measure for each of Lijphart's dimensions. Unfortunately, the additional analyses do not show any significant effects.

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Data availability statement

The core dataset used in this study is available from GESIS (<https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14409>). Some items used are currently under embargo (until the end of 2025) and they will be published by GESIS as part of a new version of the dataset. However, full replication material can be found here: <https://osf.io/frjx5/>.

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